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OttawaWatch 110: That ‘humdinger’ of a speech

By Lloyd Mackey

Chuck Strahl’s Mel Smith Lecture is, indeed posted for posterity, at [Trinity Western University \(twu.ca\)](http://Trinity Western University (twu.ca)) along with all the other texts of lectures delivered over a 20-year period. And there is also a list of the lecturers for handy reference. The lectures were wound down in 2018, but a scholarship is awarded each year from his estate, to a TWU student producing a research paper based on – but not limited to – the Smith’s archives.

It is always encouraging to learn that some recipients of OttawaWatch read all the way through each week’s missive – or at least read the last paragraph, not just the first.

In last week’s piece, I promised to make some references, today, to Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl’s January 18 speech – the 2007 Mel Smith lecture – at Trinity Western University. In that reference, I referred to the speech as a “humdinger.”

The “humdinger” reference caught the attention of a respected political reporter for a major Canadian daily and the director of a group involved in helping to relate faith to the political process.

Part of my interest in reporting on the speech related to the difficulty I experienced in getting the text of the speech.

When I checked with the agriculture ministry communications office, I was told that the ministry had not written or vetted the speech, so could not provide a copy.

The good folk in Trinity Western’s communications department said that they hoped to get a copy for the Mel Smith archives, but it was not yet forthcoming.

Finally, during my three week stay in Victoria, I met, on other matters, with an old friend of the late Mel Smith. That person, as it happens, sits on the committee that pulls together the annual lecture named in honor of the long-time constitutional advisor and – in many circles – respected Christian statesman.

It was not long before a copy of Strahl’s speech was in my hands.

It was not, in fact, a speech on agriculture policy. So the agricultural ministry was quite right to distance itself from the contents.

Neither did it, as many previous Smith lectures have done, provide a learned look at weighty policy or constitutional matters.

Strahl is an alumnus of Trinity Western. In many ways, his speech was a personal reminiscence for those who have followed him at that institution, and for others who have followed with interest, both his faith and his political pilgrimage.

He introduced his speech by noting:

I am not here this evening to talk federal agriculture policy, but to discuss why it is important where you stand, whether it is in logging, politics or life.” (Before going into politics, Strahl ran a truck logging operation near Chilliwack.)

I will try to lift some of the best excerpts from this “humdinger” and hope that readers will keep an eye on www.twu.ca for the full text, which is still being promised in due course.

So here goes:

Strahl told a story about his brother-in-law, Bob, to illustrate some of his thoughts about logging:

He was a farm boy, green as grass, and not used to the rugged coastal mountains at all. He also wasn’t used to working with the hard-driving, hard-drinking, tough-talking, somewhat crude loggers who were typical of the industry. Their expressions were vulgar; the average guy lives pay cheque to pay cheque and, let’s just say, that most of them were not choirboys ...

Bob wasn’t a stereotypical logger... Worse yet, as far as the loggers were concerned, he was a quiet Christian.

For sure, Bob is not preachy. But he does know when to take a stand, and when he was logging, that quickly earned him the nickname of Preacher Bob.

How did he earn this moniker? By quoting scripture to his co-workers? Lecturing on morality? Handing out gospel tracts? Not hardly...

He was mocked, ridiculed and belittled. They questioned his manhood. They pushed him whenever they could in whatever mean and nasty way possible, hoping ... that he would simply go away. It was a rough, rough ride for Preacher Bob.

A louder, more aggressive guy might have lashed out ... But Bob and my sister, Carole handled it different. Carole started baking cookies for the crew. Bob invited them over to his house for the occasional coffee on the weekend. He never lashed out. He continued to work hard and he treated everyone – even those who were picking on him – with kindness. But he never changed his standards, either.

The results were remarkable. Guys who had run him down behind his back – and often to his face – began first to back down and eventually became Bob boosters. When (they called him Preacher Bob, now,) it was a respectful thing, reflective of the fact that Bob was perhaps the first openly Christian person they had ever met, that they had watched him carefully under the pressure-cooker of the workplace, and had come to appreciate that he had taken a principled stand.

When you are logging, if you want to be safe, it matters where you stand. That summer, preacher Bob showed me that it matters, where and how you stand as a person.

As to what conclusions Trinity Western students could take from his brother-in-law, Strahl added:

It matters where you stand, because people watch and listen, and draw conclusions based on how you live your life. For Christians who worry about what sort of witness they have on others, the answer is often: “Never stop witnessing. If necessary, occasionally use words.”

It is why Trinity Western has it figured out. They are churning out graduates in many disciplines, all of whom focus on being excellent in what they do. These people go on to be salt and light in a world that is always watching, always attentive, always eager to know if Christians can live out what they say they believe.

When talking about life, Strahl focused to some extent on what he went through last year when he discovered that he had an inoperable cancer.

He talked about reading excerpts of a book called “Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, no good, very bad day” to his grandchildren.

Eighteen months ago, some folks would argue that I experienced one of those days myself. (That was when) I was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer called mesothelioma. The doctors told me it was caused by exposure to asbestos 25-30 years earlier, back when I was in the logging business...

Like most people, I hadn't really scheduled an event like this into my life... I have had better days.

Of course, the initial news is a shock. It makes the future uncertain. Of course, it changes your plans somewhat. But I've never felt for an instant that God is picking on me. He is not judging me or punishing me or really, even testing me. Trouble will come our way, but no matter what comes *even in the valley of the shadow of death*, God is there to bring comfort.

In the weeks that followed my diagnosis, and right to this day, that diagnosis confirms what the Apostle Paul said in the scriptures:

“He is the source of every mercy and the God who comforts. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others.”

I couldn't feel sorry for myself, because I was comforted by my relationship with God, and in turn, found out I could comfort and encourage others.

Strahl had four points for the students to whom he was speaking – points which he said he had come to understand clearly, himself, since being diagnosed with cancer. He amplified on them during the speech and I hope Trinity Western does not take too long to release the contents of the speech itself.

But here are the points, themselves:

1. Use time deliberately.
2. Work on relationships.
3. Use life's peaks and valley to share, with others, what is important.
4. Don't wait for a crisis to develop a relationship with God.

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