



Cooperative Baptist Fellowship  
*Forming Together*

***What it Means to Be  
Fellowship Baptists***

**A Series of Reflections**

**by**

**Terry Maples  
Field Coordinator,  
CBF Virginia**



## CONTENTS

|                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction                         | 1  |
| Tethered to Jesus                    | 4  |
| Forming Together                     | 7  |
| Birthing Theological Eyes            | 9  |
| Reading the Bible for Formation      | 13 |
| Forming Capacity to Love             | 15 |
| God's Heart for Justice              | 17 |
| Formed by God's Mission              | 20 |
| Learning to Trust Spirit's Direction | 23 |
| Dissonance Interrupts Certitude      | 25 |
| Formed By & For Collaboration        | 28 |
| Why I'm a Fellowship Baptist         | 31 |

## INTRODUCTION

I started seminary studies in June of 1980. Undercurrents and rumors of a “take-over” were already swirling by that time. In the next few years, rumors became reality. The Southern Baptist Convention slowly but surely abandoned its historical roots. In response, a small but passionate group of concerned Baptists began meeting to determine how best to remain true to Baptist freedoms – Bible, soul, church, and religious. Soon the “remnant” recognized the need to form a separate entity of faithful and free Baptists called the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Most who joined CBF confirm the fact the formerly inclusive SBC became a different denomination under fundamental-conservative control. Anyone who did not agree or cooperate with the agenda of the new SBC was removed or excluded from leadership. Moderates could not in good conscience abandon cherished Baptist tenets; go along with new (narrow-minded) understandings about top-down authoritative pastoral leadership; or insistence upon a literal or inerrant interpretation of scripture that, among other things, did not sanction women in pastoral leadership roles.

In our desire to contrast ourselves from the SBC, the Fellowship began its journey with attention laser-focused on what we were NOT, i.e. what the SBC had become. Walter Shurden’s clear explanations of four fragile freedoms guided us. Perhaps CBF did not craft an informing theological statement in the early days because of its staunch commitment to freedom—the deep belief each congregation is free and responsible to listen and discern Spirit’s direction for itself. In addition, most who journeyed with CBF felt comfortable with the 1963 edition of *The Baptist Faith and Message*. These statements from the prelude of that document helped shape CBF’s identity and convictions:

*That we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. As in the past so in the future Baptist should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time.*

*That they are statements of religious convictions, drawn from the Scriptures, and are not to be used to hamper freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life.*

*Baptists are a people who profess a living faith. This faith is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ who is “the same yesterday, and today, and forever.” Therefore, the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.*

*A living faith must experience a growing understanding of truth and must be continually interpreted and related to the needs of each new generation.*

Given recent reactivity to CBF changing its hiring policy, I sense Spirit nudging me to find ways to be *present*. These are difficult days offering liminal moments for the Fellowship. The best way I know to speak into the system, in addition to face-to-face conversation with as many pastors and congregations as possible, is to write. *Reclaiming and Re-Forming*

*Baptist Identity*, a book I (and Gene Wilder) wrote for CBF, was a labor of love. The final section of the two-year endeavor unpacks CBF's big idea—*Forming Together* and how we are called to *Partner to Renew God's World*. I believe these words resulting from CBF's latest branding process hold great promise for CBF as we move into the future! I commend the book to you (all proceeds benefit CBF)!

What is needed at this crucial time? Rather than focus on specific social issues that will always invite congregational conflict, I feel led to offer reflection about what I see as important Fellowship Baptist underpinnings. True to our Fellowship ethos, I am not prescriptive rather I offer questions and perspectives to challenge current practices and patterned ways of thinking, believing, and practicing. Perhaps now, in this time of recalibration, is the time to address the **embedded theology** we inherited so we may determine what we need to keep and what no longer works.

Please join me on the journey! Together let's re-discover the nature of the faith we seek to shape and form. Let's remain sensitive to Spirit's guidance as we ask good questions. Let's see with fresh eyes what God is up to in the world and determine our role in it. Let's grapple with Jesus' expectations for his followers. Let's figure out what Christian qualities we want to model and put to work in a needy world. Let's make Jesus real and bring him up-close-and-personal.

#### **PERSONAL NOTE:**

In the same spirit as that of the crafters of the 1963 edition of *The Baptist Faith and Message*, please know these reflections are NOT designed to offer definitive statements but to prompt thoughtful conversation, generate more questions, and encourage contextual reflection. In no way do I seek to frame or build walls around God's work through the Fellowship. Rather, my objective is to ask good questions that invite individuals and congregations to a journey of discovery. I pray we are all interested in more fully discerning what God is up to in the world and how we as Christ-followers can faithfully engage that work.

This series of reflections is my gift to the Fellowship. Use the thoughts in ways that are helpful to: 1) form and nurture faith in Jesus Christ for the sake of the world, 2) examine ways in which your congregation is in alignment with God's expectations, 3) craft your congregation's informing theology, and 4) serve as an aid in shaping your church's identity and ministry partners!

The unfolding story of God's work through Cooperative Baptist Fellowship continues to be written! Please join us, a band of faithful and free disciples seeking to live like Christ and to make a difference for God!

## Tethered to Jesus!

*How can Fellowship Baptists frame the mission and ministry of congregations around the life of Jesus, the One we follow?*

Christ-followers today look to the life, teachings, and practices of Jesus to frame their discipleship efforts. Jesus was shaped and formed by his Jewish roots, as were early Christian communities. Upon reading the stories of early New Testament churches, one thing is apparent: no singular set of spiritual practices informed community life, i.e. this is the one and only way to organize and conduct our common life together. That said, we can be reasonably sure community practices took their cues from Judaism.

The Jesus movement and the first Christian communities flowed out of Jewish and Hebrew understandings. Early believers embraced a covenant relationship with God through Jesus and they embodied the imperatives of Israel's community practices. Dorothy C. Bass, in *Practicing Our Faith*, identifies these imperatives (p. 125, bullets added for emphasis):

- *to redress social inequities,*
- *protect the vulnerable,*
- *keep the power of privilege in check and under critique,*
- *steward gifts of earth as a God-given trust held in common,*
- *extend hospitality to the stranger and sojourner, and*
- *consider the enemy's welfare on the same terms as one's own.*

While some formal practices of Judaism were left behind, Jesus' teachings regarding wealth, poverty, and justice for the poor were preserved as essential components of the Gospel. Jesus turned the people's understanding of power and wealth upside down – *the greatest is the one who serves* (Luke 22:24-27). Pride of rank is rejected; all come equally to the table! All are included; God shows no favoritism.

More than 2,000 years later, do our faith communities reflect the rich Jewish heritage Jesus practiced and modeled? As Christianity gained status, leadership began to change and by the fourth century some of Jesus' teachings were disintegrating. Again I turn to Dorothy Bass (p. 127, bullets added for emphasis):

*To state it without nuance:*

- *stability won out over change,*
- *hierarchy prevailed over egalitarianism,*
- *male-held office triumphed over gender equality,*
- *power was more centralized than dispersed, and*
- *social, political, and economic privilege lodged with the few rather than the many.*

What happens when the radical impulses birthed by Jesus lose their hold on his disciples? Saying things are much more complex today and avoiding the reflection necessary to address the gap between Jesus' teachings and our practices is simplistic and side-steps the difficult and time-consuming work of theological reflection. Honest reading of scripture reveals the early church's context was riddled with many extremes—not unlike the ones we face today. Into a violent, multi-cultural, and chaotic world the first Christians brought unique practices honed by Jewish heritage and the Jesus' Way.

