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Sorry, President Carter . . . This Argument Falls Flat

Thursday, July 23, 2009

For critics of the Southern Baptist Convention, former President Jimmy Carter is the gift that just keeps on giving. Over the last several days, yet another round of news reports has trumpeted the news that the former president has resigned his membership in the Southern Baptist Convention. Almost a decade after he first made this announcement, his repetitive return to this theme set up a new avalanche of news reports. Reports, we might add, that are not news. Adding insult to injury, the reports are about a “resignation” that isn’t even a resignation. Try explaining that to the international media.



Back in October of 2000, President Carter sent a letter to some 75,000 Baptists, indicating that he intended to separate himself from the Southern Baptist Convention — a denomination with which he had historically been associated through church membership, public identification, and personal involvement. He spoke of this as “a painful decision” that was made necessary by the convention’s stated convictions on a number of issues. For some years, Mr. Carter had been publicly identified with the more liberal wing of Southern Baptist life. He was well known for holding liberal positions on an entire range of issues that set him at odds with the denomination. The catalyst for his public announcement was the revision of the denomination’s confession of faith earlier that year.

Any honest observer will be compelled to clarify that Mr. Carter’s action was an exercise in public relations. Individuals are not members of the Southern Baptist Convention, and there is no mechanism for individuals either to join or to resign from the denomination. Local churches indicate their desire to identify with the Southern Baptist Convention through contributing to its causes and declaring themselves to be “in friendly cooperation with” other churches in the fellowship of the convention. As more careful media sources indicated back in October of 2000, President and Mrs. Carter actually remained members of a congregation that is, as *The New York Times* then explained, “still affiliated with the convention.”

Just a few years later, the former president reiterated his desire to separate from the Southern Baptist Convention, producing a series of news reports that rarely referenced the fact that Mr. Carter had made such a public announcement years earlier. Over the last two weeks, the pattern has erupted all over again.

The latest eruption of reports about President Carter’s severing of ties with the Southern Baptist Convention came in the aftermath of an article published in the July 12, 2009 edition of *The Observer* [London]. In this article, Mr. Carter claimed to speak on behalf of “The Elders.” The group’s website identifies “The Elders” as “an independent group of eminent global leaders, brought together by Nelson Mandela, who offer their collective influence and experience to support peace building, help address major causes of human suffering and promote the shared interests of humanity.”

In his article, President Carter reiterated his decision to sever public ties with the Southern Baptist Convention. In his words:

So my decision to sever my ties with the Southern Baptist Convention, after six decades, was painful and difficult. It was, however, an unavoidable decision when the convention’s leaders, quoting a few carefully selected Bible verses and claiming that Eve was created second to Adam and was responsible for original sin, ordained that women must be

“subservient” to their husbands and prohibited from serving as deacons, pastors or chaplains in the military service. This was in conflict with my belief - confirmed in the holy scriptures - that we are all equal in the eyes of God.

To his credit, President Carter apparently did not claim that this was a new decision or a fresh announcement. Though some media sources jumped on the announcement as “news,” others were careful to put his statement in an appropriate historical context. Furthermore, President Carter’s reference to the Southern Baptist Convention was not the main point of this article. Instead, his reference to the Southern Baptist Convention introduced his argument that any religious teaching that denies what he construes as full equality for women “is in clear violation not just of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but also the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul, Moses and the prophets, Muhammad, and founders of other great religions - all of whom have called for proper and equitable treatment of all the children of God.”

That, suffice it to say, is a mouthful. This is not a new argument for the former President. But in his article in *The Observer* he does make some interesting assertions. While acknowledging that he has not been trained “in religion or theology,” he went on to argue that “the carefully selected verses found in the holy scriptures to justify the superiority of men owe more to time and place - and the determination of male leaders to hold onto their influence - than eternal truths.”

All this fits a pattern for which Mr. Carter is now well known. He simply rejects the texts in the Bible that clearly establish different roles for men and women in the church and the home. He dismisses these verses for the simple reason that he also rejects the inerrancy of the Bible.

He may well be the world’s most famous Sunday School teacher, but over just the last several years he has publicly expressed his rejection of the belief that persons must come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ in order to be saved. He has also stated that his faith would not be shaken if Jesus did not perform some of the miracles attributed to him in the New Testament. His denial of biblical inerrancy is not merely theoretical — he actually operates on the assumption that at least some texts of the Bible are false, untruthful, malignantly oppressive, and thus untrustworthy.

President Carter actually makes no argument *for* women as pastors. He simply dismisses out of hand what the Christian church has believed for centuries — and what the vast majority of Christians around the world believe even now. His argument should embarrass any serious person who considers this question, for it is grounded in little more than his own sense of how things ought to be. He makes claims about the Bible that are reckless and irresponsible and historical claims that would make any credible church historian blush. He straightforwardly rejects what he admits some texts of the Bible teach.

Then, he opens and closes his article by citing as his main authority the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948. This text, we might note, also declares “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” as basic human rights. The more important question is this: Does President Carter really believe that he will convince Christians — Southern Baptist or otherwise — to see any human statement as holding a higher authority than the Bible? That question, more than anything else, points to the real reason that President Carter and the Southern Baptist Convention have parted ways. The point of division remains the ultimate authority and total truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God.

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