

## Discernment in a time of turmoil

Gerald Gerbrandt

**A**s a people that has prided itself in being a hermeneutical community, with communal discernment an important value in our tradition, Anabaptist-Mennonites are in some difficulty. Of course, struggle and disagreement within the church are nothing new. I remember the early 1970s when emotions flared as an ardent younger generation differed with their elders on how to respond to the Vietnam War. In the years since then, passionate struggles over women in ministry and divorce and remarriage erupted.

Any careful reading of the New Testament reveals that the early church also disagreed on how to translate and live the gospel in new contexts. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was precipitated by reports of infighting among the followers of Jesus there. Dissension over theology (resurrection of the dead), ethics (sexual immorality, practices around food offered to idols), church discipline (legal disputes) and liturgy (abuse of the Lord's Supper) was causing serious division.

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Every generation considers the battle of its time the most serious and pivotal, and yet the current conflict over same-sex marriage does seem especially virulent. Congregations have withdrawn from Mennonite Church Canada

largely because of this issue. Mennonite Church Manitoba recently held a study conference instigated by a congregation calling for a clear stance on the issue. The largest conference within Mennonite Church USA is in the process of withdrawing from the denomination. Crucial disagreement over the issue played a central role in the formation of a new ministry network, Evana. In a post on *Thinking Pacifism*, Ted Grimsrud refers to

“dispirited speculation from several denominational leaders . . . that MC USA may not be long for the world.”<sup>1</sup> It is hard not to argue that our inability to come to an understanding on this issue is tearing us apart.

Why are we not able to discern together more constructively over this ethical matter? Is the issue itself so difficult or so foundational and unresolvable that consensus on how to move forward is unattainable? Or is it that we have forgotten—if we ever knew—how to discern together as a people committed to Jesus Christ? Or might our imaginary model for discernment be flawed, not suitable for working at divisive ethical questions?

#### **Four observations about the present conversation**

I make four observations about the way the conversation is taking place among us, each at the same time raising a question about how we understand and practice discernment. At points I specifically refer to statements (“Being a Faithful Church” documents),<sup>2</sup> and dynamics from Mennonite Church Canada, but I am convinced that many of these apply similarly to Mennonite Church USA and to other denominations. These observations do not apply to everyone in the interchange, but they are common enough to warrant attention.

*First, all participants in the conversation, including those at the extremes, have the laudable concern that the church speak clearly (again?), so that the church’s witness to our world is consistent and strong.* The Being a Faithful Church document states, “Our sincere desire is to be a witness to the presence of God’s reign within us, among us, and in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Since “others are watching,” we are summoned to seek God’s help and grace so this can “be a positive witness to a watching world,” with the process itself having “missional potential.”<sup>4</sup>

I can only affirm this desire. All of us long for a church in which there is clear consensus on matters of primary importance. The saying “In essentials unity; in nonessentials liberty; in all things charity” reflects this desire, even if we debate which convictions and practices are essentials and which are nonessentials. Any organization that works with the public knows that its communication and brand are enhanced if all speak from the same page. But might an inadequate view of the unity of the church lurk

behind this urge? Is this drive to come to agreement, to speak clearly with one voice, a striving to build unity in the church? All too often we think that it is our responsibility to create this unity through agreement, that unity is a byproduct of consensus on doctrine and ethics. As a people that emphasizes discipleship and doing what is right, perhaps we are especially susceptible to this kind of thinking.

Even Jesus's disciples did not agree on how to respond to Rome, with one being willing to work for the Roman power as a tax collector, and another a Zealot—one who hated anything Roman. Despite deep division in the church in Corinth, Paul uses the evocative metaphor of the body of Christ for that divided church: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12, NRSV).

There may be little that is more radical in the New Testament than the existence of four Gospels, each telling the story of Jesus, each telling it differently from the others. And yet, they point to the one Jesus within whose body we are one. Would the New Testament have been stronger if these four versions of the Jesus story had been merged to form one about which all could agree?

Toward the end of the last of these Gospels Jesus prays for that church. It is easy to take the words "that they may be one," which occur four times in John 17, as another call to us to try harder to be one. Yet the words are not part of an exhortation to the disciples or the church, but come within a prayer to God: "The formation of the church into one body lies first and foremost in the hands of God, to whom Jesus entrusts the community before he dies."<sup>5</sup> Jesus is not calling on the church to *strive* to be one; he is praying for the church.

