Spring 2016, Vol. 17, No. 1

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Discernment

Editorial

Karl Koop

Discerning the will of God can be time consuming. Take for example the church's experience of trying to decide which books should constitute its sacred writings. In the year 144, Marcion, a Christian leader from Asia Minor, proposed that the authoritative writings of the church should consist of the Gospel of Luke and the writings of Paul. Because Marcion had a profound dislike for Judaism, he set aside the Hebrew scriptures altogether.

Most churches found Marcion's canon grossly inadequate. For them, there was no question that the Hebrew scriptures had to be part of the Christian canon, but it was less clear which other writings should have authoritative standing. As late as the third century there were lingering questions over the status of Hebrews, James, the letters of Peter and John, and the book of Revelation. In some communities it was still unclear what the church should do with writings such as the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistle of Barnabas. It was not until the late fourth century that standardized lists of New Testament writings emerged with the final twenty-seven books as we know them. Evidently the process of discernment on the matter of what constituted scripture was a long and arduous process.

Not until the late fourth century did standardized lists of New Testament writings emerge. Evidently the process of discernment on the matter of what constituted scripture was a long and arduous process.

By comparison, many issues facing the church in the present day come and go much more quickly. For example, Mennonite churches in North America have been addressing questions around homosexuality for only about thirty years. And yet for many people it is time to move on. Some voices suggest that the discernment process has gone on far too long because, as they see it, the Bible is clear in forbidding all homosexual activity. For

others, there is a strong desire to move on because the topic has become a nonissue. In their view, the church should be welcoming and ought now to turn its attention to more pressing issues such as helping refugees, feeding the hungry, and bearing witness to Christ's saving love.

Wherever we find ourselves on this question, the stakes seem high as some congregations and even area conferences are splitting over this issue and are going their own way or forming new like-minded networks and associations. Mennonites are not alone in this experience. Many denominations have gone through painful divisions over whether to welcome gays and lesbians, and it is likely that for the foreseeable future the issue will continue to divide.

In this issue of *Vision* the writers do not attempt to resolve the various questions facing the church in matters pertaining to homosexuality. Some writers hardly address the topic at all. Far more they are asking us to pay attention to *how* we discern and how we live faithfully in times when we disagree with one another: *how* we discern is as important as the conclusions we ultimately reach.

A number of themes emerge in the articles in this issue. Various writers speak of the virtue of patience, the imperative to be humble and not claim a total perspective, and the importance of not excluding any voices in the conversation. A common thread running through several of the articles is the importance of our experience, the lived witness of faith, along with a heightened awareness of the ongoing work of the Spirit of God in changing circumstances and various situations.

We should not equate the process of discernment with biblical exegesis. Genuine discernment presupposes a living faith in a relational God who has conveyed his will ultimately not in textual propositions—but in the flesh!

The sense here is that even as we diligently attend to scripture, we should not equate the process of discernment with biblical exegesis. Genuine discernment presupposes a living faith in a relational God who has conveyed his will ultimately not in textual propositions—but in the flesh! As many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Anabaptists would have it, it is not the encounter solely with the

Written Word but rather the embrace of the Living Word that ultimately saves, transforms, and breathes life.

Decades ago the church was struggling with another issue—whether women could assume leadership positions in the church. The discerning process at that time included careful biblical interpretation, but just as important was the church's consideration of lived experience and attentiveness to the leading of the Spirit of God. Such thoughtful attention to the living witness of the faith and the Spirit's breath must be at the heart of any discernment process and must surely accompany us as we journey ahead.

About the editor

Karl Koop teaches history and theology and directs the Graduate School of Theology and Ministry at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Discernment in a time of turmoil

Gerald Gerbrandt

As 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.

Have we forgotten 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?

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."[1] 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),[2] 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."[3] 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."[4]

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."[5] 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.

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.

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."[6]

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,"[7] 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."[8]

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,"[9] as a way of detecting the "the mind of God as the church engages the critical agenda of our time."[10] 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,"[11] 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.[12]

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."[13] The way Jesus lived and improvised as he fulfilled the law in the face of the challenges of his day is our model for 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."[14]

Our assignment is to faithfully improvise within 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."

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."[15]

Discernment then is first of all about "the formation, development, and renewal of a sacred *people*."[16] 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*"?[17]

Notes

[1] 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/.
[2] 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.
[3] *Being a Faithful Church*, #3, p. 2.
[4] *Being a Faithful Church*, #3, p. 4.
[5] 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.
[6] *Being a Faithful Church*, #1, p. 1.
[7] *Being a Faithful Church*, #4, p. 1.
[8] *Being a Faithful Church*, #4, p. 3.
[9] *Being a Faithful Church*, #1, p. 3.
[10] *Being a Faithful Church*, #1, p. 1.
[11] *Being a Faithful Church*, #1, p. 4.
[12] 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.
[13] Samuel Wells, *The Drama of Christian Ethics: Improvisation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 12.
[14] Ibid.
[15] *The Drama of Christian Ethics: Improvisation*, 77.
[16] Wells, p. 37.
[17] *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.

It's not always about my personal preferences—or even my personal convictions

Tim Geddert

We were a small congregation with a small decision to make. Nothing big like leadership structures, or membership questions, or ethical guidelines—just a tiny question: Should we begin our evening service at 6:00 or at 7:30?

The situation: The place we had rented for our Sunday morning services would no longer be available on Sunday mornings, but it was available Sunday evenings. We decided to move our Sunday morning activities to the home of one of the church members. There we would have Sunday school for children and an adult Bible study. We would continue to have home fellowship groups that met during the week. And on Sunday evening we would meet in our rented facilities for worship.

We just needed to decide whether we would meet for worship at 6:00 or at 7:30 on Sunday evening. A simple decision—or so we thought. But it didn't take long for us to discover that our whole concept of church was at stake.

We just needed to decide whether we would meet at 6:00 or at 7:30. A simple decision—or so we thought. But it didn't take long for us to discover that our whole concept of church was at stake. A six o'clock service would mean bringing our children along (the entire church consisted of young families with lively children). A 7:30 service would mean that most of the little ones would be home with babysitters and already tucked into bed. Some of us found the idea of gathering as adults for a peaceful and meaningful worship service appealing. Others protested: "We're not hiring babysitters. If we have a late service, one of us will have to miss it every Sunday. No way! 6:00 is far better. That way everyone can be there!"

People in the first group responded, "Where are your priorities, if you won't consider a babysitter just once a week? We already have programs for the kids!" And it soon became obvious that a

"fair compromise" (perhaps meeting at 6:45) would make everyone unhappy.

Time was running out, but the more we tried to reach a decision, the harder it got. There was misunderstanding, blaming, and plenty of anger going around.

We set the deadline: Next Sunday, after our morning service, we would have to make a decision. A week went by. On Sunday morning it was already evident in parking lot interactions that this would not be a very blessed Sunday morning. Our hellos lacked their customary friendliness. What I preached about on that Sunday has completely escaped me. I strongly suspect it had escaped the hearers by the time we regathered after the benediction to make our dreaded decision.

Now before I continue, I want to assure you that I am not the sort of person who regularly hears audible directions from the Lord. But once in a while, especially when I am on the verge of making a terrible mistake, I'm quite sure it's not just my mind but God's Spirit who says, "Stop right there! Not like that!" I had that experience not once but twice in the process of making this decision.

I was just getting ready to ask the question, "So, who is in favor of starting the service at 6:00?" when it suddenly became crystal clear to me: There is no way we can make this decision today. It would tear the church apart. To my surprise, I found myself saying: "We are going to have to delay this decision for one more week." Everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief. I continued, "But merely waiting another week is not going to help us. Here is your homework assignment for this week: Make an appointment with *every other person* who has an opinion about this question that is different from yours. And when you get together, listen carefully not only to the other person's viewpoint but also for why it matters so much to him or her." The assignment was so unexpected that the church took it seriously. It was pretty complicated.

I called Bob: "Are you at home tonight? I would like to stop by."

"No," he responded, "I'm at Phil's house tonight."

"How about Tuesday?"

"No, on Tuesday Beth is coming to my house."

"Do you think you might be done by nine o'clock?"

"With Beth? I doubt it."

All week long, we were phoning, driving around the city, listening to each other.

Next Sunday the atmosphere, even in the parking lot, was totally different. We celebrated a joyous church service, and we were dying of curiosity about what would happen afterward. And then, just as I was about to ask the congregation who was in favor of starting the service at 6:00, it suddenly became utterly clear to me: that question is completely irrelevant.

For the second time (or so I believe) the Holy Spirit helped us with this decision. If we would have voted on the *personal preferences* of each individual, we would have learned nothing from the exercise we had been practicing all week.

I addressed the congregation: "We are going to take a vote. But listen carefully to the question we are going to answer. Here it is: When you take into account everything that you heard and experienced this week, which of the two proposed starting times do you think would serve our congregation best? What you would personally prefer does not interest me in the slightest."

We took some time. We prayed. And then we voted. To everyone's astonishment, it was unanimous! But the biggest miracle wasn't the unanimous vote. It was the fact that we had learned to listen—really listen—to each other. Each of us had discovered that there is something infinitely more important than my preference. There is even something far more important than the preference of the majority. Far more important is what will best serve the church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community."

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial."[1] Are we willing to set aside our personal preferences, our wishes and desires—even our ideal concept of the church—to choose what best serves the church? If we are, we will see God work miracles among us, even if they do not always take the form of a unanimous vote.

A few years later I learned that lesson all over again. This time the decision was a personal rather than a congregational one. And I learned that choosing what best serves the church is important not only when it concerns something as apparently trivial as an appropriate starting time for an evening service but also when it concerns important theological and ethical issues.

When I moved to Scotland for doctoral studies, I knew my family and I would need to look for a suitable church. The nearest Mennonite church was 500 miles away in London. Our small village had only a Presbyterian church (Church of Scotland). We decided to attend it. In this church were some wonderful brothers and sisters who warmly welcomed us into their lives and into their home fellowship group. Each Sunday evening a minority of church members—and a growing number of their friends and acquaintances from surrounding villages—crowded into the living room of the manse for a lively and joyous praise evening, which was not on the official church calendar. In the main church, things were different. Typically, about twenty-five people gathered for Sunday morning worship services—except twice a year, when the church celebrated communion and attendance was taken. Then about 300 showed up.

The main church was terribly conflicted. Imagine the situation: The typical Scot is rather reserved, private, and conservative. But their theological convictions are liberal, and as Presbyterians these Scots leaned in the direction of Reformed theology. By contrast, the pastor was a flamboyant American, theologically conservative, charismatic, and Methodist. Between the pastor, the elder board, and the church, they seemed to fight about everything—except two things. Everyone seemed to agree that baptizing infants, if not the only biblical form of baptism, is at least the norm, the truly biblical way. And they seemed to agree that a career in the military is a perfectly acceptable choice for a devout Christian. On these two points, as a pacifist Mennonite practitioner of believers baptism, I was not on the same wavelength as the rest of the church. And I had a difficult decision to make. Did I have the right as an active participant in this church to confront the pastor, the elders, or the church as a whole and announce to them: "Dear people, there are still two topics about which you are not yet conflicted. I would like to introduce these!"

I came to a conclusion: Sometimes it is perfectly appropriate, perhaps even necessary, to graciously remain silent, no matter how convinced I am. Sometimes the right thing to do is to practice the spiritual gift of keeping my mouth shut. It is not my Christian responsibility to try to convince other people to adopt my perspective on every issue. Indeed, there may well be circumstances where the least appropriate thing I can do is try to convince others to adopt my viewpoint. If doing so is far more likely to disrupt the church than to help it, I shouldn't do it. The crucial question is: What serves the church? Of course, I had every right to look for another church. But to stay and stir up unnecessary conflict was a right I did not have.

Did I have the right as a participant in this church to announce to them: "Dear people, there are still two topics about which you are not yet conflicted. I would like to introduce these!"

We stayed in the church. In the next three years I had many opportunities to contribute—to preach, be involved in pastoral care, encourage the pastor, paint the church building, even serve on the search committee when the pastor left and needed to be replaced. I was able to make a contribution that lasted long after I left the village.

Not only that: I benefited in a multitude of ways. And when I went through the biggest crisis of my life, as my first wife died of cancer, I had a church family that stood by me. And that was possible because God had helped me learn that I sometimes need to practice the gift of keeping my mouth shut. God was teaching me that the really crucial question is always, What serves the church?—and that I must never let myself fall in love with my ideal concept of the church instead of loving the actual people who are the church.

Note

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works*, vol. 5, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 36.

About the author

Tim Geddert teaches New Testament at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary (Fresno, CA) and serves as a resource for many churches and church schools in Canada and the United States, in German-speaking Europe, and elsewhere.

The fierce grace of stability
A story of discernment through hard times

Gerald W. Schlabach

It is counterintuitive, I know. If any single existential crisis helped me embrace the Catholic intellectual tradition, it was homosexuality. That would not be counterintuitive at all if I were the kind of convert to Catholicism who has clung to the rock of Rome as a bulwark of authority against the wiles of relativism and the wishy-washiness of liberalism. To be sure, I do share a certain disdain for both of these -isms. Because I found most arguments from both sides of this culture war unconvincing, I sat painfully on the fence for more than two decades. Just as fundamentalist appeals to the authority of Bible and magisterium are often heartless, vague liberal appeals to love, equality, and inclusion are often question begging. Ultimately, the arguments that convinced me to support same-sex marriage have actually been conservative ones.

The puzzles of homosexuality loosened my confidence in Mennonite ethical approaches right when I was supposed to be coming into my own as a Mennonite ethicist. Yet the struggle to discern a faithful response to the issue deepened my commitment to actual Mennonites.

But I anticipate. As best I can understand my anguished journey of two decades, what happened is this: The puzzles of homosexuality loosened my confidence in Mennonite ethical approaches right when I was supposed to be coming into my own as a Mennonite ethicist. Yet the struggle to discern a faithful response to the issue deepened my commitment to actual Mennonites—especially a particular one, my wife.

One could name the formative practice of hanging in there with one another amid conflict and pain in various ways, but among these is the vow of stability by which Benedictine monks commit themselves to staying put in one local community for a lifetime. Benedictine stability gave me language for understanding the deep grammar of Catholicism—practices and background

assumptions that dispose them to remain together in communion with one another and their bishops even when they are pissed off. While it is often hard to sense Catholicism at its slowly moving depth, this deep grammar is what gives it qualities at odds with the rigid traditionalism that many zealous defenders and most cynical detractors alike see in it.[1]

The Gordian knot that I could not untangle as a Mennonite ethicist was this: Mennonite ethical thinking cannot readily admit the category of legitimate exceptions. Even traditional Catholic casuistry recognizes that any moral system must allow for these. However detailed the set of norms and rules one uses to lay out that system, it cannot anticipate every possible circumstance. Thus, the code of Roman Catholic canon law closes with a reminder that canon law itself always serves a larger purpose: "The salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church, is to be kept before one's eyes."

