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Psalm 78:1-8 Listen, O my people, to my ^[b]instruction; Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. ² I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, ³ Which we have heard and known, And our fathers have told us. ⁴ We will not conceal them from their children, But tell to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, And His strength and His wondrous works that He has done.

⁵ For He established a testimony in Jacob And appointed a law in Israel, Which He commanded our fathers That they should ^[c]teach them to their children, ⁶ That the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, That they may arise and tell them to their children, ⁷ That they should put their confidence in God And not forget the works of God, But keep His commandments, ⁸ And not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation that did not ^[d]prepare its heart And whose spirit was not faithful to God.

What will our children and grandchildren say about our watch -- whenever our grandchildren sit outside talking about our time at the helm – about the benchmarks set during the last decade and the decade ahead of us what kind of legacy will be left by us?

I hope they will say that those of us who are here will use our time as a springboard into new levels of missional understanding, actions, and leadership.

So what will be the legacy of our work as a network of Bradley Baptist Association partners?

In its barest form, let me ask, what difference will this make? Well, it's up to each of us to take full advantage of what is offered here and then to go back home to utilize fresh insights. I hope our impact and legacy will include something like these:

1. Consistent with our nature, we will innovate to solve pressing problems & seize opportunities.

Let me share an observation as to why I think that associations might have some of their greatest days ahead. (I am not being self-righteous and saying our association, but associations.)

Throughout Baptist history, associations have been at their best when there were perplexing issues or problems that couldn't be handled by the usual approaches. It was when the usual answers were applied – even with greater commitment and expertise – but when those great answers were ineffective, and maybe even destructive; when not only the answers, but the questions changed. As an Association we have flourished during difficult times – and when that was settled, we tended to drift downward – only to be reinvigorated when issues arose where new answers were needed or where there were new questions to be addressed.

It is the nature of innovation to bubble-up, not to trickle down. Our major strength is adaptability and flexibility. As an association cannot be both pioneers and settlers. An association can be either one or neither one, but it can't be both. The inherent nature of who we are is to be a pioneer – adaptable and flexible.

2. We Will Reinvent Our Association and Whatever Else as Needed.

Bradley Baptist Association, can say, "we have already gone through this journey several times over the last 15 years." In reality we are at the same stage again in this process – and it is still in the future. We live in a time when every institution in society is challenged. This includes churches, associations, and every other organization in Baptist life – and in the broader society. Associations, like others, must justify themselves to every new generation and every new people group.

Remember that memories are short.

We deal with many people whose question is: "What have you done for me lately?"

Here are some examples of innovation and invention by associations of churches.

The Modern Missions movement was started by William Carey in the Nottingham Baptist Association in England.

When the impact of Carey's emphasis on missions came to America around 1800, associations got busy trying to figure out the best ways of engaging in missions. Baptist associations experimented with various approaches including acting directly as a mission board and developing missionary societies. In addition, six associations in the Charleston area formed the first state convention in the South – the Baptist State Convention of South Carolina – because they recognized the need for an organization dealing with a larger area than the associations and specifically devoted to missions advance. (Note that it was associations, not messengers from the churches that created that convention.)

There were many other things done which resulted from associations that, when they confronted something that should be done, they figured out a way of doing it. As soon as success seemed assured, they usually passed it off to others such as societies and state conventions. In order to protect their strengths of adaptability and flexibility, they generally avoided tying themselves down with institutions or long term commitments. Their approach was to find a need and fill it and to practice the art of the possible.

Associations have

- Published curriculum & hymnals
- Started Baptist colleges, hospitals, and children's homes
- One association purchased a slave in order for him to preach the Christian gospel to the other slaves (the laws of manumission prohibited the freeing of slaves)

It is useful to remember that association was a verb before it became a noun.

Churches associated to do something. They didn't form an organization and then try to figure out what it was to do.

3. We Will Respond to the Condition of the Churches with Both Affirmation and Innovation as Appropriate

There are several drivers of innovation in associations, but let me focus for a few minutes on just one of these – the needs of the churches.

There is a lot that's right in the churches today – and that should be affirmed-- but there are a number of issues that call for innovation. You can easily count some of the things – but not others.

