

## **“You are our Letter”: Bethany College Convocation**

Bethany Place, April 26, 2015, 1:30 pm

Text: 2 Cor 3:1-4; 4:1-10, 15-18

### **Introduction**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is an immense privilege to be with you for this memorable occasion. I bring warm greetings from all of my colleagues at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. I know that their prayers are with us today.

I offer my congratulation to you graduates. We want to celebrate, with joy, your achievements. It is unfortunate that the circumstances of school closure threaten to overshadow what in any other year would have been, primarily, “your day.” It’s a bit like attending a beautifully decorated outdoor wedding ceremony that starts out warm and sunny, but gets interrupted by a massive hail storm. You can be sure that it will be the hail storm that people will forever remember about the wedding!

I’d also like to acknowledge all of the students who are present. Last fall you decided to attend a school with an uncertain future. That decision represents a huge personal endorsement of the school’s mission of nurturing disciples and training leaders to serve. I applaud you for this courage and commitment!

### **1. The Holy Activity of Remembering and Celebrating a Legacy**

We are on holy ground today! Not because this particular piece of real estate is more sacred than any other, but because we know that “the transforming Spirit of the Living God” wrote on the hearts of 5800 individuals *here*, in this very place. This is a place where a lot of people did life-changing business with God. Today, we want to remember, and celebrate, the remarkable legacy of these 5800 individuals, who have become, in the words of the apostle Paul, “letters of recommendation” that people can read and through whom they will recognize the “results of the ministry” done at Bethany during its 88 years.

The act of “remembering” is a profoundly holy activity. It is not simply an arcane pursuit for historians, or a nostalgic pastime for those with nothing else to do; rather, it is vitally important spiritual discipline. The word “remember” is mentioned more than 200 times in scripture – the writer of Deuteronomy makes a specific point of repeatedly emphasizing the importance of remembering the activity of God in the past by warning that failure to do so inevitably results in idolatry and apostasy. So, like detectives in search of evidence, we dust Bethany’s past to find the fingerprints of God.

The details of how this school began in the basement nursery of the Hepburn MB Church in 1927, and how it grew and evolved over the years, has been told by others. So, one of the things I’ve been asked to do this afternoon is to provide a broader sense of context, a sense of significance and impact of a school like Bethany.

Bethany was part of a much larger movement in Canada, especially in western Canada. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century more than 110 Bible schools and colleges were started in western

Canada alone: this area had the largest concentration of Bible schools anywhere in the world. These schools shaped the lives of hundreds of thousands of people – they trained a veritable host of hundreds of thousands of people who became church workers, pastors and missionaries. In total over 330 Bible schools/colleges have operated in Canada, and they are the most influential evangelical institutions in Canada during the twentieth century.

Mennonites played a huge leadership role: overall they started about 60 Bible schools or colleges in Canada, 45 of which were located in western Canada. Before 1960, the number of students attending Mennonite schools exceeded the combined enrolment of all the non-denominational schools. The impact on congregations was enormous as it increased the level of biblical literacy and instilled a predisposition to service that lasted for many decades. There were some Mennonite Brethren congregations in which 70% of the members had spent a year at Bible school – can you imagine if that was the case in your congregation today? And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the hundreds of people who found their spouse at Bible school – there is a reason why people joked about “bridal schools.” But I digress...

So why did our spiritual forbearers do this, and why did they persist through some incredibly challenging times? Was there anything unique or special about Bethany's contribution within this larger movement?

The short answer to “why” is that our forbearers in the faith believed that the future of the church depended on how successfully they would transmit their religious and cultural heritage to their children. This responsibility was simply understood as a sacred trust from God. So, it is no surprise to learn that these pioneering immigrants started collecting offerings in 1912 for their own Bible school, 15 years before a teacher became available.

Two stories from Bethany's past deserve telling in order to get a sense of its DNA: from the outset the language of instruction was a point of tension. In 1935, the entire student body at Bethany boldly confronted their teachers with an ultimatum threatening that without more English-language courses, they would “go elsewhere for their training” (what they meant was Prairie Bible Institute). The point these eager mission-minded students were trying to make was simple: if you want us to obey God's call to mission, then we need to be able to engage the culture around us in a language that makes that possible!

Bible school students routinely ignored the most famous marketing tagline in North America, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” Students took their Bible classes seriously, and what they learned invariably found its way into the life of local congregations and into conference life more generally. Bethany was one of the first places where Mennonites in Canada intentionally started making the transition from German to English, which enabled both an expanded vision for mission as well as a greater degree of integration into Canadian society.

