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THE BULLETIN

A PUBLICATION OF

Atlantic Baptist Fellowship

W I N T E R 2 0 0 4



Friday Evening Lecture at the ABF Fall Assembly

PORT WILLIAMS BAPTIST CHURCH



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In This Issue

RODGER FORSMAN, EDITOR

One of the aims of the Atlantic Baptist Fellowship is encourage free discussion of matters pertaining to church life. To this end it regularly invites to its semi-annual assemblies speakers whose expertise enables them to assist us in thinking through any of a wide range of issues touching on Christian faith and ministry. At the Autumn Assembly at Port Williams the Reverend Neal MacPherson, minister of the Church of the Crossroads, in Honolulu, Hawaii, led us in thinking deeply about what it is to live the Gospel in the cultural context in which the Christian Church currently finds itself. The following review article cannot do full justice to his two lectures. Hopefully the main themes are reflected clearly enough to give our readers a sense of the issues facing the Church, and some indication of how they might be addressed by individual congregations.

A new contributor, Allen Wayte, Director of Music at First Baptist Church, Halifax, contributes an article on Johann Sebastian Bach. His identification of three criteria pertaining to the selection and performance of music in worship is timely. It can shed a flood of light on debates about “contemporary” music, “traditional” music, and “blended worship”, which are often unguided by principles that have anything to do with what worship is supposed to be about. There is much to be learned from Wayte’s short essay.

Our President, Andy Crowell, speaks of the place of Advent in his church. In future issues we shall hear more of what our churches are doing. Sharing information and ideas is a source of encouragement and strength for everyone.

Another new contributor, Lois Forsman, offers an evocative reflection on a childhood Christmas Eve. Christmas is for us, indeed; but sparrows, chickadees and juncos, and the animals in the barn are not to be forgotten.

Advent at First Baptist Church, Truro

THE REVEREND ANDY CROWELL
PRESIDENT, ATLANTIC BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP



As I write this on a late November day I am thinking about the celebration of Advent at our church. Following the Church Year, as we do, we mark the significance of this season and heed its call to prepare for new beginnings.

We begin on the first Sunday of the season with what we describe as our Advent Family Worship. Children, young people, young adults and seniors alike are invited to share in the service.

Everything from the call to worship to the Spoken Word and the benediction comes from our lay people and their families. This is done not with the sentimentality of a Christmas concert (which is saved for another time and place!) but with the careful preparation that any worship service involves. It is in fact an occasion for rehearsing the rituals of our worship, teaching people why we do things as we do, and giving opportunity for the whole people of God to take part in a priestly ministry.

On each succeeding Sunday in Advent we introduce new decorations and symbols that reflect our preparations for Christmas. Thus we not only build the anticipation, but learn to appreciate the meaning of waiting. It is this attention to detail in our worship that helps us to make sense of and give attention to detail in the care of human souls around us, and in waiting to discern the detail of God's presence in our midst.

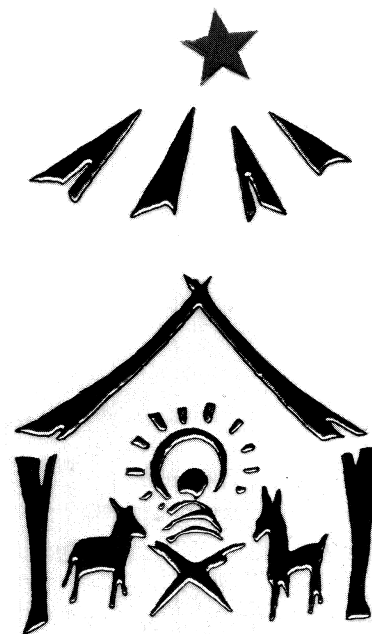
Our preparation for Advent actually begins early. This Fall we engaged in several mission projects: "Gleaning Carrots" for the food bank, holding a "Sleep-Out" to raise awareness and money for the homeless, and putting on a community supper at no charge

to people in need. Some projects are done by us ourselves, and some in collaboration with other churches and organizations. We think that in these ways we not only prepare for Advent, but also participate in Christ's coming into the world.

