

## Beyond black and white—and red all over Finding footholds for ethical biblical interpretation

Lori Unger

*Something's wrong with the Bible.  
It keeps flying through the air,  
aimed at my head.  
This Bible,  
the Good Book,  
the Holy Word of God,  
keeps piercing me,  
bludgeoning those around me,  
cutting us off at the knees.  
And who are those others,  
standing piously by,  
nodding,  
with sad, satisfied smiles,  
as another text hits its mark?  
How can I open this weapon of a book  
and seek guidance?  
How can I pattern my life  
after something so death dealing?  
If only that book had a mind of its own,  
and I could forget  
that behind every hurtling text  
is an arm.*

**W**hat's black and white and red all over? For the purposes of this article, the answer to the riddle is, of course, scripture: the black and white of sacred text saturated with the blood that has been shed over differences of scriptural interpretation and practice.<sup>1</sup>

After our pastor had told us this riddle in a recent sermon, she pointed out that scripture has always produced mighty emotional responses among those most dedicated to it, and the result is not always beautiful.

Remember the people of Israel after their many years in exile? They were initially dismayed when they heard once again the reading of their holy scriptures. As they zealously began to pattern their lives according to the words they had received, the first casualties were their foreign wives, whom they sent away in droves

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(Ezra 10:3). Families torn apart, mothers separated from their children—who among them could affirm with Psalm 19 that God’s word is sweeter than honey and more precious than gold?

When the people who were gathered in the synagogue at Nazareth heard Jesus’s take on Isaiah, they were so angry that they drove him to the edge of a cliff, intending to throw him over! He narrowly escaped, passing mysteriously through the crowds, unseen (Luke 4:14–21).

No, scripture has not always brought out the best in people. And perhaps among those most devoted to it, it has brought out the worst. This pattern of intense emotional

response to scripture seems consistent throughout history, and casualties have continued to mount over the centuries. Indeed, Anabaptists in the sixteenth century were well acquainted with the cliff of scriptural interpretation, and the blood of their martyrdom still stains the book’s pages.

It seems that patterns of passionate—and, too often, bloody—engagement with our beloved scriptures continue. Women have known something about this harm in their marginalization, as have those whose slavery was justified by appeal to scripture scarcely 150 years ago. Most recently, the angry tone emerging from many Bible-believing communities toward people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender comes to mind; it bears no resemblance to the love to which Jesus has called his followers. Yet these attitudes are vigorously defended, often with ugly words and hateful speech. Hot-button topics, certain to get our blood boiling. Who will be next, I wonder, to be driven to the edge of a cliff in the name of right belief and practice by those who consider themselves the most faithful?

## **A disorienting journey**

The church faces other hurdles with regard to the place of scripture in our life of faith. Relativism and postmodernism have challenged the simple reading of the text and undermined the authority with which the Bible speaks to us. Modern biblical scholarship, for its part, has insisted on a critical distance between the text and its interpreter, negating attempts to gain personal assurance or guidance from the text. Standing in tension with these trends, and causing a mental short-circuit of sorts, is the powerful and recently inherited fundamentalist mindset that informs us that (1) all scripture agrees with itself; (2) scripture is inerrant and thus must never be questioned; (3) scripture means what it means: its meaning is derived directly from God and it needs no interpretation; and (4) what we understand it to mean is what it has always meant. It would be difficult to argue that any of these perspectives resembles something that might have been inherited from the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century.

Questions about the nature of biblical authority are particularly poignant for Mennonites, who have widely considered ourselves people of the book. The Bible has been our stronghold, the firm ground that enables us to find our place in the world, our

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foundation on which everything else stands, the rock on which the whole of our life depends. Steady and reliable, the text has informed our choices and guided our living, becoming the standard by which we judge ourselves and others, the measure of our integrity and the source of our hope. The Bible has been our window into God's purposes, our access to the promise of Christ, and God's primary method of communicating God's purposes with us.

Yet Mennonite ways of reading have not remained static. In the past century, Mennonites have wandered through encounters with North American fundamentalism and modernist scholarly practices of interpreting scripture. We have arrived in the twenty-first century in an unsteady state, unable to escape a growing relativism, a discomfort with absolute truth claims, and an uneasy relationship with

ultimate authority. This journey has been disorienting at best, and we arrive at the present moment scarcely able to find continuity with those who have gone before.

### Looking to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists

As we attempt to reconcile past and present ways of reading, we might learn something of value from our sixteenth-century Anabaptist forebears, gaining footholds to use in navigating our current interpretive crisis. What in Anabaptist history can offer resources as we attempt to navigate a changing landscape?

