

Your American Baptist DNA

An Address to the First Meeting of the Board of General Ministries of the ABC/USA

January 19, 2012

Everett C. Goodwin

Good evening brother and sister American Baptists. I am grateful the opportunity to be with you, to Roy Medley for extending the invitation, and for insights into what might be helpful on this occasion, and to you for your warm welcome and hospitality this evening. In an adaptation of W. C. Fields counsel never to follow an animal act or one featuring children, I was once warned never to accept an invitation to speak to a group after a long boring meeting, after a heated disagreement, or after dinner. Baptists are people who don't drink in front of one another, so I am at least grateful wine was not included with the dinner. On top of a day of travel for most of you, I would soon be facing a sleeping audience!

We are here tonight caught between a time we have known, its traditions and certainties pretty well tested and defined, and the unknown future that, in recent years, has turned a bit scary, even ominous at times. As one example, in the past few months most of us have been riveted by news from the "Arab Spring" movements of revolution, liberation or chaos in the Middle East, depending on your point of view.

One nation where the drama of great change first played out was Egypt. It reminded me of a Coptic priest that Rodney Clapp recently remembered. The priest, speaking to a diverse group of Americans visiting in Egypt, summarized the difference between Egypt and America in images: "The image of America," he said, "is the rocket ship, blasting off into unknown realms, going places no human has been before. America is focused on the future and is always looking ahead." But then he said, "The image of Egypt is the pyramids, thousands of years old and still standing in the sands outside of Cairo. Rooted in deep history, Egypt is focused on the past and the importance of tradition."

His description was not exactly accurate. Not all Egyptians are tradition-bound. Perhaps some Americans are scrambling to get on a rocket ship blasting off to an unknown future. But many are not, and we do have our sacred traditions. But as I reflected, it seemed to me that it described exactly the present challenge to Baptists: some are ready to move confidently into an unknown future – assuming that in God's time all things will be made clear. But many others are not. They much prefer to cling to familiar paths to places where they perceive they have previously encountered God, not in rocket ships blasting off to places where God may not be.

You have been invited to become leaders of the American Baptist Churches in the USA, whether it is going forward into the future, or backward into familiar and traditional paths. You approach that leadership in an uncertain, and sometimes divided, moment.

WHY AM I HERE – WHY ARE YOU HERE?

First and most officially, we are both here because the American Baptist Churches in the USA has reorganized its governing structure and you represent the Board of General Ministries – the most representative and, arguably, the most critical board of that new organizational order. To that point, Section I of Article X of the revised By Laws of the American Baptist Churches, USA, clearly states, “The board of directors of the ABC/USA shall be known as the Board of General Ministries...” Unlike some Baptist statements, that one is clear, decisive, has legal implications and spiritual accountabilities, and it carries many responsibilities. You are here to comprehend them, to organize to meet them, and to begin serving faithfully to fulfill them.

Those same revised ABC/USA By-Laws describe the BGM’s responsibilities in detail. Let’s listen to some of the document’s action words: They include: managing, determining, setting policy, coordinating, reviewing, assessing, electing, appointing and adopting procedures; budgeting, appropriating and raising funds; recruiting, nurturing and overseeing leaders; electing, collaborating, supervising, administering, serving and, of course, that ubiquitous black hole of unanticipated responsibility, performing “such other services as the Board shall decide.” I feel confident that in the times to come, a lot will be said here and elsewhere to further define, interpret and focus all of these functions. I hope you get a good night’s sleep! (Just don’t start now!!)

The function that gets my attention first, and the one that I interpret as the official reason that I am here, is found in Article X, Section 4 (a) at the head of the list of those board functions: “The BGM shall manage the affairs of the ABC/USA and . . . shall seek the welfare of the whole Denomination...and give oversight and direction to the life and mission of the Denomination.” In carrying out this task, the By Laws prescribe four things you are specifically to include: (1) Promotion and celebration of American Baptist identity. (Ah, yes. Identity. We Baptists have always had identity problems, haven’t we? I am reminded of the Quaker farmer some hundred and fifty years ago who had a particularly obstreperous cow. One evening, when she kicked over yet another bucket of milk the distraught farmer spoke harshly to her: “Cow, thou knowest that I cannot strike thee or abuse thee – but I CAN sell thee to a Baptist who will knock the Hell out of thee!) You are to be stewards of American Baptist identity. The functions are further prescribed: (2) Presentation of an overall picture of American Baptist life. (3) Interpretation of Baptist distinctives and American Baptist core values and (4) Dissemination and support of broad Denomination priorities as articulated by the Biennial Meeting through the Mission Summit. The first three of those things, our *identity*, our *common Baptist life* (past, present and future) and our *core values*, are what we will consider tonight. I hope you got a good night’s sleep LAST night!

As we approach the weighty institutional reasons for your work let’s first contemplate our larger context and personal experiences. As we meet to confront this corporate responsibility, we are all confronted with change – my own, your own, that of the denomination, its constituent churches, and change in the world around us. As a Board, your task is to assimilate a new and

likely confusing new organizational model and you are invited to function in a new way of doing things. I, on the other hand, have only recently, and probably only temporarily, emerged from the trenches of pastoral ministry to enjoy the greater freedom of an “independent ministry.” (MMBB has a phrase to describe a category of “independent ministers” – “*Wandering Ministers*,” they are called. It probably describes more than they intended!) My new life circumstance allows me to observe churches and ministry more broadly and perhaps chart new ways of understanding them. So you see, we have this in common: “Where the heck do we go from here!?”

I lost a nearly life-long friend and we lost a great Christian interpreter and American Baptist voice last winter: I am sure some of you knew him, Peter Gomes. For nearly forty years he ably and artfully preached the gospel to Harvard University from the pulpit of its Memorial Church. Peter and I had been friends since seminary days, but diverging schedules and professional priorities kept us from being together very often. But one late fall afternoon a few years ago, Peter and I enjoyed a much delayed opportunity to share a wide-ranging conversation. We partially purged ourselves of complaints and laments about changes in the role of churches, about our ministries in them and about the cultural and social dynamics that created them. Most of those changes were not for the better, in our opinion. In a moment of pause, Peter looked at me and said, “You know, Everett, we are dinosaurs!”