The Gordian knot that I could not untangle as a Mennonite ethicist was this: Mennonite ethical thinking cannot readily admit the category of legitimate exceptions. Even traditional Catholic casuistry recognizes that any moral system must allow for these.

Mennonite ethics must avoid this move. In practice, wise Mennonites have always made common-sense exceptions. It's the formal category that's the problem. The legitimate reason: Mennonite pacifism. The paradigmatic issue of Christian pacifism has defined Mennonites' very identity, and pacifism as they have articulated it cannot formally admit exceptions. To insist that Christians practice disciplined nonviolence as a norm but allow for even the most exceptional of exceptions is to adopt a just-war position.

If Mennonites have sometimes deserved the otherwise unfair moniker of "perfectionists," this I think is why. It is not that their theology expects people to become perfect so that they might earn salvation by their works. Rather, the habits of mind and communal practice needed to sustain pacifism migrate over to other areas of moral discernment as well. Traditionally, every boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the Mennonite community has required negotiation. Boundaries might change or churches split if disagreement over boundaries proved intractable, but boundaries must be clear.

Obviously, a different approach would not have spared Mennonites every conflict over whether to include gays and lesbians as full church members or whether to bless their covenanted unions as marriages. God knows, other churches have struggled at least as much. But for many years I was able to find provisional resolution, thanks to characteristic modes of Catholic thought. Catholic moral theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill, for example, employed this approach to argue that the church ought to be able to uphold monogamous heterosexual marriage as its moral norm, while also acknowledging the moral integrity of those of same-sex orientation who approximate that norm as closely as they can.[2]

Eventually I made different arguments for extending the blessing of marriage to covenanted same-sex unions. So the point is not that this one framework could settle the matter for any church. But if the Catholic framework of norms and exceptions is only one resource for communal discernment, it is a telling one. On one hand, it maintains a bounded discipline that liberal Protestantism largely seems to have given up on. On the other hand, it keeps the necessary countercultural stubbornness that Mennonites need from becoming harshly rigid.

My journey into Catholicism has certainly not been solely intellectual, and my joy at encountering the long Christian tradition has not come from ethical puzzles alone. In the Jewish Talmud, apparently divergent rabbinical interpretations stand in a single canon, thus canonizing debate itself. Reading the early church fathers I found the church's talmud. Later, even when Thomas Aquinas offered Catholicism's great systemization of thought, the format was thoroughgoing debate. Every article of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* first lists the best objections to what he is about to argue, thus honoring rather than expunging rival positions.

The result of taking this approach is not a free-for-all marketplace of ideas. Disciplining the debate are certain parameters, or what George Lindbeck compared to a grammar, as defined by accountability to ancient sources, especially the creeds.[3] Yet that accountability is hardly fundamentalist. This is the orthodoxy of a living tradition, not rigid traditionalism. Things change both too slowly for progressives and too quickly for traditionalists. The ballast of tradition may make women's ordination or sacramental

recognition of same-sex marriage seem all but unimaginable for now, but that same inertia makes the reforms of Vatican II irreversible. This is a global church, after all. Segments of the global church line up both for and against causes that globally minded progressives in the West champion. Changing *as* a global, multicultural people requires changing at a just pace, in order to stay together *as* a people.

My book *Unlearning Protestantism* suggests how the Benedictine practice of stability is writ large in Catholicism as a whole. To be Catholic at all is to persist with the church through good times and bad, despite disagreements, even when one is angry. For to do otherwise, even if one moves to another liturgically high church, is by definition to become Protestant. The necessary practice of staying together, therefore, nurtures virtues of fidelity and patience. At key stages, what attracted me most to Catholicism were exactly these qualities. Even some of the most liberal of my professors at the University of Notre Dame evinced a dogged loyalty to their church. The role model they offered helped me stay Mennonite for a long time. When I found I had to make the impossible choice between practicing stability by staying in the church that had formed me and practicing stability by returning to the church that had formed it, I at least sought to do so in a way that would strengthen bridges between communities rather than burn any bridge behind me.

When I had to make the impossible choice between practicing stability by staying in the church that had formed me and practicing stability by returning to the church that had formed it, I at least sought to do so in a way that would strengthen bridges between communities.

If I had not been married to Joetta, the plot of this story might have taken a different route toward the same resolution. As I began to explore becoming Catholic, Joetta began to explore ordained ministry. I took my own time, because Joetta had to be at peace with my becoming Catholic. I did not need to find peace with women's ordination; I grieve that if Joetta had ever considered joining me as a Catholic, Roman refusals even to discuss the possibility would have presented too great a hurdle. The topic of homosexuality, though, was often hard even to broach. It constituted the single most painful area of our marriage, and for months on end we often

avoided it. If I as an ethicist pressed for strong arguments, she as a pastor was taking care lest any "bruised reeds" be broken in her congregation (Isa. 42:3).

It is not that I ever wanted to exclude gays and lesbians from the life of the church. To me it seemed obvious that any spirituality of nonviolence must entail a commitment to respect the dignity and listen deeply even to those with whom I disagree. And that steered me quite safely away from homophobia. No, my hesitations were three:

1. As a Mennonite and as a Catholic I have yearned to see the witness by which Christian communities move together through careful discernment, precisely as communities, not through pressure tactics and power dynamics. If prophetic dissent sometimes plays a role in such movement, it will be most effective as loyal rather than bitter dissent, evincing love for the church.

2. Wide public advocacy for gays and lesbians has historically emerged along with the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s. That revolution has released people from unhealthy past repressions but often invited a sevenfold captivity to newly exploitive practices. So when rationales for new sexual ethics, gay or straight, has come with an individualism that has no ethical criterion for sex except that it be between consenting adults, I have dug in my heels. Likewise with appeals to marriage equality that skirt the question of what marriage is in the first place by begging the question, "Equal what?" (Telling me I risked being on the wrong side of history only deepened my suspicion that cultural assimilation, not communal discernment, was at work here.)

3. Thus, I did not so much oppose full inclusion of gays and lesbians as insist on better arguments than I was hearing. I needed time, a measure of pain, and a good conversation partner who shared my intellectual commitments and theological language.

But it was unfair of me to ask Joetta to be that conversation partner. Nor did she have the same luxury of time; to deliberate in the argumentative fashion of scholars could easily break bruised reeds. Her formative faith experiences came from watching her parents pastor marginal folks in a small mission church at the margin of the Mennonite church at the literal edge of the United States, in a small town on Lake Superior. In her marrow is a deep commitment to hearing the stories of bruised reeds traumatized by how their home communities and churches have treated them. For her—as Pope Francis has articulated—the person standing before her at the door of the church or sitting in the pew has a reality that obliges more than any abstract argument.

Thankfully, I found another conversation partner, whom I will call David, who offered both lived reality and helpful argumentation. David is a fellow moral theologian, former Catholic priest, gay, in a faithful covenanted relationship, who was willing to skype almost weekly over a course of many months. More self-consciously than I, he works from within the Catholic natural law tradition. That God created human beings with an ultimate good or purpose not of their choosing or "construction" is theological bedrock for David. He thus has deep respect for critics of same-sex marriage, because he sees them asking the right question: What is marriage in the first place? Unlike most advocates for same-sex marriage, David had taken this question on, thus providing me with the key I needed both to become an ally and to uphold respect for the deep and valid concerns of opponents.

David's natural-law language had given him a way to articulate his own struggle in coming to terms not only with his sexual orientation but with his need for intimacy. His story is his own to tell, but my impression is that the desire once haunting him was less for sexual pleasure than for the possibility of thriving as a human being through a deep, intimate, daily, lifelong relationship with another person. Both of us would insist that healthy yet chaste intimacy is surely possible for those who freely say yes to God's calling and gift of celibacy. But David had come to recognize that as a devout gay Catholic man, his decision for the priesthood had in too many ways been an attempt to fit into the only space available to him. That in turn had stifled the very capacity for relationship that Catholicism believes constitutes us as persons.

David's natural-law framework thus combined with his experience to provide responses to the best objections of Catholic critics of same-sex marriage. Above all, this approach meant naming what marriage is (whether straight or gay) and what sexual union contributes within a marriage to make it so: Faithful sexual union seals the bond between two people that in turn seals bonds of kinship. Kinship then extends networks out into wider relationships of family, community, and church. Marriage, with the myriad small ways by which a couple builds a life together, constitutes the most basic bond in our kinship networks, and thus remains unique.[4] While social conservatives rightly speak of family as foundational for society, marriage is first foundational for family. A couple that starts a family in the way that the church believes is normative must marry first, before trying to conceive, and will remain no less married even if they find themselves to be infertile.

The more we worry about sexual "burning," the more we should counsel and support the "better" that comes when people channel their sexual energy into the civilizing, virtue-nourishing, other-directed relationship of lifelong monogamous marriage.

David's argument gave me the linchpin I needed to affirm same-sex marriage. I had already come to believe that all sides might find unexpected consensus if they paid more attention to St. Paul's somewhat embarrassing remark about heterosexual marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, "It is better to marry than to burn." For Paul, the norm was celibacy for the sake of God's kingdom, and heterosexual marriage was the concession. Pastorally realistic, Paul was willing to make such a concession precisely on the basis of experience. He was willing to recognize the value of a *better* and not always hold out for the *best*.

The practical wisdom here for us suggests that we social conservatives need not worry that homosexuality (especially male) may correspond with a somewhat greater propensity for promiscuity. For the more we worry about sexual "burning," the more we really should counsel and support the "better" that comes when people channel their sexual energy into the civilizing, virtue-nourishing, other-directed relationship of lifelong monogamous marriage.[5]

My contention is that this resolution, though not now official Catholic teaching by any stretch of the imagination, is yet deeply

Catholic in its grammar and character. It takes both scripture and tradition seriously. It may stretch previous understandings of both, but it does so respectfully by attending to their underlying wisdom. It exercises reason by refusing question-begging resolutions. It reflects the best of natural-law tradition by taking reality seriously and seeking all that we can learn from ancient sources and from new experiences.

And it does all of this by staying in relationship even when it would be easier to dismiss some difficult or painful conversation partner.

Notes

1. See Gerald W. Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010); "The Vow of Stability: A Premodern Way through a Hypermodern World," in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, ed. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2000), 301–24.
2. Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Moral Methodology: A Case Study," in *A Challenge to Love: Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church*, ed. Robert Nugent (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 78–92. Cahill may now want to state her position in other ways, since many gays and lesbians chafe at being categorized as non-normative. Yet it is worth noting that at about this same time, in the early 1980s, commentator Andrew Sullivan, a gay Catholic and influential advocate of same-sex marriage, seemed to suggest that it would be helpful if his church would at least adopt some such framework. See Andrew Sullivan, "Alone Again, Naturally: The Catholic Church and the Homosexual," *New Republic* 211, no. 22 (November 28, 1994): 54–55.
3. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).
4. Note that such a view is fully capable of recognizing that procreation is the prototypical way that the bond of marriage bears fruit or is generative. But it also accounts elegantly for what makes a marriage a marriage even when a heterosexual couple is infertile.
5. See Gerald W. Schlabach, "What Is Marriage Now? A Pauline Case for Same-Sex Marriage," *Christian Century* 131, no. 22 (29 October 2014): 22–27.

About the author

Gerald W. Schlabach is professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota and one of the founders of Bridgefolk, a movement for dialogue and unity between Mennonites and Roman Catholics. His most recent book publication is *Sharing Peace: Mennonites and Catholics in Conversation* (Liturgical Press, 2013), which he co-edited with Margaret Pfeil.

Modern certainty, historical clarity
Rediscovering how saints read scripture

Peter J. H. Epp

On March 18, 2015, Emma Green published her account of the then-very-recent Allegheny Mennonite Conference (of Mennonite Church USA) meeting and vote that reinstated Hyattsville (MD) Mennonite Church as a full conference member, after Allegheny had previously revoked Hyattsville's voting rights for accepting members who were gay and lesbian.[1] The vote required a 51 percent majority, achieved—barely—by a rounded-up result of 50.7 percent. Given this 50/50 split on a particularly divisive issue, it is not surprising that the vote also coincided with the resignation of two churches from the conference over the disagreement and provoked the immediate resignation of a third.

Critical realist approaches to scripture played a major role in pre-Reformation and early Christian history, and such approaches may provide us with the keys to a more honest and faithful approach to our conflicts today.

It might be easy to conclude, as we often do, that some Allegheny members—namely, those voting against reinstating Hyattsville's voting rights—placed a high value on individual purity, whereas others—namely, those voting in favour—did not. It might also be easy to conclude, as we also often do, that some Allegheny members—namely, those voting in favour of reinstating Hyattsville's voting rights—placed a high value on remaining in community, while others—namely, those voting against—did not.

And yet, when we stop to really listen to the voices of those involved, we recognize that our brothers and sisters in faith defy such easy categorization. Did those who voted against Hyattsville's voting rights care less about the continuance of community? Green's interview with Jeff Jones, the pastor who initiated the discipline process for Hyattsville, makes it difficult to sustain such an easy judgment. Green writes:

> *Jones himself was raised a Presbyterian and ordained as a pastor in 1976 as part of a group called the Evangelical Church Alliance . . . [but] he said he liked the community orientation of his adopted denomination. "I'm very connectionally oriented—committed to the conference," he said. "We don't have a priest, or bishops, as many churches do. The congregations decide."*
>
> *This sense of community: That's why being in a conference matters, he said. "I've seen too many independent churches . . . go off and do strange things. We need to have a certain degree of interconnectedness to keep us all Mennonite—to keep an identity.*[2]

In fact, later in the article, Jones concludes: "We're all reluctant—we'd rather be together."

Clearly, then, there is something at play here that is more foundational than our opinions about the value of purity or community or even scripture. There seems to be something deeper, something more foundational that affects *the way* we pursue our commitment to purity and community and scripture. One way to uncover some of those foundational differences may be to spend some time considering our unspoken assumptions about reality—or, as a philosopher might put it, to study our competing ontologies.

Competing ontologies

At least three competing assumptions about reality have fueled the spectrum of opinions that typify most arguments among Christians today. First, there are those who express their faith primarily through the assumptions of realism, believing that there is universal, accessible truth, and that we can claim that truth with certainty if we simply discern it properly. In this ontology, Christian disagreement provides us with opportunities to clarify or discover the certain Truth that God will give (or has given) us to resolve the argument.

