

FIGHTINGS WITHIN AND ALSO WITHOUT: NEW ZEALAND BAPTISTS, THE PUBLIC, AND GAY ISSUES 1970 TO THE PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

This article explores public aspects of the gay debate in relation to Baptists in New Zealand over the last forty-plus years. The article begins by looking at the impact of the gay debate internally in the Baptist denomination. While Baptist pronouncements have consistently viewed gay-expressive behaviour as sinful, there have still been internal debates characterised by pejorative polarisation. Consequently Baptists have sometimes avoided debate on gay issues out of a desire for unity. The article then considers public response to Baptists on gay-related issues. Often there has been no distinct public focus on Baptists *per se* but Baptists have been subsumed in the broader category of 'evangelical', 'conservative' or even 'fundamentalist' churches. This grouping of churches has commonly been portrayed in the public media as uncaring and out of step with society on gay-related issues. Thus any conservative Baptist pronouncements will now be seen in the public arena as 'homophobic'. The article concludes by arguing that Baptists ought to remain in the public debate but that the tone of their pronouncements needs always to be respectful and irenic.

Gay-related issues have been intermittently to the fore in both society and church in New Zealand for the last forty or more years. A flashpoint occurred at ecumenical church level in 1985. The National Council of Churches in New Zealand was debating whether to support a measure being debated in parliament to support decriminalisation of acts of male homosexuality. The Council decided to give its support by eleven votes to six (the Baptist Union being in the opposing group). At times the debate was acrimonious, with delegates 'yelling at each other' on the issue.¹ Were liberals simply humanists who had departed the faith, or were the conservatives extremist, homophobic bullies?²

Subsequent to decriminalisation in 1986, there has been a succession of further developments: the extension of human rights protections in relation to sexual orientation in 1993, controversy over annual Hero Parades in Auckland in the 1990s, legalising of Civil Unions for gays in 2004, and finally legislation gaining parliamentary approval in April 2013, sanctioning same-sex marriage.³

As far as the churches of New Zealand have been concerned, there has been quite a lot of internal yelling within denominations over the issue of gay ordination. This has led to a split in the Methodist Church,

¹ Letter Gerard Marks (General Superintendent, Baptist Union of New Zealand) to Dorreen Hatch (Secretary to NCC), 5 September 1985: National Council of Churches records: Alexander Turnbull Library Wellington, reference number 87-204, box 55.

² See Laurie Guy, *Worlds in Collision: The Gay Debate in New Zealand 1960-1986* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002), 128.

³ The New Zealand initiative closely followed the announcement of United States president, Barack Obama, in May 2012 that he now supported same-sex marriage. Two private members bills were lodged in the New Zealand parliament within two or three weeks of that announcement. One bill has passed easily through most of the legislative processes and is likely to become law in April 2013.

with lots of evangelicals leaving, subsequent to Methodist approval of gay ordination in 1997.⁴ Significant numbers of evangelical Presbyterians came close to leaving their denomination during a struggle over gay ordination lasting more than a decade, until they finally won their battle, with their denomination banning the ordination of practising gays in 2004. The Anglican Church in New Zealand and worldwide is currently facing the possibility of schism in the context of strong moves towards formally approving the ordination of practising gay clergy. Homosexuality-related topics remain 'hot' and divisive in New Zealand's churches today.

How have Baptists handled gay issues internally? Have they yelled at or demonised one another? The Baptist Union of New Zealand has throughout the period held a consistent position expressed at its annual assembly or through its assembly council, declaring the sinfulness of homosexual acts and the inappropriateness of gay ordination.⁵ Most recently the Baptist Assembly Council has articulated a position against Baptist pastors conducting gay marriages and against Baptist church buildings being used for such a purpose.⁶ Despite these sorts of stances there have been occasional internal flare-ups of tension amongst New Zealand Baptists.