So it is perhaps as a “dinosaur,” that I am here today – an exhibit in a museum of ecclesiastical archaeology. But even dinosaurs establish important benchmarks of the past. So I am here first to invite you to remember where we have come from. Then I want to challenge you to ponder how our American Baptist past and identity might shape our future roles of leadership and service in the ABC/USA. And then I will invite you to consider the things of importance that we may and must take with us as cherished traditions or critical principles, wherever we are going. As we begin, let’s also pause here and there to review things as they are and reflect on how different they are, or are not, from both the past and our likely future. In fact, let’s begin right there and look at some of the first hand-observations of changes we face:

First, many American Baptist congregations are panicked, demoralized or angry at declines in membership and giving. Often some congregation members think they know why – “the pastor doesn’t visit (especially newcomers or potential members or shut-ins),” or, “the pastor doesn’t preach the gospel – or he preaches too much of the gospel, or he preaches too long, or preaches politics and *not* the gospel....” From their perspective, pastors are solely responsible for congregational decline!

Second, and not surprisingly, pastors are likewise demoralized, panicked, and fearful for their careers and for their families’ financial stability. They also dread being judged faithless in ministry. They have answers too: “People aren’t committed.” “People place too many other things as higher priorities.” Pastors usually believe that because of lack of commitment people don’t give enough of their time, their money or their abilities. Their defense against accusations

is that it has grown ever more difficult to “visit” people who are not home, or who are resistant to pastoral calls. Even the retired folks are busy working or volunteering even if they are not currently traveling or cruising or playing bridge or golf. They point out that church membership is increasingly a hard sell to an increasingly secular people who prefer to remain “disengaged participants,” at best, and that even once reliable members move away or drift away for other pursuits when their children grow up. Meanwhile, their children are often reluctant to assume an obligation to attend their parents’ church – or any church at all. As to preaching, many pastors privately confess they really don’t know how to do it anymore, and no one is listening anyway.

Third, *all these things are true!* All these things reflect in microcosm the trends that we have perhaps all heard about from scholars, from observers of church and society, and in both the religious and secular media. Statistically, both church membership and participation in main-line churches have significantly declined in the last generation, and especially in the last 10 years. Main-line churches, especially, seem to be suffering from a dearth of qualified candidates for the ministry, or at least ones that are acceptable to churches for leadership. (Women, for example, still have great difficulty being accepted as pastors.) Even among evangelical Christians, there is growing evidence in this year’s elections of similar trends to such a degree that even politicians are uncertain about how to approach what was once “the evangelical voting bloc.”

And if you still doubt, consider that the mega-church movement has also seemed to lose vitality of late. In any case, those churches do not serve more than a tiny small single digit percentage of the American church-going population. Many of them have reached a plateau in membership and, in many cases, have declined and had to lay off staff. Who among us was not at least a little shaken to learn of the decline and bankruptcy of Robert Schuler’s Crystal Cathedral? Schuler was a symbolic “father” of the mega-church phenomenon. Yes, he was a little tame, even “old school” as mega church pastors and organizations go, and his offspring were seemingly not up to the task of revising his creation to meet a new day. But I would suggest that the fate of his enterprise – the Crystal Cathedral -- is a harbinger of more things to come.

One more thing is true as well. Religion and its representatives no longer enjoy the cultural affirmation and roles of privilege we/they once enjoyed. Actually, we haven’t for some time. Sociologists say that soon no one race will possess majority status in our society. Likewise, our culture already does not deem any one religion suitable to express its common beliefs or values. Therefore, it is very unlikely that any single public religious leader associated with a specific faith – or any faith – will, for example, be “pastor” to successive US Presidents as Billy Graham was for nearly four decades. No single religious interpreter will provide popular spiritual wisdom as, say, Norman Vincent Peale did a generation ago. No common religious observances will define the national seasonal calendars as Christmas and Easter have in the past. This change has been developing for over a century, but it has become rapid, inexorable and irreversible in the last generation. Let me illustrate with a few personal and anecdotal examples:

About, well, let's say "over fifty years ago," I was a young child in a Los Angeles neighborhood. White, middle class, young to early middle-aged, and two parent families hugely predominated in that community. Most everyone went to Sunday school and church – many of the kids went to the same church I went to. Those few who didn't were thought "peculiar." In school, I became best friends with a Hispanic boy named Rodriguez. He was from the wrong side of the tracks (actually they lived ON the tracks – in a converted box car). His mother was a domestic who worked from dawn until dusk, and he was Roman Catholic. On all counts – racial, ethnic, social and religious, therefore, my mother did not consider him a suitable playmate. Now, my mother, a very *good* mother, was simply making the parental judgments she thought were appropriate and protective for me. I am sure that she reflected the entire community in making them. But today, most of us would consider such actions and attitudes to be racist, exclusive, and isolationist. Later in about 5th grade, then living in a Midwestern university town, a potential playmate came from a "broken home." I was not permitted to play with him, either. I never did fully understand whether it was the divorced parents or his Irish Catholic upbringing which disqualified him. It was probably both. But today a child would be isolated and friendless in most communities if such standards were employed.

Then, thirty-five years ago, my first pastoral position was in an inner suburb of Providence, RI, symbolic birthplace of Baptists in America. It was the kind of town where the police were considered "friends" and where crime was minimal, unless you count Raymond Patriarcha, the reigning Godfather of the New England mafia who lived there peaceably as an upstanding citizen and a pillar of his church. Protestants, Catholics and Jews all lived in mutual respect and cooperative spirit. When a new playground, building or facility was opened, the dedication program began and ended with prayers offered by one or more of the city's religious leaders. And when the city Council met, a religious leader was invited, on a scheduled rotation, to open the Council's public meeting with prayer. We all knew how to act – we prayed in a community spirit to a God who was left doctrinally unnamed and undefined by parochial creed. Even the numerically vastly superior Roman Catholics conducted themselves humbly. When we finished the opening prayer, the Chairman of the Council always thanked us with a handshake, and with the other hand, shoved a boxed Cross pen – manufactured in RI and inscribed "Compliments of the Cranston City Council" – into our other hand as we departed. I still have several such pens, virginal in their boxes!

Now, you might expect me, in contrast, to celebrate the Baptist principle of Separation of Church and State which has ended such practices since those days. I don't. In many ways, those observances of a kind of local, communitarian "civic religion" always underlined the practical reality of respect for religious diversity which, ironically, magnified the benefits of such Separation. But here I betray my nostalgia, though one you may share.

Then, seventeen years ago I was a pastor in Washington, DC. Near the end of thirteen-year tenure I was thrilled to be nominated by powerful political sponsors to become the Chaplain of the US Senate. Sadly for me, that prospect quickly faded: the 1994 elections brought to

dominance in the Senate the opposite party from the one whose leaders had supported my nomination. Today, a debate continues whether having a religious figure of any kind is constitutionally acceptable or at least politically advisable. The question is not whether Senators need spiritual guidance. It is, rather, whether, like any other matter before the Senate, any one person representing any particular tradition can possibly spiritually or symbolically serve the whole Senate.

