

Fahrenheit 6/11:

A Reflection on the Resolution Passed at BCOQ Assembly, 6/11/04

I got through dinner with my kids at one of their favourite restaurants with no indigestion: no Baptist stuff. Just the stuff of their young adult lives. It was a good way to end a long June day. And it helped keep my life in perspective. They knew I was in town for BCOQ Assembly, knew the tension I was feeling, and they didn't have the least bit of interest in discussing it. Bless them.

That's what is so hard about all of this for me. As upset as I am over the dehumanizing decision Assembly made about same-sex marriage (the documents are available at www.baptist.ca) and the BCOQ pastors and chaplains, this isn't my issue. And the people who want to make it my issue aren't my people. Not that the message the decision sends to our other-than-heterosexual siblings is less than evil. And, yes, it does erode the inherent mutual trust between pastors and chaplains and their faith communities, including the BCOQ. It's just that the decision won't stop me from being the pastor I believe I am called to be, won't stop me from being the person I am called to be. That person, I hope, is one who continues to celebrate his freedom in Christ and the diversity of creation. That person believes that if two consenting adults want to make a covenant before God and God's people for their life together then they should.

But BCOQ, by its decision on June 11, says I'm wrong. And if I want to stay wrong then I can't stay in the BCOQ.

Here's what happened from my perspective. First, I need to take you back to a luncheon meeting at a restaurant in Kitchener. Ken Bellous, Executive Minister of the BCOQ, invited members of the Gathering Steering Committee to meet with members of the BCOQ Board. Not all of us were available, but 14 of us met for almost 3 hours for a civil and impassioned conversation. Their goal was to "move forward." Our goal was to be heard and to plead for the ongoing right to dissent from the published resolution. We were heard, and heard that there was room for dissent but if people couldn't agree with an organization's democratic decision then they might belong somewhere else. Then we began to read the newly revised resolution with its more stringent punitive measures and re-writing of the history of Soul Liberty and knew that "moving forward" didn't include us. It was very clear that for them this is an issue of morality: they equate a willingness on the part of a pastor to marry a same-sex couple as a moral breach to be treated in the same way as adultery. It also is an issue of orthodoxy, of the way we interpret the Bible, and it is an issue of fear of the surrounding culture. The Business must survive.

With that background I went to Assembly. I was uncomfortable from the moment I arrived. I sought the company of friends, and stayed close to them. I spent time talking about other things with my friends on the affirmative side of the resolution. Most of them didn't get how alienating this all was. Those of us who were present were, directly or indirectly, on the receiving end of the emotional violence of the resolution. We were present because we knew that we had to participate to raise a voice of protest, to see this part of our history, to be in solidarity with those whom the edict would harm. Most of us left Assembly like Marian the Librarian: sadder but wiser.

The BCOQ *Splash* Newsletter describes tersely what happened. Here is my version. It should be viewed through the lens of my impression that I'm not sure we heard each others' arguments. To us, those in favour of the resolution were being simplistic and reactionary. To them I believe we were viewed as at best, misguided and at worst, heretical.

Thursday morning the resolution was introduced along with a notice of motion to amend it to include scriptural references and make the language more direct. Thursday afternoon there was a civil (I keep using that word, but civility seems to be a chief value for the BCOQ as it makes us all reasonable people. Meanwhile some of us sit quietly listening, while fantasizing about having a whip and a few money-changers' tables to overturn) panel discussion. Some good questions were asked, some powerful statements were made, some ambiguity remained. Although the prevailing mood was obvious, there was a sense that maybe we Baptists didn't have all the answers.

Friday morning the resolution was introduced, as well as the amendment. We spent the entire discussion getting the wording right. It was frustrating and used a lot of time and energy. Friday afternoon the floor debate began in earnest. There wasn't much ranting. There was a lot of humility. Ambivalence was expressed by some, clarity by others. A few risked telling a part of their story to appeal for a different resolution. Then, 75 minutes later, someone called for the question. The delegates agreed to vote even though there was time Saturday for further discussion and there were several people at the microphones waiting to speak to the motion. Later that evening when it was announced that the resolution passed by a significant majority, there was applause. A forgone conclusion was greeted triumphantly.