Second, there are those who express their faith primarily through realism's opposite, relativism, arguing that there is no truth beyond each person's individual experience. In this ontology, Christian disagreement provides us with opportunities to

practice tolerance, to become the kind of community that refuses to presume that anyone should argue about what is right or wrong for anyone else.

Third, there are those who would actively seek to express their faith somewhere in between, through critical realism, the belief that there is universal Truth beyond our experiences, but we will always (in this world, at least) be limited in our ability to know that Truth. In this ontology, we should expect church disagreements to defy easy resolution, but the answers that parties to the disagreement give can never just be dismissed. Disagreements are simply something that we must always be working at, even if painfully.

Realism, as many would recognize, has generally dominated Christianity since the Reformation, a fact evidenced by modern approaches to proving and "proof texting" using scripture. Relativism, as many might also suspect, has recently come to challenge realism in our churches, a fact evidenced by our increasing discomfort with accountability. A closer look at the breadth of historical approaches to scripture, however, demonstrates not only that critical realist approaches to scripture played a major role in pre-Reformation and early Christian history but also that such approaches may provide us with the keys to a more honest and faithful approach to our conflicts today.

As modern realism has gained traction alongside *sola scriptura*, Protestant realists have attempted to compete with secular realism head-to-head under the assumption that scripture provides certain and definitive answers.

Scripture and ontology

Martin Luther's emphasis on *sola scriptura* helped to codify a realist Christian assumption: that scripture can be clearly understood and applied. In fact, as modern realism has gained traction alongside *sola scriptura*, Protestant realists have attempted to compete with secular realism head-to-head under the assumption that scripture provides definitive answers. As Timothy Beal puts it in *The Rise and Fall of the Bible*: In the 1800s "*sola scriptura* . . . combined with a . . . romantic idealization of . . . Puritan Christianity to promote the Bible as the key to solving all of industrial America's emerging problems."[3] Such "back to the Bible" approaches to scripture

generally present themselves as returning to the true, pure history of earlier Christianity.

Brian E. Daley and James C. Howell, however, highlight two key periods of Christian history to demonstrate otherwise. They show that (1) the approaches to scripture produced by modern realism have not been the predominant approach to scripture of the church through history, and that (2) recovering the wisdom of those approaches can actually help us solve some of the problems created by an overreliance on modern realism.

In "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" Daley explains that modern realism has led us to the false conclusion that we can find the meaning of a passage by simply discovering "what the author meant," especially by employing literary and historical criticism.[4] While such an approach may feel "true" to history, Daley reminds us that it is not, in fact, how the earliest Christian leaders—whom we often refer to as the church fathers—approached the Bible in the first centuries of the church's existence. Today, for example, in reading scripture through the lenses of modern realism, we paradoxically employ disciplines that eliminate God's agency—in an attempt to find God. We use historical studies of scripture, which are rooted in a method that allows no room for God to be a part of what happened in history, to try to better understand what scripture says about God in history.

Where realism has attempted to apply its own scientific method to scripture, we can benefit from seeing how Origen read the Bible theologically—that is, with faith that God can continually communicate new spiritual meaning through its study.

Instead, Daley asks us to consider the exegesis we find when we read ancient Christian authors such as Origen. While Daley acknowledges that our goal is not to read scripture exactly as Origen did, he demonstrates that we would do well to learn from Origen's process. In particular, in modern times, where realism has attempted to apply its own scientific method to scripture, we can benefit from seeing how Origen read the Bible theologically—that is, with faith that God can continually communicate new spiritual meaning through its study. Daley reminds us that early Christian approaches to scripture, while imperfect in their own ways, can help counter the narrowness of a modern approach that assumes it

can find a single, certain, literal meaning in each biblical text.[5] Consistent with critical realism, Origen's approach assumed that there is Truth in scripture, but that we might not always see that Truth in exactly the same way.

In "Christ Was Like St. Francis," James C. Howell explores the way scripture was used by St. Francis in the twelfth century, and the role that later hagiographers (biographers who wrote about St. Francis as a saint) played in documenting his approach. Modern realism, Howell explains, has led us to overlook the stories of saints, because of the hagiographers' historical inaccuracy. Certainly, Howell admits, hagiographers were too "consumed by their zeal to polish" St. Francis's halo to be considered historically reliable.[6] And yet, in rejecting the stories of saints for failing the standards of realism, he argues, we miss out on the theological advantages of seeing them as a critical realist would. To demonstrate this point, he explores the advantages of studying the way St. Francis, the founder of the Franciscan order, used scripture.

How might our conflicts be different if we would put our arguments on pause, attend to the work of the kingdom together, and periodically return to report on what we were learning from God and one another as we do so?

In St. Francis's biographies, we find narratives of one who sought first and foremost to imitate Christ's life as closely as possible, even if he did not succeed as fully as his biographers would lead us to believe. As a result, Francis can remind us that exegesis is not limited to our academic attempts to find the meaning of a text, but that texts often open themselves up to us in personal and unexpected ways as we attempt to embody them. He points to two Christians who pursued Francis's embodied exegesis in recent times: Clarence Jordan, who started Koinonia Farms, who in turn inspired Millard Fuller, who employed his "clever exegesis known as Habitat for Humanity."[7] As with the study of texts, of course, our embodied accuracy and insight will be limited, but such limitations are simply part of what it means to follow God. Contrasting this approach with the empty certainty of realism, Howell writes: "Just as [Karl] Barth famously taught us that our inability to speak of God itself gives glory to God, so our inability to imitate Christ can glorify God as well."[8]

Thus, Howell does not just give us an argument for critical realism; he gives us a tool for trying it out. How, for example, might our conflicts over sexuality be different if we decided that we would put our arguments on pause, attend to the work of the kingdom together, and periodically return to report on what we were learning from God and one another as we do so? What if we also allowed ourselves to believe that God does not require us to come to the perfect solution, but that in fact "our inability to imitate Christ can glorify God as well"? What if, in short, we chose to feel more urgency about attempting the day-to-day work of God's kingdom and exercised more patience with the theological conundrums that have come up along the way, recognizing that our successes and failures are for God to do with as God will?

What if we felt more urgency about attempting the day-to-day work of God's kingdom and exercised more patience with the theological conundrums that have come up along the way, recognizing that our successes and failures are for God to do with as God will?

Conclusion

A closer inspection of the key historical developments in biblical exegesis demonstrates that our modern approaches do not have the historical support we often assume they have. They are simply the product of the preferred theologies of the Reformation and the Enlightenment that followed it. At the same time, however, rejecting Christian realism has produced its own problems. All too often, our realization that realism has its limitations has led us to the other extreme, relativism. As secular postmodernism has begun to question whether there is anything universal, it has simultaneously begun to marginalize religion, labeling any moral certainty as an oppressive overreach into others' individual realities. While this development has embattled fundamentalist Christians, other Christians have absorbed the critique. As a result, relativistic Christians have begun looking for expressions of faith that minimize any Christian claims to universal Truth, thus relegating faith to personal experience with little, if anything, to offer to the public sphere.

Privatizing faith, however, can be as empty as realism is overconfident. As Thomas Finger points out, if there were no shared

universal meaning, there would be no need to communicate about meaning in the first place.[9] Furthermore, Richard Bauckham reminds us that relativism only ends in paradox: "the need to insist that there is one truth—the truth that there is no truth—and one justice—the right of every voice to equal status."[10] Not only is it contradictory to require a universal truth to deny universal truth, Bauckham reminds us that relativism fails at its own goals. How can we convince anyone to respect others' uniqueness, if we have no common ground on the basis of which to request it?[11]

In this way, much of our church and society has fallen into the trap of pillaging and oversimplifying Christian history to self-righteously justify inadequate and polarizing ontologies. Thankfully, though, our wisest thinkers have seen the value of reestablishing a middle road, and of using Christian history more faithfully to do so. Leading the charge, of course, would be Karl Barth. Recognizing the trap of liberal relativism while avoiding the pitfalls of fundamentalism, Barth wrote prophetically as a critical realist. Thus, he propounded a neo-orthodoxy that reestablished the pursuit of Truth without claiming an exclusive ability to distill it.

Much of our church and society has fallen into the trap of pillaging and oversimplifying Christian history to self-righteously justify inadequate and polarizing ontologies. Our wisest thinkers have seen the value of reestablishing a middle road, and of using Christian history more faithfully to do so.

In doing so, Barth paints a picture of faith that is simultaneously fervently confident in its Truth and mystery. As he writes in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*: "Must we not also grow beyond the strange question, Who is God? As if we could dream of asking such a question, having willingly and sincerely allowed ourselves to be led to the gates of the new world, to the threshold of the kingdom of God!"[12] For Barth, scripture and God, properly understood, point us to a "new *world*." It is a world filled with Truth, but we must constantly keep surveying it, lest we lose that Truth with static conclusions. Thus Barth reminds us that in our faith, as in our history, we find a God who is not limited by our modern or postmodern oversimplifications. In a time when both have worn increasingly thin, and where our relationships with one

another have paid the price, this, indeed, is good news.

Notes

[1] Emma Green, "Gay and Mennonite," *The Atlantic*, March 18, 2015; online at http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/03/gay-and-mennonite/388060/.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2012), 6.
[4] Brian E. Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 73.
[5] Ibid., 69–88.
[6] James C. Howell, "Christ Was Like St. Francis," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Davis and Hays, 89.
[7] Ibid., 104.
[8] Ibid., 105.
[9] Thomas N. Finger. *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 11.
[10] Richard Bauckham, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Davis and Hays, 52.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith Publisher, Inc., 1978) 47.

About the author

Peter J. H. Epp is currently completing an MA degree in theological studies at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg) after having taught Mennonite studies for seven years at Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba. He is currently a member of Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, but he also maintains an active investment in Mennonite Church USA through his close connections to Portland Mennonite Church and North Central Conference.

Practices that help us take on the hard conversations

Mark Diller Harder

We decided the time had come to begin to tackle the topic. It was fraught—an issue our congregation had avoided. After all, it was a delicate subject and could make people feel vulnerable, exposed, and defensive. It could create conflict among us. And it's hard to talk about even in our families, let alone with folks at church. People could so easily feel judged, unsure. And what role does our faith have in helping us find our way forward? Where do we even start?

We are talking—of course!—about our seniors and the process of aging. It really is a matter of life and death, or rather, of aging and dying. How do adult children and their aging parents open and sustain conversation about the many practical and emotional and spiritual questions associated with getting old and dying? How do faith communities enter into those conversations?

Opening up the subject

In January 2015, fifteen members of St. Jacobs Mennonite Church attended a congregational resource event on the topic "Aging Together—Partnering with Families and the Faith Community to Meet the Challenges of Aging."[1] Our resource people were Gerald and Marlene Kaufman, authors of *Necessary Conversations between Adult Children and Their Aging Parents* (Good Books, 2013). They began with an African proverb: "The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago." The sooner adult children and their aging parents talk, the better—preferably before health deteriorates or a crisis hits. Marlene and Gerald proceeded to raise all sorts of timely topics including housing, downsizing, health and medical care, driving, finances, and issues around death and dying.

The event struck a chord for participants. They recognized how seldom these conversations happen openly in our lives, and yet how significant they are. They were convinced that these

conversations belong in the church, that these are topics for congregational discernment. So often they remain private, happening (if they happen at all) within the confines of family, where they can be difficult or limited to the most pressing questions. What happens when we see these as significant conversations that belong in the context of the faith community? Can bringing them into that context provide members of our congregation with support and resources as they navigate the specific situations they confront? Is there a broader theological perspective that emerges from the ground up when we talk about these things in church?

How do adult children and their aging parents have conversation about the many questions associated with getting old and dying? How do faith communities enter into those conversations?

Creating space for good conversation

We decided to test the idea. In spring 2015, our Christian formation ministry planned a four-week series called "Necessary Conversations for Living Thoughtfully and Dying Well: Four Thought-Provoking Conversations for Seniors and Others." In addition to the Kaufman book, we used as a resource a book by Glen E. Miller: *Living Thoughtfully, Dying Well* (Herald Press, 2014). We identified four conversations: (1) dealing with losses and challenges associated with aging, (2) downsizing challenges, (3) putting things in order (finances), and (4) leaning forward as death approaches.

We paid close attention to content (*what* we talked about), and maybe more importantly, to format (*how* we talked together). The series was well attended and well received. We were doing congregational discernment on issues that normally remain private. On reflection, we identified some key elements that created a space in which people could engage fruitfully in these conversations:

We bathed the series in worship. We began each session with prayer, singing, and worship. Our opening worship included three scripture texts: the story of Abraham purchasing a burial place for Sarah (Gen. 23); the story of Jacob stealing his brother's blessing (Gen. 27:32–41); the story of Ruth refusing to leave Naomi (Ruth 1:8–18). Each Bible story was paired with inner musings of two people in the pew as they talk to God about situations in

their own lives.[2] Worship set the context. Worship opened us to the moving of the Spirit in our conversations.

We created a safe space for conversation. For significant conversations to happen, people need to feel safe and that their voice is being heard. We talked about respect and honouring each other's stories and experiences. All of us sat in a semi-circle where we could see each other's faces. As leaders we modelled a vulnerability and honesty about our own lives and about experiences in our families. We drew on relationships of trust built over many years in our congregation. At the end of each session, we spent time eating together.

We began with stories. At several of the gatherings, we invited a few people to be a part of a panel conversation on the particular topics of the day. Each shared a story. A daughter told about the emotional toil and challenge of navigating in rapid succession the complicated medical system and levels of care for a father with rapidly declining health as he moved toward his death. A son reflected on the experience of working with siblings living at a distance to quickly dispose of two generations' worth of hoarded stuff—the contents of a large house and barn—because parents had refused to talk or to consider other housing options before they died. A younger senior couple shared their joy and freedom in downsizing to a condo unit well before any of their peers had done so. We also spent time in small groups, allowing all participants to reflect on and share their own experiences.

We drew on broader resources. We recognized that collectively we did not hold all the wisdom we needed. We had our resource books as background. We invited a Mennonite Foundation stewardship consultant to open up the many topics around finances and aging. We invited a local chaplain of a Mennonite long-term care home to highlight for us "five important things to do before you die." We were guided into a greater depth of conversation.

We discovered a living embodied theology. We did not start our conversations explicitly with theology. Yet as we talked, our theology and beliefs emerged naturally, embodied in how we told our stories. We named how God had been present as a source of strength in difficult transitions. We reflected on the value of a Christian community around us and supporting us. We countered

the individualism of our time by making public what is so often only private, and by receiving strength to go back to our families to have these conversations. We declared our conviction that death is not the end. Death is a natural part of life. That conviction makes a difference in how we view heroic medical interventions or what we decide about do-not-resuscitate orders. We can prepare ourselves and our families for death without fearing end-of-life decisions. We can let people die. We discovered through discerning together as a congregation that a living embodied theology had undergirded our conversations.

