
What is the Atlantic Baptist Fellowship?

The Atlantic Baptist Fellowship was formed about thirty years ago by a group of Baptist lay people and ministers who conceived it as a way to pursue certain converging interests. First, they wanted to witness to historical Baptist principles. Second they wanted to be involved with non-Baptist communions in joint worship, social action and ecumenical discussions of the nature of the Church. Third, they wished to create a safe and welcoming environment where Baptists can share concerns and points of view without fear of being marginalized. The ABF is not an executive body, carrying out programs, and advocating positions. It is a consultative body with the following aims:

- (1) TO WITNESS to the freedom implicit in the voluntary principle in religion which is the essence of the traditional Baptist position;
- (2) TO AFFIRM and celebrate Baptist participation in, and witness to the whole, visible, catholic and evangelical church of Jesus Christ;
- (3) TO STRENGTHEN the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches and to encourage it to strive for the above;
- (4) TO PROVIDE a forum for the discussion of doctrinal and ethical questions and social problems and policies in that spirit of tolerance and mutual respect which issues from Christian love.

In pursuit of these aims the ABF publishes *The Bulletin*, and meets semiannually for worship, fellowship, and study of an issue of contemporary interest. Everyone is welcome to attend.

THE BULLETIN

A P U B L I C A T I O N O F

Atlantic Baptist Fellowship

W I N T E R 2 0 0 3



Discussing Religion and Politics

HOW CAN/HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH
INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT POLICY?

AT THE FALL ASSEMBLY, HELD AT
SYDNEY UNITED BAPTIST CHURCH IN OCTOBER



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SUBMISSIONS
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From the President

SHEILA REDDEN-SMITH



I write this letter right on the heels of our Fall Assembly held at Sydney United Baptist Church. What a wonderful time we shared! These gatherings provide us with an opportunity to renew friendships, to begin new ones, to discuss and to think theologically about current world affairs, and to discern God's calling as individuals, as congregations, as the Atlantic Baptist Fellowship. Be certain to read the

editor's comments regarding the weekend; they will provide you with an understanding of the theme: "Religion and Politics" as presented by Rev. Dr. Mark Parent, MLA Kings North.

One of my concerns for ABF is our dwindling numbers. Now there are many reasons why attendance at our assemblies is declining: our membership is growing older, some have moved away, some are in poor health, some are deceased. During our business meeting, we spent considerable time discussing this situation, asking questions such as: Are the topics for our assemblies interesting to both clergy and lay people? Is everyone aware that all are invited to attend and to participate in the ABF? Are people really aware of what ABF is all about? It is funny how we all take things for granted. We make assumptions that people know what we are all about. ABF's membership decided that we must do a better job of promoting ourselves.

I want to reassure you that ABF has an open invitation to all, clergy and lay people, who are interested in attending any of our assemblies. As a matter of fact, we welcome and encourage you to consider getting involved. If you are wondering what ABF's aims are, I direct your attention to the back cover of the Bulletin.

I would also like to encourage our members, especially the clergy, to make a point of inviting church members and friends

to come and join with us for a weekend. A notice in the Bulletin, or an invitation from the pulpit, is not always enough to influence the people sitting in the pews. It has been brought to my attention on more than one occasion that lay people are often hesitant to attend our assembly on their own accord. Therefore, I urge all clergy to make a point of personally inviting their congregations and reassuring them that ABF welcomes everyone. There is nothing quite like a personal invitation!

As well, the executive will attempt to work harder at promoting the weekends, letting members know well ahead of time the topic, dates, time, and location of our assemblies. Having the information early ought to allow those interested in attending a meeting to plan ahead.

One last thought regarding our assemblies concerns the host church. We are so appreciative to the churches which host a weekend. There would not be an assembly without your warm welcome. And I must say that all our host churches have welcomed us very warmly and have managed to see to all our needs, even those we had not thought of!

The role of the host churches is very important. Their role is so much more than meeting our physical needs, important as that is. One of the reasons that we move our assemblies from church to church is so that the ABF can develop a relationship with congregations throughout our Convention. So we ask the host church to inform and invite members of its congregation and its community to join with us. We want to get to know one another. What better way to do this than during a time of fellowship together!