An attempt was made on Saturday to encourage BCOQ churches to find ways of ministering to the Homosexual Community when a motion was made to have the Board work on this for the churches. Earlier in the week they admitted that they had not spoken to any non-heterosexual people in developing the resolution or the background information. I find this ironic as I participated, with some of those same Board members, in conferences in Toronto on cross-cultural ministry, the main emphasis being that you can not bring the Gospel to people whose culture you have not begun to understand—you have to learn from them first. I am a little dubious about the ability of the BCOQ churches to minister with the Gay community.

I am struck by the overwhelming positivism of the resolution: the methodology, the response to dissent, the satisfaction at having done the right thing. But we didn't do anything. There is no guarantee of protection, against legal action, no guarantee of preventing same-sex marriages, no guarantee of satisfactory discipline. All we did was to re-establish the precedent of determining orthodoxy by majority vote; and marginalize those of us who continue to believe in diversity.

In the past when we have had to agree to disagree, Baptists have had to hold their noses while talking about decisions made by Assembly while choosing to dissent. Now we are left standing looking at each other, sandals in hand, wondering at the piles of sand at our feet.

- Cam Watts

A story about Billy: Fully immersed in a ministry to a downtown pastor

Billy was a sweet simple guy I got to know while I worked at Sanctuary, a ministry in the downtown core of Toronto that focused on people who were street involved. I got to know him on the steps of the Second Cup at Church Street and Wellesley; a common cruising spot in the gay community. Billy was about thirty, but reminded me of a Great Dane puppy. We would meet up sometimes in the neighbourhood gay bars. I'm sure he thought at first I was gay. Why else would I be there? Why would anyone hang out with gay people unless they were gay too? Over a long period of time we became good friends and shared more of our time and lives together. He started hanging out at Sanctuary as well, and his love for being around people and his natural inclination to help out got him involved cooking in the kitchen.

He came to me one day and asked me, very sheepishly, if I could help him with a problem. He couldn't read. He had hidden fairly successfully from most people who knew him. We started taking regular time each week to practice his reading and I encouraged his connection to Beat the Street, a literacy program for street people. Over the course of several months we never talked much about Jesus.

He told me about his previous contact with a church he had been attending for several months. He had said something in conversation with someone in the church about playing baseball for a team based in one of the bars along Church Street. The person asked him why he would play baseball for a gay bars' team. They asked him if he was gay. He told me, "I was always told that I shouldn't lie so I said 'yes'." That person told the pastor and the pastor called Billy into a meeting and asked him if it was true that he was homosexual. He said, "I guess I should have lied, but I didn't. The pastor told me that I should not go there anymore because they have children. I tried to tell him that I wouldn't ever hurt a child but he said I didn't understand. I guess I don't. The pastor wasn't mean, or anything, he was just trying to do what he thought was the best." Then Billy said something that broke my already angry heart. Billy asked, "I guess I shouldn't come here anymore neither, cause I know you have your kids here at Sanctuary too, eh?" He was expecting me to tell him not to come back. I didn't. I told him he was welcome to come here as long as he wanted.

Our friendship continued to grow. It was through the relationships

he had with others there that Billy came to ask for baptism. He said he knew he didn't "know much about the bible and all that, but I know Jesus loves me."

At his baptism Billy stood up in front of everyone and with halting and stumbling he read (just barely) a statement he had written about this faith journey. Of course he didn't use terms like "faith journey." It was plain and simple, just like Billy.

We walked down into the freezing water, (the baptistry was not connected to the hot water supply and the heater had never worked) and after his profession of faith I eased him back into the water. But Billy, being a big guy, displaced a lot of water and was buoyed up. He didn't go all the way under. In a split second it occurred to me that not being "fully immersed" might concern him unnecessarily in the future. He might doubt whether his baptism really "worked". Without hesitation I pushed him down again all the way under the water. He felt the downward push of the second dipping and began to stiffen and push back up. He regained his footing and stood up. We exited to the customary whoops and cheers and handclapping that goes with a baptism there. It remained a standing joke between us that I had tried to hold him under till the bubbles stopped, but he just didn't co-operate.