But, you say, “We are not here as a church, or as observers of the culture around us, but as members of the central board of the ABC/USA. What does all this have to do with us?” We all know what “trickle down economic theory” is by now. (If you don’t, trickle down economic theory is the one that says that when the rich prosper the economic benefits will “trickle down” to the poorer people and their institutions below.” That’s why we should not tax rich people, of course!) But what we – or more to the point, what **you** – are facing is what I call both a spiritual “trickle *down*” and “trickle *up*” theory. That is, the more that denominations become perceived as weakened or irrelevant, the more their churches feel disconnected from their traditions and adrift in social and spiritual confusion. And, the more churches and their people are demoralized and in crisis, their denomination will suffer, become demoralized, suffer a magnified spiritual as well as economic crisis and perhaps face death. (Maybe both economists and political analysts should contemplate that theory – perhaps I will win the Nobel Prize!)

It is easy to talk of crisis and predict dire things, to be sure. But it is a political season and politicians do that all the time: choose your cause and send your money. But you are sophisticated people and I’m confident you don’t really believe that your particular candidate will necessarily avert the next crisis, or that the next crisis is what he or she says it will be. But when Roy Medley first spoke to me about talking with you this evening, he phrased the task in these core terms: “*Talk about what it is that defines the Baptist tradition. What is worth preserving? What should we take with us going forward? That is crisis talk!*” It sounds the alarm that we must take to the life boats and that you have to decide what you will take with you. It reminds us of the wonderful bit called “Stuff” that the comedian George Carlin used so effectively. You may remember it: In that routine he described a travel experience when, after starting out with whole sea-chests full of belongings for the long journey ahead, the successive points of re-embarkation increasingly required that one prioritize what was really needed. Until, having reached the last stop before a dreamed-of mountaintop destination, we had to decide what would fit in a small back-pack, so that our energies and hands would be free to allow us to climb to peak of the mountain unencumbered.

So here are the essential questions of this evening: “*Who are we? Where did we come from? What has shaped us and focused us? Is there such a thing as American Baptist ‘DNA?’ Of that DNA, which genes are the most critical and how do we take them forward?*” That ship that ran aground on the Tuscan coast a few days ago quickly reminded us of that famous ship, The Titanic, that was sinking while, at least in the movie, the orchestra played “Nearer our God to Thee” while the rescue ship was not yet even on the horizon. So which of our DNA genes do we

drag aboard the lifeboats? How should we protect and nurture them in the rough waters all around, and if you will allow me to shift metaphors and forgive a crude but innocently intended analogy, “how do we prepare them for a successful outcome as we strive to breed the generations of American Baptist peoples to come?”

First, Let’s Review Our Ancient Past

Our Baptist origins are deep in the universal church. They were specifically defined in that European social upheaval of the 16th and 17th centuries called the Reformation. Specifically, but unofficially, Baptists have a heritage from and a connection with a mostly rural and agrarian group of European believers called “Anabaptists.” We can peek back even earlier: One early Baptist antecedent – even earlier than the Anabaptists -- was a simple local reformer named Balthasar Hubmaier from a small village on the northeastern slopes of the Alps. (If you don’t know Balthasar, you should get to know him!!) Anabaptists are best characterized as “pietists” – meaning that they adopted a style of life and pattern of thought to be consistent with Christ’s teachings of simplicity and dedication. They believed that salvation was both achieved and made visible by a life that gave witness through hard work, dedication, and observance of community solidarity in simple, moral behavior. Today their tradition remains present to a more tame degree in the Mennonite churches and to some extent in the Church of the Brethren.

More directly, and more officially, we Baptists trace our origins to the second stage of the Reformation in England in the late 1500s. There, Henry VIII’s power struggle with the Holy Roman Emperor, more than with Rome, the Church of England had sheared off from the Roman church. By the late 1500s, a disparate group of mostly intellectual scholars and their followers, loosely called the “Puritans,” advocated more extensive changes in both worship and church organization than the limited English Reformation had accomplished. The Puritans were influenced by the writings and work of John Knox and later, John Calvin, as well as lesser known theologians. They conducted a vigorous campaign of debate with each other and with the established English or “Anglican” Church and influenced a relatively small but influential part of the population. Ultimately they were more successful in English political and constitutional reform in the 17th century than they were in church reform.

Baptists emerged from the radical edge of the Puritan movement in England by the end of the 1500s. Fearing oppression, a few of these early Baptists in London briefly sought refuge in Holland where they had contact with followers of Menno Simons, an Anabaptist leader. It was from these early “Mennonites” that the early Baptists experienced and adopted the practice of adult baptism. In that time it was considered “re-baptism.” They brought this new practice back to England. In England, Baptists were a tiny number who sought to live peaceably. The English establishment frequently and conveniently simply lumped Baptists with their Quaker counterparts and the more radical Puritans as “dissidents.”

The stern oppression the Puritans experienced and the dynamism of the Puritan movement itself stimulated some of the earliest English emigration to the American Colonies, especially to New England, where many of them followed the early adventurers to the New World. They were in search of the opportunity to establish their own vision of religious observance and community life without political repercussions, as well as to enjoy new economic opportunity. At the same time, a few Baptists also emigrated to America where, mostly in Rhode Island and in pockets in new Hampshire and Maine, they settled in peaceable, somewhat isolated communities to pursue their beliefs and to worship according to their own understanding.

Roger Williams, educated first as an Anglican priest, and then self-identified as a Puritan minister and scholar, connected with a group of Baptists in Providence. He had fled Massachusetts as a result of his radical political and theological beliefs regarding religious authority and, not incidentally, his view of the Massachusetts Puritan's treatment of Native Americans. But by the mid-1600s, Baptists in the American colonies numbered only several dozen, and by 1700, likely comprised only a few hundred souls scattered among a few small churches.

As early Baptists settled in America, their narrative was characterized at first by its argumentation of theological beliefs which, they believed, placed the responsibility of salvation on the individual and his/her soul. Many early American Baptists reflected the "General Baptist" position of their English origins – a non-Calvinist, somewhat Arminian point of view that argued that salvation was most evident in good works. Others Baptists were influenced by Calvinism and Presbyterianism and possessed views of faith and salvation from the perspective of predestination. Baptists were united by belief in baptism by immersion, that imported influence from the Mennonites, which was became standard practice here. But many continued to debate infant baptism vs. adult baptism as the exclusive rite and ritual of entry into the church community of faith. Most Baptists rejected a sacramental view of worship and church, and believed instead in two "ordinances" – baptism and the Lord's Supper – rituals which were largely stripped of their mystical elements.