What's next?

The congregation's good experience of talking about difficult questions around aging and death has prepared us to take up the next subject presenting itself for our discernment. At the time of this writing—in the fall of 2015—our congregation is in the midst of conversations on sexuality and same-sex relationships. We have followed the "Being a Faithful Church Process" initiated by Mennonite Church Canada,[3] designed to better equip congregations and individuals to discern scripture for our time. After a rich six-week Sunday school and worship learning series, we are now in the midst of a three-week Sunday evening listening series, to prepare us for further discernment in the months ahead.

Many of the aspects of our necessary conversations on aging series have become a part of this sexuality series. Before we begin, we eat a simple meal of soup and bread together. We worship with prayer, lighting a dancing oil lamp and inviting the Spirit's presence among us. We try to create a safe space where all voices are heard and respected. We sit in a circle. We listen carefully to each other's stories and respect the vulnerability and sacredness of each one. We draw on the wisdom and resources of the broader church.

We are having the sometimes hard but necessary conversations about what really matters to us. And we are discovering that a theology that informs our ongoing discernment is emerging from the ground up, embodied in our congregational life. Our discernment is shaping our theology, even as our theology gives shape to our discernment.

Notes

[1] This was a Mennonite Church Eastern Canada event for pastors, chaplains, and congregational leaders, January 17, 2015, Breslau (ON) Mennonite Church.
[2] This worship resource was created by Sharon Brown, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada Interim Coordinator of Leadership Formation, for the MCEC event on January 17, 2015. It is reproduced in this *Vision* issue; see Sharon Brown, "Worship Resource for an Event on Aging Together:."
[3] 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.

About the author

Mark Diller Harder is a member of the pastoral team at St. Jacobs (ON) Mennonite Church and shares ministry with pastoral colleagues Wendy Janzen and Kevin Derksen.

A worship resource for an event on aging together

Sharon Brown

Gathering

Prelude

Welcome

Call to worship (2 Cor. 4:16)

> So we do not lose heart.
> Even though our outer nature is wasting away,
> our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

Hymn: O God, our help in ages past (*Hymnal* 328)

Experiencing the Word

First story: Abraham purchases a burial place for Sarah (Gen. 23)

> [1]Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years; this was the
> length of Sarah's life. [2]And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that
> is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to
> mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. [3]Abraham rose up from
> beside his dead, and said to the Hittites, [4]"I am a stranger
> and an alien residing among you; give me property among
> you for a burying place, so that I may bury my dead out of
> my sight." [5]The Hittites answered Abraham, [6]"Hear us, my
> lord; you are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in
> the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold
> from you any burial ground for burying your dead." [7]Abraham
> rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. [8]He
> said to them, "If you are willing that I should bury my dead
> out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me Ephron son of
> Zohar, [9]so that he may give me the cave of Machpelah,
> which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price
> let him give it to me in your presence as a possession for a
> burying place." [10]Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites;

and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, 11"No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it; in the presence of my people I give it to you; bury your dead." 12Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. 13He said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, "If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there." 14Ephron answered Abraham, 15"My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Bury your dead."

16Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants. 17So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, passed 18to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, in the presence of all who went in at the gate of his city. 19After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. 20The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a burying place.

Response

Mother: O Lord, who cares about where you're buried? We aren't so old that we have to worry about that. After all these years of working and penny-pinching, don't you think we deserve to have some fun now that we're retired? I wonder if we could afford to go to Florida next winter or take a Mediterranean cruise. Thank you, Lord, that we aren't really old yet.

Daughter: O Lord, Mom and Dad are both retired now, and I can see they're getting older. Last week my friend's father had a stroke, and they don't know if he's going to make it. He's only sixty-seven. I wonder if he made any funeral plans. What if something should happen to Mom or Dad? I don't know if they have a will or have even thought about where they want to be buried. You know how much Mom hates

talking about anything to do with getting older, much less stuff like where they want to be buried. Please, Lord, help me find a way to start talking to them about these things.

Hymn: You are all we have (*Sing the Journey* 29)

Second story (Gen. 27:32–41): Jacob steals his brother's blessing

32 His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered,
"I am your firstborn son, Esau." 33 Then Isaac trembled
violently, and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and
brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have
blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!" 34 When Esau
heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly
great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me
also, father!" 35 But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully,
and he has taken away your blessing." 36 Esau said, "Is he not
rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two
times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has
taken away my blessing." Then he said, "Have you not
reserved a blessing for me?" 37 Isaac answered Esau, "I have
already made him your lord, and I have given him all his
brothers as servants, and with grain and wine I have sus-
tained him. What then can I do for you, my son?" 38 Esau said
to his father, "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me,
me also, father!" And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.
39 Then his father Isaac answered him:

"See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be,
and away from the dew of heaven on high.
40 By your sword you shall live,
and you shall serve your brother;
but when you break loose,
you shall break his yoke from your neck."

41 Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which
his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The
days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will
kill my brother Jacob."

Response

Father: O Lord, when I look in the distance I've started seeing double. The doctor has made an appointment with

the specialist for me to get my cataracts removed. What if something goes wrong? I could go blind, and then I'd lose my driver's license. But if I don't have the surgery, they'll take away my driver's license anyway. Whoever called these the golden years wasn't old. My kids are so busy. I wonder if anyone can drive me home from the specialist. Lord, could you help me find someone to go to the specialist with me?

Son: O Lord, I sure hope Dad's got his will in order. That's one way we could avoid some conflict after he goes. I don't want my dear brother to accuse me of trying to get more than my fair share of the estate. You know Dad's been looking worried lately. When Mom was alive, I could always go to her to find out what was going on with Dad. I sure miss her. O Lord, do you think I should try to talk to my Dad about what's bothering him?

Hymn: You are all we have (*Sing the Journey* 29)

Third story: Ruth refuses to leave Naomi (Ruth 1:8–18)

[8]But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. [9]The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. [10]They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." [11]But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? [12]Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, [13]would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." [14]Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

[15]So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." [16]But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
[17]Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

[18]When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Response

Widow: O Lord, wasn't Naomi lucky to have someone like Ruth in her old age? When John and I got married, I was sure we'd have a bunch of children, but that dream died a long time ago, and now John is gone too. You know, some have been saying I should remarry, but I don't want to. John was sick for so long. All those years of taking care of him—what if I married again and he got sick too? I'm getting old. It may not be long before I need someone to look after me. I would be so grateful, Lord, if you could send someone like Ruth into my life.

Pastor: O Lord, two funerals this week, and two more widows at church on Sunday. I wonder if I'll be one of them someday. I'm so glad they have children in the area. It's the ones who don't have children that I have been wondering about. I visit and they always seem so glad to see me, but I'm no replacement for children. I keep wondering if there's more the church could or should be doing for these people. Lord, please help me hear what you are saying to the church today about all these single seniors.

Hymn: You are all we have (*Sing the Journey* 29)

Closing

Prayer

Hymn: God of our life (*Hymnal* 486)

Note

This worship resource is a companion piece for the article in this issue of *Vision*, "Practices That Help Us Take on the Hard Conversations," by Mark Diller Harder. All scripture texts are quoted from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Hymn numbers refer to these collections: *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992); and *Sing the Journey* (Scottdale, PA: Faith and Life Resources, 2005).

About the author

Sharon Brown is a graduate of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN), where she earned an MA in theological studies with a concentration in Christian education. She wrote this worship resource while serving as interim coordinator of leadership formation at Mennonite Church Eastern Canada in 2014–15. She and her husband, Jim, are members of Waterloo-Kitchener United Mennonite Church in Waterloo, Ontario.

Spiritual discernment in the congregation

Angela Reed

Some years ago, I visited several churches to talk with leaders and lay people about how they offer spiritual guidance to one another in the faith community. The practices of Covenant Presbyterian Church caught my attention in a particular way.[1] Covenant's members seemed to have a common language for personal and corporate discernment and were actively engaged in listening for God.

Everyone I spoke with had something to say about seeking God's calling in everyday life. I met a business executive who silently prays his way through corporate board meetings, a group of elderly women who intercede for seminary students and needy families while knitting prayer shawls for them, and lay leaders who emphasize spiritual discernment and communal consensus in decision making about church projects and challenging congregational issues.

Spiritual discernment is rooted in the relationships we share with God and one another. It includes informal and formal processes of prayerfully seeking God's guidance and watching for God's presence and activity.

I came to understand something about the development of Covenant's culture of spiritual discernment after participating in worship and interviewing Andrew, the senior pastor. He strives to teach about and model discernment by incorporating the language of "calling" in many facets of congregational life. He continually urges church members to set aside what they *want* to do or even what they feel they *should* do in any given circumstance, and instead focus on what they sense God is *calling* them to do.

This theology of divine-human interaction is exhibited in the congregation in a myriad of practical ways. For example, during church board meetings, participants are encouraged to discuss important issues together and then pause for silent prayer. As

members emerge from the silence, they seek to make decisions in a way that reflects their understanding of discernment, using language quite different from that of Robert's Rules of Order. Following the prayer time, participants are invited to raise a hand if they believe a proposal is "the will of God for this congregation." These ideas about divine calling are built into the very foundation of communal interaction and are reinforced by ongoing teaching, preaching, and conversation on the theology and practice of discernment. Over time, this theology and practice has become a part of the congregation's cultural ethos.

Understanding spiritual discernment

The term *spiritual discernment* seems a bit ambiguous in a cultural context enamored of the language of spirituality. In her book *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Ruth Haley Barton notes that discernment in the Christian life involves seeking to know and do the will of God. At the most basic level, it is the ability to "recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God—both in the ordinary moments and in the larger decisions of life."[2] Spiritual discernment is necessarily rooted in the relationships we share with God and one another, especially relationships in the church. It includes informal and formal processes of prayerfully seeking God's guidance and watching for God's presence and activity in the life and ministries of the congregation. Spiritual discernment goes beyond public worship and prayer meetings; it can and should occur both during casual conversations about everyday life on church parking lots and during congregational meetings involving foundational decisions and commitments.

The challenge of discerning together

Those of us who have participated in congregational life for any length of time know that practicing spiritual discernment together is not a neat and tidy process. Church members who are shaped by the norms of a culture that values personal autonomy may resist the language and practices of communal discernment. An emphasis on personal autonomy may lead to a belief that discernment in the spiritual life is essentially an independent pursuit. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman suggests that the "solitary, contemplating person" has become the icon of spirituality in America.[3]

This kind of autonomous spirituality extends to the content of our prayers. In his book *Hearing God*, Dallas Willard expresses a concern that many believers seek God's will primarily for their own lives, focusing on comfort, safety, and righteousness for themselves and their loved ones. Williard argues that this approach is bound to fail. God cannot build life-giving communication on a foundation that is centered only in the self.[4] Shaping a congregational culture that encourages seeking God's will together for the sake of others and the world beyond ourselves will require us to be intentional about our theology and practice. For this we turn to the wisdom of scripture.

Shaping a congregational culture that encourages seeking God's will together for the sake of others and the world beyond us requires us to be intentional about our theology and practice.

Discernment on the road to Emmaus

As the New Testament witness unfolds, we are alerted to something new coming in the way that God chooses to reveal himself to human beings. God breaks into human history in an unprecedented manner through Emmanuel who is literally God-with-us. Through the teachings of Jesus and his interactions with those he mentored, we learn a great deal about communal discernment. Over the course of their years together, Jesus models a commitment to seeking the Father's will, and he teaches his followers to pray together and support one another in their search for God. One of the most remarkable snapshots of communal discernment in the biblical record is found in the story of two followers of Jesus making their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35).[5]

Jesus models spiritual companionship. In the narrative of Jesus's postresurrection encounter with two disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, Jesus models spiritual companionship in an unexpected way. These two Jesus followers are walking along and reflecting on the heartbreaking experiences of the past several days when another traveler joins them on the road. Somehow they are unable to recognize him, and he does not enlighten them. In the very next story in Luke's Gospel, Jesus manages the encounter differently. He reveals himself immediately, reassuring the disciples that he is alive. Why does Jesus not rush in to fix the pain of these disciples on the road? Why not relieve their suffering?

Somehow Jesus discerns that another approach is necessary. Rather than offer quick answers, Jesus lets them feel their sorrow. Instead of offering immediate revelation, Jesus simply asks them what they are talking about. He is patient as they speak at length, describing their experiences. Jesus has just brought to completion the most notable, world-changing task in human history, but he holds his news back to give them time for reflection. As a spiritual companion, Jesus is a master at listening well before explaining the truth, not only to these disciples on the road, but also to the woman at the well, the rich young ruler, and many others.

Church leaders can serve their congregations best when they provide spiritual guidance in matters of discernment by putting aside their own inner need to be effective helpers and letting go of the urgency to fix a painful problem or resolve a conflict quickly. Instead they walk alongside others, listening patiently and allowing them to explore their pain. Leaders attend to the presence and activity of God in congregations when they take up the mantle of spiritual companionship, modeling the importance of accompanying others in matters of discernment by listening with compassion. The minister is a spiritual companion to individuals and to the congregation as a whole.

Church leaders serve their congregations best when they provide spiritual guidance in matters of discernment by putting aside their own inner need to be effective helpers and letting go of the urgency to fix a painful problem or resolve a conflict.

Jesus urges a reframing of the disciples' interpretation of events. A second look at the Emmaus Road encounter reveals that Jesus is not always patient with his followers. He calls these disciples "foolish" and "slow of heart" in their understanding of events. These are not words we would normally want to use in responding to those who are grieving a major loss. Perhaps this is a moment when the resurrected Christ, who has full knowledge of the universe, may handle the circumstances differently than we would. But if we look beyond the surprising response, we see that Jesus is holding his followers accountable for what they already ought to know, trying to wake them up from a spiritual stupor. He is urging them to see God's purposes in this situation by reframing their interpretation of events. Their viewpoint is based on life in

first-century Israel under Roman rule. It appears to them now that Jesus will not bring the kind of freedom they had expected. What they hoped would be God's plan is not coming to pass.

Both individuals and congregations face major disappointments at various points in their journeys. Hopes and dreams that appeared to be divinely inspired do not come to fruition. Jesus responds to the disciples' disappointments by stretching their skills for discernment and urging them to broaden their horizons. He begins with scripture, the primary source of interpretive authority. Jesus listens to these traveling disciples first, and then he helps them discern how God is still at work in what might appear to be a hopeless situation. This kind of discernment is still desperately needed in our communities of faith today.