In 1977, Rev Dr Bruce Turley, in promoting an annual appeal in *NZ Baptist* as Director of Christian Education, urged Baptists to live in light and love, noting a comment made by a Baptist homosexual member: "My church has such a hot campaign against the evils of homosexuality that I feel I don't belong here."⁷ An angry letter followed, claiming Turley was only "tampering with the sloppy mentality of this permissive age, about God's love. He also is a God of wrath who will not spare the guilty or vile person." Such types under God's moral law "should be put to death".⁸

Tension was most marked during a nation-wide debate over the decriminalisation of male homosexual acts in 1985-1986. The Baptist Public Questions Committee (PQC), while opposing human rights protections for homosexuals out of concern for potential normalisation of homosexuality, nevertheless came out in support of decriminalisation, though at a minimum age of twenty, not sixteen as the bill before parliament suggested. PQC support for decriminalisation produced a firestorm of acrimonious protest and debate within the denomination. This ranged from Baptists at one end calling homosexuality an "abomination", to minority voices urging justice for homosexuals.⁹ This led to what was described as the "hottest debate of the year" at the annual Baptist assembly in 1985. A compromise was reached whereby the PQC stance was supported, but only with an initial rider that declared homosexual acts to be sinful.¹⁰ After decriminalising legislation had passed into New Zealand law, the much maligned PQC

⁴ Terry Wall, "Managing Conflict in Methodism: Why Did They Leave? Listening to Their Voices" (DMin Research Project; Australia: Melbourne College of Divinity, 2005); Doug Pratt, "An Ecclesial Dilemma: Homosexual Affirmation and Church Process," *Colloquium* 39 no. 1 (2007): 36-57; Douglas Pratt, "Homosexuality and Theological Process: A Doctrinal Critique," *Colloquium* 40 no. 1 (2008): 75-95.

⁵ See, for example, *New Zealand Baptist (NZB)* (December 1968): 10; Assembly Council statement, "The Values We Affirm Regarding Marriage and Sexuality," (June 1999) (reaffirmed March 2005); *NZB* (November 2006): 18.

⁶ *NZB* (May 2013): 20.

⁷ *NZB* (September 1977): 9.

⁸ *NZB* (October 1977): 3.

⁹ *NZB* (July 1985): 2; (November 1985): 2.

¹⁰ *NZB* (December 1985): 10.

issued a statement lamenting the inability of Baptists to hold in tension both moral standards and a concern for homosexual Christians.¹¹

In September 1987 there was a brief report in the *NZ Baptist* on a gathering of nineteen homosexual Christians.¹² This led to a flurry of heated letters, published under the heading, “A plea for gracious and patient dialogue”.¹³ Obviously the tone of the letters was not doing this.

Further controversy flared in 1992 when a radical Baptist congregation came out in support of gay clergy and gay marriages, discounting biblical texts on the basis of situational and cultural factors and the “limitations of the Scriptures”. Its position was that if there was no justice in this matter (i.e. full acceptance of homosexuals), there would be no genuine worship, mission or church.¹⁴ After two months of polemical correspondence in the pages of the *NZ Baptist*, its editor shut the debate down—essentially the matter was too hot to be argued.¹⁵

While debate has periodically erupted in the last thirty years on gay issues, the overall inclination of New Zealand Baptists has been to avoid debate beyond affirming the wrongs of homosexual behaviour. This avoidance was highlighted for me in relation to a paper on sexuality (including homosexuality) produced by a small committee that I chaired in 2010-2011. The committee was asked to undertake the task by the Assembly Council of the Baptist Union.¹⁶ It produced a report which could fairly be described as ‘open’ but ‘conservative’. The paper that emerged is available through the Baptist Union but has not been publicised in any way. When I asked the new Baptist national leader whether the paper would be publicised, he indicated his hesitation to do so—he didn’t want controversy early in his watch.

My paper to this point suggests that on a controversial issue like homosexuality three significant responses have emerged among New Zealand Baptists. One has been to ‘yell’ at each other, using pejorative language such as ‘false gospel’, ‘humanistic viewpoints’, ‘lack of compassion’, ‘minority bashing’, ‘homophobia’, and ‘bigotry’.¹⁷ The editor of the *NZ Baptist* summed up the correspondence he was receiving at the height of the 1985 debate: “[Y]ou would expect established Christians to be the nicest people there are. Sadly this isn’t always the case. . . . I have to admit that some of the contributions appal me. . . . As well as attacking the sin or the issue, they manage to stick every pin possible into their opponents.”¹⁸

The second response to homosexuality has been to sidestep the issue in the public arena. It is too controversial; so let’s shut any statement or debate down for the sake of harmony, unity and public image. It may be sad that it is a major public issue crying out for attention and moral leadership, but we can’t handle it—it would simply provoke yelling amongst ourselves. This perspective was a factor in the demise of the Baptist Union’s public questions committee in the early 1990s. When queried in 1996 about this, the Baptist Union Executive Secretary responded: “While there are issues on which churches do need assistance from

¹¹ NZB, (June 1986): 14.

