

Reflections from my Inbox

Listening to many voices in the midst of our theological differences, Lynn Green offers some personal reflections to our churches about our brothers and sisters in Christ who identify as LGBTQI+, bringing a heartfelt plea that we are Kingdom communities clearly demonstrating the love and grace of Jesus.

Listening to our Baptist Family

There have been two key themes landing in my inbox over the past year. Both have concerned me and this has led me to share more widely what I have been hearing. Both of these themes have been prompted by the Government's proposed legislation around what has become known as Conversion Therapy. I want to enable our Baptist family to hear and hold these concerns and I want us to reflect on the ways in which we act towards each other. As a result I have been pondering how I might do this. It seems to me that my role is to enable us to listen well to each other, but I also have a prophetic role to point to reality and draw our attention back to our Lord, Jesus Christ and what it means for us to be Christlike. I am acutely aware that even the order in which I share these themes may trigger very different reactions! I think, however, that my key reflection has been that these concerns need not be seen as being in opposition to each other but as ***highlighting different facets of an important issue***. A verse that has been important to me as a minister has been,

"The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John 1:14

Full of grace and truth. I have often wished I could be as good as Jesus at this! There are times when I find myself majoring more on one and risk losing sight of the other; maybe you find that too?

Listening to the pain

So with a "grace and truth" heart, the place that I am going to start is with the pain that some of our brothers and sisters in Christ are experiencing. I have felt honoured and humbled to be entrusted with some "holy ground" emails this year as people have been willing and brave enough to share their stories of with me. These are stories of brothers and sisters in Christ who identify as LGBTQI+, although don't be under any illusion that these are the only ones from the margins who are experiencing pain. Since most of you will not have had the opportunity to read and listen first hand to these experiences, I was wondering if you would allow me to share some key themes with you?

Huge inner conflict – the heart cry that I hear via my inbox and in other conversations is that sexual orientation, for them, is not a choice but who they are. Having to hold this, knowing that some, if not all, of your family, friends and church believe this to be wrong, causes huge inner conflict and often leads to illness, depression, anxiety and self-harm. Having to hide part of who you believe yourself to be in order to belong is a costly business indeed.

Pain – my inbox also conveys a lot of deep pain. The pain of rejection, the pain of being told you are not welcome and losing your church family, the pain of being told you have a disease, the pain of being treated like an issue rather than a flesh and blood and heart brother or sister in Christ, and the pain of others not even willing to look you in the eye or have a genuine conversation about things. We need to hear and hold this pain that is in our churches.

Acceptance – Recently I have read a book by Bessel Van Der Kolk who, knowingly or otherwise, shares a profound biblical truth,

"As we have seen, much of the wiring of our brain circuits is devoted to being in tune with others. Recovery from trauma involves (re)connecting with our fellow human beings." [Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, pg. 210]

The longing to be accepted as you are, to belong, is part of creation and reflects the very life of God himself who exists in community as Trinity. As I have read the stories of others, what has struck me is just how profoundly painful it must be if you have been rejected by your human family, to then be rejected and

excluded by the church family. As many shared, being free to come in the door is not the same as being truly welcomed. We believe and preach that the Good News of Jesus Christ is rooted in the fact that each one of us is created in the image of God and accepted as we are. This is God's grace and I for one am very grateful that the Lord has extended His grace over me. I am hugely grateful for the Lord's patient and long-suffering love and grace for me even in those times when I have kept my distance from Him and not kept in step with the Holy Spirit. I cannot see that acceptance of one another in Christ is an optional extra for the church.

Intentions and Impact

One particular thing that has become clear as I have listened, is that noble intentions do not neutralize the impact of harmful words and actions. When brothers and sisters in Christ find the courage to share that they don't always feel safe and welcome, I believe that those of us who form the "majority" need to have the humility to listen carefully and reflect on how we might respond to that. This doesn't mean that we need to agree theologically over everything but we do need to hold our differences in the love and grace of Christ. I believe that for the vast majority there is no desire to cause harm to others. On the rare occasions where there is, I am confident that, as healthy churches, we will address and resolve these incidents with love, grace, truth and justice. As we listen carefully to each other and learn together we can become even more attuned to the impact that words and actions have for others.