Jesus listens to these traveling disciples first, and then he helps them discern how God is still at work in what might appear to be a hopeless situation. This kind of discernment is still desperately needed in our communities of faith.

God's presence is recognized through symbolic act and inner response. Another component of discernment in the narrative involves the recognition of God's presence through a symbolic act and an internal response. When the disciples invite Jesus to stay, he engages in a symbolic act born out of the natural practice of eating together, something he has done with them countless times. He breaks the bread, blesses it, and passes it to them. In that moment, they recognize him. After Jesus disappears, the disciples do the important work of checking their own internal responses to the encounter. They describe how their hearts burned within, a kind of passion that many believers over the centuries have understood as one way of confirming God's guidance. When we examine ourselves honestly, our gut responses and emotional reactions can help us identify divine invitations. Coupled with the symbolic act, their inner responses give the disciples confidence that they have indeed encountered God, and they have a new understanding of his purposes for the present and future.

Symbolic acts can remind us to focus on God's presence and activity in our lives. Most congregations welcome symbols as reminders of God's action in our behalf. Certainly the bread and cup serve us in this way. Some monastic communities and con-

temporary congregations ring bells to call people to prayer or worship. Visual symbols may also serve as important reminders of God's presence. This has been true in several spiritual direction groups I have led over the years. Occasionally, I pull an empty chair into the circle as a reminder that God is with us, and we can listen for him. One group member brought a miniature chair to a meeting as a gift for another member who was starting a new job. The tiny chair was chosen for her desktop, to help her attend to God's communication even in the busy tasks of daily life.

Communal storytelling confirms discernment. A final insight about discernment in the Emmaus narrative is the role of communal storytelling. After Jesus disappears, the disciples turn to each other to talk about what has just happened. They need each other to confirm that they have indeed encountered the risen Christ and correctly discerned his message to them. Each of them looks first to the other for confirmation, and then they hurry to tell others about the encounter. Many centuries later, this story continues to witness to God's self-revelation in human community.

Telling our own stories about how we have interpreted God's presence and activity in our lives is invaluable for creating a culture of spiritual discernment in congregations. This storytelling might occur in gatherings of any size and nearly any purpose. Retelling our stories of God's faithfulness helps us begin to interpret God's presence in current circumstances. When we reflect on events in light of our theology and confirm together what we sense the Holy Spirit communicating, we take significant strides toward faithful discernment.

As we leave this story, we may wonder why Jesus would meet up with these two followers in this particular way. Why not spend precious time with a larger group of gathered disciples? We could speculate at length, but perhaps the answer is relatively simple. Jesus loves these two disciples, and he wants to be their companion in exploring and discovering the purposes of God. By walking alongside them, he is teaching them to understand his ways and recognize his call. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, God continues to draw us into intimate relationship with himself and urges us to share in discerning relationships with one another, just as he did with the disciples on the road.

Practical guidelines for discernment in congregations

Much more can be learned about congregational discernment from scripture. It is also worth noting that historical church practices and traditions have much to offer us. These include John Wesley's guidelines for small groups (bands and class meetings) and the Quaker practice of calling together a clearness committee. We turn now to practical suggestions emerging from historical practices and contemporary congregations such as Covenant Presbyterian Church.

First, congregational leaders can embrace the role of minister as spiritual guide to the community. This guidance may involve the process of patient listening after the model of Christ in pastoral care, administration, small groups, and other relational tasks. Ministers can take the initiative to teach and preach about discernment, provide opportunities for storytelling in worship, and offer classes on prayer and discernment for all ages. This spiritual guidance may also entail asking discerning questions with individuals, in small groups or committees, and in the larger congregation: Have we sensed God's presence and activity among us in the past week, month, year, or years? If so, how? What do we most desire from God? What may God be calling us to be or to do? Is there a particular biblical passage or story from church history that speaks to our current circumstances? How is God calling us to grow in character? In the fruit of the Spirit? In our relationships with one another? How is God calling us to share his love and grace with those beyond our doors in the coming month or year?

Second, congregations can foster a culture of spiritual discernment. This process may begin with the development of intentional peer relationships of spiritual companionship and guidance. Participants ask one another the kinds of questions listed above, and they listen and respond prayerfully. They resist the temptation to focus primarily on giving advice or comparing what they hear to their own life experiences. Skills in discernment are learned over time as we practice, practice, practice. Effective discernment depends on individual journeys of spiritual formation, honest self-reflection, and growth in maturity toward the image of Christ.

Third, there are seasons in every congregation's life when difficult, potentially divisive decisions must be made. When such

times come, it may be helpful to engage in a slow, reflective process that involves the whole congregation. Staff members and lay leaders ought to be involved early in the process, giving time for significant prayer and reflection in their gatherings. Leaders should recognize that discerning God's will for a congregation includes multiple sources of authority. The well-known Wesleyan quadrilateral incorporates scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Congregational members will draw on all of these to varying degrees, sometimes without fully realizing it.

The structure of discernment meetings is important. Congregations can incorporate worship, scripture readings, silence, small group reflection including the recording of notes, and the kinds of questions listed above. It may be helpful to begin with meetings for reflection, storytelling, and discernment, and then hold a later gathering with the hope of coming to a consensus.[6] In every circumstance, the affirmation of mutual trust and shared relationships must be emphasized. God has designed us to know him in and through loving community. We can develop an ethos of discernment in congregations when our practices are founded on these theological convictions.

Notes

[1] Names have been changed to protect privacy.
[2] Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 10.
[3] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45. While Ammerman's research was limited to the United States, her theory likely applies to other Western countries as well.
[4] Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 28.
[5] This biblical narrative is explored further in *Spiritual Companioning: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice*, by Angela H. Reed, Richard R. Osmer, and Marcus G. Smucker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 109–13.
[6] Barton's book, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, offers valuable insights for leaders who are designing gatherings for discernment.

About the author

Angela Reed is assistant professor of practical theology and director of spiritual formation at Baylor University's Truett Seminary in Waco, Texas. She is the author of *Quest for Spiritual Community: Reclaiming Spiritual Guidance for Contemporary Congregations* and co-author of *Spiritual Companioning: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice*. Reed is an alumna of Canadian Mennonite University and served on the pastoral staff of Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The perils and delights of leading congregational discernment

Lydia and Gary Harder

What is the role of pastors and other church leaders in discernment, especially in conflict? Should pastors and other congregational leaders use their authority primarily to ensure a healthy process, one that takes both the Bible and each person seriously, or should they champion a cause arising out of their own convictions? Or should they follow another, bigger vision?

We write this piece from our perspective as people who have reached retirement after leading a number of congregations through discernment processes. We bear some scars from conflicts we engaged, but we also carry some sense of satisfaction when a longer view showed greater health and some healing in these communities in the wake of painful discernment processes.

Should pastors and other congregational leaders use their authority primarily to ensure a healthy process, one that takes both the Bible and each person seriously, or should they champion a cause arising out of their own convictions?

All these congregations considered themselves faithful to the Bible, but they still held within them vast differences of opinion that resulted in conflict. We shouldn't be surprised that fine Christian people read the Bible in very different ways when dealing with contentious issues. After all, the Bible is more complex and nuanced and open to ongoing discernment than we—especially in our desire for immediate solutions—are comfortable with. God communicated to humans through the voices of other humans over the course of many centuries in many cultures with many worldviews. Those who heard the voice of God did not hear it in exactly the same way, and the message for one context does not necessarily translate exactly or easily to another context. Discernment seldom happens in the absence of turbulence, and leaders often struggle to stay afloat amid the currents.

A tension in Anabaptist-Mennonite history on the role of leaders

What might we learn from Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition about the role of leaders in discernment processes? Our answer is not a simple one. In fact, some of the complexity surrounding pastoral leadership in Mennonite churches in the twenty-first century can be understood against the backdrop of two defining moments in sixteenth-century Anabaptist history. These two events stand in tension with each other and highlight the ambiguity of the role of pastoral leadership in Anabaptist-Mennonite experience.

On January 21, 1525, a small group of radical Christians were meeting in the home of Felix Mantz.[1] On January 18 the Zurich city council had issued a stern warning that the parents among them were to have their unbaptized children baptized within eight days, or be subject to banishment. But on that evening in that home, George Blaurock—who had been baptized as an infant—begged Conrad Grebel to baptize him with "true Christian baptism upon my faith and confession," which Grebel did. And then Blaurock baptized the others at their request but without authorization, there being no ordained minister among them.

So began the Anabaptist movement in a rejection of the hierarchical leadership structures of the established church they had known. Eventually they borrowed Martin Luther's concept of the priesthood of all believers, and radicalized it. They believed that even untrained lay people could read and understand scripture: in the Anabaptist "hermeneutical community," lay people are full partners in interpreting scripture and in making decisions. One result is that multiple interpretations and insights make discernment more complex and more time consuming.

Two years later, in February 1527, a gathering of Swiss Anabaptists put forth what has come to be known as the Schleitheim confession. These Anabaptists were being severely persecuted and scattered. What would hold them together? Article 5 of this confession addresses the question of leadership, of "shepherds in the church of God." "But if the shepherd should be driven away or led to the Lord by the cross, at the same hour another shall be ordained to his place, so that the little folk and the little flock of God may not be destroyed, but be preserved by warning and be consoled."[2] In contrast to what we observed about events in

Zurich on January 21, 1525, the Swiss Anabaptists at Schleitheim in 1527 seem to see pastoral leadership as essential to the survival of their movement.

These two stories are evidence of an ongoing creative tension inherent in the Anabaptist movement from these earliest years. This tension can be traced all through Anabaptist and Mennonite history, and it is present with us today. Sometimes the balance has tipped in favour of giving too much power and authority to our clergy, and sometimes we have gone to the opposite extreme, almost removing the pastor from community discernment.

A tension can be traced all through Anabaptist and Mennonite history. Sometimes the balance has tipped in favour of giving too much power and authority to our clergy, and sometimes we have gone to the opposite extreme, almost removing the pastor from community discernment.

Where does authority lie today?

Against the backdrop of this historical tension, we ask: where does authority and power lie today, as Anabaptist-Mennonites try to discern the will of God in the midst of divisive issues? How do leaders help engage the multiple interpretations and insights of the community in our context?

It seems to us that the church's understanding of the role and authority of leaders has shifted markedly in our North American Mennonite journey through what we may call premodern, modern, and postmodern worldviews. Though an oversimplification, these broad categories describe the different philosophical frameworks in which our theology and our thinking about leadership take place. The very names of these three worldviews suggest that modernity—with its scientific, critical approach to knowledge—has been the defining one, the most influential shift in our thinking over the last century. But the names also suggest that both what came before and what comes after modernity are still somehow connected as precursor and response (respectively) to the values of modernity.

We find it helpful to imagine a river into which three streams flow. The three streams enter in a particular order: a premodern mindset flows in first, and then a modern mindset, and finally a postmodern mindset. Where these streams enter the river of

church life, there is turbulence. These are places where the river is most dangerous, and the ministry boat risks capsizing. But if these places of turmoil are navigated with care, the effect can be especially powerful.

In our experience, congregations will usually have some members with each of the three philosophical outlooks. And we find it helpful to remind ourselves that none of these mindsets is God's mindset, and that God works through and in spite of every human worldview.

The premodern church of our childhood

In the predominantly premodern church of our growing-up years, the church was the centre of our world, creating a moral universe ordered by a transcendent God who claimed our attention at Tuesday evening Bible study, Thursday evening choir practice, Friday evening young people's meeting, and Sunday morning and evening services. The Bible was revered, loved, read literally, and obeyed. And the preachers, especially the *Ältester* (bishop), were given a lot of respect, authority, and power. We had a high sense of their office. They came from within the congregation and were part of—yet set apart from—the community, ordained for life and not dependent on the congregation for their livelihood. The congregation had a strong sense of tradition and was relatively homogeneous. Our worship conveyed a primary picture of God as holy and transcendent. People were in fear of God—in awe at best, in terror at worst. Spiritual leadership was primarily focused on preaching the Word and on *Seelsorge* (care of the soul).

What impact did this premodern worldview have on the congregation's discernment? In some ways, discernment was a simple process. The *Lehrdienst* (the group of preachers and deacons) made the important decisions, and for the most part these were accepted by the *Bruderschaft* (the male members of the church who made the decisions for the congregation). Members of the congregation were fairly similar in the way they read the Bible and in theology (radio and television preachers had not yet appeared on the scene, and neither had those who read the Bible through a historical-critical lens). But there were conflicts. We remember deep conflicts over smoking and drinking and dancing, over troublemakers who didn't conform, over pregnancy before

marriage, and over class differences between those who had been landed or wealthy in Russia and those who weren't. Many of these conflicts remained unresolved, even when troublemakers had been excommunicated. And some of the preachers and bishops gained an enormous amount of power—and with it came temptation to abuse their authority.

A modern worldview enters the church

The early 1960s brought dramatic change. Modernity's waters were merging into the river of congregational life, with turmoil and some big waves. Potential future leaders of the church who studied in our Bible colleges and seminaries learned about historical-critical ways of reading the Bible, rediscovered an Anabaptist vision and the priesthood of all believers, and wanted their calling to ministry to be dependent on their gifts and education. Churches challenged the power of their clergy, undercut the high sense of office, and installed lay leaders to run the church using Robert's Rules of Order. Now the minister was to be a full-time, fully trained professional who would function as an employee of the church, fulfilling many tasks and given a big job description but little authority to actually lead. Discernment was left to the church council and the congregation. Ordination was played down, and pastors were now "licensed" and "installed."

Modernity's focus on human reason tended to take the sense of mystery and emotion out of faith and life—and out of ministry.

At the heart of the mindset of modernity was a subject-object polarity, a divide between mind and heart, thinking and feeling. Rationalism and objectivity were valued, and much credence was given to scientific method. Left-brain thinking (reason and intellect) was valued more than right-brain thinking (feeling and emotion). Now the Bible was read "critically" in original languages and in historical context, without expectation of a direct and immediate translation into our lives. The church was no longer the center of our world. And ministers were now expected to have a significant set of gifts, skills, and training. They were given clear job descriptions and regularly evaluated on how well they functioned. They saw themselves as servants with little authority and little job security.

One of the challenges modernity posed for the church was how to maintain any sense of the transcendence of God. Modernity's focus on human reason tended to take the sense of mystery and emotion out of faith and life—and out of ministry. As some young adults once confided in us, "We had great discussions in Sunday school. But our parents and our church didn't teach us how to pray."

