

REFLECTIONS ON THE BCOQ DIRECTIVE

Ray Hobbs

These comments are some musings on the recent “directive” from the BCOQ Council. They are made in response to the meeting of the Gathering on Sept. 28, 2003. Comments were made at that meeting concerning the unusual process through which the decision to make public the directive traveled. Since I was not present at the Council meetings, nor at the meetings of the Advisory Committee established to look at the topic of same-sex marriage, I will offer no comments on that process. There are other processes, however, which deserve comment.

I. PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

A. There is no public evidence of a Social, Historical or Theological analysis of the topic of same-sex marriage. References to the EFC statements on the topic are inadequate, and, incidentally, a reflection of the fears expressed when the Convention became affiliated with the EFC, namely, that the theological and social agenda of Ontario and Quebec Baptists would be placed in the hands of others.

B. The directive appears to be an attempt by Council to use managerial power to enforce conformity to a perceived set of “Core Values”. There is no hint that there was any serious Theological debate on the matter prior to the issuing of the directive.

C. Therefore, the directive is *de facto* Policy to which associations and churches must react, rather than a subject for discussion emerging from the churches and associations in assembly.

II. THEOLOGICAL MATTERS

A. Biblical Witness

There is an important matter of interpretive style and process which is ignored first, by the assumption that the statement of aphorisms, or the citation of Biblical texts is sufficient to clinch an argument, or to support a position; second, by the assumption that the Scriptures have a unified witness to the subjects of sexuality, marriage and other forms of human relationships.

The “big picture” of the Biblical witness needs to be brought into the discussion. This focuses on the broader issues of the ways in which the people of God relate to each other within the covenant. Specific statements in the Scriptures, taken out of their literary and social context, are often unhelpful. The story of the peoples of the covenant[s] is a story of negotiation among its members to establish a community of justice and peace. Generally, narrow-minded attempts at coercion to simplistic, literalistic patterns of life, are rejected.

B. Theological Integration

In matters of human sexuality, which are part of human relationships, and which contribute to the self-understanding of Christians are to be dealt with in a theological context, that is, talk about God, about God’s relationship with humanity and the corresponding relationships between people. This is not an easy task. Unfortunately, it is a task which appears to have been completely avoided with the appearance of the directive.

The brief preamble to the directive, which parrots some of the statements approved by

Assembly in June 2003, is hardly a theological interpretation of human relationships. It is instead a series of aphorisms which need testing before they are accepted, and which one does not find reflected in the day to day world.

III. QUESTIONS OF BAPTIST POLITY AND PRACTICE

There are several items of Baptist polity to which one can appeal as critical of the stance taken in the directive. They are ‘no brainers’ in my opinion, but I offer them in outline with minimum commentary.

A. Religious Freedom

Beginning with Thomas Helwys’s 1609¹ book *The Mystery of Iniquity*, Baptists have treasured the notion that a person’s religious belief is a matter between the person and God. No intermediaries are need. No authoritative voice is required.

B. Autonomy of the Local Congregation

Under the guidance of God the local congregation of Baptists is sufficient unto itself to live and worship as the people of God. It voluntarily enters into association with other churches and conventions.

C. The Nature of Ministry

Ministry, in Baptist polity and practice, is the prerogative of the local gathered community. In the present situation, Ministers are not hired by the BCOQ, but by the local church. Such benefits as come from affiliation with the BCOQ are incidental to this established pattern. The practice of ministry should be governed by those who employ the Minister.

D. Baptist Hermeneutics

Baptist history and practice, like that of any other diverse collection of people, are varied, and it would be foolish to state that Baptists worldwide think and act in the same way. Unlike the Roman Catholic church, Baptists have no one leader to whom they offer obedience, or one set of doctrines that they all regard as equally authoritative.

But this too is part of the genius of being Baptist, especially on Biblical interpretation. Baptist interpretation of the Bible generally presupposes an honest and open debate about the meaning of given passages of Scripture. This presupposition is embedded in the early Baptist claim to freedom of the practice of their religion. No single authority is accepted, apart from the Bible reader, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Citing of single texts to clinch an argument does not cut it. Presenting one’s case so that it may be “*freely heard and deeply considered*”² is a more responsible way of dealing with matters of difference.

In this it appears as though the BCOQ Council has erred. If there was a debate, it was not a public one; if there was consideration of the Biblical material on the topic, then it was neither serious nor profound.

IV. TRENDS WITHIN THE BCOQ

There are several developments over the past twenty years within the BCOQ which one can identify as a “trend” which has removed us farther and farther from a distinctively Baptist living out of our faith, to a more “evangelical” mode. I do not understand either of these terms in a

¹ It was published in 1611.

² John Milton “Aereopagitica: For the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing”.

denominational sense, one can still be a Baptist and live with integrity within a “post-denominational” world.

Among those trends are the joining of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. Although benign in its appearance, it was a membership which has come at too much of a cost. EFC policy has become BCOQ policy, especially in the matter of the place of gays and lesbians in the fellowship of the church. EFC’s aggressive support of anti-gay moves across the country has not sat well with many who favour a more open and understanding approach to the matter.