This observation does not justify the current tensions among us or suggest that all disagreement is fine. But it may lead us to question whether it is possible to overcome tensions by debate or by trying harder. The unity of the church is a gift from God and not of our own doing. Remember the words of the popular chorus: "We are One in the Spirit, We are One in the Lord . . . And we pray that all unity may one day be restored. And they'll know we are Christians by our love." Might we witness through our love even in the face of disagreement?

**Second, both sides are convinced they have the truth.** In the Gospel of John, Jesus says “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31–32). Both sides affirm this verse and share this conviction. But might this conviction undermine genuine conversation in the midst of difficult ethical debate?

The danger is that when one is absolutely persuaded that one has the truth, that God has revealed it through scripture and experience, the agenda becomes one of winning the battle for truth by defeating the other side. I am struck by how often in discernment conversations (at the Morden study conference we gathered around tables for “biblical discernment”) there appear to be few who are open to new insight or to changing their position. The conversation tends to focus on defending positions or attempting to persuade others of the truth of one’s position.

When one is confident one has the truth, the usual dynamics of battle kick in. As study of war shows, when the battle has commenced, asking foundational questions becomes difficult, if not impossible. The focus shifts to strategy or tactics. How can I use scripture to persuade those who disagree that their approach is unbiblical? Which stories do I choose to tell that most effectively support my position? Which experts, biblical scholars or social scientists, can I quote in support of my position? In the heat of the clash, little or no attention is devoted to “collateral damage,” those who are hurt or sidelined by the debate, even if unintentionally. Interestingly, we often use the same tactics against the other that we know are ineffectual when used against us.

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In calling attention to these things, I do not mean to minimize the significance of the issue. But when one is convinced one has the truth, all conversation becomes debate with the goal of defeating the other. Discernment, a mutual search for the truth, disappears. Where does true humility fit into this conversation? We all love the verse from Micah, “And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk *humbly* with your God?” (Mic. 6:8).

*Third, both sides affirm the authority of scripture and tend to see the problem in terms of differing approaches to scripture.*

Preventing the church from speaking clearly on key ethical issues, or at least muddying that voice, is “hermeneutical diversity.” The Being a Faithful Church documents are accordingly subtitled “Testing the Spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment.” Despite “reflecting on the same foundational scripture, guided by the same Holy Spirit, revealing the mind/will of the same God, we are discerning what appear, at times, to be contradictory and irreconcilable directions in understanding faithfulness.”<sup>6</sup>

The fourth and longest Being a Faithful Church document then focuses directly on interpretation. Since “Reading the Bible and healthy biblical interpretation are complex processes,”<sup>7</sup> it identifies twelve paths on which to walk in the interpretive process, and six ditches to avoid, with the paths and ditches together forming a “hermeneutical stance” for the church. The approach is systematic and clear; the paths and ditches are insightful, presented sensitively and with suitable nuance. Perhaps, the document suggests, these might become the “common ground upon which we could further discuss, agree, disagree, and discern how this commonness applies to particular discernment.”<sup>8</sup>

And yet conversation struggles. Might this be a case of putting too much weight on and trust in method? Or consider a more bothersome question: has our historical commitment to biblical authority been reflected in the way the church dealt with previous ethical challenges? For example, was it careful and hermeneutically sound Bible study that led the church forward on the issues of women in ministry, or divorce and remarriage, or (in some communities) head coverings for women? I expect a good case can be made that although Bible study did happen during these conversations, movement happened as the church, guided by the Spirit, assessed its experience on these matters.

Acts 15 recounts a fascinating story. In it the apostles and elders debate: do Gentile converts need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses? (Acts 15:5). Perhaps surprisingly, at least for us when considering our current debate, there is no reference to these leaders parsing the Old Testament passages requiring circumcision, debating exactly what was originally intended by them. Nor was there any debate over how best to use their scrip-

tures. Instead, they shared from their experience of Gentiles accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter's testimony that the Holy Spirit had descended on the Gentiles just as it had on them appears to have been decisive: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden" (Acts 15:28).

This observation may cause discomfort for us. Does the way the leaders in Jerusalem made their decision—and does the way we have arrived at decisions in previous times of crisis—call into question our commitment to the authority in scripture? I suggest that it does so only if we see the authority of scripture as first of all residing in its directives which later biblical interpreters (working as lawyers?) interrogate and attempt to apply to difficult contemporary issues. Which brings us to the next point.