We often say that we "can't wait" for things that we are excited about to happen. But in the preparation for and celebration of Advent we actually get to participate in that which we await, and meet God in the detail of our daily life.

So whether it is Advent, the beginning of the new year in the Christian calendar, or the new year beginning in January 2005, may we be busy in our waiting, so that the full measure of God's spirit may be known to all.

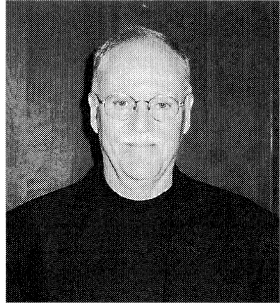
Happy New Year, everyone!



“The Church in Context”

Two lectures by Reverend Neal MacPherson,
delivered at the ABF Fall Assembly, October 2004

REVIEWED BY RODGER FORSMAN



The Reverend Neal MacPherson was born and brought up in the Maritimes, but his ministry has taken him to the United States. He obtained a BA (Honours English) from Acadia in 1964, followed by the M Div from the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley (1967), and the MA in Religion and Literature from the University of Chicago Divinity School (1971). Ordained by the Chicago Metro-

politan Association of the United Church of Christ in 1972 he has served churches in Chicago and Hawaii. He has been involved in several organizations working for justice, dignity and human rights. He has had several sabbatical leaves which have allowed him to examine the connections between spiritual life and social witness. Currently minister of Church of the Crossroads in Honolulu, he is on a half-year sabbatical in Montreal, supported by the Lilly Foundation, working on the theme of the shape of the post-Christendom church.

MacPherson's point of departure is the observation that Christendom is in the process of being disestablished. This historical development, he urges, is not to be deplored but viewed as a necessary liberation of the Church from formerly prevailing triumphalist models and as an opportunity to recover a better understanding of the Church in relation to God's mission in the world. If the Christian movement of the future is to be faithful to the Gospel it will have to model itself on the Cross, not as a symbol of conquest, but as a sign of its sharing in Christ's Passion. Its witness to the work of God in the world will be shaped by the Scriptural images of yeast, salt and light. Congregations will have to enter into the human

struggle for hope against despair, accept the costs of opposing the forces that devalue human life, and become new communities in which people can find acceptance, purpose, freedom, and love.

In order to appreciate MacPherson's argument we need to understand the terms in which it is expressed. What is "Christendom"? This word refers to the historical epoch during which the Church was a major political and social force. For thirteen centuries the Church, through its structure and hierarchy was often able to exert vast political influence and exercise a great deal of control over social mores and individual behaviour. It had not always been thus, of course. The Christian movement began twenty centuries ago as one religious option among many. Focused on the idea of the reign of God, it survived from generation to generation by confessing its faith in God and basing on Jesus Christ its hope for a coming age of justice, peace and freedom. It was not tied to any political establishment. But by the fourth century, despite the fact that Christians numbered only about 10% of the population of the Roman Empire, Christianity had become a political fact to be reckoned with. Roman Emperors began to encourage the acceptance of Christianity, and took an active role in Church affairs. For example, in 380 Emperor Theodosius decreed that his subjects adhere to the Christian faith. In effect, Christianity had become *established* as the religion of the Empire. The Church had political influence, enjoyed the support of secular powers, and was in position to exercise a great deal of control over the general populace. This was Christendom.

To say that Christendom is, or is being *disestablished* is to say that there is no longer anything like a Christian empire. This is not to say, of course, that people no longer attend church, or no longer read the Bible, or that churches no longer speak out on political and social issues. What it means is that on the whole most people—including the majority of Christians—no longer regard the Bible as authoritative in matters of faith and doctrine. Nor do they take their cues in matters of personal, social and political morality from the church and its preaching and theology. On the contrary our aspirations and ideals are drawn from the culture which surrounds us. The Church is no longer an entity which must be taken account of by social, political and economic decision-makers. Mainline churches are being pushed to the periphery

of cultural issues. In this connection MacPherson regards the emergence of the “religious right” as a political force, notably in the United States, as a kind of rearguard action of a waning Christendom.