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Characterizing early Anabaptist reading of scripture is difficult at best, given that Anabaptist communities sprang up almost simultaneously in different places, and their leaders differed in emphasis and approach. In general, however, it can be said that the Bible was of central importance to the early Anabaptists, who read scripture with eagerness and urgency, seeking direct guidance on how to sustain themselves and their communities.<sup>2</sup>

Early Anabaptists embraced a “plain” reading of scripture, meaning that they wished to allow scripture to speak for itself, unclouded by tradition or scholarly obfuscations. In the words of Felix Mantz, “The eternally true word of God will sing in the heart of each one that this is the truth. If only the Word be allowed to speak for itself, freely and simply, no one will be able to withstand it.”<sup>3</sup> The extent to which early Anabaptists steeped themselves in scripture is remarkable, and in their citing of scripture, untrained lay members of Anabaptist communities sometimes bested the doctors of theology who interrogated them.<sup>4</sup>

This rigorous learning of scripture served a pragmatic purpose for the early Anabaptists. Anabaptists asked, “How then shall we *live*?”—a question rather different from that of their Lutheran and Reformed colleagues, who asked, “What shall we *believe*?” The Bible, then, became a resource for discipleship, worship, and mission, and early Anabaptists worked hard to ensure that their lives, including their lives in sacred community with one another,

conformed to the testimony of scripture. Immersing themselves in scripture, and uncritically merging their sixteenth-century horizon with that of the first-century church, they felt enabled to live and worship in accordance with the will of God, even in the face of martyrdom and persecution.<sup>5</sup>

### **A communal hermeneutic**

The emphasis on a “plain” reading of scripture did not, however, mean that the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century all agreed on how to read the text, or even about what it meant, though their disagreement did nothing to undermine their perceptions of the authority or adequacy of the text itself.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, central to Anabaptist interpretive practice was community discernment, in which the plain sense of scripture is revealed among the gathering of believers.<sup>7</sup> In this way, early Anabaptists had no illusion that scripture would explain itself, but rather they practiced a communal hermeneutic, in which the meaning and significance of scripture is most rightly understood in the gathering of the faithful, among whom the Spirit moves.

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This communal hermeneutic offers the first foothold for our present-day dilemma. Not only were these early Anabaptists able to acknowledge differences in interpretation, they did so without experiencing a crisis of authority with respect to the Bible. Implied,

or at least possible, in this collective interpretive practice is that right understanding and practice may not remain static from one interpretive community to another as the Spirit moves through time and place, enlivening communities of faith with particular interpretive insight.

Granted, a sixteenth-century mindset did not allow for the profound distrust of authority we experience in today’s post-modern environment, nor were believers then as cognizant of the role of an interpreter in the hermeneutical process as we are today. As historically separate as we are from these first Anabaptists, and as different as our questions are, this hermeneutical move becomes a simple foothold, a place to begin as we navigate through our present-day interpretive climate.

## Love as a framework for our reading

Now, the communal hermeneutic did not always function to imbue Anabaptist communities with loving kindness. Walter Klaassen details an extended exchange between Pilgram Marpeck and the early Swiss Mennonites, who tended toward legalism in

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their application of biblical principles, in their zeal to ferret out those whose Christianity was counterfeit. Concerned with their “legalistic biblicism and their alacrity and sharpness of judgment,” Marpeck chided the Swiss for their devotion to the letter as opposed to the Spirit, and he argued that their tendency to legislate and judge “violates the basic freedom of the Christian in Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Speaking in strong language, he condemned them as hypocrites who “conceal their lack of spiritual

life under human ordinances and commandments”; he declared that whoever legislates, commands, or orders “usurps the office of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> He called the Swiss to order their discipline according to the law of love, which is the only law in the Christian life, according to the Spirit.