Of course, there were those who rejected the influence of modernity and retreated into the simpler world of the fundamentalist televangelists who still read the Bible with premodern eyes. Others moved toward the charismatic movement, with its embrace of emotional experience. We might have anticipated these developments as natural reactions to the rationalism of modernity. Many congregations became polarized, with little understanding or even conversation between camps.

And now the postmodern

But soon another worldview roiled the river's waters. After a while the name that came to identify this stream was postmodernism. Modernity had left too many deep yearnings unfulfilled. Now a younger generation wanted to focus more on personal identity—on "who we are"—and on relationships. The language of integrity, personhood, character, self-worth, and personal wholeness became important.

Postmodern youth are looking for meaning and relationships and integrity in the church. They expect a pastor to be embracing, relational, inclusive, and to have a strong Christian identity.

In the church, a younger generation is often impatient with what an older generation chooses to focus on (to many youth, the issue of homosexuality, for example, is a nonissue). They are looking for meaning and relationships and integrity in the church. They expect a pastor to be embracing, relational, and inclusive, and to have a strong personal and Christian identity. They want a pastor who is a cultivator of a healthy environment, a creator of a spirit of life and energy and hope and faith, more than a doer of tasks or a mouthpiece for doctrine. And we pastors now talk much more about "self-differentiation" and "keeping boundaries" and "intimacy issues" and "self-care." And we go on spiritual retreats.

But then comes this challenge. What about core beliefs and absolute truth claims and genuine obedience and commitment and old-fashioned Christian ethics and standards? What about authority and the truth claims of the Bible and adherence to our confession of faith?

The river is by now turbulent. How do we talk about discernment, when people have different agendas and different expectations of leadership? How do leaders keep themselves and the church from being swamped? What approach do they take when all three of these worldviews are in the mix, even when one predominates? How can leadership help forge a healthy partnership in the midst of all the voices in the congregation?

A personal story

Both of us—Gary as pastor and Lydia as theologian-educator—were involved in providing leadership for our church in 2002–3 when our congregation was trying to discern its way through the shoals of a homosexuality-focused dilemma. Primarily we wanted to ensure a healthy process and discussion, but of course we also had our own views (we are both on the "open" side). Our challenge was to be transparent about our position and the reasons for it, without imposing our views or silencing those who disagreed with us.

For fourteen months our congregation did rigorous biblical studies and heard from psychologists and scientists, and we had meeting after meeting—including Bible studies and prayer meetings. We were learning to speak in depth about our feelings and our doubts and our experience.

In the end, our conflicts seemed to overwhelm us anyway, and the congregation resorted to power plays and maneuvering using Robert's rules. As leaders, we were heartbroken about the ways we had all wounded each other.

But to our surprise, God was at work in our mess. In the end we realized that we had engaged each other in more depth than ever before. We had studied the Bible in more depth and prayed in more depth. In the outcome there were no winners. But the congregation had grown stronger and embraced much healthier rules of engagement in conflict. We have seen a lot of reconciliation and a lot of healing.

Yes—we leaders made mistakes. We were not aware enough of how each of the three worldviews affected what happened, and what gifts and roadblocks each brought to the discernment. The premodern folks ensured that we took the Bible seriously, but they weren't always open to looking at texts in context. People with a modern outlook brought a lot of expertise but didn't always understand the emotional dynamics at play. Postmoderns focused on relationships but didn't understand that for some folks truth claims are more basic. Perhaps our biggest mistake was rushing to decision at the end of a tumultuous day. We had worked for fourteen months at the issue, and still we made a decision before we were ready. Discernment in a hermeneutical community takes a long time.[3]

We did some things well. We invited many lay leaders to lead—based on their gifts, not their convictions or their worldview. We grew in our ability to listen deeply to each voice, even when we disagreed. We did thorough Bible studies. We were in regular contact with our denominational bodies. We lost both our innocence and our arrogance.

Lessons learned through pain and healing

Despite the process's painful ending, in retrospect we identify three crucial pieces of the healing that happened.

First, as painful as it sometimes was to do so, we kept encouraging the congregation to hear every voice. This care in listening to every voice among us, regardless of our agreement or disagreement with it, is still bearing rich fruit.

Second, immediately after the decisions were made, we formed a healing and reconciliation team, which began its work with a worship service of lament. This powerful service enabled all of us to bring our brokenness before a loving God.

Third, in the end we realized that our common worship of God through Jesus is a deeper value than our convictions on this issue. That realization is what kept our congregation together. But it has taken a long view to see this underlying shared commitment.

We are now less afraid of conflict in discernment. We have been learning to listen deeply and respectfully to those with whom we disagree, and we are learning healthier ways of engaging each

other. We have been learning to appreciate the multiple voices in scripture and among the interpreters of scripture. God's Spirit continues to work among us in unexpected ways.

And we as leaders? We embrace our responsibility to ensure a healthy process of discernment in which every voice and perspective is heard and valued. But we also recognize our need to be vulnerable and open about our own views and convictions. And above all, we are called to lead our congregation in worship, for it is only in opening ourselves deeply to God that we all move beyond our personal opinions and convictions and our bondage to the limitations of our worldviews. It is then that our love for God and our brothers and sisters deepens—and with it, our ability to live into God's will being done among us on earth.

Notes

[1] C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 54.
[2] John H. Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 38–39.
[3] The decisions we made then began a much longer process of discernment which led eventually to our becoming a congregation hospitable to all who seek to worship with us.

About the authors

Lydia Neufeld Harder and Gary Harder are both happily retired—Lydia from being a professor of theology and Gary from more than fifty years of pastoral ministry. They eased into retirement by working together as intentional interim pastors in three congregations over the past seven years. They live in Toronto, Ontario.

Hearing every voice
Communal discernment and gendered experience

Susanne Guenther Loewen

> *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]

Penner points to the many Mennonite materials on conscientious objection to war, for the most part a male experience. Meanwhile, violence against women has not been considered a peace issue historically.

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]

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."

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

Susanne Guenther Loewen is a PhD candidate (ABD) through the Toronto School of Theology, working on a dissertation that brings Mennonite, feminist, and womanist perspectives into conversation on questions of nonviolence, the cross, and redemption. She is currently a sessional instructor at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She and her family attend Charleswood Mennonite Church.

Holding together individual experience and communal wisdom

Kathy McCamis

Discernment is a practice through which Christians affirm that God is present among God's people and that all that we do matters to God. At its best, discernment draws the community of faith closer to one another and to God as we come together as one body to seek the presence of the Spirit in the midst of our daily lives. At its worst, though, discernment can exclude and draw lines that divide instead of embrace.

An emerging personal sense of call

It took me a long time to acknowledge that God might be calling me to pastoral ministry. One of the pivotal moments along the way in that journey came the first time I preached a sermon. Before I finally accepted the invitation, my pastor had been suggesting for some time that I try preaching. I didn't see myself as a public speaker; in fact, all my life, from elementary school through university, teachers had been remarking on the fact that I seldom spoke up in class. During the first presentation I had to make when I was in junior high, I was so slack-jawed that the gum I had been chewing rolled right out of my mouth and onto the floor. If there was ever an unlikely preacher, it was me.

Experiences of being most fully the person God created me to be as I was preaching, leading worship, and offering pastoral care accumulated until I couldn't ignore the sense that God was inviting me to explore a calling to ministry.

To my shock, that Sunday after the worship service was complete and I had returned home, I found myself wrestling with one persistent question: What if I am never given another opportunity to do this again? To my utter surprise, something within me had come fully alive that day as I stood before the congregation. As time went on, I experienced a similar sense of being most fully the person

God created me to be in moments when I was sitting with a young person, listening to her and praying with her, inviting her to catch a glimpse of her story being held within God's larger story. I recognized the same sensation again while I was preparing to lead people in prayer and worship.

Eventually, experiences such as these accumulated until I couldn't ignore any longer the sense that God was inviting me to explore this calling. I left my safe career in health care behind to study youth ministry at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg. Although the move seemed risky at the time, those two years of study affirmed my calling and made me more aware of my gifts. I left with a growing sense of who God was, and of the kind of person God was inviting me to become. I left with a growing feeling that God's call was a gift that I wanted to embrace.

Denominational discernment about women in ministry

Around the time of my graduation, the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, of which I am a member, had been wrestling once again with the question of women in ministry leadership. At issue was whether churches would be free to call women to any level of leadership within the church, up to and including that of lead pastor. This question had already been the subject of much debate among Canadian Mennonite Brethren for several decades. Then, in 2006, a resolution was passed officially declaring the issue of whether women could serve as lead pastors to be "non-confessional," which meant that local congregations had freedom to appoint women to any role including that of lead pastor, as they saw fit.

Of course, the issue of women in ministry leadership, as it had become known among Canadian Mennonite Brethren, didn't disappear when the resolution was passed. I quickly discovered that firsthand, as I began to apply for jobs in local Mennonite Brethren congregations. After applying to one congregation, I received an e-mail message from a friend's sister: "I would love for my daughter to have a youth pastor like you someday. I wish my congregation was ready to consider having women in pastoral roles." Another time, my pastor told me about a congregation that had called him to ask whether he knew of any potential

candidates for their vacant youth pastor position: "I immediately thought of you, but they specifically told me that they are only looking for male applicants."

I had been reduced to my gender. All that many search committees needed to know was that I was a woman. The gift of God's call and the process of discernment were all but lost in the midst of theological debates.

The hardest part of the whole experience for me was realizing that in many ways I had been reduced to an issue. My personhood was reduced to my gender. The rest of my story, my gifts, and my skills no longer mattered. All that many of those search committees needed to know was that I was a woman; that alone told them all they wanted to know about me. The gift of God's call and the process of discernment that I had worked through in coming to accept that gift were all but lost in the midst of theological debates about whether scripture indicates that a woman could or should possess such a gift.

Holding lived experience and collective wisdom together

The traditional wisdom of the church about the practice of discerning which individuals are being called to pastoral ministry or to missionary service has long insisted that there are two essential components to a call to ministry. One is the internal call sensed by the individual—that inward desire or sense of longing experienced by the person being called. The second is the confirmation of that call by the faith community, by those who have witnessed the person's gifts for ministry and who affirm that giftedness. Discernment must take seriously both the lived experience of the individual and the collective wisdom of the community of faith. It is incomplete unless it takes both of these perspectives into account.

This understanding of how a call to ministry ought to be discerned is consistent with the insistence of practical theologians that a proper understanding of the church and of the Christian faith must take into account not only the articulated convictions of the church as they are communicated by statements of faith or conference resolutions or other means, but also those convictions that are carried in the lived actions of the faith community. The practices of the church—practices such as baptism, communion,

prayer, keeping Sabbath, and discernment—are themselves theological. Practical theologians remind the church that lived experience bears a wisdom that must be attended to and given a place alongside the theological resources that arise from biblical study, church tradition, and other attempts to articulate statements of belief. As Alister E. McGrath writes, "Christian theology is seen at its best and at its most authentic when it engages and informs the life of the Christian community on the one hand, and is in turn engaged and informed by that life on the other."[1]

Too often, however, our collective discernment at the church and denominational levels loses sight of the importance of holding both lived experience and collective wisdom together. We reduce complicated conversations about the challenges of following Christ in our contemporary context to issues that we hope to resolve by agreeing on a correct interpretation of the wisdom offered by the Bible. In doing so, we disregard the idea that at the heart of the Christian faith lies discipleship, the modeling of one's life after the life of Jesus Christ in a particular time and place, and we neglect the theological wisdom that develops precisely in the midst of our efforts to follow Jesus in particular ways in our unique circumstances. This explains how, for many years, the issue of women in ministry leadership in the Mennonite Brethren church could be debated primarily by men, seemingly without recognition that the stories of the women who were sensing God's call to serve in pastoral ministry might be vital pieces to consider in the discernment of God's leading in whether to open church leadership positions at all levels to women as well as men.

Too often our collective discernment at the church and denominational levels loses sight of the importance of holding both lived experience and collective wisdom together.

Frank Rogers Jr. writes that discernment as a Christian practice is rooted in the conviction that "our decisions and our search for guidance take place in the active presence of a God who intimately cares about our life situations and who invites us to participate in the divine activities of healing and transformation."[2] Rogers further writes, "Discernment is the intentional practice by which a community or an individual seeks, recognizes, and intentionally takes part in the activity of God in concrete situations."[3]

The practice of discernment therefore has everything to do with identifying the work of God's Spirit in particular situations of particular people in particular times and places. It has everything to do with prayerfully seeking God's presence and activity in the lives of people who are trying to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Christian discernment requires that we affirm, first and foremost, that God is present and active in the midst of our everyday lives.

How, then, can we discern God's activity without carefully listening to the voices of those who are trying to embody the answers to the question of how to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the midst of the unique situations in which they find themselves? If discerning those who are being called to ministry requires paying attention not only to the collective discernment of the body of Christ but also to the inner experience of the one being called, then shouldn't our conversations about end-of-life care seek to draw especially on the wisdom found in the experiences of the man who is trying to live out his Christian faith while also facing terminal illness? Likewise, are there those whose voices are being unintentionally left out of the conversations in our churches about human sexuality? How might we listen to one another, affirming God's love for his people while also seeking God's transformation and healing that is making all things new?

How can we discern God's activity without carefully listening to the voices of those who are trying to embody the answers to the question of how to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the midst of the unique situations in which they find themselves?

Certainly, Christian discernment is a corporate activity that requires the participation of the full body of Christ. We affirm with scripture that "there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6, NRSV). We are one body with many members. The activity of the Spirit among us is best discerned in the midst of the body of Christ. Just as the authentication of a call to ministry requires the affirmation of the call by the faith community, we also depend on the other members of the body of Christ to help us discern the activity of the Spirit when it

comes to innumerable other questions requiring discernment. Neither the voice of practice nor the voice of theological wisdom alone tells the whole story, but when the two voices intersect, they do so with powerful effect.

When it is being practiced with excellence, Christian discernment brings together the experiences of the one and the wisdom of the many, the hard-fought wisdom of the trenches and the carefully worded conclusions of our best theological statements. It creates space in the conversation for all of God's people, affirms God's concern for all things, and reminds us that all that we say and do happens in the presence of God. Rather than reducing people to issues, it seeks to embrace the theological wisdom that is forged as people embrace Christ's call to discipleship, each in the unique situations in which they find themselves. The practice of discernment is an invitation to seek out the activity of the Spirit among God's people and to join in God's activity in the world, as we await the day when all things will be made new.

At its best, Christian discernment brings together the experiences of the one and the wisdom of the many, the hard-fought wisdom of the trenches and the carefully worded conclusions of our best theological statements.

