Hearing every voice
Communal discernment and gendered experience

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> *The disadvantage of a so-called flat structure is that it can effectively mask the places where power is held. . . . When we deny that power exists, it doesn't do anyone any favors. It can, in effect, just be a convenient way of washing our hands of responsibility. . . . I am suggesting that if we truly value the priesthood of all believers, we won't rest or be satisfied with a church system that inherently denies the ability of some to speak. A consensus garnered with begrudging silence and/or taken, whether unwittingly or not, is not a consensus.*
> —*Hannah Heinzekehr*[1]

Whenever I read critiques of Mennonite ecclesiology, even when they are made by Mennonite insiders like Hannah Heinzekehr (current executive director of *The Mennonite*), my initial, knee-jerk reaction is defensive. After all, we are an egalitarian tradition, right? It is those other traditions with overtly hierarchical church structures that have to worry about power dynamics and questions of gender and other privilege, right?

Well, yes and no. In one sense, the Mennonite church is egalitarian, especially in its understanding of the church as a hermeneutical community, practicing communal discernment and biblical interpretation as a priesthood of all believers. This perspective has allowed us, for instance, to recognize the leadership gifts of women as pastors, theologians, and today, even as seminary and university presidents. But as Heinzekehr rightfully reminds us, the Mennonite church has often construed equality and unity to mean sameness, which has blinded us to the ways we do not all start at the same place or with the same amount of power. In other words, though we may all be at the discernment table together, not all of our voices are being heard.

The various discernment processes currently unfolding within the Mennonite church have arguably raised this issue of power in new ways. It is not a new issue, but current discussions around sexuality and gender, the body of the church and the bodies of its members, and the Bible have brought into focus the fact that the Mennonite church has not always practiced what it preaches when it comes to egalitarian, communal discernment. Too often, it has declared that it is hearing every voice around the table—the "consensus" that Heinzekehr mentions—when in reality some voices are heard more often or as more authoritative, and some—including those of many women—are never heard at all.[2]

And Heinzekehr is not alone in identifying this problematic "power blindness" within the Mennonite church. In the past several decades, as women have begun to take on the roles of trained pastors and theologians, a number of scholars have noted that Mennonite tradition has mirrored rather than subverted gender stereotypes and inequalities within wider society and culture, and has therefore paid insufficient attention to how gender in particular impacts power dynamics within the church community.

Several contemporary theologians have noted that Mennonite tradition has mirrored rather than subverted gender stereotypes and inequalities in wider society, and has therefore paid insufficient attention to how gender in particular impacts power dynamics within the church.

These theologians—who include Lydia Neufeld Harder, Carol Penner, J. Denny Weaver, and Malinda E. Berry—are naming the ways Mennonite biblical, theological, and ethical discernment has neglected women's voices and experiences—and how the Mennonite church can address this problem. I contend that as these four thinkers integrate the insights of feminist (woman-centred) and womanist (African American, woman-centred) theologies into Mennonite theology, they reveal that these theologies can equip us as a church to name and address the power imbalances among us, and enable us to fruitfully and faithfully re-envision what it means to claim that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" within the body of Christ (Gal. 3:28, NRSV).

Feminist and womanist theologians often speak of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" which they use to engage in a critique of

communal norms on the basis of women's experience. At the outset, I should clarify that "women's experience" does not here refer to an innately feminine perspective which all women share, characterized by the stereotypes of being more emotional, sensitive, and nurturing. Rather, I am speaking of the ways women are socialized into serving, nurturing, supporting, and self-effacing roles which are considered feminine and how the history of being excluded from positions of leadership and authority continues to affect women today. This is what feminist theologians call the structural sin of patriarchy, sexism, or androcentrism—the way our society and communities, despite professing to be neutral or egalitarian, are actually built on and oriented toward privileged, male experiences of faith and of the world.

Lydia Neufeld Harder: Hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutics of obedience

Mennonite-feminist theologian and pastor Lydia Neufeld Harder lays important groundwork for Mennonite-feminist dialogue, indicating the distinctions and similarities between the two theologies. She notes that Mennonites and feminists have a lot of common ground: both theological streams started as protest movements which reenvision the church along antihierarchical lines, granting authority to the community of equal disciples to interpret the Bible together.[3] Despite these shared roots, they have ended up with distinct approaches to the Bible, and as a Mennonite woman, Harder feels caught between them. She writes about being sidelined by mainline Protestant and Catholic feminists: "In my personal struggle to understand the nature of biblical authority, I read many feminist theological writings that began with assumptions foreign to me. . . . As a member of a minority Christian denomination, I have often felt that these construals of biblical authority did not fully express my convictions born out of my Mennonite faith tradition," i.e., a tradition in which the Bible remains central to ethical discernment.[4]

Yet Harder also recognizes the ways Mennonites can learn from feminist insights about gendered experience and power, since for Mennonite women the "tradition of discipleship as obedience, service and self-denial, has sometimes not been life-giving. The theology of peace, justice and non-violence that has characterized

the Mennonite community has generally not examined the power relationship between women and men."[5] As a result, she admits, "I have often felt angered by a practice of biblical interpretation in Mennonite churches that was oppressive and stifling to many women in the congregations. . . . Despite strong affirmations of the church as a hermeneutic community, the pattern of communication and social interaction often did not encourage an active participation by women in the theological process of determining the meaning of biblical texts for the community."[6]