MacPherson argued that Christendom fostered, and was fostered by, a “Theology of Glory” symbolized by the image of Christ triumphant over the world. The Church, as the repository of the means of grace, bathed in the glory reflected from the victorious Son of God. Attributes such as coercive power and authority were thought to be divinely vested in the Church. The Theology of Glory encourages Christians to aim at self-centered happiness, to adjust themselves to established social and political powers, to believe in progress, and enjoy a suffering-free faith. Notably, too, the Theology of Glory accepts a disastrous divorce of faith from reason. Faith becomes tied to authority rather than being linked to what we can know about the real needs of people, and to what we can do about those needs. Hence faith becomes insulated from what we know and do as rational beings in our day-to-day activities. Worship is modelled on popular entertainment, and outreach is conceived of as serving clients well in order to encourage their ongoing support. Evangelism is construed as adding more and more members to the rolls. Growth in numbers is made the measure of success, and achieving popular respect becomes a fundamental objective.

This kind of theology, MacPherson holds, is inconsistent with the portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament. There we have a “Theology of the Cross”: Jesus has a humble birth. He has a message of grace and hope for outcasts of society. He himself suffers, and so demonstrates his solidarity with all who suffer under every kind of oppression and injustice. Far from being a symbol of triumphant power the cross demonstrates the way by which God engages the world. And what is “the world”?

The *world* is essentially the organized structure of power and privilege, owing allegiance to nothing but itself. This is where God’s mission takes place. In order to be part of God’s mission the Church must extricate itself from the world. In practice this means, for example, that congregations have to acknowledge their dependence on economic structures which foster oppression and injustice. The Church cannot address such issues without being honest with itself about such things. Humility, modesty and vulner-

ability are called for, not a blithe turning of a blind eye to the fact that Christians themselves are part and parcel of the structures that contribute to despair, hopelessness and anxiety. The church needs to acknowledge the ambiguity of its life. While living with the vestiges of Christendom it must find ways of returning to the spirit of the Christian movement, and focus once more on the reign of God.

Above all, it is an implication of the Theology of the Cross that congregations be fully cognizant both of the context within which they exist, and of the nature of God’s mission in the world. This means, for example, that they acknowledge the causal connection between poverty and hunger on the one hand, and rage and violence on the other—and then act on their knowledge to try to make the world a better place for all. In short, in a despairing world, the mission is hope in action.

What would a congregation living under the Theology of the Cross look like? Its prayers would express the longings of the world for hope and purpose. Its doxologies would express the sovereignty of God. Preaching would focus on taking seriously what the Scriptures say about the human context of God’s mission. There would be confession of faith, not merely as profession of belief in doctrine, but as expression of commitment to the kind of life in the world which the doctrine is about. Leadership would be egalitarian; power would be shared by the many, not grasped by one or a few. Music would express human longings and evoke hope based on the God’s mission in the world. Congregations would be small: members would know one another. They would work together for justice, accepting the struggles and risks often associated therewith. They would acknowledge their own fallibility, yet be courageous and hospitable.

Throughout his lectures MacPherson acknowledged his debt to the writings of Dr Douglas John Hall, of McGill Divinity School, Montreal. His illustrations of the differences between the Theology of Glory and the Theology of the Cross, however, most often came directly out of his experience as a minister in a congregation which struggles to apply the Gospel to its specific context. This is a congregation which has endured risks for the sake of justice. It strives to become a new kind of community whose values are love, acceptance, solidarity in suffering, courage to speak the truth even

when it is costly to do so, and the affirmation of the sovereignty of God rather than a popular or powerful culture.

How might one assess the lectures? As already suggested they bore the marks of authenticity forged in concrete experience. From this point of view they were theological lectures in the best sense of the word 'theological', namely, they were an attempt to engage listeners in the work of thinking through some central issues in spiritual life. Such issues—concerns about hope and despair, purpose and meaninglessness, suffering and love, the nature and conditions of happiness (to name a few)—are the very stuff of theology. Put in these terms it is easy to see that theology, well done, touches our lives intimately.

