



Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways

Thank You...

The first word must be one of gratitude. Thank you to each one who participated in providing valuable feedback about how to use the Bible well for faith and life. Congregations, small groups, and individuals responded. There was also helpful feedback from a group of Bible scholars of the church. Many suggested that the exercise had been beneficial for your group or congregation. Most of you expressed appreciation for this effort to keep us biblically grounded as God's people. Thank you for the time and effort you dedicated. We are aware that for some of you, the effort was very substantial indeed. We are grateful for these insights from our part of the Body of Christ.

We have indicated from the beginning that the BFC process is happening *in the midst of hermeneutical ferment*. The responses have underlined the profound truth of that statement. The ferment goes much beyond concern about interpreting particular passages of scripture, or clarifying particular themes or questions. We are all aware of examples of misuse, or even abuse, of the Bible, and these make us anxious, lest we also be found guilty of exploiting it for personal or ideological purposes. A few respondents suggested that the Bible should be set aside because they do not see it as life-giving for our community. Most, however, in spite of an awareness of the complexities of the Bible, continue to affirm the life-giving nurture that scripture offers and they value the effort to

strengthen our capacity to understand scripture.

A Reminder of the Task:

Our focus is on being a faithful church and on how scripture helps us in this vocation. We asked you to be the teachers and to share with others what you have learned about the use of scripture in your Christian life and what you think others might learn from your experience.

We now want to reflect back to you what you have taught. And we want to make some suggestions about how this teaching can help us all in our vocation of being God's people.

The responses began by reminding us that we need to take great care in the words we use to define the task itself. For example, we had asked you to name some "criteria" that are helpful for interpreting scripture. Several suggested that "criteria" is not quite the right word because it may imply a set framework that can become more important than the text itself. This was not, of course, intended. Several alternatives were suggested: principles, assumptions, guidelines, indices, noticings, hermeneutical stance, elements, characteristics, framework, central paradigm for interpretation, bias of scripture, how scripture might function as a word from God for us, or simply what is most helpful in our reading of scripture. We appreciate this discussion because together these nuances help us to affirm our desire for scripture to function as an authoritative guide for our common life and faith.

"Stay on the Paths and Avoid the Ditches"

Reading the Bible and healthy biblical interpretation are complex processes. One scholar used a helpful image by suggesting that biblical interpretation is like a communal hike on which we try to "stay on the paths and avoid the ditches."³ This simple image is useful and can incorporate the nuances indicated above. The path we seek is to acknowledge the complexities of the hike but to see these complexities as an integral part of its adventure rather than as deterrents to faithfulness. We will use this image of "paths and ditches" to summarize the wise counsel we received in the responses.⁴

Paths to stay on:

1. The life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus are central and serve as the critical lens of interpretation that helps us understand all of scripture.⁵
2. Context makes a difference in how scripture is interpreted, understood, and applied for faith and life. Context refers not only to the importance of understanding the time and place out of which scripture emerged and to which it was addressed. It also refers to our time and place and how that impacts our understandings of scripture.⁶
3. Scripture already interprets scripture. It is very important to pay close attention to this inter-textual interpretation because this already gives us essential clues in the ways we need to understand how various passages relate to each other.
4. Jesus also interprets scripture. One response focused exclusively on trying to understand the "hermeneutics of Jesus," (i.e., how the Gospel writers portray the way Jesus uses and interprets the Old Testament). It is

1 We will use the abbreviation BFC to refer to the Being a Faithful Church process and the related documents.
2 We will continue to use the word "hermeneutics" in this document. It is the word used by biblical scholarship to talk about the dynamics of reading, interpreting, and applying

the wisdom of scripture to our lives.
3 We will not identify respondents. But the use of quotation marks ["] will indicate where quotations are taken directly from the responses.
4 A more complete compilation of results is available. We will not duplicate that here.