The last time I saw Billy was this past winter at St. Mike's Hospital, ICU. He was hooked to a respirator and couldn't talk; the final stages of along battle with AIDS. He tried to say something to me, but the tube down his throat made it impossible. He wanted to communicate, but the heavy sedation also conspired to keep his urgent thought from coming. He could not hold a pen to write on paper. I asked him if he was scared and he nodded 'yes'. I asked him if he felt that Jesus loved him and would accept him. He nodded 'yes' again. He squeezed my hand, pointed at himself and then at me. I said "I love you too". We sat in silence till the time came for me to go. He had drifted off to sleep again. That was the last I ever saw Billy.

When I remember his baptism I laugh, and I am confident that someday Billy will be able to tell me what was so urgent that day last winter, and I will laugh with my friend.

- Joe Abbey-Colborne

PATEFO Report: fellowship and sense of community

Heather and I returned from the Czech Republic on Friday, July 23, after spending a delightful two weeks there. We participated in the third biennial Pankrac Theological Forum (PATEFO). The conference began in Prague, then retired to the beautiful village of Siroky Dul (Broad Valley) in the Moravian hills east of the capital.

Attendance at the conference was slightly down this year, with participants from the Czech Republic (6), Canada (3), the US (2), Britain (2), and Estonia (6). One of our regulars was finishing her PhD dissertation in Scotland, another hosting a group of German young people at a Hutterite community in Slovakia, yet another in the process of moving from one church to another in Italy.

Under the general title of "Christianity and Culture" papers were given and discussions were held on several excellent topics - "Post-liberal Christianity and Current Culture" (Dr. Petr Macek, Charles University, Prague); "The War on Terror - ...to see ourselves as others see us" (Colin Bond, Minister, Glasgow); "Christian Theologies and Religious Pluralism in a Polycentric World" (Dr. Jeff Pool, Berea College, Kentucky, US); "Polity and Ethics: Canadian Baptist Case Studies" (Dr. Ray Hobbs, Hamilton); "Aspects of Identity-related Bible Reading: Estonian Churches in the Wake of the Referendum on

Joining the EU" (Ain Riistan, University of Tartu, Estonia); "Power as a Substitute for Soul" (Dr. Ken Jackson, First Place, Hamilton); "New Issues in the Politics of Religion: A Theological Perspective on Same-Sex Marriage" (Dr. Warren Kay, Merrimack College, Boston, USA).

The fellowship and sense of community were excellent. We are already planning for our next meeting in 2006, and are hoping to expand the conference. We have outgrown our home in Siroky Dul, and are looking for something larger. PATEFO is a great way to meet Baptists and other Christians from Europe, and to have some deep and meaningful discussions on many issues avoided by others. The fellowship is wonderful, and the host country breathtaking in its beauty and overwhelming in its hospitality. If you are planning that far ahead, and wish for a stimulating location and context for a vacation — remember PATEFO.

I cannot end this without a word of deep thanks for Ladya and Pavla Meckovsky and Mirek Swiatek, of Pankrac (Topolka) Baptist Church, Prague, for their wonderful arrangements, and tireless work throughout the conference.

- Ray Hobbs

Inconsistent, or what?

On March 31, 2004 I found a statement on the BCOQ website directing readers to "EFC Statement Condemning Hate in Toronto: EFC issued a statement Condemning Hate Expression against Jews in Toronto". Turning to the EFC statement I found the sentiment expressed commendable. It condemned acts of violence against the Jewish community in Toronto, this in the wake of recent spray painting of houses and synagogues and the desecration of Jewish graves. Such actions are cowardly and despicable, and should receive vigorous public condemnation.

Yet, also on the BCOQ website is a link to a concern about Bill C-250. The link is to the EFC website where there is notice of a campaign against a private member's bill in Parliament to counter hate propaganda. The Bill (C250) would include gays, lesbians and transgendered as those to be protected. The EFC urges "Pray that the Senate will amend or defeat this bill at third reading." This opposition is justified by raising the fear that the Bible could be declared hate literature under the provisions of the Bill, and that the Bible would be accused of promoting hatred against certain groups.