Harder's solution is to balance feminist and Mennonite approaches to the Bible, blending them into a hybrid approach that takes women's experiences and voices into account as historically marginalized from discernment processes and takes the Bible seriously as an authoritative voice to guide our discipleship. She calls these a feminist "hermeneutics of suspicion" (critical analysis of the Bible and theology based on women's experience) and a Mennonite "hermeneutics of obedience" (commitment to the transformative authority of the Bible for the discipleship community).[7]

Carol Penner: A new conscientious objection

Carol Penner, also a Mennonite theologian and pastor, sounds much like Harder when she writes that "parts of our Mennonite peace theology tradition have not brought peace to women's lives, but rather increased suffering," in part because "women's experience has not been an important source for written Mennonite theology." As a striking example of this dynamic, she points to many Mennonite materials on peace as conscientious objection to war, which is for the most part a male experience. Meanwhile, violence against women, which directly affects many Mennonite women, has not historically been considered a peace issue and has not shaped our understanding of peace to the same extent. "While the historical silence of the Mennonite church on the subject of abuse is not unique," she concludes, "it is particularly ironic given that the theology of this historic peace church has wrestled with the importance of nonviolence in the Christian life."[8]

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As a corrective, Penner "strives to find a balance which neither compromises the integrity of feminist experience, nor loses the essence or the substance of my own Mennonite religious background"; like Harder, she outlines a balance between feminist and Mennonite approaches. Penner broadens our Mennonite understanding of peace so that it can hear women's particular experiences of suffering, which in turn reframes our biblical-ethical discernment with regard to peacemaking. In her words, "Some writers have characterized patriarchy as a 'war against women.' In the face of this violence, who will be the new conscientious objectors?"[9]

J. Denny Weaver: A nonviolent God who saves nonviolently

American Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver would agree with Penner that Mennonite definitions of peace must be broadened to include women's experience, but his nonviolent account of salvation and nonviolent depiction of the Divine also reveal the far-reaching theological implications of such a move. He has been widely criticized for his nonviolent reinterpretation of the atonement (how the cross saves), a position he reached using feminist, womanist, and black liberation theologies to create a more thoroughly nonviolent Anabaptist-Mennonite theology.[10] In his view, Mennonite peace theology can take its place among particular, contextual, or experience-based theologies (black, womanist, feminist, etc.), as they are "marginal in different ways and to different degrees"—that is, all stand outside the mainline, "orthodox" theology of Christendom.[11]

Agreeing with feminists and womanists that traditional, violent understandings of the atonement are justly accused of amounting to "divine child abuse," Weaver's "narrative Christus Victor" model deemphasizes the cross, stressing instead the whole narrative of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. He writes that God did not "send Jesus for the specific purpose of dying, nor was his mission about death. . . . Jesus's mission had a life-giving purpose—to make the reign of God visible." He dismisses arguments that God either required Jesus's death to satisfy divine justice or to show God's loving solidarity, because both fail to overcome the problem of God requiring violence for salvation. The cross is "anything but a loving act of God," signifying rather that Jesus's

nonviolent confrontation of the powers cost him his life, and likewise costs believers "our lives, which we give to God for the rest of our time on earth."

In continuity with (and beyond) his Mennonite tradition, Weaver argues that God's reign is centrally characterized by human *and* divine nonviolence.[12] Weaver's integration of feminist/womanist insights into his theology can be seen in his inclusion of systemic forms of violence—such as racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism—into his definition of violence, alongside capital punishment, war, and interpersonal verbal and physical violence.[13] Interestingly, Weaver's theology has been received with some skepticism within Mennonite theological circles, and critiques of his work often fail to mention that engagement with feminist and womanist theologies and an emphasis on gendered experience are part of his theological method and approach. Some even engage Weaver's interpretation of feminist/womanist ideas rather than turning to the female theologians' original writings.[14] But while Weaver's efforts to take feminist and womanist perspectives seriously are laudable, there is a sense in which even he does not sufficiently integrate feminist and womanist theologies into Mennonite peace theology; for instance, sexual abuse and assault are absent from his detailed definition of violence in *The Nonviolent Atonement*.[15]

Malinda Berry: Constructing a theology that resonates with women's ways of knowing