Faith communities have a tendency to “institutionalize” ways of being and doing church. What is lost on us is that early Christians were full of faith and willing to *experiment* with inherited practices and traditions they brought with them from their Jewish roots. Communities comprised of people from all echelons of society invited everyone to participate. Each one's unique gifts and abilities focused on human needs. Early Christians were comfortable initiating *new* practices they believed were congruent with the life and teachings of Jesus. Ongoing reflection and adaptability kept these Spirit-led disciples pliable and open to being shaped and formed in new ways as required by their context.

One of the reasons I love CBF's Big Idea—*Forming Together*—is its inherent call for Christ-followers today to remain open to Spirit's leadership. Believers must consent to being transformed (no longer the same) in order to develop the spiritual vitality necessary to address today's circumstances.

Most of us have been shaped and formed by Christianity in the West, and for many of us, by a Deep South understanding of what defines Christianity. Faith practices along with life experiences make us who we are and form our expectations for what it means to be a Christ-follower. I believe many of us are ready to confess our faith is incompletely formed and needs conversion. When our declarations of faith separate from authentic discipleship (the process of becoming like Jesus in thought, word, and deed) faithfulness is reduced to being “good” church members. Shaping loyal church members is not a bad thing per se but focuses on minimal expectations and not on exhibiting God's character. Clinging to what no longer works in church-life results in consumer mentality instead of covenant fidelity. Followers who seek and work for what *they* want have misunderstood and distorted what life in community means. We must change our flawed thinking and seek conversion. *Today's church needs new practices to help us get disconnected from culture-driven goals that yield individualistic faith.* We must exercise both inward and outward transformation. We need practices that call us to participate in making justice “flow like a river.”

What exactly is a practice? Dorothy Bass says, “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in light of God's active presence for the life of the world.” Some people call these spiritual disciplines. I prefer “practice” because the word is more accessible to the average person. For example, the Winter Olympic Games are underway at the time I'm writing. I love the human-interest stories that help us understand the years of practice necessary to compete on the international stage. Coaches often say, “Practice does not make perfect; practice makes patterned” and develops *muscle memory*. As one who played high school basketball, I know from experience this is true. I practiced thousands of free throws that enabled me to shoot over 80% in games.

Every congregation has practices. We have patterned ways of doing things, and the patterns teach (for good and bad). For example, worship is practiced in every congregation. Practices evolve around worship, and we send powerful and formative messages by how we worship, who can lead worship, who can proclaim during worship....you get the message. If a woman is never allowed to preach, your practice teaches it is inappropriate for a woman to preach in “our” pulpit. If youth only provide worship leadership on Youth Sunday, we send a powerful message about the role of young people in worship. If we stay away when the senior pastor is out, we communicate our personality-driven worship loudly and clearly.

So, you see, practices do make patterned. We confess many of our practices are so ingrained we are oblivious about what we teach or fail to teach. Churches today must re-appropriate their rich heritage and intentionally and imaginatively bring practices into conversation with the world in which we live. We need new practices to reawaken our imagination. We need new practices to discern fresh ways of embodying Christian faith for today. New practices are essential to challenge old practices that settled into institutional think and culturally driven understandings. New practices can enable people to be more faithfully committed to Jesus.

Look once more at the two lists from Dorothy Bass. Which one describes the practices of your congregation? Faithfulness today demands we re-appropriate the Jesus approach. Without this re-evaluation, we run the risk of reducing the Gospel to something manageable but less faithful.

Our highly individualistic society has forgotten, sometimes marginalized, the imperatives coming out of our rich heritage. What drove Jewish understanding was their conviction the world is a whole and everything is an interconnected web designed by God. For early believers everything fit together like a puzzle—each piece touching the other to create the big picture. The price we have paid for neglecting this vision of interconnectedness is obvious: social exploitation denies humans their God-given dignity and the myriad ways we fail to care for God’s good creation. Fake substitutes and “us vs. them” thinking separate and evaluate/judge based on cultural standards and severely limits our capacity to love neighbor as we love God. False messages that elevate one issue (like the economy, national security, race, sexual orientation, ideology, etc.) are opposite the huge heart and mind of the Savior of the World. Our myopic vision fools us into believing it is okay to destroy for gain or a perceived “nobler” goal. It never is....

Christ-followers must know their heritage, their current context, and where they are going for God. Believers will never be uniform in how we handle life’s challenges. We will never be of one mind in all matters of faith. We won’t live out our Christian mandate in exactly the same ways. Therefore, we need practices that tether us to Jesus and help us embrace God’s all-consuming love.

## Forming Together

*If “forming together” is CBF’s Big Idea, how can congregations articulate how we seek to shape and form faith?*

As a long-time congregational educator, I love the “big idea” emerging from CBF’s branding process! *Forming Together* captures my imagination and emboldens my conviction about how faith is formed and shaped. *Forming Together* is congruent with CBF’s understanding of spiritual formation:

*Spiritual formation is the process of being formed in the image of Christ by the gracious working of God’s Spirit in community for the transformation of the world.*

This definition reminds us faith is formed by God, is challenged and nurtured in Christian community, cannot be programmed, and is “caught” more than it is taught. Spiritual formation is an ongoing, life-long process. Its goal is to encourage believers to become like Christ in conviction, attitude, and action. Certainly, our formation is not complete unless and until we invest our lives in others.

Our understanding of forming faith comes from our experience and from scriptural insight. In Galatians 4:19, Paul says, “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you.*” The larger passage from Paul offers a beautiful theological treatise until a change in tone in verse 19. Here Paul speaks the language of deep love. He says, “I’m experiencing labor pains like a mother birthing a child.” But we know Paul thinks this is ridiculous because then he says, “You’ve already been born! Why am I again feeling birth pains?” Paul insinuates he’s already been through the birthing process, and it isn’t normal to go through it again.

Why is Paul again sensing labor pains? He birthed the church and mentored followers rightly, but Judaizers appeared and taught something different. Paul’s young flock fell for their rhetoric hook, line, and sinker. Jesus Christ lived in their hearts but the Lord’s beauty was barely evident in their lives. That’s why Paul is again in pain.

What does Paul mean when he says, “until Christ is formed in you?” Paul means the goal of all Christians is to allow Christ to totally inhabit our lives. We strive to become like Christ (“little Christs”) in thought, word, and deed and are conformed to his likeness in every way. Jesus modeled for us what it means to love, serve, and sacrifice. Our assignment is to make Jesus tangible in the here and now.

“Does the kind of faith we shape and form in our congregations matter?” Unequivocally, YES! Our understanding of faith and how we shape that faith in congregations matters deeply. Congregational leaders must be very concerned about theological honesty, accuracy, and application. Far too many times what is said and done in our churches looks and sounds nothing like Jesus!