In the same connection one might ask, nevertheless, whether MacPherson distinguishes clearly enough between theology and psychology. For example, when I say: "I *hope* that I don't run out of money before I run out of life", I am *not* fundamentally concerned about a state of mind which we can call "hope". Instead I am concerned about a number of *facts* related to my retirement planning such as the price of heating oil, my health, inflation, and so on. And for someone to give me the *hope* I express it is certainly not enough merely to alter my state of mind by (say) giving me a happy pill that makes me euphoric and optimistic. Feeling good about oneself and one's situation is not the same as hope. Hence, if we say that it is part of the Church's ministry to foster *hope* in place of despair, we surely must mean—if we understand our theology properly—that we are not simply helping people to feel good about themselves and their situations. Rather we are invoking some kind of objective grounds of hope, something independent of our state of mind. I am quite sure that this is what MacPherson intends, as it is in keeping with the general tenor of his presentation. But I think this is a point at which more clarity is needed about the nature of Christian doctrine.

Perhaps the most appealing feature of the lectures was their practicality in relation to the situation of most or even all Baptist churches in the Maritimes. It is obvious that mega-churches are not going to proliferate in our region. Church growth strategies aimed at 10,000-member congregations are just irrelevant to our context. Nevertheless the notion that success as a congregation and as a minister is correctly determined by growth in member-

ship, budget, programs, and popularity is part of the atmosphere we breath. And this might be intimidating for church leadership in congregations who are not experiencing this kind of "success". MacPherson's message should be encouraging to such folk, for it challenges on historical and theological grounds the propriety of striving for such marks of success. The Theology of the Cross is liberating in this respect; it tells us to lay such concerns aside so that we can get on with our real business: incarnating the mission of God in the world.

Moments of Magic: Christmas Eve

BY LOIS FORSMAN



Editor's Note: Lois Forsman grew up on a farm in Southern Saskatchewan. She became a teacher and taught both in Saskatchewan and Ontario. After moving to Nova Scotia with husband Rodger and sons Jon and Andrew she completed a BA (History) at Acadia University. She is active in the Wolfville Baptist Church, the University Women's Club. She says that her favourite hobbies are reading, and reading...!

When I was a little girl the day before Christmas seemed to be the longest day of the year. I grew up in a good Scandinavian home, which meant that Christ's birth was celebrated on Christmas Eve. Time dragged despite all the preparations. These began early. Outside, the gatepost to the barnyard was decorated with a great sheaf of oats for the birds to enjoy, and extra bells were tied to the horses' harness. Inside, floors and furniture were waxed

and polished until they gleamed. Streamers, garlands, wreaths, and other decorations were all in place; and there were real wax candles on the tree. The table was carefully set with the best dishes and a white linen cloth. In the kitchen the turkey would be roasting to perfection. The baked ham was already sliced and arranged on a large platter. *Korv* (homemade sausage) was ready to be cooked and the pickled herring was in a special glass bowl. The traditional *lutfish* (made from dried cod) was ready, with two sauces to help it go down, one of melted butter and the other a milk sauce with nutmeg.

We were scrubbed and polished too: best dresses all around, dress clothes for the boys and men, with only white shirts allowed. This was an important night!

By the time farm chores were done for the evening guests began to arrive. We were never fewer than twenty-five and one year we had forty-nine! There were often three sittings. Good food was accompanied by conversation and laughter. The last course was Christmas pudding—just to tide you over until lunch later in the evening!

When the table had been cleared for the last time and the dishes done everyone gathered in the “front room”. There was always a peanut scramble for the younger folk, and sometimes those not so young joined the fun. Then we heard the Christmas story and sang carols. At long last we turned our attention to the many parcels large and small under the Christmas tree. We never had Christmas stockings; gifts arrived from under the tree. They were wrapped in white paper and tied with red ribbon or string. Someone, usually my mother, read the names on the parcels and each would be carried by one of the children to its recipient. We opened our gifts slowly and carefully, pausing often to look at what others had received, joining in laughter over a funny gift, or passing comment on a newly modelled item of clothing.

