

Hey Everyone, it's Rob.

A few weeks ago Brendon popped into my office and mentioned that he was planning to shoot a short video that would summarize his final thoughts around the issues we've been talking through in our community conversations and invited me to feel free to do the same. In a more recent meeting the Elders also asked if we might consider doing that and so that's what's brought me to this point.

Initially I didn't really have anything I felt like I needed to add. I think the community conversation committee did a really good job at bringing in speakers to help us consider the full spectrum of the topics, so there is always a possibility to go back and revisit those if you want to be reminded of some of the theological conversations or if you want to hear people's personal stories. That's all on our Community Conversation page so you just go to www.ebap.ca and then click on that and they all come up.

Then in more recent times we've had conversations around church autonomy that were led by Ken Bellous and Colin Godwin, and we also had three of our denominational leaders sit in and answer questions. So I think that when you think about that process it really has created quite a wide spectrum.

What I've noticed is that in all of these conversations what we are beginning to hear more and more is that there's always kind of this point-counterpoint – somebody makes one comment around how they might understand a piece of scripture and another person has a different idea around what that means. So at this stage what I have been thinking more about is how do we as a community figure out a way to stay together despite really sharp differences. Is that even a possibility?

And I realize that maybe what's initially ruled out as a way to generate conversation according to the CBWC - the Identity Statement and those three motions that they put together – were designed to begin to help churches begin talking. I think that unfortunately what has happened because there's a vote attached to these motions that it's created this polarity, that has become binary in fashion where it's either a yes or no. And because it's either yes or no then that creates this line of demarcation in which you are either this or you're that.

So I think unfortunately what the motions do then is create this system, this mechanism by which there is a group of people that can be excluded from the full life of church. And for me that's problematic. That's the piece that doesn't sit well with me.

And there's ways that people are working at trying to resolve some of that. If you read through the email that came out last week there are four amendments that have been added to be considered. Some of those amendments include just removing the whole piece of marriage from the Identity Statement, that in no time in Baptist history has marriage been part of a denomination's identity. That's not essential to what it means to be a denomination or even to be Christian. Others have asked to broaden the idea of autonomy – that there is certainly an interdependence between local church and denomination, but that there should be space for a local church to be able to work out its own existence and its own story within the context of where they find themselves. Each church finds itself in a different area of the country, a different neighbourhood, and a different set of people, and we should create space for them to kind of work out issues on their own. So those are all part of the amendments. There's also

amendments that would suggest that churches who don't comply to any motions that are passed should be asked to leave after six months, so again we see this wide spectrum.

I think that for myself at *the connection* our mantra, if you want to use that word, has always been that at the beginning of every gathering I would say "no matter where you come from, no matter who you are, no matter how you identify yourself, there is a place for you at the table" and we have worked to create this space that welcomes all people. That's always been what I have been an advocate for – to welcome all people. We even centre the communion table in the middle of our gathering to remind us that at the centre of all of this it's always Christ and that Christ is the one, actually, who sets the table for all of us. So for me it becomes problematic when in welcoming all people some people who are welcome feel like they then should have the freedom to take away chairs that normally other people would sit in. So that's kind of been my objection to these motions; I think it creates an exclusion of people.

I think that as I understand the nature of Jesus I would say that I don't get everything right. And that I would concede that an apostle Paul writes things about what he calls homosexuality. I think that though that we have to also understand that there's certain lenses that every person brings to the way they write and the way they read. And that, as I mentioned at the beginning, that there are people who would agree wholeheartedly with what Paul writes and other people who think that what he has written or how it's at least to be understood is not actually his initial intent. I think this idea of allowing people the space to think and praying and to arrive at their own decision is what is needed in this kind of situation. And people might call that "soul liberty" or "soul freedom" – the idea that everybody has a conscience that they are to pay attention to – that the Holy Spirit tugs and pushes, and that we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling as Paul might have written.

And so how I have arrived at my position is that I really feel that in the gospel what we see of Jesus is God coming into our space to make God's self known to make God's love known. And that love is generous, that it's wide and it's deep, and that there's always an invitation to follow. That Jesus centred himself with people who were considered on the outside; Jesus worked at pulling all people in. As I begin to extrapolate what that means and what that means for me personally, and what that means for our community I think it means that our job is to create the belonging that God would want – that God through the working of Jesus and the working of the Holy Spirit has been an advocate for. To bring alive, to kindle into flame everywhere around us the acknowledgement of this universal, gracious, radical love of Jesus. And that I don't think we need to protect God from God's own generosity nor do we need to try to work to make sure that God doesn't take unreasonable risks with God's own love.

I think that the church shouldn't be about defining boundaries of us-and-them as much as it should be about working to reach out and love and show compassion and to hear people's stories and to understand and to invite people to the Table. To create pathways of welcome and create space for everyone. To work at building belonging by emulating the love and the grace and the generosity of Jesus in order to show whoever is around what the love of God looks like in motion, in presence, and in concrete form. Not to be a community that shuts others out but in a communion that constantly tries to draw others in.

The picture that comes to my mind and all of this is the picture that Jesus painted through the Parable of the Great Banquet. And he is sitting with a group of people and he is talking to them and he says you know when you are throwing a party don't invite all the right people. Don't invite the important people or the rich people, or your family members only, because they can

pay you back or pay it forward to you. Rather, invite those who would never qualify to come. Invite the poor, invite the people on the edge of society. Invite them in.

And then he tells this story about this king who's throwing a banquet, and as this banquet rolls around there's people who make up reasons for why they can't make it, for a variety of reasons, and the king is disappointed because this is his son's big wedding banquet. He tells his servants to go out and to pull in whoever they can find, to tell them if there's a place at this banquet for them. That they are invited to be a guest of the king.

And it begins to paint this picture of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like – this God who is always on the lookout for all people inviting them to come and to be a part, to belong, to understand and receive the love of God. And I believe that's what community life of a church should look like.

So that's my objection to how this motion can be then extrapolated; it can work against those ideas, and work to create an us-and-them, to exclude people that God is desperate to be in relationship with.

So the way in which we can begin to move forward has to be through an acknowledgement that despite differences we will work at being people who love and support and are connected to Jesus which then pulls us into this wide body; a body that is diverse and beautiful in all of its glory.

So thanks for taking this time to listen. I hope you have a good day.