

*An official statement from the Cabinet of Central Baptist Church of Wayne, PA, regarding the proposed by-laws changes to be discussed and voted upon at the 2009 ABC Biennial. Approved 6/10/2009.*

Central Baptist Church in Wayne Pennsylvania brings before this biennial gathering a deep concern about the proposed structural changes for American Baptist Churches USA. We voice these reservations with respect and gratitude for the team who worked faithfully to draft these changes, and with an appreciation for the challenging circumstances which necessitated changes in our by-laws and which presented the team with a tremendously difficult task. We express our concerns with heavy hearts because of our continuing regard for and appreciation of our shared heritage as American Baptist churches. However, we feel called to speak with a prophetic voice, bidding American Baptists to move beyond the spirit of fear that has constrained our discourse in recent years, to reestablish our trust of one another, and rise again through the hope we have in Jesus.

Our principal concern regards the provisions of the new by-laws that transform all existing resolutions and policy statements into "Public Witness Statements" of the ABCUSA, and that set a higher threshold to rescind these past statements than it will take to rescind future Public Witness Statements. Central Baptist Church is specifically concerned about the impact this will have on the 1992 resolution which states, "We affirm that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching", and the 2005 decision of the General Board to include this statement in the official Identity document that purports to speak for American Baptist congregations. Under the new by-laws these immediately become "Public Witness Statements," which can only be rescinded by an action initiated by the Board of General Ministries, and ratified by three-quarters of all regional and national Boards. We are troubled that this threshold to rescind is so much higher than the 66% majority of the General Board which enacted the 1992 resolution.

Central Baptist is a welcoming and affirming Baptist church. We have struggled since 1992 to maintain our good will for and our material support of our collective witness as American Baptists, in the face of creedal resolutions which have offended and violated the Baptist principles of soul liberty and the freedom of a congregation to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in its ministry, unhindered by human decrees which attempt to speak for Scripture. In spite of our reservations about the resolutions, we have chosen to maintain our financial support of American Baptist missions. In 2008 Central Baptist gave more than \$34,000 to American Baptist Mission Support, and over the last ten years we have given more than \$430,000. We speak here of our Mission Support amounts only to indicate our level of commitment to American Baptist life, and our willingness to find common ground with congregations who think differently from us.

It appears to us that the proposed by-laws changes will solidify these creedal statements and functionally insulate them from constructive dialogue and possible reformulation. With such creedal statements in place we lament that ABCUSA has lost its integrity as a Baptist body. In the words of Walter B. Shurden, "Baptists, if they are to be historic Baptists, are required to resurrect their tradition of anti-creedalism and resist statements about the Bible that limit access to the Bible and that codify human understanding of

biblical theology.”\* With these resolutions in place, Central Baptist church feels betrayed and disrespected within the fellowship we have so highly valued. We are also angered that our denomination’s public witness statements cast judgment upon, and propose to speak for the biblical authenticity of members of our congregation.

We call upon our American Baptist sisters and brothers to vote against the proposed by-laws changes. We remind all those who will be voting that the General Board enacted resolutions in 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998 which called for constructive dialogue concerning matters of human sexuality, in recognition of the fact that there are differing opinions regarding these matters. To enact the proposed changes in the by-laws effectively ignores all of these resolutions by setting rules which so greatly restrict initiatives to reopen discussion on the 1992 resolution as to render it unlikely that the dialogue will ever be reopened. We understand that many American Baptists agree with the 1992 resolution. We respect those who hold these views, and we would decry any resolution which silenced their voices, with equal energy to our outcry against the current by-laws changes.

We ask you to vote against the by-laws changes not as a act of protest, but as an expression of hope – hope that our Baptist ways are firmly founded and viable, hope that we can forge missional unity as congregations without imposing creedal statements which attempt to limit the freedom of movement of the Holy Spirit, and hope that we can do better for one another and for the our shared witness to Jesus Christ.

If the proposed by-laws changes are enacted, the congregation of Central Baptist Church will begin a process to discern whether we can remain in association with American Baptist Churches USA. While we will conduct this discernment through deep sadness, and with a keen sense of all that we stand to lose of our heritage, we also have an unwavering sense of our calling to maintain our integrity, and to our higher calling as the Body of Christ.

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\* Shurden, Walter B., The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1993), p. 17.