“Just as the twig is bent, the tree’s inclined.” This piece of accepted wisdom, first penned by Alexander Pope, reminds us that one’s beginning shapes one’s outcome. What is true in humans and nature also is true of churches and denominations.

The first meeting of the BGAV was on June 7, 1823, in Richmond’s Second Baptist Church. Fifteen messengers attended. The organization’s constitution stated that its purpose was “to propagate the Gospel and advance the Redeemer’s Kingdom throughout the State.” They also agreed among themselves that they “shall in no case interfere with the internal regulations of the churches or associations.”

From its first day the BGAV has been about the gospel, missions and churches.

The Gospel

The founders of the BGAV did not believe it was necessary to define the gospel, or add any frills to its essence. In a 1788 letter to another Baptist, John Leland summarized the gospel in clear, simple terms:

“I believe there is a God, possessed with all glorious Perfections. 2. That the Book called the Bible is of divine Authenticity. 3. That Jesus Christ is the Messiah, properly God and Man. 4. That Men are all fallen from God. 5. That absolute Necessity of a Death unto Sin and a new Birth unto Righteousness to be either safe or happy. 6. That what System or Spirit soever a Man have that does not lead him to love God, hate Sin, deny himself and follow after Holiness, is certainly wrong.”

This simple gospel has been the core of Christian teaching since the first century, and it is the foundation of the BGAV for 180 years.

Missions

The BGAV was started to spread this gospel throughout the state of Virginia. Two months after the founding meeting of the General Association, a small company of men gathered at the home of Andrew Broaddus in Caroline County, and their first tangible act was to appoint two missionaries.

Daniel Witt and Jeremiah Bell Jeter, ages 19 and 20 respectively, were employed to survey the religious climate in “destitute regions” of Virginia and report how this tiny nucleus of Baptists could start churches to reach the citizens of Virginia.

Almost two centuries later the BGAV is missionary to the core. Last year almost 5,000 members from BGAV churches volunteered for missions projects in and beyond Virginia. Several dozen new churches were started. Thousands were baptized by the BGAV’s 1,400 churches.

Churches

As the human body is composed of millions of cells, the BGAV consists of more than a thousand autonomous churches. The building blocks of our Baptist body are the churches.

The BGAV’s founders were careful to write into their constitution that the state body would not interfere with the internal activities or decisions of the churches or associations.

Not every church is alike. Not every church agrees, but every disagreement is met with respect for another church’s freedom to make its own choices. Early Baptists feared the danger of a connectional, established church. BGAV churches still do.

But our founders were willing to cooperate around the gospel and the task of telling it across our state. They knew that a family of churches could have more impact than one acting independently. BGAV churches still do.

The BGAV is the right choice for your church because the BGAV began right. Not in anger. Not in reaction to other Baptists. Not as a franchise of a national Baptist organization.

The BGAV began with three things in common: The Gospel. Missions. Autonomous, cooperative churches. This is the BGAV’s DNA. And it’s still our life’s blood.
The Right Beliefs

BGAV churches believe in these truths and principles:

- **The centrality of Jesus Christ.** “Jesus is Lord” is the confession of the BGAV and its churches from its beginning. Jesus is the beginning, center and end of our worship. It is heresy to make the church, denomination or even the Bible as the supreme object of faith.

- **The authority of the Bible.** In 1988 and again in 1995 the BGAV affirmed its complete confidence in and commitment to the inspired, written Word of God. It is the primary source that sets our faith and practice. From its message Virginia Baptists draw truth and power.

- **Soul competency.** Every human being is free and responsible for his or her relationship with God. This, wrote E. Y. Mullins almost a century ago, is the “keystone” principle of Baptists. New-style Baptists argue that making faith a personal matter leads to a subjective faith that overlooks the role of Christ in salvation, makes secondary the authority of Scripture and eliminates the need for the Holy Spirit. Virginia Baptists reject this criticism, believing that soul competency comes straight from the Bible's view of God and humanity. God is revealed to us, and we are free to respond to God and are accountable for our response.

- **The priesthood of all believers.** Virginia Baptists believe that every person is privileged to approach God without a human intermediary and that every person, led by the Holy Spirit, may interpret the Bible. No human authority should compel another person to submit to his or her interpretation or belief. The BGAV believes in empowering laity for service, and not in making distinctions between the callings of clergy and laity, except in function.