The events which took place at the Divinity College a decade ago, and the politics surrounding the “Equality in Ministry” report were very hurtful to many. Yet in the case of the former they were unjustly and dishonestly portrayed as a redemption of the College from liberalism, and the establishment of a truly ‘evangelical’ college. This is far from the truth, and constitutes a “metanarrative” which will not stand the light of examination.

The BCOQ went along with this, and its ‘fact-finding’ report on the matter was mless than helpful, and contained misrepresentation.³

A. New Systems Document

There is a direct line between these earlier moves, to the NSNC document and new forms of governance, and the recent directive from the BCOQ Council. The NSNC document has enshrined a centralized form of governance which demands conformity, rather than dealing openly with dissent. During a visit of the sales team to the Niagara Hamilton Association meeting in Grimsby in the Spring of 2003 we were treated not to an open discussion of the document, but to an aggressive attempt to persuade the audience that it was right and proper to pursue this path. In a discussion following the meeting, at which I had made some comments, I was informed in no uncertain terms that “democracy is not a Biblical word!” I conceded the point, but told the claimant that “stoning”, “cutting off from one’s people”, “branding” and other forms of personal injury for dissidents were.

It is a matter of degree, I suppose, but the directive and the accompanying threat to one’s livelihood conveyed in the recent move of the BCOQ Council is in the spirit of the latter and not the former. One should question too whether such a threat is within the spirit of the law in Ontario or Canada.

B. The Myth and Dangers of “Efficiency”

The “New Systems for a New Century” [NSNC] document, which is now BCOQ policy, uses the word “efficiency” and its cognates throughout. It is clear that this was a motivating factor in the development of a new form of governance for the BCOQ. “Efficiency” is a corporation word, as befits the new governance model introduced in the “NSNC” document. Apart from a confusion in the document between ‘governance’ and ‘management’ of the BCOQ, the goal of efficiency has its severe drawbacks.

³ Upon receiving the document I was surprised to find in it motives and emotions attributed to myself which I had never expressed. In fact, I had expressed nothing because I was not interviewed by any member of the Committee which produced the Report. My request for clarification of this, and the possibility of an apology for misrepresenting my position was ignored. It was argued that, since i had left the country at the time of the Committee’s work, it was not considered important to talk to me.

Henry Mintzberg offers the following analysis of “efficiency”.⁴

“Efficiency” is dependent upon things that can be measured. Therefore, because costs are more easily measured than benefits (those things which have to do with a happy, motivated workforce), efficiency all too often reduces to economy. Because efficiency measures costs more easily, social costs are treated as external. There is little or no attempt to accommodate these social costs. Because economic benefits are typically more easily measured than social benefits, efficiency often drives an organization towards “economic morality” (“if it saves money, or gets things done faster, do it!”), which can amount to a social immorality (“If you don’t like it, then leave!”)

C. Control

Efficiency, as presented in the NSNC document, needs complete control to be effective, hence its character as a “corporation word”. It has little, if anything to do with community, and even less to do with the Covenant community of the people of God. In fact, it can be antithetical to the Community of justice and peace, or to use the phrase of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Community of the Beloved.

Two things have come to my attention in recent weeks. The first is the decision of the Divinity College administration to stop the conduct of all weddings in the University Chapel. Whether they have the right to do this is yet undetermined, since the chapel is a University Chapel. However, one rationale given in a telephone conversation was that they wished to avoid the embarrassment of having same-sex weddings conducted at the chapel, therefore all weddings had been stopped. Later, to rationalize the move refuge was taken in the recent BCOQ directive. It is obvious that the BCOQ directive has absolutely nothing to do with who gets married in a facility of a publicly funded University.⁵ Nevertheless, it has been used as a reason to deny a practice which at present is legal in Ontario.

The second was a conversation with an ordained friend who, although open and welcoming in his own attitude, refused to take a public stand on the recent directive. The reason was obvious. He feared for his job. Any conduct that causes such suspicion, fear and which forces people to live under a threat is unchristian and contrary to the Gospel. It should be named for what it is. It is not a form of church discipline. It is intimidation of the most blatant kind. It should have no part in the dealings of Christians with each other.

V. NOTE ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF “MARRIAGE”

A. Biblical Diversity

One hears a lot today about “Biblical family values” or “The Biblical View of Marriage”. The problem I have with such general statements is that they seem to assume that there is one, clear teaching on the topic. As with most moral and ethical issues, the Bible invites dialogue rather than offers directives, and this is simply because there are several sides to a topic.

⁴ Mintzberg is Bronfman Professor of Management at McGill University, Montreal, and a highly respected, if unconventional, thinker on management and the nature of corporations. See his *Mintzberg On Management: Inside Our Strange World of Organizations*. New York: The Free Press, 1989, pp. 330-334; and his more recent, careful analysis of management and ‘strategic planning’ in *Strategic Safari: A Guided Tour Through the Wilds of Strategic Management*. New York: Free Press, 1998.