evident that we can learn much from that in our own reading of scripture.⁷

5. It is important to take the entire canon of scripture as our base of operations for healthy hermeneutics. The fact that scripture already interprets scripture compels us to use the whole of scripture in order to better understand each part.
6. Scripture persistently hopes that the letters of its words will become a living word in a world in need of redemption. This does not diminish the authority of scripture, but sharpens it and makes it real in our community and to the world. This pathway indicates that other sources can illuminate what scripture also teaches.
7. It is the Holy Spirit who guides the interpretive community in faithfulness, and in faithfully understanding scripture for our lives. This means that we must continually open our hearts and minds to the work of the Spirit within and among us. Without this, "the text is just black marks on the paper."
8. Scripture calls us to remember that we are a part of a larger story of "God's love affair with the world." The Gospel's command to go and baptize and the invitation to remember the Lord's Supper are prime examples of when we "do not forget" how God has accompanied us. The yearning to know God is inseparably connected to "remembering" the story of God, a story that we now acknowledge as our own.⁸
9. "Knowing" is inseparable from "doing," "hearing" is inseparable from "acting," and "praxis [practice] is indispensable for gnosis [knowledge]." Jesus' hermeneutic also repeatedly indicates this critical connection between "works [erga] and

faith [pistis]." In other words, on a hike we need to walk and not just sit on the path and contemplate the map.

10. Scripture is a "delight" that serves also for devotional refreshment and daily inspiration. The "delight" of scripture is even greater when we can hike together rather than going out on a lone trek.
11. We need to see our interpretive community as larger than the people we can see around us. The hiking trail we are on has already been forged by many who have gone before us.⁹ They have left markers on the trail to help those who come after and we will leave markers for those coming behind us. This does not mean that we can't make the trail better, create short-cuts where advisable, remove obstacles for better mobility, and so on. The interpretive community extends geographically beyond those in our hiking group; it is not restricted to our choice of time and schedule; and it is not constrained by our particular agenda. We must affirm the critical importance of those on the trail with us at this time¹⁰ – those who have gone before, and those who are hiking at the same time, but on trails that may be geographically and culturally distant from us. The awareness of other hikers should not, however, close our eyes to the contextual dangers lurking on our hike and the scenic beauty that may highlight something new for us.
12. Jesus is portrayed as "consistently interpreting scripture in reference to, and with regard for the needs/realities of "the least" - the most needy and vulnerable (the poor, the sick, the foreigner/outsider, women, social outcasts...)." God's intention through scripture is to bring wholeness to creation, justice to the orphans and widows, sight and healing to the blind

and the lame, reconciliation and salvation to the sinners.

Ditches to avoid

Each of the paths indicated above inherently hints at a ditch that we would wish to avoid. For example, we enter ditches when Jesus is not a central lens to interpretation, if we ignore context, if we diminish the extent of the canon, etc. We will, therefore, not repeat them all. We will highlight only a few that were specifically identified as potentially problematic ditches.

1. The desire to keep Jesus central to hermeneutics at times leads some to disconnect him from his own scriptural roots (The Hebrew Bible) and his own social/political context in 1st century Palestine. We need to avoid both of these ditches and not leave Jesus without a context.
2. We should avoid the temptation to set the Old Testament aside. The Old Testament is part of our scripture for at least two reasons: i) The New Testament is grounded in Old Testament language, images, quotations, and assumptions and therefore the two Testaments cannot and should not be separated; ii) The Old Testament speaks to things that the New Testament may not highlight. "All of scripture witnesses to God's revelation." "Both Testaments carry a living word of God for us." "Our task is to attempt to discern how all of scripture might function as a word from God to us."
3. We need to avoid proof-texting. "Proof-texting is essentially the use of a text to support or reject a position without giving sufficient attention to the meaning and function of that text in its historical and literary setting in the Bible, and without bringing it into dialogue with other texts particularly relevant to the issue." This

- 5 John Howard Yoder, noted Mennonite theologian, states forcefully what the respondents also point to, namely that the experience with Jesus represents: "... a cosmos shaken by the cross.... a universe being re-ordered by the Word of the resurrection" (J. H. Yoder: *To Hear the Word* 2nd edition; Cascade Books, 2010. p.135). Such a cosmic understanding of Jesus will impact the way scripture is read and understood among God's people.
- 6 We must be aware of all the "contexts" that have touched scripture, including those of choosing and forming scripture, preserving it through the centuries, and translating it.