Also, Baptists vigorously debated the various roles of deacons, pastors and laity in church government and affairs. The majority concluded that "priests" were unnecessary as mediators, but that ministers were important for inspiration and education. The concept of the "priesthood of individual believers" – an important Baptist principle -- resulted. Some, a minority, argued that deacons were to be ordained. These were the "Six Principle Baptists" and some scholars believe that the few Baptists in Providence from which our 'mother church' was created were, at the time Roger Williams encountered them, Six Principle Baptists. Some Baptists disagreed about whether it was spiritually inappropriate to receive into church membership a "magistrate," a loose term describing a government official. (Some still do!)

Second, let's review our North American Past

Among Baptists in America there emerged several traditions: The New England Tradition, The Philadelphia Tradition, and a bit later, the Southern Tradition. Baptists in the early colonies until 1700 or so were a small number, strongest in Philadelphia/Delaware, Rhode Island, and to a lesser degree, in Boston, as well as in surrounding towns and rural areas. In New Hampshire, Baptists were often indistinguishable from Universalists, a confusion which retarded Baptist growth in their earliest years. But, generally, in New England, Baptists' objection to paying taxes to support the "settled churches" of the Puritan establishment caused them to experience oppression. They were variously socially ostracized, flogged, jailed or forced to spend time in the stocks. Opposition to paying the taxes to support another's religion was thus an early development, encouraged and elaborated by Roger Williams. It later developed into another Baptist principle: Separation of Church and State. And, after many trials and much negotiation, that principle emerged in the US Constitution as an expression of the First Amendment.

Early Baptists, although not yet uniquely missionary minded, did often advance their views. One example was a small group of Baptists in Kittery, Maine, which experienced repression in Maine. The tiny congregation abandoned Maine and relocated to Charleston, SC aboard a ship in 1684. According to Baptist mythology, at least, those they influenced there resulted in the earliest beginnings of the Baptist movement in the South. Those staunch Yankees brought the basics of a Baptist theological view of personal salvation, baptism by immersion, and a works-oriented piety. They also brought the view that, in contrast to the Anglicans who sought to govern in the Carolinas, priests were an unnecessary corruption of the biblical church, and that the laity should be responsible for the church's affairs. That potent combination of beliefs and practice began what Martin Marty coined as the "baptistification" of the South – and much of the North American Continent.

In the first four decades of 1700s, Baptists experienced a surge of growth during a spiritual renewal movement up and down the East Coast, one characterized by open air, vigorous preaching known as the "Great Awakening." That event was propelled at first by the preaching of the Puritan or "Congregationalist" Jonathan Edwards, and its cause was soon taken up by preachers of both Methodist and Presbyterian views from Britain. Baptists gained hundreds, perhaps thousands, of new adherents from among the established but often moribund Congregational churches of New England, especially those who had chafed under the perceived spiritual ineffectiveness of the establishment Puritan/Congregational churches in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Baptists won the allegiance of those who responded to the preachers and teachers who focused on individual salvation, and were convinced of the value of "religious affections," as Edwards had described them – or emotions as we might assess them – in religious conversion. The more staid and orderly Congregationalists thought that this emotive behavior was disorderly, and drove such "new light" sympathizers out.

Many of these "new light" Congregationalists became Baptists. To the staid Congregationalist Puritans, such emotional worship seemed like Pentecostals sometimes seem to

us. I am reminded of James Dunn's story of one of the revered elderly professors at Southwestern Seminary in Texas. In a course on Christian theology, he had described in negative terms the emotive, spirit-filled worship and faith of Pentecostals. In a question and answer period following his lecture one student asked, "Dr. X, is it possible for Pentecostals to get into heaven?" After a pause, the revered elder statesman professor responded, "Yes, it is possible – if they don't over-shoot it!") Baptists seemed "over the top" not only by their more spirit filled worship, but by their radical views of congregational organization and the role of the ministry.

Thus, many New England and Mid-Atlantic churches split. Other congregations abandoned the Puritan or Reformed traditions as whole and became Baptist. As one result, Baptists who had perhaps numbered about 500 or a little more in all the colonies by about 1700 were numbered at about 20,000 or more at the time of the American Revolution in 1776. By 1764 they had established "Rhode Island College," later re-named as Brown University, as an institution to educate Baptist ministers. A few years later, at the point of the American Revolution, Baptist views had become well enough known and broadcast far enough to be noticed that John Adams, of Boston, is credited with courting Baptist sentiments to support the Revolution itself. That support, and Baptists' general support of the Revolutionary cause, later played a large role in the placement of the *Separation of Church and State* as an important part of the Constitution's First Amendment.

The Second Stage of Baptist Development in America: the 19th Century

Until now we have talked about "Baptists" in the general sense. Leaving aside some isolated groups that were self-titled Baptists, but were not part of the identifiable mainstream, Baptists had established certain principles or core values: they included a nearly exclusive reliance on the scriptures for spiritual guidance and authority, a sense of personal salvation, however expressed, a belief in the priesthood of individual believers, a deep commitment to separation of church and state, which was born out of their own experience in both England and in America, the rejection of a sacramental view of the church or its worship, an aversion to any hierarchical authority, religious or otherwise, and an interactive role of the laity, no matter how contentious, in governing the church. The laity's role in leadership, especially on the frontiers, gradually morphed into a simple sense of democratic decision-making.

During the 18th century, in a few areas, Baptists had developed fraternal connections and, for example, in Rhode Island. In some regions, especially greater Philadelphia, regional "associations" were created to settle church disputes, maintain standards of congregational belief and practice, and to establish the standards for ministry and ordination. But before 1800 it is not truly accurate to speak of "American Baptists" except in the broadest geographic sense. That began to change as the nineteenth century

The period from 1800 to 1840 has been described as the "Second Great Awakening" among a significant segment of the American population. As a result, in the second decade of the

1800s, Baptists proliferated in numbers and organizational creativity. Associations multiplied and became multi-purposed. A growing Baptist passion for missions was one of the compelling drivers of much of the new organization. William Carey, who initially faced great opposition on the matter, had led English Baptists into the effort of world mission and evangelization and established a mission in India. In America, that spirit soon found expression in Adoniram and Ann Judson, and their colleague, Luther Rice, all of whom had been influenced by the evangelical spirit of the new century. The Judson's were, by background, Congregationalists. Adoniram proposed to follow in William Carey's footsteps and provide a mission to India. En route aboard their ship in 1812/13, his reading of the Bible convinced him to convert to the Baptist way and he and Ann were baptized by British Baptists when they reached Calcutta.