Allow me to illustrate. I grew up in Alabama where racism was real and conspicuous. Churches were complicit in supporting *cultural* expectations relative to race. The church I attended during my years as a student at the University of Alabama had a poor track record regarding racial issues. Years earlier when a black man tried to enter the sanctuary, the pastor stood in the doorway and did not allow him to enter (Recall George Wallace blocking African-American students from entering the University of Alabama.) How can people who claim to worship a God who is “no respecter of persons” and who assert “all are equal at the foot of the cross” treat other human beings with such hostility? I suspect members of this congregation joyfully sang, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world” without an inkling of their disingenuousness. In this congregation and many, many others, cultural expectations collided (and continue to collide) with biblical teaching. Unfortunately, congregants of this particular faith body were rarely (if ever) urged to reflect upon the cultural practice of racism in light of scriptural truth that God loves *all* equally.

I contend the type of faith we shape and form is **the** most important assignment of Christ’s body the church! The clarion call is to shape faith that embraces the life, teachings, and ministry of the One we adore. That means we give priority to studying what Jesus taught, how he lived, how he loved—then practice what we learn in the context of community – with rose-colored glasses and blinders removed!

How intentional are we about what we seek to form? Jesus said the greatest commandments are to love God and love neighbor – no exceptions! Nurturing capacity to love what God loves shows the world what it means to be Christian. We could never go wrong using those commandments to guide formation efforts. In addition, Paul provides a compelling list of what it looks like when Christ is formed in us. Hear these words from Colossians 3:12-17 (NRSV):

*As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Paul offers us a great place to start. Developing these characteristics is far more powerful than the *bodies, buildings, and bucks* score card many churches still use.

May our formation efforts birth compassion and forgiveness, yield disciples with capacity to love all God’s children, produce peace in our homes and the world, and result in gratitude and thanksgiving to God. I challenge congregational leaders to “travail in pain” and become midwives to the beloved community Christ intended. Amen!

## Birthing Theological Eyes

*How can Fellowship Baptists encourage congregational contexts in which members practice theological reflection capable of examining embedded theology?*

“All Christians are theologians...It’s a simple fact of Christian life: their faith makes them theologians” (*How to Think Theologically*, Howard Stone and James Duke, p. 1).

During my twenty-seven years as a congregational educator I worked with laypeople every day, and what I recognized was most church members reject the idea they are theologians! The fact that Christians are baptized into God’s family means they are called to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and engage the journey of understanding Christian faith. As Stone and Duke observe, “Christian theology is at its root a matter of faith seeking understanding.” That sounds like theological work to me!

Faith is both a gift from God and a human response. Theology is a crucial part of the process as humans seek to understand the meaning and implications of Christian faith. Of great importance to thinking theologically is *theological reflection*. Theological reflection challenges Christians to consider faith understandings, historical church patterns, ministry concerns, and scriptural interpretation in evaluating life experiences and can be employed around any life situation. We ask questions about where God is evident, how scripture intersects with the event, and what we can learn from church history relative to what happened. Congregational or community reflection is a conversation that must happen, as well. It must become our first response to the perplexities of life and our desire to make faithful decisions. Corporate theological reflection is beneficial and encourages lively conversation among congregants that is essential for the church’s well-being. We must learn to appreciate diverse thinking, healthy debate, and creative tension.

Before going on, we must define “faith.” Richard Osmer in *Teaching for Faith* says, “Faith is a relationship of trust in God whose loving-kindness and faithfulness have been shown in Jesus Christ. This is the heart and soul of Christianity. The essence of the biblical narrative is the story of God’s faithfulness to creation and to humanity, a story that culminates in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God’s faithfulness is what brings Christian faith to life. God is trustworthy, and in faith we recognize and accept this trust” (p. 15-16). Osmer’s description of the four sides of faith is instructive:

1. *beliefs* about God serve as the basis of our trust
2. ongoing, personal *relationship* with God brings us into relationship with other persons of faith
3. *commitment* to God as trustworthy shapes the way we invest our time and energy
4. awareness of the *mystery* surrounding God places limits on our understanding and control of God

These four sides of faith, seen clearly, can fundamentally shift our understanding of faith and our analysis of faith in the church. Without this holistic awareness, we can get side-tracked by the idea of “getting our beliefs right” (as if belief and faith are the same thing) to the neglect of other dimensions of faith. Being “stuck” in this way of thinking is damaging to the believer, the Church, and the kingdom. Expanding consciousness about the nature of faith is essential if we hope to nurture trust in God, to assist people in evaluating all of life in light of their faith, and to acknowledge our limited ability to understand an infinite God.

In today’s world, expression and exercise of Christian faith vary from one denomination to another and from one congregation to another. For example, I grew up in a context that taught drinking alcohol is a sin; prohibition was even part of the church covenant pasted in the front of the hymnal. Other Christians did not grow up with this strongly stated lifestyle rule and find no biblical mandate around the prohibition of alcohol. These are certainly differing theologies. Your and my life experiences illustrate faith understanding is an ongoing assignment.

Scholars call theology taught in the faith communities we participated in during our growing up years *embedded theology*. The term refers to the many ways faith is taught, understood, and assimilated by church members. Certainly every congregation believes its approach and practices are faithful interpretations and applications of scripture. Theological messages are bred into the hearts and minds of congregants. Most of us cannot readily articulate the embedded theology that shaped and formed us. Some people outside the church avoid involvement with Christian communities because they notice a lack of congruence between embedded theological understandings and the words and deeds of Christians they interact with in the “real” world.

Not surprisingly, embedded theology comes to the fore when congregations are confronted with social and moral issues. Christians rise up to defend their theology and express outrage when their convictions are challenged. Of course, pastors and parishioners face these disagreements with the embedded theology they learned. Without challenges to *group think* and assumed theology, our perspectives are unquestioned and unchanged, and growth is impeded.

What we need today is *deliberative theology* that encourages careful reflection on our embedded theology in order to understand our faith in different ways. This approach empowers us to suspend preconceived convictions for the purpose of discovering insights our embedded theology might not allow. Deliberate theological reflection is essential in faith communities: it keeps churches honest by encouraging congregations to be faithful to the Good News in each new phase of life together. Our understanding of God is always imperfect and partial (*we see through a glass darkly*) so we must welcome the journey of discovery. Each new situation demands fresh theological consideration. “As Christians we are called to pursue growth in faith: by relearning and reinforcing what we already understand faith to be and by expanding, deepening, and even correcting our initial understandings of that faith” (*How to Think Theologically*, p. 24.).

All Christ-followers need theological templates—guidelines that help us figure things out; fresh lenses through which we see the world. We must not feel smug or safe with (current) rigid frameworks. Theological templates provide ways to organize our reflections about what happens to us during our earthly life. What are our core theological understandings or themes? How is my template shaped by scripture, tradition, reason, and experience? The toughest question might be: Is my theological template primarily informed by my cultural lenses?

Why all this emphasis on theology? Theology no longer seems to be an important consideration for people when selecting a faith community in which to invest. We know denominational labels don't matter to most church seekers anymore either. We live in a post-denominational and post-Christian world. Most things have been secularized. Many ask what can the church contribute that can't be answered by psychology, sociology, or economics? Absolutes no longer exist in most people's minds. Instead of being embraced by faith leaders as a creative opportunity for the church, this phenomenon leads to bitter quarreling over doctrine and social issues. The church has responded to increasing diversity in the world and within congregations by becoming polarized. To quote Paul Jones in *Worlds Within a Congregation*, "Liberals are pained by what they perceive as inflexibility of conservative dogmatism...Conservatives, on the other hand, are incensed by a liberal tolerance that savors of indifferentism...Liberalism, although theologically open, appears incapable of evoking the passion of profound conviction. Conservatism, although capable of forcing deep commitment, does so at the price of content so parochial, and a defense so divisive, as to seem derelict of compassion."