For example:

The primary missionary force – the churches – has cumulatively grown weaker as indicated by these facts:

- 77% of BBA churches are in a non-growth pattern – either on a plateau or declining
- Of the 23% that are growing, only 6% is growing by reaching people for salvation. The other 17% are presumably growing as people transfer from declining churches.
- The number of baptisms is declining.
- The number of churches relative to population is declining.
- TBC tells me we have a population to church ratio of 1736
- TBC tells me we have 1,000 lost people per church.
If we revise the population to church ratio by subtracting the Church of God and other churches the numbers look like this.
- In 1990 we had one church for 1171 people in Cleveland/Bradley County
- In 2012 we have one church for 1379 people in Cleveland/Bradley County
- The number of Baptists, as well as other Christians, in relation to population Declining.

The most important things in the world are not measurable, but, are nevertheless observable.

For example:

- There is a growing biblical illiteracy – both in the churches and in society.
- Some churches are victimized by spiritual amnesia – they neither know who they are (Body of Christ, etc.) nor whose they are. Their primary operational theology is church autonomy rather than the Lordship of Christ.
- There is a shrinking leadership pool – you can get plenty of helpers, but leaders are in short supply.
- Some have been diverted from the main task by important, but lesser issues. The greatest enemy of the best is usually not the bad, but the merely good. The direct, easily understood commands of Jesus should not be side-tracked in order to pursue lesser issues.

4. We Will Commit to Follow the Holy Spirit – the Cosmic Director of God's Mission.

If we had understood the questions or problems adequately, we would have already addressed these and other issues effectively. However, we must consider these in terms of challenges, not achievements.

We all probably know it, but we might need to be reminded from time to time that whatever we do in our association or churches, that we are not in charge. The book of Acts makes it clear that the Holy Spirit is the Cosmic Director of God's Mission. The Holy Spirit is not our resource – we, and the churches, are His instruments for accomplishing His mission in the world.

The issue is not what the future will be like, but how we will participate with God in co-creating the future. When we recognize that it is God's mission, we realize that prayer must be Strategy #1.

Expect Great Things from God; Attempt Great Things for God.

I know of no better admonition to us all as we address the challenges in our own fields of missionary service than those given by William Carey in his famous message to his colleagues in the Northampton Baptist Association, Expect Great Things from God; Attempt Great Things for God. I hope and pray that the legacy of our partnerships will be that because we expected great things from God, that we attempted great things for God.

5. We will model a Call to Confession

Every one of us will agree with these words. The only hope for our world, this country, the state, this association, and the church is revival, renewal, and an outpouring of the Spirit of God.

Let me quote, Dr. Randy Davis, Executive Director of Tennessee Baptist Convention who stated in his May 26, 2011 article of The Baptist and Reflector.

Over the last 10 months, I have often been asked what the greatest need of the Tennessee Baptist Convention might be. Here is the answer: personal and corporate revival that is birthed in a desperate hunger for God and God alone.

Our greatest need is not vision, organizational restructuring or strategic planning, as vitally important as those things are in fulfilling The Great Commission.

Indeed, we must give our attention to vision, realignment and strategic planning. But the fuel and fire for all we do must come from a brokenness of our hearts so that we might know His heart. We are talking about a brutally honest repentance that leads to real holiness. Our pride, arrogance and selfishness must be crucified and radically replaced with genuine humility.

Living in a state of 3-4.5 million people without Christ, we must confess that we cannot begin to reach them through our own strength. We need such a movement of God that unity of purpose becomes an ever present reality among Tennessee Baptists. The common denominator that makes us an uncommon denomination will be a complete surrender to the Lordship of Christ. There is no room at the cross for territorialism, disunity, axes to grind or personal agendas. As a convention of churches, the choice is clear: die to self and exalt the Lord, or simply die.

As you complete reading this column, I invite you to read II Chronicles 7:14. Read it slowly, carefully and prayerfully. Read it again. Now, let us fall on our faces and seek His face, praying for revival. There is nothing He wants to give to us more than the power of His presence.

Would your church consider adopting a unified revival theme beginning immediately for the churches of Bradley Baptist Association as our focus for the year ahead (2012-2013):

- Call your church to a solemn assembly as we prayerfully seek the face of God
- Engage in seasons of prayer, confession, and repentance in our churches across our city and county.
- Strive for reconciliation of relationships between individuals and churches
- Acceptance of our personal and corporate failure in following the Great Commandments and fulfilling the Great Commission – becoming burdened for the 60 thousand lost people in Cleveland / Bradley County and 3.6 million lost people in Tennessee and billions more around the world
- Crying out to God for revival in our hearts, our homes, our churches, and our nation - *It's Time! (Sow with a view to righteousness, Reap in accordance with kindness; Break up your fallow ground, For it is time to seek the LORD Until He comes to rain righteousness on you. Hosea 10:12)*