Instead of India, they ended up in Burma. Adoniram's and Ann's experiences there became the stuff of legend – not only among Baptists, but in the emerging American culture. It is hard to over-estimate the Judsons' effect on popular culture of the time – think of a young Harrison Ford, or maybe a Tom Cruise, fused with Joel Osteen and possessing powers of personality to compensate for the lack of modern media! In Burma, Judson persistently and patiently worked to achieve his first conversions. Ann, perhaps his intellectual superior, translated portions of the Bible into local languages, and wrote interesting and entertaining descriptions of their experiences to audiences back home. There, they were often delivered to small towns and village populations starved for news, entertainment and inspiration.

The Judson's succeeded in establishing the Baptist movement in Burma – and more broadly, in Southeast Asia. Ann became an important part of the literacy movement in America with her stories and accounts being published broadly and being received expectantly. Judson's subsequent wives kept up that effort – though less consistently. Luther Rice, having returned to America, labored to garner financial support for their work, and in the process, created a network of churches and individuals that generated the first national expressions of a “denominational movement.” *The American Baptist Foreign Mission Society*, founded in 1814, was one such expression. The “*Triennial Convention*” was founded the same year with its key leadership centered in Philadelphia and Washington, DC. It was a collaborative effort among Baptist churches and associations to support missions and to accomplish other purposes. With the creation of the American Baptist Foreign mission society and the Triennial Convention structure, it is possible to mark the first emergence of what became the American Baptist Convention.

As a result of the era's spiritual upheaval and its excitement about missions, by mid-century, best estimates numbered Baptists in excess of 300,000 people. There is a kind of “genetic” progression of what Baptists created between 1812 and 1890. The broad network of Baptist mission support called the “Triennial Conventions,” so named because it met every three years, included Baptist churches, associations of churches, individuals, organizations, and institutions which sent representatives to confer, solicit funds and organize financial support for foreign and later, domestic missions. The Triennial Conventions also served as a creative center for the further development of Baptist “societies:” In 1824 the Baptist General Tract Society was

founded to disseminate “evangelical truth” and to “inculcate sound morals.” Two years later it moved to Philadelphia and was renamed The American Baptist Publication Society, and later, the American Baptist Publication and Sunday School Society, and after several further re-iterations, became the Board of Educational Ministries of the ABC/USA in 1972.

The *American Baptist Home Mission Society* was founded in 1832, reportedly at a break in the business of the Triennial Convention. It was inspired in part by the missionary activities in the Midwest of John Mason Peck, and by the recognition of need to extend the gospel into the new settlements of the rapidly growing USA. In 1834 a Free Will Baptist Home Mission Society was formed in Dover, NH, and soon also the Free Baptist Women’s Missionary Society. In 1877 the Women’s Baptist Home Mission Society (WBHMS) was founded in Chicago, and later the same year, the Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society (WABHMS) was founded in Boston. Most of these groups merged into the American Baptist Home Mission Societies in 1911.

Henry Lyman Morehouse was the Corresponding Secretary of the ABHMS in the later part of the 1800s and he shaped the American Baptist Education Society in 1888 to promote “Christian education under Baptist auspices in north America.” A major project of ABES was the founding of the University of Chicago, and by its influence and leadership enabled the founding or financial support of Bacone College, Spelman College and black education in general, largely from funds given by John D. Rockefeller. Later, Morehouse was the “father” of the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board; Morehouse College honors his name.

These are just a few of the societies and associations that Baptists created in the 1800s. Many endured, and many lived out their purpose. But the mission impulse provided both the vision and the motivation for the development of a Baptist presence in America. By those efforts, it also became a part of creating what we have later come to call “globalization.”

We must also add that the creation of societies encouraged another characteristic of our heritage: Contention, controversy and debate. The meetings of the Triennial Convention and the various societies were frequently accompanied by theological and institutional debate, turf wars, personal prejudices, agendas and parochial preferences. As one brief example, John Mason Peck’s resume was lengthy and impeccable as a missionary in the American West. Yet, he became controversial in the Triennial Convention because the “Anti-Mission” or “Old School” Baptists, who did not believe in Sunday schools, colleges, theological seminaries, tract societies or Bible societies fiercely opposed both him and his views. Some leaped on the fact that he and his family had settled in St. Louis as the base of operations, and was therefore guilty of “not plunging into the wilderness and converting the Indians.” That is to say, Baptists were intensely political, only occasionally brought to unity by the common values of faith commitment, and by the blessings of wise, perhaps to say shrewd, leadership. But in both peace and conflict, by mid-century, Baptists were a force for good and for God that was noticed and had to be reckoned with.

The Triennial Conventions generally followed a “Big Tent” view of Baptist life. In that spirit, both free will and predestinarian Baptists could function, and the cultural and style differences between Baptists in the North and South could be managed. However, regional differences regarding slavery and “states’ rights” in particular invaded Baptist life. For example, in the North, many Baptists were sympathetic to the Abolitionist Movement as early as the 1830s, and a few Baptists were among its leaders.

Southerners were particularly resentful of northern Baptists abolitionist sympathies and especially the northerner’s accusations of the unique Southern sin expressed in slavery. In one sense they were right – the Northern states had only abolished slavery a few decades before, and Northern economic and industrial institutions benefitted from slavery as much – or more – than the South did. Nevertheless, the Baptists in the North claimed the high principles and moral ground. Throughout the 1830s the tensions regarding “states’ rights” especially with regard to slavery simmered and then came to a boil. In 1845, most Baptists in the South determined to withdraw from the Triennial Convention structure and created their own organization: The Southern Baptist Convention. From its creation, the SBC opted for a more centralized structure for carrying on mission work. The Triennial Convention continued to offer a more broad sense of autonomy to churches and societies. In that sense, it expressed a more traditional practice of Baptist polity.

The Baptists in the North, the Midwest and far Western regions who remained after the southern Baptists departure, continued their work. Generally, they expressed their support and channeled funds through organizations that carried the name “American” – as in the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, American Baptist Home Mission Societies and others. After 1845, though much diminished in strength, The Triennial Convention was in “American Baptist” hands. The later creation of the Northern Baptist Convention was beginning to emerge.