One of the best illustrations for how Bethany's DNA came to influence the ethos of the entire Mennonite Brethren conference has to do with work of the Bethany Prayer League. In 1933, five years after the school started, students and teachers began meeting on Monday evenings to pray for their neighbours. That summer, 13 students volunteered their summer to hold VBS and

evening services in surrounding towns; each summer thereafter the number of students involved in VBS grew, to the point that in 1937 this prayer meeting group organized its own “interdenominational, international, evangelical and evangelistic” mission called Western Children’s Mission. Two years later the idea spread to BC – the place where all good things from Saskatchewan eventually go – and the West Coast Children’s Mission was started. These school-based, but somewhat arms-length, ministries mobilized young people for innovative, and at the time somewhat controversial, outreach initiatives. The model came to be used for organizing radio broadcast and camp ministries. In time, it expanded the meaning of so-called “home missions” for an entire conference. It would be fair to say that these early initiatives were the seeds from which our current C2C church-planting network grew.

Much, much more could be said about the Bible school story in general, and about the story of Bethany in particular, but suffice it to say that without them evangelical Protestantism in Canada, the missional DNA of the Mennonite Brethren, and the missionary impact of Canadians around the world would have been substantially less. The “sacred trust” of our forbearers facilitated a kingdom impact that they never imagined possible.

## **2. Lamenting a Loss and Taking time to Grieve**

We turn our attention now to a different aspect of this complicated, bittersweet day. Alongside celebrating and remembering, we also lament a loss. Today represents a collective moment of grief, a time when we name and feel deeply the pain that the loss of Bethany represents.

The pain is probably most acute for those closest to the scene, so a word to the leaders of Bethany: few will ever know the full extent of the challenges you have had to endure during these past two years. You’ve faced decisions and have had to do things you never signed up for. In order to offer encouragement, confidence and hope, to others, you put aside your own frustrations, disappointments, and fears.

Our culture prefers showcasing leaders who innovate or who are exemplars in expansion, not those who downsize and shut-down. You have done your best to do what was necessary and right, and for that you should feel no shame. Your leadership in difficult times has shown us why differentiating between faithfulness and success really matters, and when the two don’t converge (at least humanly speaking), it is always faithfulness that is most important in God’s eyes.

To faculty and staff: you’ve worked tirelessly pouring your energy into the lives of young people, knowing that if even one person’s life is transformed, *you helped to change the future*. You’ve had the awesome privilege of witnessing hundreds of people encounter Jesus year after year. Despite the investment of time and financial sacrifices, this is why you have served at Bethany. And now you face the loss of your jobs and perhaps also the need to re-design your sense of calling. Our hope is that the enormous difference you have made in the lives of young people will bring some sense of consolation to the upheaval that now confronts you and your families.

Many others will of course experience a sense of loss too. Some individuals will never have the opportunity to the Bethany experience like their siblings, friends, youth leaders, parents or even grandparents did. The surrounding community will miss a pattern of public events that brought

people together at dinner theatres, sports camps, concerts, tournaments, and graduations. Congregations and conferences will sorely miss the presence and involvement of students, and the teaching and leadership impact of faculty.

After news of Bethany's closure became public, Ryan Dueck posted an incredibly poignant lament on Facebook. He rightly recognized that the sadness around Bethany's closure is amplified because of how it exemplifies broader trends both within and beyond the church:

- \* The growing sense on the part of young adults (and parents) that devoting a year or two to discipleship and faith formation is a waste of time in comparison to educational opportunities that might increase job and career opportunities;
- \* The steady decline of a Bible school movement – hardly a year goes by without another school closing its doors (2 in BC this past year);
- \* Declining level of biblical literacy;
- \* Declining denominational support for theological education across North America. These are precarious times for theological schools.

It's not hard to see some of the ironies that the closure of Bethany evokes:

- \* It is ironic that Bethany managed to survive, only a few short years after its humble origins, one of the most economically devastating decades that this region has ever known, but it closes during the most economically prosperous decade the province has ever experienced
- \* It is ironic that theological schools in Canada are facing such perilous times when evangelicals have never been more affluent, and when theological education is booming in the southern hemisphere often in countries with very limited financial resources – 138 new Christian universities have been started in the last 20 years, 46 in Africa alone.
- \* It is ironic in view of the historic understanding on the part of the Mennonite Brethren of Christian education as mission. The great commission is not primarily about proclamation, it's a call to making disciples, and as Matthew explicitly notes "teaching to obey" is an indispensable part of that commission. As a church historian, I can say that *the most effective missional movements in the history of Christianity are those that have combined proclamation of the gospel (they do evangelism) with the more systematic task of teaching and educating (they start schools)*. One without the other is a recipe for deficiency.
- \* It is ironic in view of the desperate need for well-trained church leaders in an increasingly secularistic, individualistic, consumeristic, and at times openly hostile, culture. Has there ever been a time in Canadian history when we have needed schools for the discipleship of young people more than now?

The loss of a school like this, and the grief (and perhaps even some anger) that naturally surrounds it, inevitably stirs up questions around why did/how could this happen? And as the armchair quarter-backing takes place, a variety of narratives will surely emerge. David Tracey from the University of Chicago, tells us to keep three words in mind when considering questions about the passing of institutions: transience, contingency, and finitude.