How do we respond to this impasse? What can bridge this gaping chasm? How do we find and foster the seeming impossible combination of "openness" AND "conviction" expressed paradoxically by Jones as "open conviction," "formed passion," and "disciplined freedom"? Unfortunately, scripture does not help us address diversity *per se* unless a singular, literal interpretation is demanded. Thus, the tension between those who "know the truth" and "those still searching" has escalated into warfare. The loser in this battle is the Church (faith followers) and God's Kingdom (God's influence now).

For some "diversity" is a dirty word. Diversity is reality and must be acknowledged. Diversity is a good thing and must be embraced. Diversity within the Body of Christ must be welcomed and encouraged. Diversity means "theology needs to be done in ways that start where we are, and so affirm what we are and who we are, (enabling) our movement on to what and who we are to be" (Jones, p. 30). Diversity is not a threat to the church, but differing understandings do demand a framework for understanding how under God we live together and become one in community.

People today seem to be searching. They want something different. They want to learn how to deal with the chaos they experience in everyday life. People have a growing desire to make a difference, to belong, and to be accepted for who they are. What most congregations of "politically like-minded, socio-economically homogenous groups that easily reach consensus" offer today cannot address the needs described above. We need faith communities that relish diversity and see it as a gift, that provide spiritual formation

experiences that do not claim to have *the only* answers, and where theological content focuses on “birthing theological eyes.” The self-limiting, polarized options within most churches today may successfully indoctrinate, but they cannot address the complexities of life people experience in today’s world.

Again I quote Jones, “The goal is not only to support persons in discovering and living into contrasting pilgrimages, but also to test them in depth and breadth...spiritual formation must be the prime rationale for the church of the future, luring and forging persons through alternative sub-communities into that quality of commitment which requires wagering one’s life” (p. 21).

The time to teach congregants how to become good theologians who seek to understand their faith and how it is activated in the world is long past. Vocational ministers must become resident theologians who help parishioners re-evaluate their theological templates, unpack their embedded theology, and empower deliberate efforts to discover new spiritual insights.

## Reading the Bible for Formation

### How might reading the Bible formationally empower transformation for Fellowship Baptist?

I loved reading and teaching Scot McKnight's book *The Jesus Creed*. The entire volume unpacks what is most important for Christ-followers, i.e. learning to love God and others. Jesus' response to an expert of the law who asked about the most important commandment yielded what McKnight calls the Jesus Creed:

*"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these (Mark 12:29-31).*

Jesus expands the *Shema* of Judaism (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) by adding Leviticus 19:18, showing us the path to spiritual formation is found in loving God and others. For Jesus, love of God and other people is paramount. McKnight defines love as "unconditional regard for a person that prompts and shapes behaviors in order to help that person become what God desires." This statement is very close to my long-time personal definition of love: *the active willing and working for the good of another.*

Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer provide a framework for conversation with God. In prayer, we are challenged to think more like God thinks—*Thy will be done*. Jesus knew his followers would be tempted to lapse into utterances focused on what we want or need. Richard Foster says one of the most transformative experiences of his life was learning to pray, "so my experience conformed to the words of Jesus rather than trying to make his words conform to my impoverished experience." The Lord's Prayer is an effective summary of the Gospel.

One of the most powerful questions McKnight raises in *The Jesus Creed* is, 'How might we attend to Jesus so we have constant access to his love and life?' He answers by saying we best attend to Jesus by listening to the Word, participating in worship, and engaging in Christian fellowship. Let's focus on the first way of attending to Jesus: listening to the Word.

We spend time with Jesus by reading the Bible and studying his teachings. Robert Mulholland in *Shaped by the Word* distinguishes between reading the Bible for "information" (to learn more) and reading for "formation" (to be changed), i.e. *how* we read the Bible vs. *why* we read the Bible. I believe this difference is key for Fellowship Baptists.

Muholland offers these comparisons between informational and formational reading of scripture:

**In Informational reading we:****In Formational reading we:**

Cover as much as possible

Cover what we need to

Read line after line

Read for depth, perhaps only a word

Have a goal of mastering the text

Have a goal of being mastered by the text

Treat the text as an “object”

Treat ourselves as the object of the text

Read analytically

Read receptively

Solve problems

Are open to mystery

These distinctions are important. Reading for information fuels our desire to know more, not in and of itself a bad thing, but reading for formation deepens capacity for personal and kingdom transformation in addition to gaining more knowledge.

Conditioned by our life experiences, what we’ve been taught, and interpretations we’ve heard preached, all of us come to reading scripture with preconceived ideas about what biblical texts mean. As such, *we* are in the position of control over what we understand. Our agenda (what we are looking for) is firmly in place. This human and very common tendency can block a formational reading of scripture where the primary goal is *giving up control* and *allowing scripture to read us!* Mulholland says shifting toward formation allows us to move from being our own production—false self and all—to being God’s creation!

Mulholland suggests: 1) make listening for God your top priority, 2) respond to what you read with your heart and spirit rather than your rational mind, and 3) let your response to what you read take place in the deepest levels of your being.

Certainly we need to read the Bible for information. There are facts like context and what was said to original hearers we need to know. We must, however, reach a time and place in our formational reading of scripture when we invite sacred text to reveal truth about ourselves. Awareness of truth leads to transformation of our attitudes and actions. Most importantly, formational reading shapes and forms us into disciples who are known for our capacity to love God and neighbor!

## Forming Capacity to Love

*If God is LOVE, how can Fellowship Baptists make love tangible in the world so all flourish?*

During his final meeting with his disciples in the upper room Jesus said: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love each other. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Jesus commanded his disciples to love, but he didn’t stop there. Jesus modeled love by washing his disciples’ feet. Jesus’ actions backed up his words. We prove God’s love by serving!

Jesus gave us this new commandment on the first Maundy Thursday then he showed his followers how to put love into action. More than likely the first disciples didn’t immediately or automatically embrace this new calling. Can love be switched on by one command? Jesus’ imperative did, however, establish a *goal!* The direction we are called to move together is LOVE. To the extent we live into this purpose, we show signs of godliness, we birth compassion, and we expand our capacity to love others.

CBF’s BIG IDEA is *Forming Together*. What does that mean? This mantra acknowledges Christian community is an important influence in the shaping and forming process. In community we learn how to be Jesus to each other and how God brings us together for the sake of the world. What is the nature of the faith (our understanding of God) we seek to form, and how do we love (faith in action) each other in Christian community?

After Jesus told his disciples he would soon leave them, he explained how his followers could keep his work alive. Arthur John Gossip writes: “What Christ asks of us is to be unselfish, generous with ourselves, using our lives for others, and not merely for personal interests and our own ends” (*The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 8, p. 692). When Christ-followers fail to embody this kind of active love in the world we neglect what is distinctive about being Christian. Jesus is the standard by which we are measured. Jesus’ words reveal a *new, more challenging* commandment. How are Jesus’ words novel, new, and sometimes difficult?