⁵ It should also not be overlooked that, because of its status in offering McMaster University degrees, the Divinity College also receives money from the public purse.

The Bible is a narrative, and as with all good narratives, character presentation, plot twists and other literary devices invite engagement of the reader with the story. There is an assumption of variety and diversity. There are choices offered, each with consequences. There are cautionary tales told. There are parts that instruct, and parts that confuse and have lost their meaning through the passage of time. There are progressions of moral thinking. There are abandonings of past practices and the encouragement of new ones. Each time the reader opens its pages there is the expectation of conversion, that the reader will go away from the text a different person than when she first read it.

B. Contextualization (Social and Literacy)

On the topic of marriage the Bible offers no single witness. Even the teachings of Jesus are fraught with apparent contradiction. Divorce is clearly prohibited (Matt. 5.31-32) with few exceptions, yet “hating” one’s *“father, mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters”* (Luke 14.26) is also encouraged, even demanded of disciples.

Patriarchal polygamy, and apparent unlimited sexual access to the women in the traditional tribal family are an embarrassment to proponents of “Biblical Family Values”⁶ Instructions prohibiting battlefield rape, but encouraging it at home (Deut. 21.10-14) likewise give pause to the modern reader. Accumulation of political or economic alliances through marriage (Gen. 34.8-12; 1 Kings 3.1-2), and the abandonment of them for political or religious expediency (Ezra 9-10; Neh. 13.23-30⁷) are equally unacceptable today.

Yet all of these practices are presented in the Scriptures without much comment, certainly without critical comment. They demand understanding as part of the story, and this involves careful analysis of the social and literary context. Contradictions that emerge need not always be resolved. Choices offered are not always clear-cut. But such a situation encourages discussion, debate and dialogue, not directives.

C. Baptists and Sexuality

Baptists and sexuality generally have not mixed well. Statements which have been issued on the topic have tended to be negative, and I know of few serious examinations of human sexuality written by Baptist theologians. In cases where sexuality has been misused, or led to abuse or even misunderstanding there has been a tendency not to enter into a helpful dialogue, but to hide the matter beyond public scrutiny. The unfortunate result is that the topic is rarely, if ever discussed in a helpful manner.

An open and constructive debate on the topic of sexuality in general and same-sex relationships in particular, held under the auspices of the BCOQ would have been a helpful and most valuable experience as background for the current situation. It has not taken place because, as the directive suggests, there is one view on the matter which has been endorsed by Council. Even the motion that was brought to the Assembly in June 2003 was a surprise to many and did not receive the necessary kind of careful consideration. Baptists deserve better than that.

Sadly, with the diminution of the role of the Assembly in the post-NSNC document life of Baptists of Ontario and Quebec, it is unlikely in the future that any chance for open dialogue

⁶ On this topic in general see the excellent recent book by John Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality: The Body and the Household in Ancient Israel* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

⁷ Note the accompanying violence in this story (vs. 25).

will take place. All for the sake of efficiency, the Convention has handed over far too many decision and policy making powers to the Board of the newly fashioned BCOQ. Our role seems to be to await additional directives on how to behave and how to believe. Whatever the benefits of this for the few, it is certainly light years away from what has traditionally been Baptist polity.

The Brethren Mennonite Council has been active since 1978, and provides a forum for open and respectful dialogue on the nature of the church as an inclusive community of the faithful. Its website can be found at <<http://www.webcom.com/bmc/news-video.html>>. This organization has no counterpart in Canadian Baptist circles, and Canadian Baptists are poorer because of this. Of excellent value is the BMC statement entitled *Guidelines For Establishing And Maintaining Respect And "Fair Play" In The Church's Dialogue About The Inclusion Of Gay, Lesbian And Bisexual People In The Church*. Sadly, such an enlightened, positive approach to dialogue has been notably absent from BCOQ politics.

V. CONCLUSION

In his tract on divorce, a topic which as scandalous to some in his day as was the matter of same-sex marriage is today, John Milton concludes with the following, helpful vision:

Last of all, to those whose mind is still to maintain textual restriction, whereof the bare sound cannot consist sometimes with Humanity, much less Charity, I would ever answer by putting them in remembrance of a command above all commands, which they seem to have forgot, and who spake it; in comparison whereof this which they so exalt is but a petty and subordinate precept... Let them go therefore and consider well what this lesson means "I will have mercy and not sacrifice"; for on that saying "all the Law and the Prophets depend" much more the Gospel, whose end and excellence is mercy and peace: or, if they cannot learn that, how will they learn this? which yet I shall not doubt to leave with them as a conclusion, That God the Son hath put all things under his own feet, but his Commandments he hath left under the feet of Charity.⁸

Biographical Note

Ray Hobbs is a retired Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation, McMaster University, a longtime Baptist, with Family Baptist roots going back to the 18th century in Gloucestershire, England, and with extensive experience of ministry in teaching and preaching in the churches of the BCOQ.

⁸ John Milton "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce: Restored to the Good of Both Sexes".