¹² NZB (September 1987): 2.

¹³ NZB (November 1987): 2. See also NZB (October 1987): 2.

¹⁴ NZB (June 1992): 8.

¹⁵ NZB (August 1992): 2.

¹⁶ Email, Rodney Macann to Laurie Guy dated 19 July 2010 and a response in return, 9 December 2010.

¹⁷ NZB (September 1991): 4; (October 1985): 2; (June 2000): 4; (February 2000): 4; (August 1996): 4.

¹⁸ NZB (October 1985): 2.

time to time, it seems that the Public Questions Committee method per se doesn't meet those needs."¹⁹ In reality, taking that line then often meant doing nothing and saying nothing.

A third response to the issue of homosexuality has been to argue the issue from a scriptural base, but to do this with graciousness and respect, utilising the theology that underlies the verses, coupled with interaction with contemporary society and wise reflection. But those voices have too seldom been the dominant voices of the debate. To avoid fighting within the Baptist denomination we have often simply sat on our hands.

What then of fighting without? How have New Zealand Baptists related with society on the issue of homosexuality? From early times Baptists in New Zealand have comprised a little less than two per cent of the total population. This relatively low percentage has meant that a distinctive Baptist position has often not been noted by the media. Baptists have rather been located in the public eye within a broader stream of 'conservative', or 'evangelical', or even 'fundamentalist' churches.

A century ago evangelicalism, represented primarily by Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Congregational, Brethren churches, and the Salvation Army, was often seen as narrow-minded, obsessed with shutting down the 'trinity of evil', namely alcohol, gambling and immoral sex, and turning Sunday into a gloomy Sabbath. This perception, which was overdrawn but also significantly true, gave rise in New Zealand (and Australia) to the term 'wowsers', conveying the notion of a 'puritanical fanatic'.²⁰

As a significant strand in this broader evangelical approach, Baptists were wowzers in popular public perception, especially in relation to alcohol. Hence a gutter-press article attacked the pronouncements of the annual Baptist Conference in 1912, accusing Baptists of being a "wowsers" and "kill-joy" group, "stirring up hatred and all uncharitableness", and having "an unbalanced mind obsessed with . . . the drink question".²¹ This wowser image persisted for most of the twentieth century, with some teetotal Baptists up into the 1980s even embracing the label with pride and challenge to society.²² Overall, however, a Baptist wowser image tended to have negative overtones. As *NZ Baptist* editor, Barry Hibbert wrote in 1976, "we have tended in our puritanical tradition to be at least a little suspicious of sheer enjoyment".²³

An absolutist Baptist stance in relation to the prohibition of alcohol gradually disappeared in the 1980s. The point at which Baptists were now most at variance from society related to sexuality issues generally, and to homosexuality in particular. The public image of kill-joy, puritanical, 'no-fun', conservative churches has persisted, particularly in relation to sexuality issues, even though 'wowsers' language has largely dropped out of usage.

Whereas public attitudes in the 1950s supported a Baptist sex ethic which validated sexual activity only within the framework of marriage, this was not the case from the 1970s onward. In the language of

¹⁹ Executive Secretary's report to Assembly Council, 15-17 March 1996.

²⁰ Della Thompson, ed., *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (9th ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 1617.

²¹ *NZ Truth* (2 November 1912): 5. For a similar attack on Baptists as kill-joy wowzers, see *NZ Truth* (16 December 1911): 4; (8 February 1913): 4.

²² *NZB* (December 1981): 2; (February 1985): 2.