Jesus’ new commandment to *love* compels, even obliges, us toward Christlikeness, i.e. becoming like Jesus in thought, word, and deed. We know we must offer ourselves to others in sacrificial ways like Jesus did. Jesus modeled compassion, mercy, and forgiveness; he sacrificed for those he loved. Lip service is easy. Saying “Jesus is Lord” or “Wherever you lead I’ll go” is simple. The hard part is giving up our selfish, ego-centric ways. The hard part is letting go of our preconceived notions and comfortable assumptions. How can we move from declarations alone to words backed up by godly behaviors? We need spiritual practices like silence, prayer, meditation, and reading the Bible for formation to help shape us into Christlikeness that leads to action that then changes the world.

Christ highlighted distinguishing characteristics of true followers: Love expressed in kindness to all, unselfishness, and generous investment in others – *By this all people will*



*know you are my disciples if you have love for one another.* The words are easy to say but difficult to demonstrate in everyday life. In his wisdom, Christ gave us Christian community in which to practice. We acknowledge some people are easier to love than others, and our congregations sometimes struggle with distributing grace, acceptance, hospitality, and compassion equally, but without capacity and willingness to show grace to all, how can we hope to achieve Jesus' goal of loving each other with no exceptions? God-Love must be the mark. If we do not grow in our ability to love as God loves, how can we hope to be changed and transformed personally or in community?

John Carmody says it this way in *How to Make It Through the Day*: "If there is one task that life sets before us, one charge we must fulfill before we end our days, it is to love the whole world and labor for the whole world's prospering, despite the finitude, evil, and death afflicting each of the world's parts." I heard someone say something similar recently but instead of using the word "prospering" he used the word *flourishing*. Think about all the evils in the world today. How many of them occur because of failure to understand the truth God desires everyone regardless of race, creed, color, sexual orientation, or otherwise, to flourish.

As we *form together* we expand our *agape* potential and learn better how to love as Jesus loves. In other words, we cultivate capacity to invest in helping all flourish. We remove walls that separate. We acknowledge doctrinal differences but do not allow them to block our love for each other as we seek to collaborate for God and for God's larger kingdom goals.

Now is the time to consent to be shaped and formed in our common life together under God for the sake of all creation. God calls us to stir up love. Christ Followers and Congregations, invest your best energies to invigorate God's love in the world. This type of love is contagious, energizing, and transformative – Good News indeed!

## God's Heart for Justice

### *How can Fellowship Baptists more fully embody God's heart for justice?*

On March 3 CBF Virginia was privileged to partner with First Baptist Church in Ashland, Virginia, in *Mission Possible* at nearby Randolph-Macon College. Through interactive encounters and by highlighting a natural symbiosis between the arts and justice, college students were challenged to connect to God's mission in the world.

I observed firsthand the excellent investment CBFVA and other partners made in this experience. The intent of *Mission Possible* was to shape and form faith in those who engaged worship, breakout sessions, and exhibits. Presenters increased awareness about God's heart for justice. Raising consciousness about what God seeks to accomplish in the world is high priority for CBF Baptists.

FBC's pastor Josh Hayden led a session called "God's Heart for Justice." After explaining the terms *righteous* and *justice* come from the same root word, Josh defined justice as "how to bring equity and wholeness, putting God's love into action." He unpacked two scripture passages—one from Old Testament and one from New Testament. They are summarized below:

#### Isaiah 58:1-14

- Justice is inherently relational. Isaiah speaks to exiles and calls them to deeper justice lest they miss out on the "heartbeat of God."
- People fast outwardly while simultaneously exploiting workers – and the enslaved do the same things their oppressors do. Do not pass the wrong you experience on to others.
- Do not say one thing with your mouths then say something different with your behaviors.
- All are made in the image of God. With our actions we confirm or deny this truth.
- Loose the chains of injustice and set the oppressed free—feed, clothe, house, and empower the oppressed.
- Keep orienting your hearts toward other people. Stay in relationship with individuals from whom you want to run. In doing so, the light of righteousness breaks forth.
- When we practice justice, we earn the new names *repairer* and *restorer*.
- The by-product of practicing justice is greater joy!

#### Luke 4:14-30

- Jesus arrives in Galilee and attends temple on Sabbath. The scroll is handed to him and he reads from Isaiah.
- Jesus speaks to Jewish people who are under Roman occupation. The words from Isaiah are Good News for these oppressed people.

- Jesus announces himself as the fulfillment of this Isaiah passage, i.e. Jesus owns it as his mission statement. His claim is not well received by the “home crowd.”
- Jesus says, “I’ve come to bring freedom and justice for everyone—even oppressors! In the Year of Jubilee everything is restored.”
- People speak well of Jesus until he starts lifting up examples of how God works through non-Jewish people. When the Jews hear these words they try to run Jesus out of town.

Soon after *Mission Possible*, I met with CBFVA’s intern Mary Jo Dailey, a student at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, to unpack her *Profile in Ministry* report. One thing in particular about the report stood out—two lengthy sections on *Conversionist Ministry* and *Social Justice Ministry*. Here are the markers listed under each category:

*Conversionist Ministry:*

- Assertive individual evangelism
- Precedence of evangelistic goals
- Concentration on congregational concerns
- Law orientation to ethical issues
- Theologically oriented counseling

*Social Justice Ministry:*

- Aggressive political leadership
- Support of unpopular causes
- Openness to pluralism
- Active concern for the oppressed
- Interest in new ideas
- Concern for social justice
- Support for women’s pastoral leadership

The need for seminary students to reflect on these two approaches to ministry is crucial. While students likely lean one direction or the other, both “being” and “doing” are essential to holistic ministry. The Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40) demands attention to our faith development in two directions – nurture both the capacity to love God (vertical dimension) and the capacity to love neighbor (horizontal dimension).

How do these two understandings impact local congregational leadership? What are the implications? If a church’s pastor focuses primarily on conversion, i.e. getting people to make professions of faith, then the church will likely define the mission of the church as “reaching people for Jesus Christ” with primary concern for the vertical dimension of their faith. Spiritual goals will be more transactional in nature with emphasis on heaven and hell. If a pastor’s focus is on social justice, the church will likely define the mission of the church as “being God’s heart, hands, and feet to the world,” emphasizing horizontal dimensions of faith. “Doing” oriented church leaders encourage their congregations to focus on fair and equal treatment of people, i.e. we have a role in fixing and redeeming broken systems in the here and now.

Lest you assume this is all theoretical thinking, a real-life story illustrates how these two understandings often collide. Once upon a time I visited a young pastor who was about to be fired by the congregation he was serving. Had he committed some grave moral indiscretion? No, but, according to the deacons, the pastor's efforts to move the congregation outside the walls of the church and into the community were ill-advised and had not been well-received by church members. The pastor was told, "This church doesn't believe in these liberal ideas about serving in the community. We decided a long time ago this church exists to preach the word, offer Sunday school classes, and meet each other's needs through the Deacon Family Ministry!" Clearly, this congregation's predominantly vertical focus could not abide the pastor's more holistic understanding and approach to kingdom ministry.

I believe the conversionist-social justice continuum is wide; leaders and congregations fall somewhere in the sequence. We need both types of ministry. Often, however, we become myopic and neglect one or the other category of ministry. Do we not reduce the Gospel to something less than Jesus expects when we forget one dimension or the other? *How* local churches understand, interpret, and exercise their roles in the world determines whether people engage the Good News of the Gospel or turn away from it.