- **Believer's baptism.** Most BGAV churches practice immersion as the mode of baptism, for compelling reasons. But the timing is more important than the mode. When Virginia Baptists practice baptism of believers, the baptism is a sign that one is a deliberate, willing follower of Jesus Christ. This squares with our belief in soul competency.

- **The autonomy of the local church.** The BGAV believes every congregation is self-governing. It is to be under the control of Jesus Christ, not an autocratic pastor, faction of laity or denominational body to which it relates.

- **Voluntary connectionalism.** Every Virginia Baptist congregation chooses its friends and partners. It may choose to relate to a local Baptist association, the BGAV, the SBC or the CBF, or it may choose not to relate to these. BGAV churches believe no denominational hierarchy may force itself on local churches or compel cooperation. Cooperation is always voluntary.

- **Separation of church and state.** The BGAV believes this is embedded in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Virginia Baptists want to live in a nation where the institutions of government and religion exist in an atmosphere where individuals follow their conscience, not the government’s direction, in matters of faith. Personal faith thrives best where government and church are free and separate.

This is a summary of beliefs held by a majority of people and churches in the BGAV, having been affirmed more than once by messengers to a BGAV annual meeting.

But they are not binding on any BGAV congregation or its members. It is a consensus of what Virginia Baptists believe, not an infallible document of what they must believe. This is a final principle of our fellowship. The BGAV is confessional, but not creedal.

Virginia Baptists have embraced confessions of faith for 180 years. The BGAV has affirmed such confessions as the *Baptist Faith and Message Statement* of 1963, which summarizes what Southern Baptists generally believed at that time.

But the BGAV always has rejected creeds, or written documents designed to instruct people what they must believe. Virginia Baptists reject creeds because they usurp the place of the Bible and the role of the Holy Spirit as our Helper in interpreting it. We also reject creeds because as human creations they are incomplete.

The BGAV has not endorsed the *Baptist Faith and Message* of 2000 precisely because it is being used by the SBC as a creed instead of a confession. It is being wielded as a tool to enforce conformity rather than as a document to state consensus.

The BGAV continues to be “the right choice” for more than 1,400 churches, not in spite of its beliefs, but because it is unwavering in its commitment to historic Baptist truths.
The Right Friends

Friends are important.
Friends enrich our lives. They open our lives to a larger world, enlarge our reach, strengthen us in our weak places, guide us when we lose our way and prompt us to become the person God intends us to be.

Our friends also signal who we are. Life is about choices, so who we choose as friends says something about our values, ambitions and needs.

Healthy friendships are symbiotic. Both partners benefit from the relationship, though the friendship is rarely equal.

Healthy friendships are not possessive or exclusive; they do not demand that partners dissolve ties with others in order to remain friends.

Friends need not be alike in everything. They respect the ways in which they are different from each other, recognizing that on occasion they may not endorse each other’s actions and values.

Friendships are not restricted to human beings. Institutions, corporations, nations and denominations have friends.

The Baptist General Association of Virginia has many friends. Old and new, near and far, young and mature, rich and poor, large and small. They go by different names, agencies, commissions, institutions, entities, partners but they are all friends.


Each of these partners provides a service or an array of ministries that enhance the work of Virginia Baptists and our churches. They contribute to the BGAV a vast network of ways God is active in Virginia and throughout the world. Virginia Baptists would be impoverished without these friends.

But these friendships are a two-way street. They connect the BGAV to God’s activity, and in return they receive financial contributions from Virginia Baptists through Cooperative Missions, through designated or direct gifts or from the sale of products to individuals and churches. These friends also benefit from the prayers, good will and talents of Virginia Baptists that are mustered in behalf of their agencies. These connections are mutually beneficial.

Does the BGAV keep a ledger that guarantees it profits most from its partnerships? No. Does it force one friend to give up its other friendships in order to be a partner? No. Does it require all its friends to embrace identical values or to endorse identical behaviors? No. Most of the time the BGAV does not see a conflict between its relationships with other Baptist groups and biblical ideals, Baptist principles and its own mission. There is latitude and flexibility in healthy Baptist friendships.

When your church joins the BGAV you plug into a family of friendships that extend around the world. They are the kind of friends that will let you and your church fulfill your calling under God.
One reason many churches want to be affiliated with the Baptist General Association of Virginia is because they like the people who make up the BGAV. There is a lot to like.