Notes

[1] Alister E. McGrath, "The Cultivation of Theological Vision: Theological Attentiveness and the Practice of Ministry," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 107.
[2] Frank Rogers Jr., "Discernment," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 106.
[3] Ibid., 107.

About the author

Kathy McCamis is community pastor at House Blend Ministries, an intentional community in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She recently graduated with an MA in theological studies from Canadian Mennonite University and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary Canada.

Welcoming as Christ has welcomed
Paul's challenge to Christians in Rome

Gordon Zerbe

"Therefore, welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you" (Rom. 15:7).[1] Everything in Romans leads, in one way or another, to this forceful and challenging conclusion. Paul boils down the theological substance of the entire argument ("as Christ has welcomed you [all]") with the practical issue of increasingly critical and urgent importance ("welcome one another").

Romans is not designed primarily as a book of unchanging doctrine, a systematic theology deposited for all time and places, and focused around how a private and isolated individual can get right with God (the classic Protestant view of "justification by faith"). Rather, what we have in Romans is a contextually articulated, practical-pastoral theology. Paul hopes that this theology can unify a movement on the verge of disintegration into factional divisions, both locally and globally, an outcome that Paul is energetically and desperately seeking to prevent. Romans is primarily about resolving a crisis of relationships in the community of Christ's faithful, in connection with God's plan to realize true justice and peace throughout the whole world.

Paul hopes that his contextually articulated, practical-pastoral theology in his letter to the Romans can unify a movement on the verge of disintegration into factional divisions, both locally and globally.

The context

Having just come through a harrowing experience of imprisonment, torture, and hardship in Asia (2 Cor. 1:8; 7:5–6), in early 56 CE Paul is resting and convalescing in Corinth. He has travel plans on his mind, but for the moment he must wait, reflect, study scripture, and pray, as all the major seafaring ships are moored at port for the winter season (from approximately mid-November to mid-March).

Paul is especially contemplating what is happening on the simultaneously hopeful and ominous horizon. From a vantage point a few hundred meters from town, he can see the sun rise on the sea to the east, and he can see the sun set on the sea to the west. Looking east, he thinks of Jerusalem. He has not been there for eight years, and the last time he was there he formally established a partnership with the leaders of the Jerusalem congregation, by which his ministry among the nations-Gentiles was affirmed, on the condition that he would remember the poor (Gal. 2:1–10). But the tensions between the mother church and his network of assemblies outside of Judea have only heightened, and he fears the growing divide will probably get worse.

Once travel season opens, Paul expects to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost, to deliver practical assistance to the poor of Judea, who are suffering from famine and an unjust system of imperial tribute. Paul sees this undertaking as a token of unity and partnership across the waters that divide. It is also a way of enacting the fulfillment of prophecy—that at the dawn of the age to come, the nations would make pilgrimage and bring their tribute to Jerusalem, reversing the outflow of wealth experienced for hundreds of years.[2]

Turning toward the horizon to the west, Paul sees both new opportunity in Spain and also foreboding amid crises in Rome. Though he has never been to Rome, he has many friends and coworkers there (Rom. 16), and through correspondence with them he has kept up on the dynamics in this strategically located centre. The Jesus loyalists in Rome are organized around multiple house assemblies, and increasing disputes have meant that not all remain in communion with each other.[3]

Using a shorthand not unlike our "liberal" and "conservative," Paul describes the two main factions as "those who are weak in conviction (loyalty-faith)"[4] and "those who are strong-powerful." This simplistic binary names convictional differences, while also reflecting socioeconomic divisions.[5] What we can discern is that the "weak," who appear to be primarily from a Judean (Jewish) heritage, were biblical traditionalists, claiming ancient biblical and unchanging standards for conduct. By contrast, the "strong-powerful," who appear to include people from both Judean and non-Judean backgrounds, were messianic revisionists (in the

manner of Paul), claiming a new pattern for conduct revealed through Messiah Jesus, stressing loyalty and conviction over against detailed rules propounded by Moses the lawgiver. The watchword of this group, which Paul endorses, is apparently "freedom in Christ" (cf. Gal. 3–5; 1 Cor. 8:9; 2 Cor. 3; Rom. 7).

Paul describes the two main factions as "those who are weak in conviction (loyalty-faith)" and "those who are strong-powerful." This simplistic binary names convictional differences, while also reflecting socioeconomic divisions.

This local divide thus replicates the mounting gulf among Jesus loyalists worldwide. At one end are mainly Judean Jesus Messianists ("Christians")[6] committed to a detailed, literal interpretation and application of Torah. This group is centred in Jerusalem, with thousands embracing this perspective (Acts 21). On the other side there is the overwhelming majority of non-Judean adherents (alongside a core group from a Judean heritage, like Paul himself), who see potential new members from the nations as free from many of the regulations of Torah, especially those regulations that appear to be mainly Judean (Jewish) identity markers.[7] What it means to be "practicing" (in regard to regulations for ethical "walking") is a hotly contested matter, and the cause of increasing tensions and divisions.[8] The letter is thus deliberately addressed to "*all* God's beloved," as Paul seeks to embrace all the factional components now tearing the community of Christ apart (14:1–15:13). Along the way, Paul makes it clear that *both* those of Judean heritage *and* those of non-Judean heritage are equally named as beloved (9:25–26; 11:28).

Meanwhile, Paul has come to realize that the differences between the weak and the strong are so intractable that it will likely be impossible for both sides to come to an agreement on some hotly contested questions. In this circumstance, how can the strong and the weak ever welcome each other? How might it be possible to avert a massive split over a single lightning-rod issue that could scar the church forever? These are the questions that drive the entire argument of Romans.

Much is at stake for Paul. Paul's vision is for a movement that will grow to eventually reconcile the whole world (11:32; 15:7–13). If the church in the capital city of a massive empire remains

divided, how should one ever expect the global church to remain a single movement? And might we even start to doubt the breadth of God's vision of restoration in Christ? The very integrity and efficacy of the gospel is at stake.[9]

The argument

Paul writes Romans, then, deeply conscious of what is on the horizon, both east and west, and with a fair bit of time on his hands as he waits for the season for traveling by ship to reopen. Romans is Paul's longest and most complex letter. It is both essay and appeal, organized in four densely packed movements, all interconnected with recurring and developing motifs, and each concluding with a dramatic crescendo (4:24–25; 8:31–39; 11:32–36; 15:7–13).

Paul realizes that the differences between the weak and the strong are so intractable that it will likely be impossible for them to agree on some hotly contested questions. In this circumstance, how can the strong and the weak ever welcome each other?

With complex issues to discuss and intractable issues to resolve, Paul writes in ways that are not always straightforward; it is not always obvious what particular points he wishes to score with his divided audience. Paul seems to be aware of how each side might be listening to how he either supports their position or rebukes the other side. One can only imagine the challenge faced by Phoebe (16:1–2), who was sent as Paul's personal representative along with the letter, and no doubt tasked with explaining orally its more ambiguous or difficult points, bridging the divide between the weak and the strong.

The prevailing theme at the outset of Romans is God's new justice-righteousness and justification (making right) over against universal human injustice and retribution. At the core of Paul's theological argument, designed to realize and sustain a unified community into the future, is the conviction that Christ welcomes in a way that demonstrates a radically new framework of justice-righteousness, what can appropriately be called "restorative justice." God's new framework of justice and justification through Christ is not simply a pardon that leaves the prior and prevailing retributive justice system otherwise intact, where a select few

receive a free ticket to heaven while the rest of humanity is consigned to eternal damnation. God's new system of justice, which transforms the offender and reconciles the offender and the offended, involves a complete reorientation and transfer into what Paul calls the "regime of grace," away from the "regime of law." Paul's firm conviction is that only by seeing the other through this new lens can one truly welcome and be reconciled with the other. Eventually, then, the theme of justice-righteousness gives way, as the letter unfolds, to images of reconciliation, mercy, forgiveness, liberation, filiation (adoption as heirs), transformation, and re-creation, and ultimately to divine and human welcome.[10]

In the first movement Paul shows how the system of retributive justice ("wrath") that has been in force up to the present will itself be undone, as it gives way to God's new system of a restoring justice through Christ, under the banner of merciful generosity (grace). Indeed, God's newly revealed system of justice-righteousness is displayed precisely in an act of divine generosity and forbearance, whereby all previously committed offenses are "passed over" (3:21–25; 4:25).

The second movement (chaps. 5–8) focuses around a comparison and contrast of three "regimes": the regimes of error (sin), of law, and of grace. Paul's makes the case that only by a transfer to the regime of grace can the error (sin) problem of humanity finally be conquered (Rom. 5:12–8:13); the regime of law is incapable of fully transforming the human condition.

The third movement explains how God's mercy in the regime of grace will ultimately conquer all human infidelity (see esp. 9:16, 22–23). By way of climax Paul asserts: "For God has confined (enclosed, imprisoned) all humanity into disobedience, with the ultimate aim that God will have mercy on all humanity" (11:32). And all Paul can do in response is launch into doxology, admitting that this hope goes beyond his ability to comprehend (11:33–36).

The final movement (12:1–15:13) articulates a kind of moral code, not by reference to the sanctions of law, but by reference to God's mercies, the restoring action of God. Earlier, Paul challenged the confidence of those who seek to know God's will and discern what really counts simply on the basis of Torah (2:18). Now he emphasizes that to discern the will of God requires a

renewal of the mind that emerges through the transformative power supplied by the mercies of God (Rom. 12:1–2).

The virtues that Paul enjoins are especially social virtues, and the entire obligation of the law is summed up in the command to love one's neighbor. "The one who loves the other has fulfilled the law" is an assertion important enough to be repeated: "Love is the fullness of the law" (13:8, 10; cf. 12:9).

The virtues that Paul enjoins are especially social virtues, and the entire obligation of the law is summed up in the command to love one's neighbor. "The one who loves the other has fulfilled the law."

Back to the controversy on the ground

Paul finally comes to the crux of the dispute that is raging locally and globally among Jesus followers. Christians today are accustomed to thinking that the particular issues at stake here were inconsequential, not among the things that really matter, and pertaining simply to rules about food, or observances of days. But that would hardly have been the view of both parties. The dispute pertained to the interpretation of the moral laws of scripture. What might have been a matter of relaxed indifference to one group, who considered themselves free from certain rules of scripture because of Christ (Paul and the strong), was a matter that for the other party (the weak) negated the very status of the unchanging word of God, the Torah divinely revealed through Moses. Realizing that the sides are working from vastly different premises, Paul pleads for the strong to cease despising, and for the weak to desist from judging.

Addressing both sides in the biblical-ethical dispute, Paul's appeal is designed for all the partisans to hear. Still, some sections seem framed to apply especially to one side or the other. On the one hand, Paul first challenges especially the scripture-literalist, law-oriented weak, whose main posture is to judge: "God has welcomed [the strong]. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand" (14:3b–4, NRSV). They are never to question the fact that God has fundamentally welcomed those whom they deem morally unclean. God has offered radical welcome on terms newly revealed in Christ, on the basis of absolute generosity. Therefore

they ought never to take the place of God, who is the one who will make final judgments, and to whose tribunal all claims should be deferred (14:10–12).

On the other hand, Paul speaks to the strong just as forcefully (14:14–23). They must always be attentive to the virtues of love, peace, justice, and mutual upbuilding (14:15, 17, 19), lest their despising of the weak puts a stumbling block before them, causing them to fall (away) and thereby destroying them. Moreover, they must never let their behavior be based on mere trendiness, soft thinking, even if they are free from the law. Using the same verb for "discernment" as in 12:2 (and 2:18), Paul stresses that any conduct that has not gone through careful discernment is not worthy of acceptance. "The conviction[11] that you have, have as your own before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves, because of what they discern. But those [among the strong] who are uncertain are condemned when they eat, because they do not act from conviction; for whatever does not proceed from conviction (based on persuasion) is error" (14:22–23). Here Paul seems to conclude with a proverbial statement in the Socratic tradition: anything not subject to careful scrutiny is potentially mere error.[12] Earlier Paul has claimed to know the correctness of his own position (and that of the strong) by careful persuasion, although he doesn't explain what exactly has gone into that persuasion (14:14).

People on both sides must be ready to give an answer for their own behavior directly to Christ himself, whose tribunal is the only one that truly counts. They are not to be preoccupied about what is wrong with the other.

One of the most important arguments, then, is that *all* must be fully convinced in their own minds (14:5), because each person individually will be required to give an account before God (14:12). Moreover, partisans on each side must acknowledge that the other is seeking in good faith to live and act in complete devotion to the Lord (14:6–9). Paul advises that whereas all Jesus loyalists are ultimately seeking to live in dedicated service to God, they should all focus on their own lives in relation to God (14:4–8, 22). That is, they shouldn't be constantly looking over their shoulders to check out what someone else is doing. All must be convinced in their own minds without prejudging or

focusing on the other. They must be ready to give an answer for their own behavior directly to Christ himself, whose tribunal is the only one that truly counts. They are not to be preoccupied about what is wrong with the other (14:5–12, 22–23).

So then, whenever they welcome each other, they ought to do so not for the purposes of debating divisive issues (14:1). Those kinds of conversation might easily degenerate into solidifying even further unresolvable differences, leading to an irreparable split. Rather, they must somehow find a way to be in communion with each other, giving each other some generous space, as Christ has, so that they can give glory to God as one in spirit and with a united voice (15:6).

Notes

[1] Paul uses the plural "you," y'all. Translations in this essay are mine, though following standard English versions, especially the NRSV.

[2] For detailed discussion, see Gordon Zerbe, "Partnership and Equality: Paul's Economic Theory," in *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2012), 76–82.

[3] For a history of the assemblies in Rome, see John E. Toews, *Romans*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2004), 21–29.

[4] Paul uses the flexible term *pistis*. *Pistis* can have the nuance of (a) reliance, faith, trust, (b) loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness, (c) conviction, belief, or (d) proof, persuasion. Sometimes a number of these possible senses are implied in a given use of *pistis*. The weakness here in Paul's view seems to be a combination of presumed weakness of conviction but also of loyalty (as a core feature of their way to relating to Christ). In 1 Corinthians, referring to a somewhat similar perspective, Paul uses the term "weakness of conscience" (1 Cor. 8:7,10; or just the "weak," 1 Cor. 8:9, 11) in contrast to "those who have knowledge" (1 Cor. 8:4, 7, 10, 11). In Romans 15:1 the weak are also called the "non-strong," whose weaknesses the strong have an obligation to support.

[5] "Weak" and "strong" were regularly used in Paul's world to refer to the poor and the rich. Many in the weak, non-powerful group, especially those of Judean descent, will only have returned to Rome in the year 54, when the expulsion order for all Judeans-Jews was lifted. They will have lost financial assets, not only leadership roles and predominance in the broader group of Jesus loyalists in Rome.