The Civil War’ heritage of devastation and bitterness encouraged Southern Baptists to follow on a separate path that sought to comfort and support a defeated culture. Denominational loyalty and dedication became a unifying and rallying center in the South. Mission activity also served to unify them. In the North, Baptists were faced with the new challenge of rapidly rising immigration, and an astonishing economic expansion that created both enormous wealth and grinding poverty along with escalating expectations. The 1890s also made the extent of industrialization’s companion urbanization evident. In the 90s, Baptists turned both to evangelization and to amelioration of urban poverty through education and social service as high priorities. The establishment and growth of urban churches, missions to recent immigrants, a new affirmation of the value of Sunday Schools for children, and harvesting the opportunity for growth as people left small churches in the country for the economic promises of city life all converged. Baptists held in balance a commitment to individual salvation with ministry to the least and the lost, and a sense of servant hood beyond their own self-interests.

The “Social Gospel” – an interpretation of the scriptures that underlined Christian responsibility to minister to those in need of support and direction, was a uniquely Baptist contribution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Several leaders of the “Social Gospel Movement” were Baptist pastors or educators. In Greenwich Village in New York, a grandson of Adoniram Judson founded the Judson Memorial Church first as a ministry to Italian immigrants. The church provided potable water – the only such water available for a great distance -- by means of a street corner fountain. It established a clinic – the only health service available to a very large population, and other services to the immigrant population. Judson envisioned the church to be open to all seeking faith – and created a worship focus in his new church that was devoid of any symbols that might discourage anyone from entering.

The Social Gospel’s pastoral standard bearer was Walter Rauschenbusch, a German-background pietist, who drew upon his experience as a Baptist pastor among immigrants in New York’s Hell’s Kitchen in defining a Christian response to human need. Some evangelical Baptists were skeptical of the humanitarian aspects of the Social Gospel, preferring to focus on individual salvation. Many more conservative Baptists viewed Rauschenbusch as a socialist, and chose not to support any aspect of work reflecting his purpose. Later, as a professor at the Rochester Theological Institute (Later Colgate-Rochester), Rauschenbusch influenced a generation of emerging ministers. Shailer Matthews, a Baptist professor at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School, developed a theology to undergird the Social Gospel and extended it to an interpretation of the gospels advocating social justice. Many Baptists became social activists. But both evangelicals and social gospel advocates continued to work through the various Baptist societies.

The last decade of the 1800s also saw the rapid rise of cities with their “teeming masses,” poverty and moral uncertainty. The cities grew from both foreign immigration and from the movement of already present peoples immigrating from American farms and small towns to the jobs that cities offered. Baptists in many cities focused their attention in two directions: one was the establishment of “institutional churches” with outreach ministries of help, as well as settlement houses and other responses to homelessness and poverty. The other direction was the beginning of urban mass evangelism and revivalism. Baptist churches enlarged their buildings and their educational facilities to accommodate children, especially. Many children received their only real education in church Sunday Schools. One relatively famous example was Grace Baptist Church (later Temple Baptist Church) in Philadelphia. Its pastor, Russell Conwell was an example of the fusion of an evangelical style with “institutional” or social gospel strategies of ministry. Conwell was a stirring orator and evangelist, but perhaps his greatest achievement was the establishment of Temple University which he envisioned as a place where poor people, especially immigrants, could get an education.

In summary, to the growing list of American Baptist core values and traditions, the 1800s added two more: a passion for mission, foreign and domestic, and a highly successful style of “society driven” organizational structures to accomplish it.

Third, let's review the creation of our Denomination and its Development during the 20th century:

After several years of conversation and planning, in 1907 Baptists in the North determined to unify the work of the several mission and other societies for greater effectiveness and efficiency by establishing a new denomination. The various Baptist societies advancing missions, publication and evangelism were working essentially in isolation. Greater coordination of their work was one goal of the new denomination. Another was a desire to match the Southern Baptists in creating a national enterprise.

The constituency of the new Northern Baptist Convention included “Baptists in the North with ties to the historic American Baptist mission societies in the nineteenth century.” Charles Evans Hughes, governor of New York and later Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, served as its first President. His reputation and popularity was a large factor in creating trust for the new organization.

Another reason for the NBC's initial success in unity is that in its creation, the NBC sought to accommodate, not counter, the societal organizational style. That is, the new convention proposal did not seek to take over the work of foreign and home missions, but to coordinate them and to relate them more effectively with churches and associations. The new Northern Baptist Convention required that the American Baptist Home and Foreign Mission Societies, as well as the American Baptist Publication Society, and others, would choose board members from those who served on the new denomination's General Board.

The NBC was therefore a “first cut” attempt to gather up disparate Baptists who, in many cases, had major differences of heritage, tradition, ethnic origin and perspective. It included some others as well: In 1911, the Free Will Baptist General Conference merged with the NBC. It all worked because it began with a relatively loose sense of connection – one inherited from the Triennial Convention model that preceded it. In 1908 the **Baptist World Alliance** was also founded with strong NBC support and with even an even looser sense of connection. Its world-gatherings had the primary goal of fellowship and inspiration, and its commissions and committees were organized to emphasize common understanding and education across geographic and cultural lines.

In fact, one Baptist leader observed that American Baptists are always stronger and better as a movement than as institutions. Despite that, American Baptists in the twentieth century a lot of energy in institution building:

From 1907 to 1950 it invested increasing effort in building its denominational infrastructure. That infrastructure had to accommodate the reality that it included Fundamentalists and Modernists (progressives and traditionalists), free will Baptists and

Predestinarian Baptists, evangelical Baptists and Social Justice or “good works” Baptists, and not a few Baptists influenced by pre-millennial, post millennial and dispensationalist theological interpretations, anti-intellectual Baptists and scholarly Baptists, and many more polarities. As part of the denominational infrastructure they established committees and boards to consider ways to support ministers and missionaries in retirement or emergency. One resulted in the founding of the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board soon after the NBC organized.

In addition to the Baptist World Alliance, American Baptists also joined with other Baptist bodies to provide institutions to preserve and advocate specific Baptist principles – resulting in the formation of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (more recently renamed the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty) in the late 1920s, to preserve and protect Baptist principles in the political and Constitutional contexts, notably Separation of Church and State.

American Baptists also strengthened institutional structures for their mission goals, developing common and routine as well as extraordinary ways to raise funds for both foreign (ABFMS) and domestic (ABHMS) missions. Those societies sought more effective means to train and administer missions and missionaries, and sought to cooperate with other denominations to manage global mission effectiveness and efficiency.

