

Competing visions

Can we keep Isaiah and Ezra in the same Bible, and you and me in the same church?

Gary Harder

The good words *diversity* and *unity* have been much worn recently and provoke a negative reaction in some circles. For some folks diversity feels like a threat to faith and community whereas for other folks unity suggests pressure to conform and enforced agreement. Perhaps both diversity and unity can be a blessing to the church and both are sometimes a curse to the church.

The Scriptures themselves contain a healthy tension between the impulse to exclude people who shouldn't belong in the community of faith, and the startling invitation to some people to enter the community of faith despite their seeming unsuitability.

The theme of this issue of *Vision* may help us as we struggle with the complexities of our differences and similarities. Hospitality. How far does our hospitality extend? Whom do we include in our community and whom do we exclude? Who are the insiders and who are the outsiders? Who belongs in our community of faith and who doesn't belong? To whom do we extend the invitation to enter and who gets the messages that they are not welcome?

I suggest that the Scriptures themselves contain a tension—a healthy tension, I believe—between the impulse to exclude people who shouldn't belong in the community of faith, and the startling invitation to some people to enter the community of faith despite their seeming unsuitability. Can we live with this tension? Can we keep Isaiah and Ezra in the same Bible, and you and me in the same church?

I write these reflections as a pastor. I do not approach the theme or the texts in a scholarly way but make observations from my reading of the texts and from my experience in a diverse church. These thoughts need testing and challenge.

The newly integrated Mennonite Church

In the Mennonite Church across North America we are struggling with a classic dilemma about who belongs inside and who should be outside. Two conflicting impulses, both powerful, seem to be on a collision course in this newly integrated Mennonite Church. Two emphases seek to capture the church's agenda: Will we devote ourselves to becoming a missional church or to becoming a pure church?

On one hand, the powerful new emphasis on being missional makes mission central to who we are and how we organize ourselves. We want to "be mission" rather than only "do mission." We want to reach out to others. We want to be open to outsiders. We want to welcome them in. We want to be hospitable. We want to share our understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ. We want to respond to people in need, people in pain. We want to invite outsiders to become insiders. At the 2001 Mennonite

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Church Canada Assembly in Abbotsford, B.C., we listened for several days to conference leaders explaining how the conference has been totally restructured. Our conference is being rebuilt on the framework of being a missional church. We enthusiastically approved the new proposed structure.

On the other hand, in the new Mennonite Church North America we are paying a great deal of attention to membership rules, to who can be a member and who can't. Some say that we should frame membership guidelines around what unifies us, around common

understandings of what it means to be a Mennonite Christian. We should emphasize what we hold in common and the things that hold us together. But others say that we need to be clear about what separates us, about who should not be allowed in: "We have to be a pure church that takes sin very seriously and prevents at least certain kinds of sinners from entering and contaminating the church."

The issue most debated is whether church membership should be denied to non-celibate homosexuals, and whether membership

in the conference should be denied to those churches who accept gay couples. But the thing goes deeper, I think. Can we live with diversity? Can we live together with people who think differently, perhaps believe somewhat differently, interpret the Scriptures differently, and perhaps behave differently?

Can we live with different understandings of how to use the new *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* adopted by the Mennonite Church some half dozen years ago? For some the confession is a helpful summary of what Mennonites generally believe today. For others it has acquired an authority almost like that of Scripture: Any new member of the church and any new pastor or staff person in the conference should have to confess that they believe everything it says exactly as it says it.

So we have two opposing impulses. We want to be missional and reach out and be welcoming and hospitable and invite outsiders to become insiders. But we also want to be pure, careful not to get contaminated or have our faith watered down, so we are wary of allowing in strange people who will inevitably change the church.

The issue of insiders and outsiders is universal. All churches and probably all groups wrestle with it. It was the major issue for the exiles returning home to Jerusalem after seventy years in captivity in Babylon.

The promise of Isaiah 55

Isaiah 55 points to the homecoming from exile in Babylon. The text's invitations to everyone who thirsts to "come to the waters" (v. 1) and to "seek the Lord while he may be found" (v. 6) resonate deeply within me. The exile is ending. The people of Judah can go home. After seventy years in captivity in Babylon they can return to Jerusalem. The prophet, in an outburst of poetic exultation, shouts,

*For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

(Isa. 55:12)

It is wonderful to be going home. But the euphoria of home-coming and images of an idealized holy city can carry you only so long, until you have to deal with organizing life again in a difficult environment. Reality sets in for the returning exiles. Jerusalem isn't going to be much of a home, at least not at first. It has been mostly destroyed. It is an awful, barren mess, filled with poverty and despair and little rule of law. And strangers are living there, people who moved in to fill the void, occupying abandoned homes. They will probably be upset with exiles who lay claim to land and homes the new occupants have lived in for seventy years now. And most of the originally exiled generation have died, so almost all the returning exiles were born not here but in Babylon. For the returnees Judah is a foreign land, known to them only through the memories and traditions and stories of their elders.

The exiles are now home, and two visionaries, Isaiah and Ezra, try to bridge the 700-mile gap between Babylon and Jerusalem. They each spell out a vision for how to organize their community life here. The two visions have little in common. They are essentially competing visions.

Ezra's vision

After returning "home" to Jerusalem, Ezra, a religious leader, is deeply troubled. When the exiles get back to Jerusalem and try to reform their faith community again after everything has come apart at the seams because of the exile, what Ezra sees is the threat of assimilation with the pagans who have flooded the vacant land. The returning exiles' identity as a people of Yahweh God, as a people of the covenant, is fragile. What do you do when your very identity as a distinct community is threatened by assimilation, when it looks like you might be absorbed into the general mass of pagan society?