Fall Assembly, 2003 *Sydney Baptist Church*

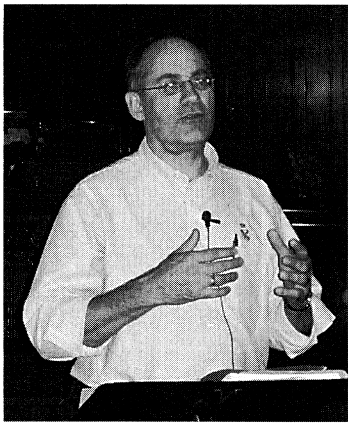
A REPORT BY RODGER FORSMAN

How can the Church influence government policy? Should the church even try to do this? These are timely questions in light of the recent debates over same-gender marriage, stem cell research, or human cloning, to name just a few. These questions were the focus of two presentations to the recent Fall assembly of the ABF.



The Reverend Roger Prentice, Chaplain of Acadia University, reviewed the historical background of Baptist thought about Church/State relations. The basic starting-point for Baptists is the conviction that local churches are formed when, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, believers are moved to join together in a congregation. Congregations are governed by the Holy Spirit, whose will is discerned by study of the Scriptures, prayer, and informed discussion characterized by good will and charity to all. In short, congregational life proceeds by a consensus characterized by participation and partnership, rather than by a decision-making process which creates winners and losers, or which depends on an outside authority. Christians thus enjoy “freedom of conscience”, and Baptists have always opposed any attempt to interweave religious and secular authority. Christians are to pray for civic and political authorities, and even try to inform and persuade them to act in a manner acceptable to Christians. But in the long run the congregation owes allegiance to a completely different kind of authority.

Dr Mark Parent, MLA for Kings North (Nova Scotia), began his two-part discussion with the question, Should Christians become involved in politics at all? If we believe that a Christian should stay



out of politics because it is somehow dirty, or sinful, all discussion stops. Dr. Parent went on to point out that it is difficult to reconcile this position with biblical passages such as the Lord's Prayer ("Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven....") or with the prophetic emphasis on justice. Furthermore, to the extent to which human beings are challenged by the Gospel to seek the will of God and to work for right relationships among people it is not

plausible to hold that practical Christian life in the world can avoid involvement in politics. This being established the real questions arise: What is the appropriate role for Christians in politics? How does a Christian exercise that role?

Dr Parent drew a distinction between "religion and politics", on the one hand, and "Church and State" on the other. The latter involves a relation between *institutions*: churches, denominations, councils, lobby groups, and governments, government offices or agencies. "Religion and politics", by contrast, is fundamentally concerned with the relationships among *individuals*, and—perhaps most crucially—with the tensions within an individual who struggles to bring a Christian faith to bear on the issues around which people construct their lives from day to day. Dr. Parent focused our attention on "religion and politics", because this is the point at which one has to face the question, What am *I* going to do about such-and-such an issue, as a Christian, and on what grounds?

Having established a framework for thinking about religion and politics Dr. Parent proceeded to sketch aspects of political life where "the shoe pinches" for the Christian.

1. *Politics is partisan.* Political parties push for ultimate, exclusive allegiance to themselves. Christian faith, by contrast, is framed in terms of an ultimate allegiance which is inclusive of all. Partisanship can lead to animosity; but it also furnishes the stimulus for clear thinking about how to put Christian perspectives into the decision-making process.



Clockwise from left: Philip Jennex (Deacon and Youth Leader, Sydney); Wayne Hardy (Treasurer and Deacon, Sydney); David and Cynthia Ogilvie (Port Williams)

2. *Party politics is based on conflict.* Christians have often rejected political involvement on the grounds that conflict is to be avoided. In fact, conflict can lead to good decisions if people are resolved to try harder to resolve divisive issues. Bad decisions are often lazy decisions.

3. *The relativization of truth.* In politics "truth" is often identified with "what is good for the party". Christianity, on the other hand, has maintained that truth is something to be discovered and that it is independent of what anyone believes or asserts. In politics perception is everything, so what is "true" at one time or in one context can later be "false". Christian faith however, says: "Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No' be no."

4. *Politics emphasizes consequences.* In politics power is the ultimate good, and consequently what supports getting and keeping it is right. In Christianity actions are right or wrong independently of their consequences for political power.

5. *In politics systems take precedence over individuals.* Hence systems, processes, ways of doing things are the primary objects of concern. In Christian faith however, it is the individual who is the primary object of concern.

Jesus & Politics

REVEREND DAVID OGILVIE
PORT WILLIAMS UNITED BAPTIST CHURCH

Editor's Note: It is always a pleasure to welcome a new contributor to the ABF Bulletin. The Reverend David Ogilvie became the minister to Port Williams United Baptist Church on 1 August 2003. He and his family came to Nova Scotia from Regina, Saskatchewan, where Dave served as Senior Pastor in First Baptist Church. The Ogilvie family includes Dave's wife, Cynthia, and their three daughters, Julie, Kristy, and Erin. Dave is a graduate of the Baptist Leadership Training School, the University of Lethbridge (B.A.), McMaster Divinity College (M.Div.) and the University of Prince Edward Island (B.Ed.). He has served Baptist congregations in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and P.E.I. He has also been an active member in the Gathering of Baptists within the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec.