Along with these key themes, and whilst I don't want to minimize the pain shared, it is also important for me to share with you that I also read glimpses of love and hope. There are times when these stories tell of loving friends and churches where there is an assurance of Jesus' unconditional love. There are stories of churches discerning together with love and care. I am encouraged to hear this. I am confident that it is our common desire across Baptists Together for our churches to be places where everyone can experience the love and grace of Jesus and be cherished and flourish as the precious child of God that they are. I hope that hearing these stories and having a growing understanding of the experiences of others will renew our commitment to reflect further on how we can live out the Good News in our own church communities.

Listening to Scripture

So with a "grace and truth" heart, the place where I am going to continue is with the deep desire of brothers and sisters in Christ to be true to Scripture and to maintain the freedom of conscience to be able to minister and pray in ways that reflect their theological convictions. As I said earlier, I see a number of key themes in my inbox.

The authority of Christ as revealed in Scripture – I consistently hear expressed a desire that we remain true to Scripture and a concern that we are diligent in searching Scripture and living in the light of that. Furthermore, there is a heartfelt concern that we are faithful guardians of the Gospel that has been handed down to us. What my inbox reveals is that Baptists are still passionate about the centrality of the authority of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. This is part of our Declaration of Principle, of course, which is the basis of our Union. The conversations that I have, and the leaders that I meet, make it clear to me that this remains a core conviction for us; along with the liberty of the local church to be the place where the teaching and discernment of Scripture is best done in context.

Discipleship – Earlier I referred to the unconditional love and grace of Christ. We say that Jesus accepts us as we are, but we go on to say, though, that He doesn't leave us as we are. Reflecting this, I am also hearing a genuine concern that we are making disciples and teaching them to obey everything Jesus has commanded (Matt 28:20). This is a particular privilege and burden for those entrusted with leadership and again something which I believe to be a shared desire across Baptists Together. It is certainly not an easy task to lovingly empower others to avoid what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, cheap grace, and embrace the costly path of discipleship. It is interesting that Shane Claibourne, at our recent Assembly, shared with us his conviction that our role is to love and encourage each other as followers of Jesus (John 13:34-35), the role of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of sin and equip us for Christlikeness (John 16:5-15) and the role of our Loving God is to hold us to account; a role which He has entrusted to Jesus (John 5:24-30).

Respecting our LGBTQI+ siblings who are committed to historic biblical orthodoxy – One thing that I have noticed is that when our conversations about sexuality become polarized there is another voice that gets lost in the cross fire. This perspective is conveyed in the Listening area of our website and I want to amplify the voices of those who experience same-sex attraction but have devoted themselves to being celibate or have

remained faithful in heterosexual marriages. This is a precious, courageous and sometimes painful expression of their deep commitment to be faithful to Scripture and deserves to be heard and respected. As I shared above, orientation is not a bar to God's love and grace and it is also no bar to exercising leadership and ministry in Baptist Churches.

Freedom of Religion and Belief – As Baptists its part of our dna that we stand on the shoulders of those who faced opposition and persecution to defend freedom of religion and belief. Baptists are still committed to this today and we want to honour. We are grateful too, that as churches we are able to make our voices heard to our Government expressing our hopes and concerns about Freedom of Religion and Belief issues. Thankfully, seeking after and living in the light of God's truth is not at odds with our churches being loving and welcoming spaces. As Scripture says, our freedom should always be exercised with love (I Cor 8:1). Jesus the one who is full of grace and truth, is our pioneer and our guide and is able to show us the Christlike manner in which we are to minister in His name.

A concern that the Baptist Union has a "denominational position" – when a Baptist says, writes or supports something, there is the understandable concern, and sometimes confusion, about whether this person speaks for the Union or not. In as much as "The Baptist Union" has a view on anything when it comes to particular matters, this would need to be discerned and expressed by Council. As it prayerfully reflects on issues that concern us all, Council is very aware of the need to honour and uphold the importance of the authority of Christ, revealed through Scripture and discerned in the local church.

My hope and prayer

So this is what I am hearing through my inbox. As we listen to these convictions I am wondering what it would look like for us and our churches to affirm the grace and truth from each of these voices? And for us to value and respect the facets that each is trying to hold before us? This is what the new Listening area of our Website is seeking to do <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/353808/Listening.aspx> I would also encourage you to contribute to this area too.

My hope and prayer is that each one of our churches is deeply committed to the Lordship of Christ as revealed in Scripture and that because of this, each of our churches radiate the love of Jesus and are places where all are genuinely welcome. Every Baptist church and community, full of grace and truth and reflecting Jesus.

Lynn Green
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