Says Ezra in despair: "After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, 'The peoples of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations.... For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.' When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle

and pulled my hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled” (Ezra 9:1-3). Ezra prays a long, impassioned prayer of repentance. “O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens” (Ezra 9:6). Then Ezra tries to lead his people to repentance. They read the Torah and pledge themselves to follow it. And that leads to action.

Ezra has been shocked to hear that so many Jews, including many leaders, have married non-Jewish wives. He holds a census and discovers that 113 Jews have in fact married alien women (chap. 10). He is deeply troubled and cries out, “Now make confession to the LORD the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives. Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, ‘It is so; we must do as you have said’” (Ezra 10:11–12).

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A few people oppose Ezra’s commands and vision, but the opposition seems to have little impact: “Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah opposed this, and

Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levites supported them” (Ezra 10:15). The editor of the book of Ezra offers a description of what Ezra said and did, but doesn’t comment positively or negatively. The last verse in the book says simply, “All these had married foreign women, and they sent them away with their children” (Ezra 10:44). They were excluded from the community being newly formed and established in Jerusalem.

Ezra’s vision makes sense in his context. The threat of assimilation into a foreign culture and religion is real. The community’s sense of identity as a chosen people of Yahweh God is precarious. Sometimes you need to look to the outer perimeters of your sense of peoplehood and close the porous boundaries that let in people who will threaten your identity and your purity.

But to our sensibilities the action taken seems extreme. Send away all the foreign wives with their children? What about the women who married foreign husbands? Not mentioned. Perhaps they were already excluded. The writer of Ezra notes some

opposition to this decree within the community. And Isaiah offers an alternate, even competing, vision.

Isaiah's vision

Isaiah 56 spells out Isaiah's vision for rebuilding the covenant community after the return from exile. Isaiah claims that this vision comes from the Lord.

*Thus says the LORD:
Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.
Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil. (Isa. 56:1–2)*

The vision begins with fundamentals as old as Abraham (Gen. 18:19) and revisited by prophet after prophet. The basis of God's community needs to be "justice and righteousness" (see also Amos 5:7, 24; 6:12). There is an ethical center to being God's people. This command is central to the tradition.

Living ethically and anticipating fuller salvation is rooted in keeping the sabbath. Keeping the sabbath is a sign that you have faith that God is working and you don't have to make it all come out right. You can rest because God, not you, is Lord of the world. You can break the cycle of competitive production and consumption and just rest and worship. The theme of the sabbath will return as a central theme in Isaiah's vision of who should be included in the reconstituted community.

The specifics of Isaiah's vision come with stunning, controversial force.

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
"The LORD will surely separate me from his people";
and do not let the eunuch say,
"I am just a dry tree."
For thus says the LORD:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,*

*who choose the things that please me
 and hold fast my covenant,
 I will give, in my house and within my walls,
 a monument and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
 I will give them an everlasting name
 that shall not be cut off.
 And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
 to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
 and to be his servants,
 all who keep the sabbath and do not profane it,
 and hold fast my covenant—
 these I will bring to my holy mountain,
 and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
 their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
 will be accepted on my altar. (Isa. 56:3–7)*

Who will be included and who will be excluded? Who will be an insider and who an outsider? Isaiah's vision is shockingly inclusive, especially given the context of chaos and confusion and general struggle with the many foreigners who had inhabited Jerusalem.

Ezra and others are setting boundaries and putting up fences and purifying membership lists, but Isaiah sets about including people who had always been excluded. Among those he specifically includes are the eunuch and the foreigner, both excluded by Moses himself: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD" (Deut. 23:1); "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants will be admitted to the assembly of the LORD" (Deut. 23:3–6).

By admitting the eunuch and the foreigner, Isaiah is apparently moving beyond the boundaries set by Moses; he welcomes those

Ezra took pains to exclude. Walter Brueggemann suggests that this is the clearest case, perhaps the only case in the entire Old

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Testament, in which a Torah provision of Moses is explicitly violated for the sake of the future community.¹ Not until Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said [by Moses]... But I say to you...” (Matthew 5) does another claim explicitly to move beyond what Moses said.

Isaiah offers criteria for determining who should be welcomed into the community. The criteria have accountability built in. Those the LORD includes “keep my sabbaths” and “hold fast my covenant” (Isa. 56:4). These precepts have to do with the center of faith. Keep the sabbath. Acknowledge that your own efforts to make a go of life aren’t enough; you need to rest and depend on God who is after all working for you. Hold fast to the covenant. Commit yourself to a relationship of trust in God. Acknowledge the salvation God has brought. Respond by keeping the commandments. That is all, nothing more, though that is quite a lot. It doesn’t matter that you are an eunuch or a foreigner or... What matters is that you keep the sabbath and hold fast the covenant.

The tension

I confess that I am drawn more to the inclusive vision of Isaiah than to the exclusive vision of Ezra, more to the vision of a missional church than to the vision of a pure church. It seems to me that Jesus quotes Isaiah more than he quotes Ezra. In fact, Jesus takes a major quotation from Isaiah 56. After saying that the foreigner who keeps the sabbath and holds fast to God’s covenant will be “joyful in my house of prayer,” Isaiah notes that

*My house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.
Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered. (Isa. 56:7–8)*

Jesus quotes this text when he cleanses the temple.

In the Bible Ezra and Isaiah exist side by side, and their respective visions exist side by side in the church today. Should we eliminate one or the other? Or do they each offer a necessary

corrective for the other? Are they meant to exist side by side, in creative tension with each other?

Note

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Using God's Resources Wisely: Isaiah and Urban Possibility* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1993), 56.

About the author

Gary Harder has three children and six grandchildren. He serves as pastor of Toronto United Mennonite Church, and has for a long time been involved in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, on the Canadian Mennonite Bible College board, and more recently on the Mennonite Church Canada Leadership Commission.