

you weeping?" She replies, "They won't let me into the church", and Jesus says, "Don't worry, they are not letting me in either".

That's not a joke. It's a parable for us today.

Scripture was used to justify slavery up until 1865. Christians needed to review their understanding of scripture – and this, not to conform to societal pressure, but rather the opposite: to conform to the better way of Jesus. There is a better way.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, to vote us out of affiliation today is not merely an administrative procedure; it is a severing of bonds forged in the Gospel, a declaration that a secondary conviction has eclipsed our shared bond, our shared core faith. I urge this Gathering to pause, reflect on our Baptist principles, and reject this motion of exclusion.

Our first appeal must rest on the foundational truth: the essence of the Gospel. Our shared confession is Christ's deity, his atoning death and resurrection, and salvation by grace through faith. These are the essentials upon which our fellowship rests. In the rich tradition of Jesus followers, we have long held to the maxim: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

The definition of marriage, while a deeply important ethical and theological issue, is a matter upon which prayerful, Bible-believing Baptists have reached divergent conclusions. It is a secondary matter. To make this a litmus test for belonging violates the Baptist covenant principle of local church autonomy and the individual freedom of conscience. Our denomination has always valued the right of the local congregation to discern the will of Christ without coercion from a central body. To require doctrinal uniformity on this issue breaks faith with our history. This is not being 'Baptistic'!

The choice is still yours. If you vote yes to disaffiliation, you are conforming to the current destructive context of aggressive polarization. You are simply mirroring current trends of the world, where disagreement leads to rejection and separation, and dialogue is replaced by denunciation. This is a world which seeks to define itself by who it excludes.

There is a better way! The Church of Jesus Christ is called to be the absolute opposite of this destructive spirit. We are called to be a body united not by perfect agreement, but by supernatural love and radical forgiveness. Are we going to tell a watching community (and watching they are) that our disagreements are more powerful than our unity in the risen Lord? Really? Really?

The Association states, "We are greater together". That is absolutely right! So why vote against it? Division always weakens mission. As an association dedicated to bringing the Good News to all people, our credibility rests on how we love those within our own walls. If we cannot hold fellowship with fellow disciples who genuinely believe in the foundational tenets of our faith, yet differ on the complexities of marriage and other issues, how can we convincingly invite a broken world into the unity of Christ?

I ask you to choose charity over cancellation, liberty over uniformity, and the greater work of the Gospel over organizational purification. Vote no to cancelling us. There is a better way, and it is the way of Christ.

Grace and peace be with you – and with Avalon and Seaforth as we continue to hold fellowship with one another!

Belinda

**I went back to the Minutes of the February 2021 Special Assembly to compare these attendance figures. According to those minutes there were 500 people attending and 174 churches represented. Less than half that number attended the most recent Assembly. The Assembly Council, at the behest of Baptist conservatives, may have successfully disaffiliate four 'troublesome' churches, but it has cost them the support of 50% of the Association.*