[6] At this stage in history, the term "Christian" is anachronistic, as it implies a movement and theology completely divorced from Judeans (Jews) and Judaism. See V. G. Shillington, *Jesus and Paul before Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

[7] Paul never advises those born Judean (Jewish) to forsake the Torah; he only argues that internationals (Gentiles) do not need to become fully Torah observant to be true loyalists of Messiah Jesus.

[8] Things are far more complex than two main groupings. The New Testament attests to at least six distinct positions or groupings along a rough continuum, from those who are "zealous for the Law" (Acts 15:1, 5; 21:17–22), to those associated with James

(and the "men of James," Gal 2:11–13), to those close to the positions of Cephas/Peter and Barnabas, to Paul and his movement, to the Johannine community and those who departed from it. See Zerbe, *Citizenship*, 245n2.

[9] In hindsight we know that Paul's wild hope to keep the worldwide church united was not realized. Maybe even he had doubts, as many came to conclude: Will it not be easier to reframe salvation simply in terms of the experience of the private individual, and allow pockets of believers to remain in their own solitudes? And might it not be easier to think of world Christianity and the unity of the church as a merely aspirational concept? What actually happened was that the Bible-literalists ("the weak") were disinherited, as the liberal "strong" became the numerical (Gentile) majority, and as the centre for the "weak" in Jerusalem was decimated by the war with Rome (66–74 CE). Meanwhile, the freedom-embracing Gentile Jesus loyalists eventually developed their own sharp way of defining boundaries to identify heretics, on the basis of their own new rule-based schemes.

[10] For a detailed discussion of the contours of Paul's main argument, see Gordon Zerbe, "From Retributive to Restorative Justice in Romans," *Direction* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 43–58; online at http://www.directionjournal.org/.

[11] See above, n4. Given the emphasis in these verses on discernment, judging (in the sense of "critically assessing"), and not having doubts, the emphasis with *pistis* here is on having conviction, based on careful persuasion/proof. Cf. the emphasis on being fully convinced in 14:5.

[12] The word *hamartia* is the ordinary word for "error," even though it is typically used in the sense of "sin" in the New Testament.

About the author

Gordon Zerbe is a professor of New Testament at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and is now serving as Vice President Academic. His most recent book is *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics* (CMU Press, 2012).

On being the church—a garden, a body, a table
A sermon for a divided church

John H. Neufeld

The church has been in trouble and turmoil for centuries, splintering and dividing, erecting walls to keep some out and knowing who is in. And today the congregations in Mennonite Church Canada and in Mennonite Church USA are in trouble. I mean, we are in deep trouble, aren't we? It's no use pretending it isn't so. It's no use pretending we are "without spot or wrinkle." It's no use claiming that we are one in Christ while we are acting deeply divided. Yes, we are in a heap of trouble. There are serious issues about which we are deeply divided.

The trouble we're in has deep roots. The trouble we're in can be traced back in history. The trouble in the church began right at the beginning. I want to state it bluntly: actually it was Jesus's fault.

What are we going to do about it? What can be done about it? Some say, let's break apart at the seams, insist on purity according to our own norms. Let's leave the church. Let's withdraw from the denominational body. My question is, is this the way of wisdom? Is this a Christian response in a time of disagreement?

I want to suggest a response to the trouble we're in that is rooted in scripture and that can help us move beyond our present impasse.

It's Jesus's fault

The trouble we're in has deep roots. The trouble we're in can be traced back in history. In fact, the trouble in the church began right at the beginning. I want to state it bluntly: actually it was Jesus's fault.

I mean it, seriously. And I want to spread the blame a bit more. Peter is also to blame and so is Paul. But Jesus started us off on the wrong foot, and Peter and Paul didn't stop it. They continued it, went along with it.

You and I today are definitely not to blame. Let's lay the blame where it belongs—with Jesus primarily, and secondarily with Peter and Paul. We are off the hook!

You may well wonder how I can make such a claim. Let me explain. If only Jesus had given greater attention to their backgrounds, their convictions, their lifestyles, and their temperaments when he chose his twelve disciples, it might have been different. But he didn't.

Even after being in prayer about it, he called the Sons of Thunder as well as the reflective John. He picked Simon the Zealot who was totally against the Romans, willing to use the dagger when opportunity came along, and he also picked Matthew the tax collector, employed by those same Romans. Simon and Matthew—at opposite extremes, now in the same small group, called together by Jesus!

What in the world was he thinking? Had he lost his mind? Was this wise and practical? Who could imagine Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Roman civil servant working together, sharing leadership? Matthew getting a regular cut from the Romans for his work, and Simon wishing every Roman dead.

It didn't take long till differences erupted among the disciples, and disagreements and conflict quickly followed. "Who is the greatest among us?" "Can we have the two top positions in your cabinet, Lord?" The Gospel of Mark mentions arguing among the disciples and indignation at the request made by James and John.

Do you think Jesus ever had second thoughts about his choices? A bit of screening and some background checks would have helped. Did he ever wonder, what in the world have I done? How can such a diverse group form the nucleus of the church?

This is why I blame Jesus for the mess in the church.

Peter is also to blame

But I also want to give some blame to Peter. It wasn't long after Pentecost that Peter did an unheard-of thing: He stepped outside the tradition in which he had been steeped all his life. He went beyond the confession of faith. He went beyond what every Jew considered proper. You know the story in Acts 10–11. Luke really liked it and emphasized it by devoting one and a half of his twenty-eight chapters to this one mind-blowing event.

As a follower of Jesus, Peter pushed the envelope. He coloured outside the lines. At first when the notion got into his head about going to Gentiles with the gospel, he dug in his heels. He resisted. He protested. He said, "No way!" But then he did what the Spirit prompted him to do—he walked over to Caesarea, right to the door of Cornelius, a Gentile. Peter had come, knowing that it was improper for him to do so. He said as much to Cornelius's household. And then he shared the gospel with them.

In the end Peter made an amazing confession: "Now I understand that God is no respecter of persons." And the diversity in the church grew by leaps and bounds. Peter and his six friends couldn't believe their eyes: a revolution was happening and they were in the middle of it!

After four days, they decided to head back to Jerusalem, to the council gathered there. We have no idea what they told their families. We are told what the church leaders charged them with and how they responded. They were asked one question: "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Why did you dignify those Gentiles, those dogs, by sharing table fellowship with them? Just look what you've done! The horses are out of the barn. Jews and Gentiles are now in the church, together. Unheard of! Never before!

These Jewish Christians had inherited strong exclusionary impulses from their tradition, their theology, and their leaders, but that dominant impulse had also been challenged by inclusionary impulses—by the prophet in Isaiah 56 and also by Jesus.

Paul continued what Peter and Jesus had begun and harvested a bumper crop of diversity. Diversity was the trademark of every congregation he founded in his missionary work.

And Paul didn't help matters

If only Jesus hadn't started it by recruiting twelve very different disciples. If only Peter hadn't gone to Cornelius and baptized him and his household. If only Paul hadn't followed in Jesus's and Peter's footsteps, we wouldn't have this messy problem of diversity and conflict to deal with now.

Paul continued what Peter and Jesus had begun and harvested a bumper crop of diversity. Diversity was the trademark of every congregation he founded in his missionary work. There were no

homogeneous groups with Jewish-background folks in one house church and Gentile-background folks in another. There were no separate house churches for slaves and for free people.

In Corinth, for example, Paul shared the good news with everyone and ended up with a church divided, split into four major factions. Placards appeared: "I'm for Paul" (the founding missionary). "I'm for Apollos" (the charismatic speaker). "I'm for Cephas" (emphasizing the Jewish background and tradition). "I'm for Christ" (the real Christians).

Did those church members like the factionalism in their fellowship? Some seemed to think the right way to go was to declare their position and point out the others' faults. Others thought the issue had to be addressed, and they informed Paul about it. Paul wrote back, telling them the disagreements were actually signs that they were of the flesh—not spiritual, but immature.

A trio of metaphors

But perhaps Paul also offers us something that can help us in living with our differences.

It seems to me that the most important thing Paul did in addressing the incredible diversity in the church was to plant three metaphors in their hearts and minds. He didn't give them parables, as Jesus had done, but metaphors—seemingly harmless but incredibly potent word pictures that would take root in their hearts and continue to work like yeast in a batch of dough.

Paul, the metaphor man, must have been inspired by the Spirit when he said that the church is a garden, the church is a body, and the church is a table.

Paul, the metaphor man, must have been inspired by the Spirit when he said that the church is a garden, the church is a body, and the church is a table. These words—garden, body and table—invite our participation, our engagement, our careful reflection. They trigger our curiosity and sense of wonder. They raise questions: what might Paul have wanted to communicate with these three simple words?

These are great metaphors for a church in disagreement, but over the centuries we have not allowed them to shape our life in church. Yet these three images show us the way beyond agree-

ment and disagreement. They are to be the default setting for the church that is in trouble as it is dealing with its inherent diversity. Instead of pointing out where we are right and others are wrong, these three images show us a more excellent way, a way forward.

These startling, often-neglected metaphors are as powerful as seeds, bursting with creative energy and potential. They may seem counterintuitive, but they are inspired by Jesus and suggested by Paul. They are deeply rooted in the gospel and were introduced into real-life situations characterized by differences, diversity, disagreement, and conflict! They were not theoretical and abstract. To me these words seem to be an inspired practical theology capturing the daring vision Jesus had for the church in the first century and for us today. Let's explore this trio of metaphors.

You are a garden

Paul introduces the garden metaphor in the longer section in which he addresses the issue of divisions and disagreement in church. "You are God's field," he tells the Corinthian Christians (1 Cor 3:9). He's referring to a city plot, in which a gardener crowds as many varieties of vegetables and flowers as possible. Every garden is filled to capacity with a variety of plants. The gardener enjoys, celebrates, and admires the abundance found in her garden's diversity. The unity of the garden is found in the soil and the moisture and the sun. Rather than lamenting diversity, Paul affirms and celebrates it. We as a congregation of diverse people are God's garden!

If only the soil wouldn't be so fertile, welcoming, and accommodating, but the gospel soil, the church, encourages all to take root, to flourish, to be part of the amazing variety growing in the same ground, dependent on the same sun, and drawing nourishment from the same water. Gospel soil and church gardens are what they are, and we need to adapt to God's reality and vision for how they are to be together.

You are one body

Paul uses the body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12:4–27: "You [plural] are the body of Christ." Isn't it amazing that Paul says this to that deeply divided church in Corinth, in which four groups are embroiled in conflict arising from their different backgrounds and

perspectives and concerns. Isn't it amazing that Paul speaks body language to a group that includes some spiritual and some unspiritual, a quarrelsome bunch, a diverse bunch, some slave, some free, some wise, some foolish? To this deeply divided church, Paul says, "You are one body."

Is Paul serious about this, or is he kidding? Certainly the human body has huge differences and disparate functions among its members. Surely there is the danger of some parts feeling either superior or inferior.

The body metaphor insists that the parts actually need each other. One can't get along without the others; they are interdependent. The unity of the body is found within the whole range of diversity. The unity amid diversity is found in the one Spirit. Paul is telling his readers: Don't lament the diversity among you. Celebrate it, affirm it, and make the most of it!

Stay at the table—together

I think of Romans 14:1–15:7 as introducing a table metaphor, although the word *table* is not to be found in this passage. But it is implied. Listen to the concluding words of this long section: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Jesus got into trouble because he shared table with all kinds of people ("Why do you sit with publicans and sinners?"). Peter got into trouble because of "tabling" with Gentiles (Acts 10–11). And here in Romans 14 Paul picks up the table metaphor and continues the tradition of radical table fellowship—dignifying the other by sharing a table with him.

Like the church in Corinth, the church in Rome was diverse and deeply divided. One of the issues that divided this fellowship was a table issue. Some in that church were convinced vegetarians, while others were meat eaters. For many of us today this is not a big issue, but it was a big deal for them at that time. It was a big enough issue that Paul devoted more than a chapter to it in this letter.

When it came to being a vegetarian or a meat eater, people had deep convictions and differences in practice. I say that the convictions were deep, because Paul identifies the emotion associated with this position or that. He poses two surprising and

troubling questions: Why do you despise? Why do you judge? He does not ask, Do you despise? or Do you judge? but instead asks, Why do you?

The more conservative tend to judge the more liberal, and the more liberal tend to despise the more conservative. Both the more conservative and the more liberal are motivated by the same thing. Both want the other to conform to their way of thinking and their way of expressing their discipleship. What does Paul expect of them?

Paul's incredible word to a divided church is this: Welcome, affirm, and embrace those who live differently, those who have convictions different from yours. Treasure those who are different, as God in Christ has treasured and welcomed you!

Does he expect them to come to agreement before they come to the table? No, not at all. He tells them: Become convinced in your own mind before God, and stick to it. It's obvious that some are more conservative than you or I may be, and others are definitely more liberal than you or I may be. Some are more open-minded, while some are more narrow-minded. He urges everyone, the more conservative and the more liberal, to stay at the table with their different understandings and different ethical practices. Do not walk away to start your own table.

Paul's incredible word to a divided church is this: Welcome, affirm, and embrace those who live differently, those who have convictions different from yours. Treasure those who are different, as God in Christ has treasured and welcomed you!

Images of a new humanity

This trio of metaphors is a picture of the new humanity created among us by Jesus's reconciling death and by his Spirit present with us. This is Paul's amazing vision for the church. These three metaphors highlight diversity, acceptance, and inclusion. They challenge our tendency to want everyone to conform to our way of seeing things and living life.

The dividing walls of hostility—Jew-Gentile, slave-free, rich-poor, educated-less educated, derision, judgment, feeling superior and right, etc.—have all been overcome by Jesus. Peace has been made—given—not by erasing differences and not by overlooking differences. Differences remain, but we are no longer strangers and

aliens but co-citizens in God's new humanity. In Christ, it all hangs together. We are being built together spiritually.

While I thought about these metaphors, I felt as though my toes were being stepped on again and again. My hunch is that what I have said here may have stepped on some toes. All of us are called to repentance in light of what Paul shows us about Christ's garden, his body, his table. All of us are welcome in the new humanity being formed among us by Jesus himself. These amazing metaphors invite us to reenvision how we are being called to be the church together.

About the author

John H. Neufeld is former president of Canadian Mennonite Bible College (now Canadian Mennonite University), Winnipeg, and a retired pastor. This sermon was preached in Morden, Manitoba, at a Bible study conference on homosexuality. A version of it was also delivered at First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg on October 18, 2015.