- 7 This response identified 21 key things about the ways in which Jesus is portrayed as using scripture. These are very helpful. The first thing is that Jesus used scripture a lot, and is described as being creatively and provocatively engaged in conversations about and interpretation of scripture. For example, the respondent identifies up to 25 Old Testament quotations, images, allusions, and echoes in a single chapter of Matthew. This demonstrates that there is already very significant "hermeneutical ferment" in scripture itself.
- 8 One scholar suggests the following four important points: "The Bible has a persistent 'present tense' (it does not only address

- people long ago, but continues to address communities of faith throughout the ages), it functions as a 'witness' to divine revelation, it is linked to human writers, and it is sufficient rather than exhaustive."
- 9 For a brief look at how our responses correspond to key elements of 16th century Anabaptist understandings, please refer to Appendix I.
- 10 Mennonite Church Canada people are a tapestry of cultural and ethnic diversity, regional loyalties, and congregational histories. These are the people hiking together now.

definition highlights the importance of both context and canon for healthy interpretation.

4. We need to avoid generalizations without having immersed ourselves in particular texts. This is the opposite of proof-texting and is equally detrimental to theological discernment. Some of the most common generalizations are: "the Bible says," or "all we need is love," or "let's just focus on justice." Each of these generalizations needs to be understood from particular texts.
5. "We should not assume that our own context is either static or normative when interpreting the Bible." The Apostle Paul says that "now we see in a mirror dimly... now I know only in part." (I Corinthians 13:12). This is an important reminder that we live in a changing context, and our understandings are partial.
6. We should not try to subject God to our ideology. The gift of scripture is that it may challenge rather than support our preferences.

Moving Ahead

The feedback provided above reflects the remarkable promise of the process we have engaged. We are not aware of another effort like this, focusing this agenda via extensive feedback from congregations, individuals, and biblical scholars. As far as we know, this is the first time we have such a helpful and profound articulation of a desired "hermeneutical stance" for the church - articulated by a portion of the priesthood of believers itself.

Is it an exhaustive framework? Clearly, it is not. Scripture is much too profound to be contained in one such effort.

Is it adequate for us as a church now? It is never adequate in any final sense of the word, but it could be an agreed upon path on our hike, and that would already be very helpful.

Whether this path is desirable and possible is the question that we will need to test with congregations and delegates.

What are the benefits of accepting this framework as an adequate path for us? Allow us to suggest a few:

The need for common ground can hardly be overstated.

We have common ground upon which we could further discuss, agree, disagree, and discern how this commonness applies to particular discernment.

7. The need for transparency is urgent.

We would be transparent about our assumptions, and we could explain better on what basis we arrive at given interpretations, directions, and decisions.

8. Increased awareness is healthy.

Transparency and awareness would alleviate the sensation we feel at times that different parts of our body function as "ships passing in the night" (i.e., unaware of each others' presence and unappreciative of each others' sincere efforts to be faithful).

9. The need for accountability is critical.

We could better hold each other accountable to interpretive processes, even while it would not guarantee interpretive consensus.

10. The value of acknowledging and affirming our body as an interpretive community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is important and timely.

We would take seriously the way in which the Holy Spirit has led and is leading our church as a body of believers.

11. The need for teaching in our church is essential.

This "hermeneutical stance" could become a teaching preference for the church. It would help us to engage church members – new and old church leaders – new and old pastors – new and old.

12. The ongoing and careful nurture of our vocation as a body of discernment is vital.

It is a seed that could grow, be refined, and become even more useful.