After all the paper and peanut shells (!) were cleared away it was time for coffee (never tea) and special Christmas baking: breads, tarts, cookies, doughnuts, *fattigman* (a thin, deep-fried pastry; the Norwegian word means “poorman”), Christmas cake, and candies and nuts. Well after midnight our company left amidst shouts of “Merry Christmas! *Glæde Jul!*”, and jingled their way home in horse-drawn sleighs over sparkling snow under a twinkling star-lit sky.

The house became still. We children would get ready for bed, then sit quietly for a few minutes in our new pajamas enjoying the warmth, comfort and security of our home. I remember my dad slipping a parka over his suit and going to the barn to give the cattle some especially nice hay. It was Christmas Eve: all creatures celebrated Christ’s birth.

Bach in the Church

ALLEN WAYTE

Editor’s Note: Allen R. Wayte began his church music career as a choirboy at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco. Further musical studies led him to Universities in Canada and England where he studied organ improvisation. Allen began his duties at First Baptist, Halifax, in the summer of 1997, as Director of Music, he administers a music programme that includes four choirs, and an active concert schedule. As well as conducting two community-based choirs, he is an active recitalist, accompanist, and teacher. Allen has recorded for CBC Radio I & II, Vision TV and CBC Television.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in 1685 into a family of musicians. By that time the Bach’s had been employed as musicians for so long in Germany that the name had become synonymous with “musician”.

Bach followed in the footsteps of his ancestors, taking various musical positions in town, church, school and court. Except for six years at the court at Cothen (1717–1723) his musical duties involved church music, planning, composing, playing the organ and preparing the choir. Although people recognized his unparalleled skill as an organist and composer, Bach did not achieve widespread fame during his lifetime. His music was considered old-fashioned, and he never sought fame and fortune where it was chiefly to be had, in opera. Rather, his primary goal was, in his own words, “a well-regulated church music.”

At least three primary ingredients went into Bach's achievement of that goal.

First, dedication to his art. For Bach this meant developing his skill, honing his craft. Bach could have said with the poet George Herbert, "With my utmost art I praise thee." With his utmost art, because being a good steward and making offering of thanks required it.

Second, good theological knowledge. Theology pervaded Bach's education at home and at school. When he left school, he continued to study theology. The entire contents of his library were theological and included two editions of the complete works of Luther. Of all the books in Bach's library, only the Bible survives. It is in three volumes and contains the complete Bible in Luther's German translation and extensive commentary by Luther. What is particularly interesting about these volumes are the marginal notes and underlines in Bach's hand that reveal thorough and thoughtful reading.

Third, rooted in tradition and selective use of the new. Bach was very much aware of what was going on in the musical world around him. His music is a synthesis of old and new and of various national styles. Though basically conservative, he used the new styles coming out of opera, recitative and aria and was heavily influenced by the new concerto style of Vivaldi. When a new style of cantata text became popular, Bach, to a certain extent, joined the crowd. But in none of these cases did his use of the new uproot him from the tradition.

Church musicians today can learn much from Bach's example. Even though none of us is likely to achieve as much as he did, we, no less than he, are called to do our job with our "utmost art." But our utmost art needs to be guided by theology. To do our job right, we as musicians need theological knowledge as much as we need musical skill. And when the currents of our culture run contrary to our Christian faith, we find encouragement in Bach's courageous swimming against the cultural currents of his time.

The above essay first appeared in the Newsletter of First Baptist Church, Halifax (September 2001). It is re-published here with the permission of the author.

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 of pursuing certain converging interests. First, they wanted to witness to historical Baptist principles. They also wanted to be involved with non-Baptist communions in joint worship, social action and ecumenical discussions of the nature of the Church. Finally, they wished to create a safe and welcoming environment where Baptists can share concerns and points of view with out 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 United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces 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.