***Fourth, discernment is treated in the current debate primarily as a way of dealing with difficult ethical issues in a time of crisis.*** The Being a Faithful Church documents more than once emphasize that discernment is a constant responsibility of the church. And yet they speak of it as "deliberate processes that help us face the challenges in the life of the church,"<sup>9</sup> as a way of detecting the "the mind of God as the church engages the critical agenda of our time."<sup>10</sup> The text then goes on to identify five critical issues facing the church today, including that of human sexuality in the life of the church. Despite assertions to the contrary, the impression one receives is that discernment is first of all a response to difficult issues facing the church, making it an episodic exercise.

On the face of it, this understanding of discernment sounds eminently fair and even praiseworthy. After all, doesn't being a faithful church, one that "is committed to its vocation of relevant presence and ministry in the place and time into which God has placed us,"<sup>11</sup> require that the church struggle with difficult questions, developing agreed-on positions in response to them?

### **Discernment as improvisation in an unfinished drama**

But I wonder whether the context of crisis is the most helpful or important context within which to imagine or locate ecclesial discernment. N. T. Wright proposes that the authority of scripture may be understood using the analogy of an unfinished drama.<sup>12</sup>

Scripture is understood as the script for a great drama, but the last act is missing. The stories of the Old Testament, Jesus Christ, and the early church are the script we have. The church today has the opportunity and responsibility to develop the script for that last missing act. We have freedom in drafting the lines for our part in the drama, but we are limited to doing so in ways that are consistent with the characterization, plot, and themes of the earlier acts.

Samuel Wells builds on that imagery to speak of Christian ethics, the practical responding to the challenges facing the church, as corporate improvisation. Our assignment is to faithfully improvise within that Christian tradition. For that assignment, the Bible “is not so much a script that the church learns and performs as it is a training school that shapes the habits and practices of the community.”<sup>13</sup> The way Jesus lived and improvised as he fulfilled the law in the face of the challenges of his day is our model for

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this process. Ethics, then, “is not about being clever in a crisis but about forming a character that does not realize it has been in a crisis until the ‘crisis’ is over.”<sup>14</sup>

The story of the horrific murder of five young girls in their one-room school in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, exemplifies this alternative approach. The reaction of the Amish community to the tragedy was widely discussed in the media. Instead of calling for revenge, or even justice, the Amish community members visited and comforted the widow, parents, and parents-in-law of the perpetrator. This response did not come

about through careful biblical exegesis, making use of paths and avoiding ditches, with extensive communal discernment. Rather, the response came from a community shaped by practices (e.g., daily recitation of the Lord’s Prayer) and habits, doing what came naturally or instinctively in a crisis.

Wells suggests that we all too often imagine the majority of life as “run by habit,” with ethical challenges interrupting that routine from time to time. At those points the church then makes a priority of discerning the will of God in order to respond faithfully to the challenge. This is the atmosphere of the current debate

over homosexuality. Instead, Wells argues, we should see things the other way around. “Moral effort and the creative imagination are concentrated in the time of preparation, the formation of character; the ‘moment,’ if it comes, is to be addressed by habits already formed.”<sup>15</sup>

Discernment then is first of all about “the formation, development, and renewal of a sacred *people*.”<sup>16</sup> Through discernment the church finds itself in God’s story, with imagination, habits, and practices which then govern quite naturally its response to the challenges as they arise. Might this be a far more helpful way of understanding our confession when it affirms scripture as “inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and *training in righteousness*”?<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Read on October 12, 2015, on *Thinking Pacifism*, <http://thinkingpacifism.net/2014/02/28/will-mennonite-church-usa-survive-reflecting-on-three-decades-of-struggle-part-1/>.

<sup>2</sup> In 2008–9, Mennonite Church Canada began developing and then testing the “Being a Faithful Church” process, designed to better equip congregations and individuals to discern scripture for our time. See more at <http://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/5/17176#sthash.b8dFc702.dpuf>.

<sup>3</sup> *Being a Faithful Church*, #3, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Being a Faithful Church*, #3, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Sheila Klassen-Wiebe, “The One and the Many,” in *New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology*, ed. Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, and Karl Koop (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Being a Faithful Church*, #1, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Being a Faithful Church*, #4, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Being a Faithful Church*, #4, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Being a Faithful Church*, #1, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Being a Faithful Church*, #1, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Being a Faithful Church*, #1, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative,” *Vox Evangelica* 21(1991): 7–32; also available at [http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Bible\\_Authoritative.htm](http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Wells, *The Drama of Christian Ethics: Improvisation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *The Drama of Christian Ethics: Improvisation*, 77.

<sup>16</sup> Wells, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 21; my italics.

## About the author

After a career of teaching Bible and serving in administration in Christian higher education, Gerald Gerbrandt (Winnipeg, MB) is officially retired, but continues to do some part-time teaching.