Mennonite feminist/womanist theologian Malinda E. Berry evaluates Weaver's theology along similar lines, noting the value of his engagement of "other voices on the peripheries of theology in general, particularly the voices from liberationist traditions in contemporary theology: black, feminist, and womanist," but also urging him—and, by extension, other Mennonites—to allow this engagement to lead to difficult questions surrounding how we do theology and work for justice. She asks, "For example, what might feminist, womanist, and Mennonite theologians have to say to one another about the tension between violence against women and the love of enemies and neighbors?"[16] In this way, Berry speaks of feminists and womanists helping Mennonites to view patriarchy as "one of the structural powers that holds us all—men and women

alike—in its bonds," and uses the imagery of quilting needles rather than the traditionally masculine language of nails to frame her "*reconstructive*" theology in such a way that it "resonate[s] with women's ways of knowing, being, and doing" and reflects "theological work as a communal process of bringing 'scraps' of materials used elsewhere and joining them in new ways."[17] It is key for Berry that our interpretation of scripture be life-giving food and not a stone (Matt. 7:9, Luke 11:11), becoming the "nourishing bread" that spurs "communities to struggle against injustice" rather than "the foundation stone of truth" that prevents the church from speaking against the status quo.[18]

As an African American Mennonite woman, Berry reminds Mennonites that even their minority tradition is affected by the power dynamics of gender *and* race. As we "admit that Mennonite theology is not a theology that has been significantly informed by black women's experience," we must ask, "Exactly whose experience has significantly informed our theology?" If we remain beholden to "our favorite sixteenth-century Anabaptist(s)," Berry concludes, then we are problematically out of touch with our present-day context, and its crucial critiques of "the high price of pointless self-sacrifice." Asking ourselves, with the lawyer in Luke 10, "And who is my neighbor?" leads us to recognize the black women who have been speaking out against war and for social justice alongside and among Mennonites for decades. These neighbors and sisters can therefore help the whole Mennonite church weave, quilt, and piece "the Christian tradition together in ways that bind up the brokenhearted rather than keeping old wounds open and even creating new ones: We favor needles over nails."[19]

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Doing discernment differently, by attending to the experience of women

With the help of a variety of feminist and womanist theologians, these four perspectives—Harder's balance between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of obedience, Penner's notion

of "conscientious objection" to violence against women, Weaver's nonviolent atonement as reflective of the very nonviolence of God, and Berry's imagery of the Bible as justice-nourishing bread and theologizing as quilting and mending—each offer insights to move us beyond the ways the Mennonite church has "always" done discernment.

As we seek to name and address the power imbalances that persist in our communities of faith, we can begin the important work of deeply communal discernment that hears every voice.

We must recognize that despite the Mennonite tradition's valuable emphasis on sitting down together at the discernment table, some have consistently been denied the chance to speak, and still others (i.e., sexual and racial minorities) have yet to be invited to the table. As we listen to feminist and womanist theologians giving voice to the experience of women, we are reminded that equality and unity cannot simply be declared, as if our following in the way of Jesus Christ means the *erasure* of our differences rather than their *transformation* into distinct aspects of a whole body. As we seek to name and address the power imbalances that persist in our communities of faith, we can begin the important work of deeply communal discernment that hears every voice. Listening with our many gifts for the one Spirit, we can thus recognize that this is the same Spirit who multiplied the voices at Pentecost, and who will ultimately bring us the peace of Christ which surpasses understanding.

Notes

[1] Hannah Heinzekehr, "The Hidden Power Traps in a Priesthood of All Believers," *The Femonite*; http://www.femonite.com/2014/01/31/the-hidden-power-traps-in-a-priesthood-of-all-believers/.

[2] I am limiting my discussion in this paper to women's experience, despite the obvious connection to the experiences of sexual minorities. This limiting is in part because I am speaking from my own identity as a woman and because women constitute a larger portion of the church than do sexual minorities, but I see the two discussions as deeply related. If we as the church can acknowledge gender difference and see (embodied) experience as a source of theological reflection, then we can begin to speak more profoundly about our sexual differences as well.

[3] Lydia Neufeld Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority*, Studies in Women and Religion Series (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1998), 8.

[4] Ibid., 1.

[5] Ibid., 10–11.

[6] Ibid., 1.
[7] Ibid., 1, ix.
[8] Carol J. Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women" (PhD diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1999), 14, 180, 3.
[9] Ibid., 13, 165, 147, 171. Cf. 163. Penner aims to be credible to women and authentic/true to Christian tradition.
[10] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 5–8, 323–24.
[11] Ibid., 141–42, and Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium*, C. Henry Smith Series (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 2000), 68–70, 123.
[12] Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 160–62, 265, 166–67, 316, 94, 48, 277, 312. Cf. 308.
[13] Ibid., 8–9, 151.
[14] See the proceedings from a forum responding to J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement* in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 1–49; Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); and Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).
[15] Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 8–9, 151. It should be noted that Weaver mentions sexual abuse in passing in his *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 193–94.
[16] Malinda E. Berry, "Needles Not Nails: Marginal Methodologies and Mennonite Theology," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2008), 263–64. Cf. Berry, "*Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* and *The Nonviolent Atonement*" [Review Article], in *Mennonite* Life 59, no. 1 (March 2004); http://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-59-no-1/article/anabaptist-theology-in-face-of-postmodernity-a-pro/.
[17] Rebecca Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), quoted in Berry, "Needles Not Nails," 264–65. Berry speaks of "patriarchy/demonarchy/kyriarchy" as one of the principalities and powers.
[18] Berry, "Needles Not Nails," 267.
[19] Ibid., 272–73, 278.

About the author

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