CBF Baptists believe in *forming together*. We are passionate about nurturing faith in God through Jesus Christ AND we are committed to helping folks understand God's heart bends toward justice. We work to form relationships (both vertical and horizontal) and to foster justice (equity, wholeness, God's love in action). Our Christian calling demands spiritual formation—shaping and forming disciples who serve the world. God bless our efforts to make God's love visible and tangible to all.

## Formed by God's Mission

### What shifts will be necessary for Fellowship Baptists to be shaped by God's mission?

Mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation. "Mission" means "sending," and sending is the central biblical theme describing God's interaction with humans throughout history. Consequently, a *missional* church is shaped by participating in God's mission that sets things right in a broken world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God originally intended.

Because a missionally-focused church is changed by participating in God's mission (*missio Dei*), CBF strives to help congregations connect to what God is doing in the world. This new *modus operandi* calls for essential and fundamental re-visioning by many congregations. For example, Reggie McNeal says going missional will require three shifts in thinking and behaving:

- *From internal to external in terms of ministry focus (less focus on institutional management to engaging the world)*
- *From program development to people development in terms of core activity*
- *From church-based to kingdom-based thinking in terms of leadership agenda*

These shifts mean the church must move from being the *recipient* of a generous culture to actually *being* generous to the culture. Congregations must move from programs and pre-occupation with self to engaging with partners to meet real needs in the world. Missional church faithfulness is defined by following God into acts of service and sacrifice—developing influence in the community through incarnational ministry, i.e. becoming the hands and feet of Christ in the neighborhood.

Some struggle to define the word missional. The concept certainly connotes more than being a missions-minded church or participating in mission projects. Stories of missional faithfulness communicate more powerfully than limited definitions of the word. That said, The Center for Parish Development offers what I consider a helpful working definition on its website:

*A missional church is a community of faith where people are discerning and participating in God's mission. As a dynamic process, the outcome of their discernment and participation will vary given their unique circumstances. At the center of their life and ministry missional congregations spend time together, opening their minds and hearts and imaginations to the movement of the Holy Spirit through prayer and worship, Bible study and conversation. At the same time, missional congregations engage in learning about their missional context, asking what are the forces and factors that are blocking the fulfillment of life as God created it? As together they discern God's mission and discern the challenges of their context, missional*

*congregations may shape their life and ministry in distinctive ways, utilizing their particular gifts.*

The clarion call is for the Church universal to be God's wisdom, energy, heart, and presence in accomplishing God's mission. This perspective flies in the face of the attractional model of church. In *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One*, Alan Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren contrast the difference between an attractional church and a missional one:

**Attractional Church:**

- Church is about an event and about getting people to attend the event.
- Church provides spiritual goods and services that will help people lead better lives.
- Church plays limited role in speaking to spiritual life.
- Church is primarily focused on getting people into the building.
- Church unwittingly shuts down the transformational capacity of the missional.
- Church strives for the measurable, for countable certainty, and is information-driven.

**Missional Church:**

- Embraces the idea "It is not the church of God that has a mission. It's the God of mission that has a church."
- Invites us to turn toward our neighborhoods, listening first to what is happening in the lives of people and learning to ask different questions about what God is up to in their communities.
- Does not operate out of a predetermined model.
- Acknowledges Missional Imagination = Mystery + Memory + Mission.
- Engages God's people around the world.
- Encourages renewed dialogue with Scripture, allowing Scripture to prompt serious conversation regarding cultural context.

The shifts required for congregations to become more missional will not be easy. To successfully make these changes, a new scorecard for evaluating effectiveness is necessary. According to Reggie McNeal (*Missional Renaissance*), a program-driven church prioritizes:

- Number of people involved, attending, or participating
- People recruited for church services
- Spiritual disciplines
- Money gathered and spent on church needs
- Church turf
- Church-centered "opportunities for growth"
- Staff devoted to program management

Moving to a people-development culture requires:

- Relationships people intentionally cultivate
- People released into service

- Personal life development
- Money spent on people rather than buildings and administration
- Life turf (home, work, school, community, etc.)
- Life-centered growth
- Staff engaged in coaching people for their personal development

Churches everywhere are waking up to the global mission of God. This awakening includes a desire to connect with other churches, work with them, learn from them and, for the sake of mission, collaborate and cooperate with them. Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is poised and prepared to facilitate and nurture even greater participation in godly efforts. Our desire to connect in powerful ways with God's work in the world drives our global mission enterprise. In contexts of global poverty, global migration, and the global church, CBF field personnel live out the following commitments alongside CBF congregations:

- *Cultivating Beloved Community* - We cultivate communities of reconciliation and hospitality that serve as instruments, signs, and foretastes of the commonwealth (kingdom) of God.
- *Bearing Witness to Jesus Christ* - We bear witness to the gospel with words that invite faith in Jesus and embody Jesus' love in action.
- *Seeking Transformational Development* - We work to transform systems that suppress individuals and communities so God-given gifts of all people in all places are recognized, and celebrated.

The time to move the church outside its walls and into neighborhoods is now. Discover what God is doing in your community and partner with others to engage in redemptive and incarnational work. Partner with CBF's Global Mission enterprise to expand your missional reach. Become part of what God is doing around the globe through dedicated and gifted CBF field personnel.

## Learning to Trust Spirit's Direction

### How do Fellowship Baptists give up “control” and learn to trust Holy Spirit?

I recently read the book *Sailboat Church – Helping Your Church Rethink Its Mission and Practice* by Joan S. Gray. A local congregation used the book to help them discern next steps on the journey of faith, and they asked me to help them unpack the meaning of the book.

I can summarize this excellent resource in a few words. Sailboat church is a metaphor comparing sailing to rowing, i.e. being blown by God's Spirit vs. doing church in our own strength. Church membership and budgets are shrinking, and many congregations seem to row harder than ever. Leaders are frustrated that their human efforts are not rewarded with more members and bigger budgets—traditional markers of success or faithfulness.

In this book Joan Gray suggests a better way: sailboat church. The idea is both simple and difficult. Stop working so hard in your own strength and focus on corporate discernment and guidance from Holy Spirit. The goal is for the church to “put up the sail” and “catch the *ruach* (wind) of God.” This means giving up control over the direction of the church is heading and trusting God! This metaphor is a good one as long as we must remember how much more difficult it is to sail than to row. Sailing doesn't mean leaders and members don't have anything to do. Quite the contrary, much strategy is involved in adjusting the sails and keeping the boat sailing in the right direction!

The more time I spend coaching congregations the more I realize the problem isn't that congregations are unwilling to seek God's guidance. The members of most congregations genuinely desire to journey with God and make a kingdom impact. The problem is many congregations are stuck on the shore—clinging to something that is safe and secure. This location is deemed safer and more comfortable than pushing out into the water, and we know the further out we get into the water the more risk is required to stay there.

Truth is, for Christ-followers and for congregations, clinging to the shore causes much pain and discomfort. We intuitively know the adventure with God is out in the middle of the water, and we know Jesus beckons us to join him in the deep, but we say no and cling to homeostasis. This causes spiritual atrophy and decay. This path leads to death. We seek comfort to avoid the danger/pain associated with risk/change. However, this action (or maybe we should call it inaction) sets us up for pain and suffering. Instead of making us comfortable, failing to leave the shore confronts our disobedience, leaves us with little spiritual vitality to change the world, and causes us to stay frustrated. It takes courage to turn loose of the shore, put up the sails, and trust where God's Spirit blows. But that is exactly what we are called to do.