The problem with this argument is the implicit, and veiled admission that the Bible does promote hatred against certain groups. This it clearly does. Canaanites (Josh. 6.17-21), Amalekites (1 Sam. 15.1-3), Babylonians (Jer. 51-52), Egyptians (Jer. 46.1-28), Philistines (Zech. 9.5-6), Edomites and Moabites (Ps. 60.8) are all deemed worthy of national shaming, or vengeful death and annihilation, unless they conform to Israelite standards and are incorporated (subjugated?) within the Israelite empire. Racial slurs appear in the New Testament (Titus 1.12). An important question is Why should the Bible be exempt from the reaches of the law? As so often before, in following the EFC public statements on matters of social concern, the BCOQ has side-stepped the important Baptist principle in dealing with the Bible, namely that congregations and individual Christians have the right and "authority" (the word is used in some early Baptist confessions) to interpret Scripture for themselves. The modern evangelical position is

that the understanding and role of Scripture in Christian life are given and are immutable. The Baptist principle is that the understanding and role of the Scriptures in the Christian life are the subjects of prayerful discussion and dialogue. The former position displays a distinct lack of trust in the power of the documents of Scripture, the work of the Holy Spirit and the dedication of the believer to walk honestly as a disciple.

In my opinion, despite its protestations of giving dignity to all, the position of the EFC is quite inconsistent. On the one hand it decries hatred, and on the other combats a bill that would punish it.

In passing one should point out that to my knowledge the protest against the desecration of Jewish property has not been matched by similar protests against the burning of Sikh temples, attempted burning of mosques, and general abuse suffered by Canadian citizens originally from the Middle East. The protest against the law is self-seeking. There is certainly no threat to the reading of the Bible and its use in churches. All that is needed is that the approach regarding Philistines, Canaanites and all the others mentioned in the Bible is applied to the passages dealing with same sex-acts between males. Namely, that they are historically and culturally conditioned, and they need to be understood in the light of the teachings of Jesus. One can hardly escape the conclusion that had a different group been the subject of the law, the reaction would have been different, or non-existent.

Living in a pluralistic world Christians, along with Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus and hosts of others, live at risk. For the creation of that pluralistic world a price has to be negotiated by all. Attempts to turn a tide, perceived as dangerous, and campaigns to preserve a so-called Judaeo-Christian heritage, or in the EFC's own words "a Christian culture" - also included on the EFC website - are doomed to failure. Cultures or societies are not fixed entities with clearly defined borders, entrances and exits, but are rather negotiated patterns of life together amidst diversity. In the New Testament I read of a Jesus who demands of His followers a faithful discipleship, no matter where it takes them, and the willingness to give up what is precious to them in the service of others. Surely the task of the Christian leadership in this country is to assist Christians to live amidst change in creative, productive and indeed Christian ways.

- Ray Hobbs

Letters are welcome at gnl@gatheringbaptists.ca, fax: (local Toronto) 416-922-4359 or by post to Michael Steeves, at 70 Linsmore Cr., Toronto ON M4J 4K1. Letters may be edited for clarity and length. Please include full name, address, phone number and email if applicable. Editorial Board: Michael Steeves - Editor, Cam Watts, Barbara Bishop, Colleen Furry, bob paterson-watt, Daphne L. Hunt (production).

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Fall Gathering of Baptists together in Toronto

For its morning session, the Fall Gathering of Baptists joins The Lester Randall Preaching Fellowship held at Yorkminster Park Baptist Church, Toronto on 24 October 2004 featuring Dr. Joseph Jeter from Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, Texas.

The afternoon session, solely a Gathering of Baptists sponsored event features David Gregg of The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB) will converse with us on ministry with our GLBT brothers and sisters.

More information is available at www.gatheringbaptists.ca.

Toronto Peace Garden celebrates 20th anniversary

The 20th Anniversary of the Toronto Peace Garden will be celebrated on 19 September 2004 at the Nathan Phillips Square in Toronto. For more details, follow the link on the Events page at www.gatheringbaptists.ca.

Christian Peacemaker Training opportunity in Toronto

Christian Peacemakers offer an intensive three-week team training session in Toronto, 24 September to 11 October 2004. More information can be found at <http://www.cpt.org/corps.php>

BPFNA Peace Camp report:

These “stones” gathered together, cried out, sang and worshipped together

Judy and I returned from the summer camp/conference of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America at Towson University Campus, a bit north of Baltimore, Maryland.

Among 275 attendees were 15 Canadians. These included Bob Holmes, a Jesuit priest from Toronto involved in Christian Peacemaking Teams, Pat Cosman working as a chaplain in the USA, and the following folk from our Gathering of Baptists network: BPFNA president, Bob Paterson-Watt and his family, MJ, Zoe and Genevieve, Ron and Barbara Getz, Karen Turner and Heather Steeves, Michael Steeves and Elena Zanetti and Lee McKenna duCharme.