Is it appropriate for Christians to address the political system, and if so, how? William Herzog, in *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2000), argues that Jesus' 'clearing' of the temple in Matthew 21: 10-17 is a highly political action. The incident is not about Jesus taking offence at commercial activity in the place of worship, or abuses of the temple system. Nor is it a 'cleansing' or hostile takeover of the temple by Jesus and his followers. Rather, the overturning of the tables is an enacted parable of God's condemnation of the current, oppressive political order.

Herzog draws upon current research into the historical Jesus, and the work of social scientists which helps us to view the context of Jesus' ministry with fresh insight. Jesus lived in an advanced agrarian society ruled by an aristocratic empire, Rome. Two percent of the population made up the ruling class. Their wealth and power were based on the ownership and control of land. 'Retainers' comprised roughly five percent of the population. These bureaucrats served the ruling class by managing the peasants, the remaining ninety-three percent of the population. Retainers (priests, scribes,

6. *Politics trivializes the large questions of life.* What is ultimately worth living for? What is happiness? What is the best kind of society? Politics in practice is not really about such major issues, but about the short-term advantage of one group over another. Christianity, by contrast, is largely about those deep questions.

7. *Politics is primarily about getting and keeping power.* Christianity is more about the renunciation of power.

In Dr. Parent's view, clearly, Christian faith does not move us towards the same goals as party politics; nor does it advocate the same means. Nevertheless, involvement in political life gives opportunity to witness to Christian faith, to help people in need, and to take part in addressing large social, political and economic problems.

So what does the Christian do about politics? Dr. Parent's basic message is: Get involved. How? He described several avenues. For example, it is possible for individuals to have input into the legislative process: one calls the Legislative Council office and asks to make a presentation before the Law Amendments Committee. One can also get involved in an interest group. One can use the media to distribute information and present argument. One can make use of legal processes; existing legislation is often challenged in the courts. One can support a political party or candidate financially. The best way is to join and become active in a political party so that one can urge others to consider the implications of Christian values for political decisions. In summary: "Don't sit back! Get involved!"

Those last words caused an uneasy rustle in the audience! Dr. Parent asked, "How many here are active in a political organization?" Observing the minimal response he remarked that in his experience less than ten percent of the people in audiences drawn from churches or church-related organizations take any active role in political life.

I shall not moralize on the above fact. But two questions come to mind.

(1) Is the quality of the government we get a function of our level of involvement in the political process?

(2) Do we fully understand the implications of the faith we profess?

tax-collectors, military personnel) had two tasks—military control and economic exploitation of the masses.

The Jerusalem temple was very much a part of the social order. It functioned to legitimate the political regime and to convince the peasants that their exploitation was ordained by God, thus lessening the likelihood of a revolt. Its very architecture and rituals embodied a theology of purity and separation. The temple was built as a series of raised platforms, like a holy mountain rising toward heaven. Each successive level served to separate the sacred from the profane: Jews from Gentiles, men from women, priests from worshippers, the clean from the unclean. Separation maintained purity, but it also preserved class distinctions, which served those who ruled.

Purity was associated with wholeness. Whatever was not whole, for example the blind and lame, was not holy. Those who were in debt were also considered unclean. Galilean peasants were perpetually in debt because they owed heavy tribute to Herod Antipas, to Rome, and to local landlords in the form of rents and tolls. Only the temple provided the means of forgiveness: sacrifices could re-establish purity and a right relationship with God. But this too came at a price.

By contrast, Jesus heals a paralyzed man, telling him, “*Your sins are forgiven*” (Matthew 9: 1–8). The teachers of the law are incensed. They recognize Jesus’ words as a challenge to their temple monopoly on God’s forgiveness, and hence to their political power. And the crowd marvels that such authority has been given to a man, Jesus. Later, in the midst of Passover, Jesus steps into the temple and overturns the tables of the moneychangers. Drawing upon the prophetic words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus challenges the temple system: “*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people...*” (Is. 56:7). The temple is to be a place of inclusion rather than exclusion, where everyone can approach and encounter God. Jesus continues, “...*but you are making it a den of robbers*” (Jer. 7:11). The real bandits in the land are not those who hide in wilderness caves, but rather the chief priests who control the temple. “*Then the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw what he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple... they became angry.*”

Overturning the tables in the temple symbolizes God’s judgment

on, and rejection of, the temple system, and a prophetic sign of its impending destruction. Inviting in the blind, the lame, and children—those whom the temple would exclude—Jesus foreshadows the new reality and justice of the coming reign of God. He also reveals a new image of God: not the temple’s God, who is first concerned about purity and tithes, who punishes those who cannot pay, and maintains debt records as a means of foreclosing on the poor, but rather a God who cancels debt, heals and restores.