Scripture itself points to the need for the Body of Christ to be an accountable hermeneutic community. These words of scripture may make us squirm, but they are poignant and fresh:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. - Ephesians 4:11-16

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. - Hebrews 5:12-14

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Processed and approved by:

BFC Task Force and Mennonite Church Canada

General Board

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Delegate Assembly Actions:

We recommend acceptance of the following statements of affirmation and action:

1. We acknowledge with gratitude the counsel received from congregations, groups, scholars, and individuals of our body. We receive this summary report as a sign of the Holy Spirit's work among us, and will use this emerging framework in future efforts to interpret scripture together for our faith and life.
2. We recommend that in the next 12 months (July/2012 – July/2013) each area church of Mennonite Church Canada organize opportunities to explore, deepen, and strengthen our understandings of each of the "paths and ditches" identified in this summary report. We further suggest that some common resources generated and/or identified by Mennonite Church Canada be used.
3. We recommend that congregations process this document carefully. We further recommend that congregations highlight particular questions or issues they are facing that could benefit by using this framework of scriptural discernment.

Appendix I

A Quick Look Back:

Path #11 above suggests that we need to be aware of other hikers. How do the paths and ditches identified from the responses compare with others who have gone before? Specifically, how do they compare with the Anabaptist forbears of the 16th century? These are important questions, but it is not within the scope of this document to answer them fully. That would be a substantive study for which many resources are already available.

Stuart Murray, for example, identifies six hermeneutical principles essential in 16th century Anabaptists.¹¹ These are: The Bible as Self-interpreting, Christocentrism, The Two Testaments, Spirit and Word, Congregational Hermeneutics, Hermeneutics of Obedience. We cannot investigate these here in detail, but it is remarkable how closely these resemble the paths outlined above. It is also noteworthy how the early Anabaptists struggled with some of the same ditches that our responses highlighted.

We can point to some of the overarching, key ingredients of 16th century Anabaptist understandings of scripture and hermeneutics to taste a bit of what we would find in a more intensive study. We turn to that briefly now.

1. Some 16th century Anabaptists understood scripture to be the most authoritative source for Christian faith and life. Indeed, they borrowed from other reformers the idea of *sola scriptura* to indicate that other sources that claimed to be authoritative really were not. Their passion, however, was not so much to keep *scriptura* pure, but to maintain the faithfulness and obedience of the church connected to God's revelation in scripture. We see a similar emphasis in the "paths" indicated above.
2. Some Anabaptists, however, had an interesting sense of the "living word," or the "inner word" that could be present quite apart from scripture - indeed, that needed to be present apart from scripture in order to fully understand scripture. This understanding did not eliminate the sense of *sola scriptura* but relativized it slightly. However, John H. Yoder indicates that even in these cases: "the only court of appeal is the text of Scripture. No congregation and no prophet may claim with any authority to have heard the Spirit, unless in the testing of that Spirit scripture can be appealed to."¹² We see a similar emphasis in the "paths" indicated above in our yearning for the Spirit to show us God's will also beyond scripture.
3. One of the primary distinctions of the 16th century Anabaptists was their sense that the authority of scripture was best understood in the context of the hermeneutic community. Again, this was due not only, or even primarily, to their desire to protect scripture, but because of their passion for seeing the Church as the agent of God for the restoration of creation. We see a similar emphasis in the "paths" indicated above.
4. The Anabaptists had a strong sense that Jesus was the interpretive key to understanding all of scripture. We can see a similar emphasis in the paths indicated above.
5. The Anabaptists believed in the importance of the Holy Spirit to guide the hermeneutic community in its understanding of faithfulness according to scripture. We see this emphasis in the "paths" as well.
6. The Anabaptists were well known for their insistence that understanding and obeying scripture were integrally linked. It was unfathomable that either could be possible without the other. This hermeneutic of obedience is also very evident in the "paths" outlined above.
7. One of the remarkable things about the early Anabaptists was that simple, often uneducated folk articulated their faith in compelling ways even on the road to martyrdom. This sense that ordinary people, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and without the mediation of the hierarchy of the church, can understand enough to be faithful was a key conviction of the Anabaptists. We note in our respondents the desire to integrate the contribution of the scholars with the wisdom of the members in the churches.

This is a very brief summary. Certainly, it does not do justice to the dynamics of 16th century Anabaptist hermeneutics. It is enough to indicate that the paths suggested by our responses correspond closely to those of our hermeneutical ancestors.

11 Murray, Stuart, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000).

12 J. H. Yoder: *To Hear the Word* 2nd edition; Cascade Books, 2010, pp.135, 227.