The theme for the week, expressed in song, bible study, sermon, picture, symbol and protest was "The stones will cry out."

Molly Marshall led us in creative, stimulating and involving Bible Study each morning using the symbol of stones from the Bible as we focused on stones of lament, dissent, witness and community.

Trinette McCray preached on three of the evenings — her content not in my view anyway, as deep as the Bible study or as some of the preaching in other years, but certainly theologically balanced, socially and culturally relevant, lively and with some challenge.

Lee led a couple of workshops on conflict resolution (creating a team of volunteer trainers) and one on why we call ourselves the BPF of NA.

Michael and John represented the Gathering on a panel which focused on "Baptists Without Borders", and continued the discussions regarding our future along with other like-minded groups of progressive Baptists.

We were introduced to the new Co-ordinating Director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship, Gary Percesepe, and his wife Suzanne. He started his new job on the first day of the conference. Gary's position description as a "co-ordinator" is deliberate and carefully chosen to represent the main thrust of his responsibility: to stimulate, encourage and support those initiatives for peace and justice already going on or will happen in various regions and local settings. In an address to the attendees at the final evening session of conference, Gary called peace activists to three movements of spiritual transformation: from loneliness to solitude, from hostility to hospitality, from illusion to prayer; and he shared his vision of "reaching out" to claim the gifts of peace-making and to use those gifts effectively.

The Memorial Service on one of the evenings, remembered among others, Madeleine Paterson-Watt, whose life, spirit and world view was so strongly impacted by her attendance at summer peace camps. She was remembered at other times and in other ways as well.

On one of the afternoons, about 60 of the attendees (including MJ, Zoe, Lee and Pat) made the trek down to Washington and Capital Hill, to stage a visible protest to the war in Iraq and to war generally. There was some tussle with the officials who control activities on the hill, and some television coverage as well.

Next year, the conference will be in beautiful McMinnville, Oregon with Bible Study leader, Cam Watts, of Aylmer, ON. One of the plenary speakers will be Paul Dekar.

- John Furry

“Dorothy’s” forgiveness and lies from our leaders

In one of my earlier school years, I remember a recess where I had squirted watered-down glue at one of the other girls—let's call her Dorothy—staining her coat. Dorothy came from a family of some apparent disadvantage and it showed. Frequently, her clothes had not been laundered and my glue shot seemed insignificant on her well-worn coat.

When I was asked point blank if I had done this, there seemed to be no point in lying. I remembered the deed, the stain and the distressed face of my victim too well. I would betray myself if I lied.

At our recent Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec (BCOQ) Assembly in June, we were presented with a resolution that appeared to ask for a decision on the issue of same-sex marriage. In reality it was an omnibus resolution — a directive — calling for affirmation of three items. The first was a definition of marriage that could be construed as a ban on remarriage of divorced persons and, if one pushed hard the envelope on the wording, a ban on remarriage of widowed persons. The second was a call to lobby our political leaders and justice officials against same-sex marriage. The third was a threat to accredited pastors who officiate or co-officiate at a same-sex marriage ceremony. The threat was to be "subject to disciplinary review as provided for in the BCOQ Protocol for Discipline, Reinstatement and Restoration

Manual (a.k.a. The Red Book)."

So, we were told that the disciplinary procedure was in the Red Book. Examination of the contents of available copies (April 2003) made no mention of such a procedure. We were not presented with any such procedure in writing at the Assembly. How do we know that such a procedure even exists? What does it entail? How can we vote on something we cannot properly examine?

Getting back to Dorothy, I realised that the worst that could happen might be that I would get the strap, I had no idea on what part of my anatomy, but I had heard rumours. Other kids seemed to live alright after the horrific event, but surely had stories to tell. A few wore it as a badge of honour.

Someone on the teaching staff was compassionate though. Through some dialogue, expressions of "ouch," and "I am very sorry," I came to a point where I felt compassion for Dorothy and her family as they struggled together to meet the needs of each family member, even if they were quite out of step with the rest of the community.

Where is the compassion of the BCOQ leadership? Why did they tell us something that they knew was not true? What disciplinary procedure must they undergo for this abuse of power? How can we trust them if they do not offer their repentance?

- Daphne L. Hunt