It seems to me fear keeps us holding onto the shore, and that clinging is a prime source of suffering. In order to stay grounded and comfortable, we cling to the shore in three ways:



**1. Holding on to things** – Our capitalistic and materialistic culture sends powerful messages about possessing things. We crave new cars, new houses, new clothing, new jewelry, the latest i-phone, and the list goes on. We get a jolt of pleasure until a newer model car or i-phone hits the market or we get a stain on our new shirt. Churches are often guilty of holding onto buildings and programs that are no longer effective, i.e. choosing patterned but ineffective ways of being and doing church over innovation and life-giving faithfulness. If we aren't careful *things* will consume our thoughts and our hearts. Clinging to things keeps us from trusting God.

**2. Holding onto fixed ideas** – Experience proves many congregations are stuck clinging to fixed ideas—about the purpose and mission of the church, about Jesus' expectations of disciples, and about the scorecard for effectiveness or faithfulness. In an uncertain world, we strive for certitude—which I see as the opposite of faith. How easy it is to project our biases, views and opinions onto others. These are most often rooted in culture rather than scriptures. Holding onto fixed ideas closes our minds to new possibilities and stifles innovation. Holding onto fixed ideas becomes really damaging when attachment to our views leads us to say, "You are wrong; I'm right." This perspective shuts down potential for ecumenism and collaboration with folks outside our tribe.

**3. Holding onto spiritual highs** – Of course there is nothing wrong with a spiritual high. An occasional spiritual high is the encouragement we need to stick with the journey of faith. The problem comes when we try to stay on a high to avoid the messiness of the real world. For many of our congregations, spiritual highs are tied to nostalgic glory days when pews were packed and Sunday school classes overflowed. We are better off reflecting on what God is calling us to be and do today instead of expecting the same results.

Reflect on these questions:

- To what degree is my congregation or her leaders clinging to the shore?
- What will it take (how much pain) for us to turn loose and move into the deep water where the adventure with God takes place?
- What spiritual practices might cultivate capacity for "sailing?"
- What things are we clinging to that keep us from fully trusting God?
- What fixed ideas are keeping us stuck?
- What will allow us to celebrate the "glory days" of the church without believing that how we did church then will work now (it won't!)?

Jesus beckons us to lives of faith and discipleship. Courage demands we push away from the shore, put up the sails, give up control, and consent to being blown by Spirit. I pray God's richest blessings upon your congregation as you journey by faith, not by sight. Let the adventure begin!

## Dissonance Interrupts Certitude!

*How can Fellowship Baptists use dissonance and challenge to foster growth and transformation?*

I grew up in North Alabama in the 1960's. My Dad was a bi-vocational preacher in Southern Baptist churches his entire adult life. The context of my early years shaped me in powerful ways, and I am grateful to the members of the churches Dad served who invested in me and encouraged my faith development. The distinctively Southern Baptist way of understanding faithfulness to Christ kept me on a straight and narrow path. If I strayed at all, the annual revival confronted me with my need to re-commit, maybe even get re-baptized!

I proudly claimed to be Southern Baptist through college and later received an excellent theological education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. My years at SBTS were both exhilarating and scary. Southern professors challenged what I was taught at home and through SBC curriculum resources. What now feels like the “indoctrination process” of my early years ingrained certitude – *I'm right; you're wrong* – in me, so I arrived at Southern with my theology completely figured out—ha! Immediately, what I thought I knew bumped into different interpretations and understandings. Initially, the experiences made me very uncomfortable and created dissonance in my mind. The contradictions between what I was taught and how God was shaping and forming me in fresh ways were unsettling. Certainly my encounters at Southern Seminary were an invitation to transformation.

Dissonance (if we engage it) sends us on a journey of searching for new options. When old frameworks for understanding God no longer make sense, we are invited to seek fresh awareness. Only when we encounter dissonance are we pressed to turn loose of the certitude that controls us. Dissonance can be an important component in our faith formation. Wrestling with what we thought we already figured out can make “more than we ever imagined” possible.

Here's a personal example of dissonance from my young adulthood. I grew up believing what I was taught in SBC circles—*God can't call a woman to be a pastor*. This conviction birthed out of literal interpretations of select few passages of scripture bumped into my experience at Southern Seminary. Women who sensed God's call sought to educate themselves for vocational ministry, specifically pastoral leadership in the church, just like I did. Not only were these women called, many possessed gifts far superior to the men's! During my years in seminary, women frequently won the preaching awards. My reflection around this cultural dissonance stimulated my growth beyond inherited faith. I confess God is no respecter of persons, including one's gender, and calls males and females to vocational ministry.

A biblical example deepens our understanding. My favorite parable The Prodigal Son (more aptly called The Unconditional Love of the Father) shows Jesus creating dissonance to

teach an important lesson. In the story, Jesus confronts the religious leaders of the day who have strong convictions about who is *in* and who is *out*. The leaders are frustrated with Jesus for “eating with sinners” and “hanging out with society’s outcasts.” “Why would this sought-after preacher waste his time on unclean and unacceptable people?” they wondered.

In response to these judgmental remarks by the religious leaders, Jesus tells the story of a young man who prematurely requested a share of his father’s estate. Legally the son had no right to the property until the father’s death but the younger son asked for possession *in addition to* the right to immediately dispose of the resources. He wanted to live an independent life NOW. In essence, the younger son’s improper demands communicated, “You my father are dead to me already.” Despite the young son’s obvious disrespect for his father, the family patriarch allowed his son to claim his inheritance. The son leaves. All went well until the younger man’s riotous living depleted his financial resources and a famine led him to the brink of starvation. The prodigal hit rock bottom and finally realized how disconnected he was from everything that defined who he was. He came to his senses and remembered his home. “Perhaps I can return as a servant,” he hoped. To the son’s surprise, his father welcomed him back home not as a servant but as his fully re-instated son. The overjoyed father threw a big party to celebrate his child’s return. Watching from the fringes and bitter because the father never threw him a party, the older son’s anger kept him outside the circle of love. The father expressed his love for both sons because he truly loved them equally.

Jesus told this parable to religious leaders. The self-righteous leaders were not only privately concerned by Jesus’ dinner guests, they expressed public disapproval and called Jesus irreligious. They saw Jesus hanging out with people engaged in “dishonorable” occupations. Because these folks were “immoral” and “dishonest,” they were frequently denied their civil rights, including exclusion as witnesses in legal proceedings.

The religious leaders responded negatively to Jesus’ parable because they had been taught:

- Not to hang out with people “outside God’s love.”
- Certainly God loves dutiful, hard-working people more.
- People are ceremonially unclean if they hang out with pigs.
- “Sinners” don’t deserve grace and forgiveness.

Jesus’ parable confronts these long-held assumptions about how God thinks and acts. The leaders thought they had God figured out, knew what God expects, and how God operates. Jesus dismantled their assumptions by holding up the father’s capacity to show unconditional love and forgiveness to the wayward younger son.

Welcome to the transformative world of dissonance! Upon hearing this parable the keepers of the law are confronted with questions like: “Is what I was taught and currently believe about who God loves and forgives correct?” or “Could God’s love possibly extend to people with whom we never associate?” Tradition and law said one thing; Jesus said another. Jesus’ truth: God’s love has no boundaries!