²³ *NZB* (November 1976): 2. See also a self-reference to a columnist's "Puritan upbringing" in *NZB* (May 1985): 7.

psychology professor James Ritchie, “We got with sex in the sixties”.²⁴ The ideological shift, a revolution “in the head rather than the bed”, meant sex was perceived primarily as pleasure, largely disconnected from procreation.²⁵ If sex was essentially pleasure, why not homosexual sex also, so long as no one else was harmed? There has been a shift of seismic proportions in public attitudes. This was noted in a recent major newspaper article by columnist Paul Thomas headed, “Now it’s the sex police who are the odd ones: times have changed, and the guardians of our morals need to realise it.” In criticising a Pentecostal church for refusing to host a concert involving lesbian singer, Anika Moa, Thomas observed that sex had become commonplace, particularly through the seeping of pornography into popular culture which had become progressively sexualised. So a conservative voice on sexuality issues was an antiquated relic: “Hard as it may be to believe, some people still get het up about sex”.²⁶ Should Baptist give up the public fight? Should they have done this long ago?

Baptists were a major strand in the opposition to homosexual law reform in 1985. A mammoth 800,000 petition (around 25% of the population) expressing opposition to decriminalisation was presented to parliament in September 1985. Two prominent New Zealanders were the public face of the petition. One was a Baptist—Sir Peter Tait, ex-mayor of Napier and ex-Member of Parliament. In parliament itself, prominent Baptist Graeme Lee was one of the two main parliamentarians leading the sixteen-month unsuccessful struggle against decriminalisation.

From a public relations point of view the opposition to decriminalisation came across as uncaring. A cartoon from that time ably captured this perception. A group of the anti-decriminalisation leaders including Sir Peter Tait are portrayed as discussing how they could have “insisted that these vile degenerates be boiled alive in chicken-fat” etc. But they didn’t, “because we love them” (though, in the satirical cartoon, it is patent that they did not).²⁷

The decriminalisation forces (including Baptists) lost the debate. The process reinforced a negative image of evangelicals as “against things”—against fun, against pleasure.²⁸ Subsequent to decriminalisation public opinion began more and more to move towards full gay rights, including gay marriage. It became increasingly difficult to speak out any message in the public arena on gay rights other than tolerance and support, without being howled down. As one correspondent indicated to the *NZ Baptist*, “Whenever someone is brave enough to publicly disagree with homosexuality we are invariably treated to an exhibition of name calling. The usual ones are bigoted, intolerant, homophobic and fundamentalist.”²⁹

One can see the impact of public negativity towards non-gay-affirming churches on the Salvation Army. This church was at the forefront of opposition to decriminalisation of acts of male homosexuality in

²⁴ J.E. Ritchie, “Morals and Social Habits: N.Z. in the Sixties,” *NZ Listener* (16 January 1970): 6.

²⁵ Danielle C. Moreau, “Living with the Pill: Oral Contraceptive Use in New Zealand 1960-1975” (MA thesis, Auckland: University of Auckland, 1997): 120-21; also Linda Grant, *Sexing the Millennium* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 18; 60.

²⁶ *NZ Herald* (9 March 2013): A23.

²⁷ Tom Scott, Cartoon, *Evening Post* (5 October 1985).

²⁸ Editorial, *NZB* (May 1988): 2.

²⁹ Letter of Andrew Davies, *NZB* (October 1996): 6. Examples of such name calling can be seen in Nicola Legat, “Needing Another Hero?” *Metro* (February 2001): 46–57 at 48, 50, 51, 52.

1985-1986. This provoked a major, gay-orchestrated, public backlash, with people urging a boycott of the Salvation Army's 'Red Shield' annual public appeal for funds, and with many (typically nominal) Salvationists disavowing their ties with the Salvation Army at the following census in declaring their religious affiliation. Such an experience led the New Zealand Salvation Army headquarters in the gay marriage debate of 2012–2013 to send a memo to its officers instructing them to keep out of the public debate altogether. Such sidestepping of gay issues on grounds of expediency makes practical (though not necessarily gospel) sense.