Laity: The strength of the BGAV was and is its laity, the men and women who comprise the rolls of the BGAV’s 1,419 churches. The autonomy of every BGAV church is respected, but most embrace the priesthood of all believers. While this concept relates to salvation and the interpretation of Scripture, it also has an impact on congregational relationships. It implies that church members have equal access to God, an equal voice in congregational decision-making and equal value in God’s eyes. Clergy are not inherently more valuable than laity, and pastors have no spiritual authority over laity.

So valued are the laity that for more than 50 years the presidency of the General Association has been rotated between clergy and laity. Every other year a member of the laity has been elected president, not because the constitution of the General Association requires it, but because the quality of Virginia Baptist laity argues for it. No other Baptist state convention follows this practice, and the Southern Baptist Convention has not had a layman serve as president for 30 years. Baptists in the South, according the church historian Bill Leonard, suffer from “clergification,” an unhealthy process whereby clergy wield most of the power in local church and denominational matters.

Your church should consider the BGAV because it is not a clergy-run convention; its laity are not just worker bees.

Clergy: Virginia Baptist churches have been blessed by excellent ministerial leadership for almost two centuries. Jeremiah Bell Jeter, one of the SBC’s founders, was a pastor of BGAV churches. George Braxton Taylor, founder of the Sunbeams, served BGAV churches. George W. McDaniel, SBC president, was a Virginia Baptist pastor, as was a successor at First Baptist Church of Richmond, Theodore F. Adams, who served as president of the Baptist World Alliance. (Editor’s Note: Currently, John Upton is serving as president of the BWA.) Across the South the average pastoral tenure is scarcely more than three years. In the BGAV the average tenure is more than eight years. That may speak to the patience of Virginia Baptist laity, but also it is a tribute to the quality of trained, committed ministers who serve in BGAV churches.

Though ordination is a prerogative of BGAV congregations, a growing minority of Virginia Baptist churches ordain women as deacons or clergy. The BGAV was the first Baptist state convention, for example, to have a woman minister elected as a state convention officer, and the first to have a woman pastor serve as president of its pastors conference.

Do you want your church to be associated with a Baptist state convention where laity play a prominent role in the leadership of its ministries and institutions? Where clergy are respected, but not worshipped? Where women can fulfill their calling under God? If so, then the BGAV is the right choice.
Anne Lamott says that writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way. “You don’t have to see where you’re going, you don’t have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you” (Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, p. 18).

This also is a parable about life, discipleship, church and denomination. The future is, at best, murky. The Baptist General Association of Virginia cannot expect to journey into the 21st century with the entire way illumined. We can, however, begin with a vision that sheds light on the road immediately ahead. This consistent vision continues to shove aside the darkness, so we can arrive at our destination safely.

The BGAV has the right vision for a wholesome and fruitful future.

**Kingdom More than Baptist**

“I am a Baptist, but I am more than a Baptist,” wrote Walter Rauschenbusch. “The old Adam is a strict denominationalist; the new Adam is just a Christian” (“Why I am a Baptist,” A Baptist Treasury, pp. 183-184).

Virginia Baptists are Baptists in principle and practice, but we are more than Baptists. We are Christians first, Baptists second. This means we are motivated by a Kingdom vision, not merely a denominational vision.

Though the BGAV’s founding documents state that its purpose is “to advance the Redeemer’s Kingdom,” the daily demands of church and denomination can shrink this vision. Controversy among Baptists, the turn of the calendar to a new millennium and the challenges of our postmodern age have forced the BGAV to recommit to its original purpose.

**Missions with, Not for**

Missions has been the BGAV’s passion since its birth 180 years ago. “Advance” is as important a word as “Kingdom” in the BGAV’s original purpose.

The methods were left up to Virginia Baptists, so long as they were “in accord with the word of God.” That gives the BGAV enormous freedom, and Virginia Baptists have responded with an array of redemptive ministries.

Partnership missions captured the imaginations of BGAV churches almost two decades ago. Since then it has enjoyed a marquee place in the list of Virginia Baptists’ missions methods.

Partnership missions reveals an approach to missions that is essential to the BGAV’s vision of missions—missions with, not for. Whether in Virginia’s district associations, the United States or around the world, the BGAV’s goal is to work alongside the recipients of our ministries.

This vision of missions is designed to encourage and empower rather than to create a paternalistic relationship marked by dependency. It is a vision in which Virginia Baptists admit our weakness equals our strength, and that allows God’s grace to function in relationships to make everyone a recipient as well as a giver. Most important, it recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit in others, not just in us.