If you are alive and engaged, you *will* experience dissonance. Something you were taught and believed to be biblical will bump into new understandings or perspectives about God's all-encompassing love. When dissonance comes....

1. See the time as an invitation to growth.
2. Read deeply and widely as you search for new options.
3. Engage in theological reflection – bring issues into conversation with scripture, tradition, and experience.
4. Consent to being shaped and formed in new ways and turn loose of certitude.
5. Experience the joy of transformation.
6. Welcome substantive dialogue with those whose ideas differ from yours.

God works in mysterious ways. Recognizing and wrestling with dissonance is one way God can challenge you, grow you, and convert you. Welcome the winds of change as Holy Spirit blows you toward God's purposes.

## **Formed By & For Collaboration**

### **Why do Fellowship Baptists highly value collaborative ministries and partnerships?**

We cannot talk about Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's values and convictions without mentioning commitment to partnership and collaboration. From the very beginning, CBF has been willing to work with others. We envisioned a partnering paradigm designed to build fruitful networks of relationships and collaborators. This value is overtly expressed in CBF's identity statement coming out of the 2012 Task Force:

*Our community consists of congregations, individuals, regional fellowships, and ministry partners. While we respect the freedom and individuality of each member of our community, we are committed to practices of cooperation, collaboration, and leadership that will enable us to be faithful and wise stewards of our common life and mission.*

*In summary, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is a community of Baptist Christians who cooperate together to engage people in missions and equip people for ministry.*

Inviting collaboration assumes center stage in CBF's core purpose coming out of the 2015 branding campaign:

*We exist to partner in renewing God's world!*

God's call to redeem and restore what is broken and out of alignment with God's design extends to all. These tasks are bigger than any one group can accomplish. Fellowship Baptists embrace ecumenism and welcome partnerships with others in redeeming God's world.

### **Formed By Collaboration**

A look at CBF's birthing documents reveals a strong commitment to partnership and collaboration. After living with Southern Baptist Convention top-down governance, CBF Baptists were drawn to a less authoritarian model. A collaborative model that attracted and involved people outside CBF's formal control and organization in order to accomplish common goals was extremely desirable.

Individuals and congregations that came together to birth CBF did so because they saw the value of something bigger than themselves. They recognized they could accomplish more together than they could alone. Suzii Paynter's expression, "We can be alone or we can be a Fellowship" states it well. Early CBF folks came together to collaborate with like-minded moderates and to preserve historic Baptist understandings they witnessed being left behind.

From the beginning CBF Baptists saw the benefit of a nimble “denomi-network” that *partners to renew God’s world*. From the outset we invited others to work with us to achieve common goals, and we shared an ecumenical mindset that undergirded our understanding and efforts to serve alongside believers with similar theological values.

### **Formed For Collaboration**

Because CBF was shaped and formed with a healthy appreciation of collaborative ministry and mission in mind, the Fellowship has worked hard to model these understandings. CBF welcomes mutually beneficial relationships and partnerships and expresses confidence in ministry partners over whom we exercise little or no control. CBF models this willingness to trust and sees it as a gift to the Kingdom.

CBF identifies three categories of partners:

- *Theological Education Partners* – CBF partners with schools and houses of Baptist studies that are members of the Consortium of Theological Schools Partnering with the CBF. [L] [SEP]
- *Resource Partners* – CBF entities choose to partner with other organizations that provide resources for the spiritual growth of individuals and congregations. [L] [SEP]
- *Membership Partners* – CBF entities choose to be member bodies in Baptist and ecumenical organizations that help us live out our mission and clarify our identity. [L] [SEP]

These principles guide our partnerships and collaborative efforts:

- Partnerships must be voluntary. [L] [SEP]
- Partnerships are born out of desire to achieve a goal that cannot be achieved alone. [L] [SEP]
- Partnerships are based on mutual trust and respect. [L] [SEP]
- Partnerships require persistence, patience, and planning. [L] [SEP]
- Partnerships function most effectively when accountability is built into the relationships.

### **The Impact of Collaboration**

Pick up any copy of *fellowship! magazine* to read about the fruit of effective collaboration.

The Spring 2018 edition highlights these mutually beneficial efforts:

- The new Dr. Emmanuel McCall Racial Justice and Leadership Initiative in which CBF partners with black colleges and builds bridges through the CBF African American Network. Congregations can partner around Covenants of Action.
- Building Beloved Community through a partnership between First Baptist Church in Williams, AL, and Chestnut Grounds Trailer Park in Jacksonville, AL.
- Matt and Michelle Norman’s partnerships in Spain.
- CBF partnership with Australian Baptists.
- Powerful ministry partnerships in Danville, VA, guided by Josh and Jessica Hearne.

CBF testifies to the incredible impact of partnerships and collaboration through its Global Mission Enterprise, through *Together for Hope*, through college student ministries, through church starts, and more. CBF experiences first-hand the value of partnering with incredible

organizations like Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, New Baptist Covenant, Passport Camps, Baptist Center for Ethics, Baptist News Global, seminaries and divinity schools, and much more.

All this partnership and collaboration is made possible because of committed individuals and congregations. THANK YOU to all who invest in CBF and her partners to make a difference in the world! *You* significantly enlarge your mission portfolio, meet needs, and change lives when you partner with CBF!

## Why I'm a Fellowship Baptist!

After 27 years in local church ministry, I sensed a call into leadership with Fellowship Baptists and have served as field coordinator in Tennessee and Virginia for the past 8 years. I love the Fellowship! I invest heavily in CBF because of the important contributions CBF makes to the broader Christian witness. Here are a few of the reasons I'm a Fellowship Baptist. Hopefully you can resonate with my list. May your mind be stimulated to remember more reasons you, too, are a Fellowship Baptist!

- Belief God loves all equally
- Commitment to church as an authentic body of Christ that reflects the love, values and practices of Jesus
- Belief in the power of the Great Commandment and The Great Commission to empower the New Testament church
- Commitment to historic Baptist principles (Four Fragile Freedoms: Bible, Soul, Religious, & Church)
- Recognition we don't hold the corner on truth and we haven't arrived—we're in the process of becoming
- Belief salvation is based on relationship with Christ, not keeping rules
- Commitment to solid biblical scholarship in faith communities
- Commitment to sound theological education in seminaries
- Belief in spiritual formation as opposed to indoctrination
- Conviction and affirmation God also calls women to all areas of ministry
- Capacity to embrace doubt, paradox and mystery vs. certitude that leaves little room for faith
- Commitment to express our faith with head, heart and hands
- Commitment to advocate for peace, social justice & racial reconciliation with special concern for the poor and downtrodden
- Concern for and care of God's creation (ecology)
- Belief churches find spiritual vitality through missional engagement
- Commitment to relational evangelism (telling our faith stories) as a natural by-product of good discipleship
- Commitment to ecumenism and substantive dialogue that focuses on what binds us together as Christians instead of what separates us
- Capacity to embrace unity in diversity
- Commitment to civility rather than demonizing those different from us
- Investment in young Baptists and young leaders

While other Christian traditions also embody some of these attributes, I believe the convictions listed uniquely converge in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. These reasons are important and why I have committed my life to assisting God's work through CBF. What we enjoy in the Fellowship Community is too good to keep to ourselves!