At a personal level I experienced negativity towards Baptists when I enrolled at the University of Auckland in 1997 for a PhD thesis on the gay debate in New Zealand, 1960–1986. Two or three of the history faculty unsuccessfully sought to block my enrolment on the basis that I was Baptist and therefore prejudiced. Subsequently they verbally attacked me publicly at a PhD presentation day when each candidate had to outline their work to date. My supervisor advised me to complain about my treatment to the head of department. When I did so, the head indicated that the leading challenger thought I was homophobic. When I assured him that I was not, he then treated that as the end of the discussion. This experience suggests a widespread perception: Baptist = homophobic.

I survived that initial grilling and was able to get co-operation from almost all key participants in the 1985–1986 decriminalisation debate, from fundamentalists to gay liberationists. The one exception was Don McMorland, law lecturer and co-drafter of the 1985 decriminalisation bill. He declined to be interviewed on the basis that "Baptists were not helpful to us when the decriminalisation bill was being passed".

Eventually my completed thesis appeared as a published book.³⁰ It was reviewed in the *NZ Journal of History* by a gay-sympathetic academic with these words: "The tone is measured and even-handed. As a lecturer in the New Zealand Baptist Theological College, in a denomination whose members are most vehemently opposed to relaxing the law on male homosexuality, Guy understands the mind-set and rhetoric of religious conservatives and fundamentalists but he maintains a critical stance. Not many historians of this subject have managed to present the views of both sides with such balance."³¹

Decriminalisation fostered a public mood-shift on gay issues which became very evident in the 1990s. In 1994 gays in Auckland began holding annual Hero Parades, celebrating gay identity. At City Council level there was clearly reluctance to provide full endorsement and support for the parade. Deputy Mayor and Baptist, David Hay, was the key councillor in opposition to the parade.³² The council organised a hearing for two pro-parade and two anti-parade leaders. The meeting was attended by 1200 people and turned into a chaotic shouting match at times. Bruce Patrick, pastor of the Auckland Baptist Tabernacle, was one of the two anti-parade speakers. Though he was careful to keep the focus on the public nudity and simulated sex that was involved in the February parade, and though he expressed concern for the suffering of the gay community, there was clear hostility to his stance as simply a cover for an anti-gay attack on the gay community.³³ As the meeting was about to start, Patrick was interviewed on the popular *Holmes* program on

³⁰ Laurie Guy, *Worlds in Collision: The Gay Debate in New Zealand 1960-1986* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002).

³¹ *NZ Journal of History* 37 no. 2 (2003): 221.

³² Legat, "Needing," 46, 51.

³³ *NZ Herald* (13 April 1994): 3; (15 April 1994): 3; Nicola Legat, "Hay Fever," *Metro* (June 1994): 86–96 at 91.

New Zealand's main television channel. In the interview Patrick made the point that his concern was not anti-gay but simply concern with the nudity and lewdness of the parade. Part way through the interview the television company lost the interview connection and the interview was terminated. The company later suggested that a cleaner at the town hall had inadvertently turned off a switch—but the last one had left work several hours earlier. Patrick's view is that a gay-sympathising, television technician had deliberately lost the connection.³⁴ Whatever the facts, the cutting off of Patrick conveyed powerful symbolism: we don't want to hear your sort of views in public any more.

Five years later Bruce Patrick joined with others in lodging a full-page advertisement, featuring public figures such as Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa. The advertisement asserted, "it takes more than a parade to make a hero".³⁵ It was clearly aimed against the Hero Parades and the normalisation of homosexual relationships. This provoked a great deal of controversy, including a gathering of fifty protestors outside the Baptist Tabernacle.³⁶ The advertisement was seen as "bigotry" and "homophobia".³⁷ New Zealand's Chief Human Rights Commissioner viewed the advertisement as "unfortunate", and described any "attempts to stir up ill-feeling" against gays and lesbians as "destructive".³⁸

Since then New Zealand Baptists have continued to face criticism for opposing normalisation of gay relationships. Opposition to the Civil Union bill in 2004 from groups such as the Baptists and the Catholic bishops was seen by one newspaper columnist as intolerant and "inclining people to stop listening to them at all".³⁹