The BGAV works with people, not over or for them.
Engagement, Not Separation

Christians of every generation decide whether they can fulfill their discipleship best by bearing witness to Jesus as a participant in the culture or whether they can follow Jesus better by standing outside the culture and critiquing it.

The BGAV has chosen a vision of the future that engages the postmodern age instead of creating a subculture that separates from the 21st century and attempts to recapture a prior era.

The majority of Baptists in the South have chosen the latter strategy. They are recreating the glory days of a denomination as a religious corporation that proscribes the practices and beliefs of its churches and members. The result is a parallel subculture that engages in a noisy monologue against an increasingly diverse world.

The BGAV has chosen to plant itself in a postmodern age and engage the culture in a conversation about Jesus in an attempt to woo and win it. This strategy has risks. Attempts to use 21st century styles, engage in dialogue with different religions, cooperate with diverse Christian groups and champion a church that is separate from the state will subject the BGAV to accusations that it is accommodating itself to the world. Allowing individual believers and churches to interpret Scripture rather than endorse a man-made creed, or to open pastoral ministry to women and men, will invite others to brand Virginia Baptists as liberals.

It is a risk worth taking, because it reflects a vision consistent with the BGAV’s Baptist heritage and 189-year-old mission.

If you want to join hands with Baptists in Virginia whose vision for the future is Kingdom centered, works in missions with people around the world and engages the 21st century in a conversation about Christ, the BGAV is the right choice.

View the Video!

Watch the video "Why I’m Proud to Be a Virginia Baptist” at www.vbmb.org/about.
There is more to the Christian life than orthodox doctrine and energetic witness. And a denomination is more than the sum of its doctrinal statement, institutional size and missions reach.

Christians and denominations must possess the right spirit. A people’s theology may be letter perfect and their organizations may hum with precision, but they are not much use to God if they are narrow and mean. According to Paul one can worship in style, fathom the depths of God, accomplish great deeds and die a martyr’s death; but if a spirit of love is missing, then all this has little to do with God (see 1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

The Baptist General Association of Virginia holds the right beliefs. It conducts an impressive array of ministries and links BGAV churches to partners who are doing the work of God around the world. But the BGAV does not ignore the spirit with which it embraces doctrine and conducts ministry.

During the 1920s a painful, fractious debate between fundamentalist and moderate Christians was part of the Christian landscape. In that era the BGAV celebrated its 100th anniversary. Robert H. Pitt, editor of the Religious Herald, delivered an address to the General Association in which he described the distinctive “temper” of the BGAV. “Temper” is a now-obsolete term that means “spirit” or “attitude.”

Pitt characterized Virginia Baptists as a genteel, courteous, cooperative people. Eighty years later this remains true.

Among the galling features of national Baptist gatherings during the present era of doctrinal differences is the way debates are punctuated by partisan applause or jeers. This rarely occurs at annual meetings of the General Association. Its messengers prefer to listen with respect even when there is disagreement.

In his speech Pitt said Virginia Baptists “often differed, sometimes seriously and sharply, about doctrine and duty. Seldom have they allowed their zealous support of their own views to lead them to forget that the queen of all Christian graces is love. This spirit of Christian charity extends to Christians of other denominations. Virginia Baptists, said Pitt “have claimed no superiority of rank over their brethren, but have never been willing to acknowledge any inferiority on their own part. They have not allowed their denominational self-esteem to run into arrogance, or to degenerate into intolerance.” A sign of healthy faith is the capacity to appreciate the beliefs and practices of others without compromising one’s own. The BGAV has a spirit that allows for ecumenism without suffocating under political correctness.

The spirit of Christian courtesy also allows the BGAV to bear witness with integrity to its beliefs without bashing non-Christian religions, an ugly practice of some Christian leaders in our pluralistic age. Virginia Baptists, said Pitt, have found it possible “to maintain firmly, to promote steadily, and to press earnestly the great truths of evangelical religion without sacrificing Christlikeness of temper.” Still do.

This cooperative Christian spirit does not serve everyone’s purposes, of course, particularly those Christians who engage in personal kingdom building or set themselves up as guardians of doctrine. “The atmosphere of this State,” Pitt told the BGAV in 1923, “has never been favorable to the development of doctrinal martinet who demand that we shall all pass in review before them.” Virginia Baptists are quick to sniff out this judgmental spirit and refuse it a platform.

The BGAV has the right spirit. Catch it.

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