American Baptists also sought to institutionalize strategies for advocating both Christian education and the education of Christian citizens for leadership in community and society. They did so against trends where economic necessity necessitated the mergers of seminaries and theological schools, where colleges and universities they had founded had chosen, by reason of vision and necessity, to develop greater independence, and against cultural trends which increasingly sought to isolate religious education from public classroom education. In response to court decisions forbidding religious education in public schools, American Baptists provided leadership with others to create new institutionalization of community efforts to provide religious education outside the classroom on a released time basis. We could pursue many more examples. But you may see that the older work of the ABHMS, ABFMS, Education and Publication societies, was intensified and institutionalized, and new structures created as NBC traveled into the twentieth century.

Northern Baptists also focused to some degree on external structures consistent with their beliefs and principles. These included world and national councils of churches, local interfaith groups and other organizations with a desire to share some goals of work in the world, or to advance mutual issues of understanding. Some of these emerging ecumenical relationships were vigorously opposed by a vocal minority of American Baptists who, from a faith perspective, considered fellowship with non-Baptist groups to be a compromise of faith principles, or from a political perspective, perceived such cooperation as tending toward a dangerous “one church” governance that would compromise personal liberty or Baptist independence .

American Baptists also spent much of the twentieth century striving to institutionalize peace and unity among the diverse groups within its constituency. A few examples: The NBC's inheritance from the 19th century had already brought sometimes serious theological tensions and disagreements into their midst. Theological tensions, especially, were increasingly magnified as Baptists became uniquely divided in response to the European "modern scholarship" which seemed to some to diminish the role and authority of the scriptures and advocated the use of form criticism and historical context in evaluating their meaning. These "new school" Modernists and "old school" Fundamentalists thus were embattled for much of the century, affecting virtually everything in Baptist life and denominational affairs.

Baptists in the North also were faced with the differences of culture and language in their midst. From the previous century they had received the diversities of English, Welsh, Scottish, German, Scandinavian and other mostly European traditions of Baptists. The twentieth century's waves of immigration brought Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Hispanic, and Eastern European Baptists and Baptist converts to the American Baptist fellowship. There was also the continuing gulf created by the unique racial divide between white and black Americans.

Theologically, American Baptists had continuously to balance the impetus for personal evangelism with the conviction to be prophetic witnesses in their culture. Sometimes these combined well as in the denomination's outreach to poor immigrants in cities from 1900 to 1930, or later in its leadership in the Civil Rights movement of the 60s. Sometimes it failed completely, as in its silence in the face of social and legal repressions of German Americans in WWI, or Japanese Americans in WWII. More recently, because of its presumed potential to feed church growth, personal evangelism has seemed to predominate over both prophetic social witness and missions. Frequently the question has been simply phrased as to whether to convert souls or to feed and heal bodies or confront injustice. American Baptists have also frequently struggled to agree on appropriate boundaries between prophetic faith and witness and participation in partisan politics.

All of these, a desire and need to create infrastructure to perpetuate and expand their vision, their desire and the necessity to achieve coordination and cooperation, the necessity to develop consensus and common purpose, and the continuing reality of disagreements over theology and church styles, and acceptable strategies for ministry, absorbed great energy. On several occasions it led to the further focus of denominational re-invention and re-organization, partly in an attempt to keep its various constituencies and caucuses at the table.

The structure established in 1907 served well, with some expansion and tinkering for about thirty-five years, although not without internal debate. But in the late 40s, a theological rupture occurred that had been brewing for nearly three decades. A vigorous minority within the Convention became acutely concerned with theological deviations from what they considered evangelical "orthodoxy." Among other things, they advocated the acceptance of a "creed" to which Northern Baptists would be expected to assent and adhere as a condition of participation

in churches and denominational life. Ironically, the rupture was in part the result of strong leadership. Reuben Nelson, then the General Secretary of the NBC (and ABC), was strongly opposed to anything that seemed oppressive. In giving his personal testimony, he proclaimed that he “could not endorse a creedal approach to Northern Baptist life.” With that leadership, and majority convention votes that thwarted conservative goals, a significant withdrawal of many of the Convention’s most conservative churches resulted. Following that event, the denomination re-organized in relatively minor ways, but significantly changed its name from “Northern” to “American” Baptist Convention.

In the late 1950s the continuing desire for unity and coordination led to a decision to relocate ABC’s Societies and agencies from New York and Philadelphia to one location in Valley Forge, PA. In the early 1960s, further revisions attempted to strengthen the central decision-making of the convention in relation to its boards, societies and regional structures. Then, in 1972 the denomination approved a more radical restructuring not only to achieve more centralized decision making, but also to account for the diversity and variety of its constituency. One part of that proposed plan to make the denomination more “connectional” in its relationship to regions, churches and boards did not succeed.

In the last decade, the withdrawal of additional conservative churches and regions – particularly around the issue of homosexual participation or church leadership -- significantly weakened the denomination’s representational and financial resources, prompting yet a further restructure, including the ownership and management of the Valley Forge headquarters. It also led indirectly to By-Laws changes – which you are now dealing with. At present, it feels rather like a great many churches and pastors, as well as the denomination itself, are focused on one of two goals: maintaining a sense of the past while simply surviving. These we might call the “Pyramids Churches.” At the spectrum’s other end where pastors and churches set goals for numerical or financial growth at the exclusion of everything else, we might call the “Rocket Ship Baptists.” Some have both goals and become conflicted or disabled.

Now, let’s review this American Baptist DNA and try to prioritize which genes are most critical to nurture and carry forward. We shall divide these genes first into the “Doctrinal Genes” we have accepted in faith, and then the “Experiential Genes” that have shaped our organization, behavior, and achievements.