It is perhaps ironic that in condemning the Swiss Mennonites for their legalistic applications of the biblical text, Marpeck makes a judgment of his own, authorized by his larger interpretive framework that privileges the practice of love as the primary work of the Spirit. Notice both that (1) he has made an interpretive decision based on a framework of love, and that (2) in doing so he has excluded judgmentalism as a proper posture of faithful Christian communities. It could be said that, according to principles outlined by Hans Denck, Marpeck has relied on the inner word, or the testimony of the Spirit moving among the gathered people of faith, to inform his choices regarding the outer word of scripture.<sup>10</sup>

Here we gain our second foothold into current conversations. Where entrenched legalism leads to ethical abuses and estrangement, and relativism inevitably disintegrates into nothingness, Marpeck offers us a way forward. He demonstrates a self-consciousness about *the manner in which* he chooses to read and use the text of scripture. Nearly five centuries ago, he seems to have

had a sense of what some of us are just coming to now: that the act of interpreting, even interpreting scripture, inevitably involves choice—about what is most important, about how it will inform the landscape of our values and judgments, about how we will treat other people as a result. Marpeck also offers love as a framework for our reading, compelled by the leading of the Spirit, imploring his sixteenth-century counterparts—and all who would come after—to hold each other with compassion, even as we strive to remain faithful.

### **Listening to the voice of God through scripture and Spirit**

We end where we began, confronted by what is black and white and red all over. Given the chaos of postmodernity, our resultant (and increasing) inability to allow authority to remain unquestioned, the glaring inconsistencies pointed out by critical engagement with the biblical text, the ethically problematic nature of some biblical injunctions, and the ways those injunctions have been used to sanction systemic oppression, we can no longer

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affirm with simple trust that “the Bible tells me so.” We can no longer affirm that the text speaks plainly in its own voice and that we have no responsibility if it becomes a weapon in our hands.

Yet how can we let it go, this book that is full of wisdom, that invites the people of God to a transformed life characterized by upside-down values that call into question and resist

the prevailing wisdom of our day? How can we find our way back toward this book that has formed and shaped us and given us hope in Christ? Can we again be people of the book?

Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Christ never called us to be people of the book. Jesus called us to be people of the Spirit. The book is not God, after all, but the witness of God’s people to the presence and work of God in the world. The Bible is not and never has been a static repository of knowledge and wisdom. Rather, we are called to listen for the voice of God—yes, through scripture, and also through the Spirit, blowing among the gathered people of God. As Pilgram Marpeck admonished Anabaptists nearly 500 years ago, we, the community of faith, are

responsible to discern the word of God, using a framework of love and humility, expecting with gratitude that our communal interpretive impulses will change through time and place, as the Spirit moves.

I believe that this Spirit has been at work among Mennonite congregations as we continue to navigate the rough waters while seeking to pattern our lives after the witness of scripture. In 2006, after many years of painful process, the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches affirmed the freedom of individual churches to call women as pastors, citing the urgency of their mission and the movement of the Spirit among them. Currently, Mennonite Church Canada has embarked on a “Being a Faithful Church” initiative to discern various ethical matters, particularly anticipating and facilitating a conversation about sexuality and the church. An abundance of resources are asking the wider Mennonite community to consider its interpretive framework as they listen for the voice of God in scripture together. In these initiatives, one can hear echoes of our Anabaptist forebears, finding our way forward together with the guidance of the Spirit.

In the words of my pastor, the words of scripture mean nothing “until we get a taste for its ultimate goodness, until we are intimately familiar with its powerful provocation, until we realize that the deepest hungers within us are only satiated when we encounter the God contained within its pages. And we cannot know God intimately through scripture until Christ has found and knows us in this way, until the Spirit of the words is stronger than the words themselves,” until the black and white gives way, not to the red of our mutual annihilation, but toward a mutual bond in Christ, trusting the Spirit to lead us into faithfulness.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Zehr, “What Is Sweeter than Honey?,” a sermon preached at Toronto United Mennonite Church, January 27, 2013; available online at [http://tumc.ca/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=422:taste-and-see-sermon-by-marilyn-zehr-february-3-2013&catid=10:sermon&Itemid=58](http://tumc.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=422:taste-and-see-sermon-by-marilyn-zehr-february-3-2013&catid=10:sermon&Itemid=58).

<sup>2</sup> Willard Swartley, “The Anabaptist Use of Scripture: Contemporary Applications and Prospects,” in *Anabaptist Currents: History in Conversation with the Present*, ed. Carl F. Bowman and Stephen L. Longenecker (Bridgewater, VA: Penobscot Press, 1995), 65–79.

<sup>3</sup> Felix Mantz, “Petition for Defense” (Zurich), quoted in Swartley, “Anabaptist Use of Scripture,” 67.



<sup>4</sup> Swartley, “Anabaptist Use of Scripture,” 67.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Walter Klaassen, “Anabaptist Hermeneutics: The Letter and the Spirit,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 40, no. 2 (1966): 94.

<sup>10</sup> Swartley, “Anabaptist Use of Scripture,” 72.

<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Marilyn Zehr, “What Is Sweeter than Honey?”

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