***1. Transience*** has to do with the fact change happens over time. The 88 years of Bethany's existence spans a century during which the world experienced the most bewildering spectrum of transitions ever seen in human history. Bethany began when inventions like zippers and penicillin were being discovered, and ended in an age when students carry in the palm of their hands an electronic device that makes all things instantly accessible – it is simultaneously a phone, computer, camera, newspapers, movie theatre, a concert, radio, mapbook, restaurant guide, post-office and so much more. Bethany's history coincided with a century during which more Christians were killed for their faith than in all other centuries combined; life expectancy in North America increased by 50% from 52 to 78; the percentage of teens graduating from high school increased from 13% to 85%. It was a century that witnessed both the beginning and the end of an aggressively atheistic Soviet Russia, one of the most brutally repressive regimes of all time; and it was a century that saw the demographics of Christianity transformed from being 80% white to only 40% white. The world is a very different place than when Bethany began, and the immense scale and unrelenting pace of change has placed an incredible amount of torque on leaders during this extraordinary century.

***2. Contingency*** recognizes that stuff inevitably happens when people are involved. Schools are started and run by people who bring their unique passions, gifts, and personalities, but they also bring idiosyncracies, frailties, and flaws. Even the most capable, well-intentioned leaders make decisions that have unexpected and irreversible consequences. And no leader can ever prepare fully for the random fortuities, and unexpected misfortunes that color the experience of every school. The people who led and taught at Bethany are exactly what the apostle Paul describes in our text, as “fragile jars of clay.”

***3. Finitude*** simply notes that nothing lasts forever. Of the 60 Bible schools and colleges started by Mennonites in Canada, by 1960 more than 75% had closed or merged (during its history Bethany absorbed several schools including Dalmeny, Herbert, LaGlace and Coaldale). Like the grain elevators that were visible in every prairie town, the Bible schools have almost disappeared. Today, only 7 Mennonite schools remain in operation. Not just schools, but all social creations ever built by human beings including political empires and kingdoms, have died, are dying or will die one day. All things are here only for a season.

As helpful as these three words may be in making sense of the questions around why a closure such as this happened, they do *not* offer an adequate narrative. In the midst of the constant transience of culture one must recognize also the presence and unchanging character of the One who is “the same yesterday and today and forever,” whose steadfast faithfulness we affirmed in song earlier.

Alongside the reality of contingency that is a part of the human condition, one recognizes that

human limitations and fallibility offer opportunities to glorify the “power of God made perfect through weakness.” The Bethany story is a celebration because the “fragile jars of clay” who led and taught at the school accomplished what they did because of God’s sovereignty and the Holy Spirit’s empowerment.

Alongside the reality of finitude, one must consider Paul’s words in our text, “For the things we see now will soon be gone (these buildings for example), but the things we cannot see will last forever.” All of us only appear on the stage of human history for a short moment, and hopefully we do some good before we die. In his lament for Bethany, Ryan Dueck writes, in faith “we trust that the One who is the source of love and all that is good, the One in whose name we did what we could, with the resources we had, for as long as we could, can be trusted to bless and care for that which was given, to water seeds that were planted along the way.” The 5800 “letters of recommendation” that this place has sent the world over, have in the name of Jesus planted, watered, and harvested, and as a result made a difference for eternity in the lives of thousands of people.

### **3. The Future of a “Sacred Trust”**

After the emotionally complicated, bittersweet celebrations and laments of this week-end, we will all walk away from this campus – we hope that some God-honouring use will be found for it. But we must not walk away from the calling to disciple our young people. We put at risk the future of the church and its witness in Canada if we walk away from what our spiritual forbearers considered a sacred trust. In our text, Paul recognizes that “death” (or finitude) will always accompany whatever human beings are a part of, BUT “the treasure” of God’s “all-surpassing power” also always makes “new life” possible. And it just so happens that the Jesus whom we worship specializes in resurrection, in breathing new life into dry bones. I know it’s just a curious coincidence, but Bethany was the name of the town where Jesus resurrected his friend Lazarus from death. While it may be that the sacred trust of “commending God work from one generation to another,” as the Psalmist puts it, will no longer be through educational vehicles like Bethany, my prayer is that this event will help us envision new, creative avenues for being faithful to what is collectively our “sacred trust.”

A final word to the graduates: you are part of a generation that faces an astounding and often bewildering range of possibilities for what to do with your life, who to be with, what to believe, who to *become*, and what to pursue in life. You are, in the words of your dean Gil Dueck, part of a “media-fuelled, technologically driven culture,” a digital age that promises unprecedented connection and community, but like all forms of idolatry delivers loneliness, confusion, and endless distraction instead. While Bethany may not have helped you find an answer to all of the questions you will face in life, it has encouraged you to embrace the One who is the giver of life and who satisfies our deepest hungers for love, significance, forgiveness, meaning and purpose. And that is the “treasure” you now hold within your own “jar of clay.” And with that treasure, we now send you as our “letters of recommendation” to a generation that desperately needs to encounter this same Jesus. May God help you to be faithful stewards of that sacred trust.

Bruce L. Guenther  
President, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

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