American Baptist “Doctrinal Genes” are predominantly expressed in terms of “freedom:”

First, there is *Scriptural Freedom* – An affirmation that the Bible, under the Lordship of Christ, is central in the lives of individuals and the church and that individuals, with the best scholarly tools of inquiry, are both free and obligated to study the scriptures and conform their lives to it. First, American Baptists continue the Reformation Tradition of placing the scriptures in the center of faith experience – freeing us from hierarchy, presumed or imposed authority in

matters of biblical interpretation. Second, American Baptists have encouraged – even insisted – on individual interpretive freedom in approaching the scriptures for their own understanding and spiritual life. Sometimes this is known as “*freedom of conscience.*”

Second, there *Soul Freedom* – An affirmation of the inalienable right and responsibility of each and every person to approach and deal with God and to engage in personal ministry without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy or the intervention of the civil government. Sometimes this has been shortened to mean “*the priesthood of every believer.*”

Third, there is *Church Freedom* – An affirmation that individual churches are free, under the Lordship of Christ, to determine their membership and leadership, to order their worship and work, to ordain whomever they perceive as gifted for the ministry and to participate in the larger Body of Christ – the Church Universal – of whose unity and mission Baptists are a part. In contemporary terms, this is sometimes referred to as commitment to “*congregational polity.*”

Fourth, there is *Religious Freedom* – An affirmation of the freedom OF religion, FOR religion and freedom FROM religion, insisting that Caesar is not Christ and Christ is not Caesar. In Constitutional terms, this is sometimes stated as the *doctrine of Separation of Church and State.*

In addition: American Baptists have generally rejected a sacramental understanding of the church and worship, preferring instead two “ordinances” of *adult baptism* and the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper, or “communion.” American Baptists have also generally rejected the concept of a “confession” which strives to unite participants in a particular description of common belief. The few confessions some American and other Baptists have assented to, notably the New Hampshire Confession of 1833, have been intended to unify Baptists. Most often they have divided them. Instead, Baptists have preferred the idea of “*covenants*” which are voluntarily entered into. Baptists are even wary of these.

American Baptist “experiential” genes – that part of our DNA that has evolved as the result of historical experience, are somewhat less specific but nonetheless determinative:

First, as former General Secretary Daniel Weiss commented some years ago, the experience of American Baptists has consistently demonstrated that we are more often more effective as a mass movement than we are at creating effective centralized organization. We have what, in political terms, is described as a “populist personality.” Think of either the “Tea Party” or the “Occupy Wall Street or Washington – or the city of your choice” movements as parallels. Those movements, though very different in agenda, are “baptistic” without knowing it – just as we are populist without always admitting it.

Second, in “movement mode” American Baptists hunger for strong, mildly charismatic, open and faithful leadership as a means of achieving cooperative accomplishments. I think of *Isaac Backus* as a mediator of church disagreements and negotiator for separation of church and

state in the 1700s, or of *Adnoniram and Ann Judson, Luther Rice and John Mason Peck* in the early and mid-1800s in missions. There is *Henry Morehouse* – a forty-year leader in missions, education and support of ministry in the late 1800s/early 1900s. We recall some “political Baptists” like *Charles Evans Hughes* in the early 1900s and later, *Harold Stassen*, “boy wonder governor of Minnesota, Presidential candidate, and a framer of the Charter of the UN, both of whom lent their national credibility to American Baptist leadership.

We might recall professional denominational leaders like *Reuben Nelson, Edwin Tuller, Dean Wright, Jitsuo Morikawa*, as just a few of those who led the denomination through difficult or contentious times in the Convention or in the culture around us. We think of pastors who led by inspiration and fellowship, like *C. Oscar Johnson* in St. Louis, *Roger Fredrickson* of Kansas and South Dakota, or *Harry Emerson Fosdick* at Riverside Church, who led American Baptist theological re-considerations with such a graceful touch that even his staunch conservative critics frequently stole his sermons! We could add many others to this list. They led by example, by passion, by commitment and by a common touch that could gather up the “Baptist movement” and call it forward.

Third, when we are organizationally effective, it is by the creation of “associations” or “societies” which focus on the accomplishment of mission and ministry in specific arenas like education, missions, advocacy of Baptist principles, social reform or restoration. American Baptists rarely unanimously agree with each other, but they can often agree with SOME others and, in agreement, can accomplish great things for God.

Fourth, and in the negative, American Baptists are rarely successful when the goal is to convince or coerce everyone to believe or behave in the same way, or to prioritize one goal to the exclusion of all others. Likewise, we are not successful when we attempt to unilaterally advocate social, political or moral decisions in the society around us. Unilateral or monolithic approaches violate too many inherent or inherited aspects of our DNA that relate to freedoms of conscience, interpretation, action or self-direction.

Fifth, American Baptists have big hearts and compassionate spirits. We can be generous to those in need, supportive to those in trouble, and indefatigable in causes we profoundly believe in. Yet we can also be petty and mean-spirited – sometimes to the same people to whom we have sought to demonstrate compassion or generosity, or to leaders of causes we agree with, but of whom we disapprove for one reason or another! That is to say, we are profoundly human, and while we have faith that providing a witness to Kingdom of God is our most urgent task, evidence of it is occasionally hard to find!

So What Defines Us? What do you take forward into your work and into the American Baptist future?

First, please recognize that there are many on-going tensions within American Baptist life and institutional structures that, in many respects, continue age-old disagreements and even some animosities. That is part of our experiential, institutional DNA. Be aware of it.

Second, if I were to prioritize, I would be willing to leave behind some of our pride of accomplishment, our nostalgia for past glories, and our sometimes debilitating memory of one previous “Golden Era” or another. I would NOT be willing to leave behind our “doctrinal principles” I described earlier – Biblical Freedom, Personal Freedom in the spirit – the “priesthood of all believers” – Commitment to Separation of Church and State – Church freedom and its commitment to congregational organization – and the rest. These define us. Without them, we become something else.

Third, I would make a list of the genes of our “experiential DNA” that we briefly reviewed – our strength as a mass movement, our inability to successfully centralize in contrast to our ability to organize to accomplish specific concerns and the rest. I would tape them to my refrigerator or my shaving mirror as a focus for daily meditation. Awareness of these – and others we could describe – may grant great wisdom and insight in how you provide leadership to a great denomination that, despite its warts, is ordained by God for service in ministry and mission.

Fourth, and finally, realize that you – and the ABC/USA – are in the rare position of scrolling back a century or more. You have been granted that generous opportunity we often most miss from our outgrown childhoods: a “do-over.” I was reminded of that when I saw a whimsical classified ad recently in an Ivy League Alumni magazine. It said: *“Wanted: Successful Financial Advisor to travel back to 1915 to give my grandfather good financial advice thus enabling him to leave me great wealth. Provide your own time machine.”* Now there is someone with both vision and fantasy! But you need no time machine. The new By Laws, in many ways, give you the opportunity to re-create and rejuvenate the American Baptist Churches. You are now in a role similar to that of the whole convention in 1907. You are asked to coordinate, not control, to accept the strengths of the several Societies and agencies and help focus them on their greatest strength and good. In other words, you have been given leadership of the best of us, not the weakest or worst of us. You have been given permission to celebrate past and future successes – and ignore past errors, mistakes and defeats. Claim it!

And Good luck! May God bless your leadership and your work. And with a mischievous wink toward the enormity of your challenge, “May God have mercy on your souls!!

Thank you.