Fuelling negative perceptions of Baptists on this issue are other groups using the Baptist name. In the 1960s there was virtually only one Baptist denomination in New Zealand. Now there are at least twenty-three, a number of them fundamentalist imports from the United States.⁴⁰ Overseas Baptist voices on occasion tarnish the image of New Zealand Baptists. This particularly applies to the tiny United States Westboro Baptist Church with its godhatesfags.com website, which periodically receives publicity in New Zealand as a "gay hatred" body.⁴¹ This tiny body has left its toxic footprint here. A recent 2013 cartoon on New Zealand's gay marriage debate has a conservative person holding a "no to gay marriage" placard and wearing a shirt emblazoned, "God hates fags".⁴²

A few weeks after I presented the conference paper in July 2012 on which this article is based, I was asked to go on a short current affairs discussion on gay marriage on the *Close Up* program of New Zealand's leading television station. I was introduced as a "Baptist theologian". The program led to over 2300 television website responses, a majority of which were negative. Although I used no overtly religious

³⁴ Interview with Bruce Patrick, 1 February 2013.

³⁵ *NZ Herald* (10 February 1999).

³⁶ C. Daniells, "Anti-Hero Parade Ad Stirs Protest," *NZ Herald* (12 February 1999).

³⁷ *NZ Herald* (12 February 1999): A13; Chris Ryan & C. Michael Hall, *Sex Tourism, Marginal People and Liminalities* (London: Routledge, 2001), 109.

³⁸ Ryan & Hall, *Sex Tourism*, 109.

³⁹ Ian Harris, "Back Up Bishops—Civil Unions No Threat," *Otago Daily Times* (14 December 2004): 17. See also Geoffrey Vine, "Civil Unions See Churches Abandon Leadership Role," *Otago Daily Times* (22 February 2005): 17.

⁴⁰ Kevin Ward in Stephen Kilgallon, "Selling God," *Sunday Star Times* (3 July 2011): supplement, C4-5.

⁴¹ David McLoughlin, "Are Liberals Fascists?" *Dominion Post* (28 August 2004): E1-2.

⁴² *NZ Herald* (16 March 2013): A22.

language or argument, a lot of the negative responses were against Christianity, religion or the church. This negativity was summed up in one statement: “One victory for humanity, take that religious fanatics!”⁴³

The following day I received an email from one of my students: “Thanks for the way you spoke on Close Up last night Laurie. I really appreciated having a Christian viewpoint portrayed by logic, not emotion. My best friend is gay, and it’s refreshing not to feel like crawling under the table as a Christian, when this issue comes up.”⁴⁴

We Baptists should not be concealed under the table. We need to be out in the public arena. But for this to be effective, a warm public image is required. And this will not be produced either by anger or by naïve rhetoric.

When the New Zealand gay marriage bill went to a select committee hearing in November 2012 to February 2013, only a small proportion of the several thousand people who put in submissions were heard in person. One of them was Masterton Baptist minister, Scott Lelievre. He went on the attack, calling gay marriage an “abomination” and a sin under God.⁴⁵ Fighting words; but is that the way to win friends and influence people? Is that the way to reach the majority who sit in the middle on these sorts of debates and can be swayed either way? This sort of response may strengthen the faithful in the church, while alienating the church from the society it is seeking to reach with the gospel.

Too often New Zealand Baptists have engendered negative perceptions in wider society on gay-related issues. Some of this is unavoidable. But we have brought a lot on ourselves. In speaking in public spaces on public issues we ought to heed the words of 1 Peter 3:15-16a: “Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence”.

⁴³ “Gay Marriage Likely to Pass the First Hurdle”: <http://tvnz.co.nz/politics-news/gay-marriage-likely-pass-first-hurdle-498849?page=2&pagesize=5>, accessed 7 March 2013. For similar response to a newspaper article I published in the *New Zealand Herald* on 29 August 2012, see http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10830082, accessed 7 March 2013.

⁴⁴ Email, Bronwyn Duffy to Laurie Guy, 7 June 2012 (used with permission).

⁴⁵ Gay marriage “abomination”, committee told: <http://www.3news.co.nz/Gay-marriage-abomination-committee-told/tabid/1607/articleID/277713/Default.aspx>, accessed 7 March 2013.