Jesus was not shy about engaging and challenging the unjust political system of his day, suggesting that his followers may be called upon to do the same. However, when he did so, Jesus was motivated by, and modeled, the compassion and justice of God’s kingdom, emphasizing inclusion, forgiveness, healing, and grace. When entering the political arena, Christians would do well to follow our Lord’s lead.

Completion of Life Program

DR. ROGER CANN

Currently promoted in the Annapolis Valley by Dr. Gerald Klasen, former professor at McGill University, the “Completion of Life” program has attracted considerable attention particularly with respect to meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of seniors. Seniors are encouraged and helped to tell their “life story”. Given in confidence, the story is the point of departure for a process which explores four domains: religiosity, religious coping, spiritual well-being, and spiritual needs. The life story is the map upon which the person, and those they wish to involve, can formulate an individual plan of meeting needs. This program would be a valuable resource for unpaid caregivers who are accompanying a family member towards the end of life.

Advent: Circle or Spiral

REVEREND JUDITH GATES
WOLFVILLE UNITED BAPTIST CHURCH, NOVA SCOTIA

There are things we do in life over and over; we can do them almost without thinking.

Sometimes Advent is only a circle. Get out the wreath, buy the candles, remember to light one each Sunday. Between Sundays the Christmas rush goes on as usual.

There is another way. Circles can become spirals. By observing Advent—indeed the whole church year—we have the opportunity to spiral closer to God and deeper within ourselves. It is a journey worth taking each year.

Advent (meaning ‘coming’) has ancient Christian roots as a season of inner waiting and preparation for God to come in new ways into our lives, and communal waiting and preparation for His Second Coming into our fractured world.

In a world where we have been conditioned to want instant communication Advent provides the opportunity to learn to wait. Jesus taught us that while we are waiting we are to have our lamps lit (Luke 12:35–48). Those who keep their Advent lamps lit, who practice contemplative, hopeful, expectant, joyful, active waiting for God to speak to us, will “learn to live in what is coming from God every day and to carry a light from this awareness into the darkness” (Christoph Blumhardt). Transforming our circles into spirals requires time.

In a world bursting at the seams with commercialism, Advent offers us an opportunity to discover a different gift-giving. The essential Christmas is not about whether we have something for everyone on our list, but whether we have recognized and been open to God’s gifts to us. Advent days allow us to ponder Mary’s words: “He who is mighty has done great things for me” (Luke 1:49). Transforming

our circles into spirals means a growing awareness that the Word made flesh is the gift we need.

In a busy world of Christmas celebrations, observing Advent days can hone in us a yearning for new life. It is so easy to be lulled into complacency, to be comfortable with our routine of worship, study and service. Advent calls us to look again at the roots of our faith, to trace the story of God’s people, and to risk discovering anew that God is at work in our lives and our world. The overcrowded inn, which did not welcome Mary and Joseph, prompts the question: Is my heart ready to receive Jesus? Transforming our circles into spirals means yearning for, preparing for new life to be born within us.

As I place the figures in the nativity scene each year I am reminded that life is about shining stars and dark stables, about learned magi and humble shepherds, about being excluded and still finding a place, about harsh, painful human realities and the miraculous coming of God among us. Everyone journeyed to arrive at that stable. And so, whatever each person’s situation might be as Advent dawns, if we are willing to make the journey there is a place for us at the nativity.

“Christmas is for children,” we often say. No. Santa is for children. Christmas is for those, young or old, who make the spiraling Advent journey to Bethlehem.

*Atlantic Baptist Fellowship
Spring Assembly*

WOLFVILLE UNITED BAPTIST CHURCH
MAY 14-15, 2004

Guest Participants

REV. DR. LIONEL MORIAH
President,
Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches

REV. DR. HARRY G. GARDNER
Executive Minister,
Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches

REV. RONALD BAXTER
Regional Minister, Region 2

REV. DR. FRANK GUINTA
Regional Minister, Region 4

Details of program and important
items of business will be announced
in a future edition of the *The Bulletin*.

The Spring Assembly will be held
in conjunction with the annual
Vincent Rushton Memorial Luncheon.

*Friends of the
Atlantic Baptist Fellowship*

Friends are sympathetic to the aims of the ABF, and support its
work by an annual subscription fee of \$10.

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