

## Community-Developed

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# Revisiting our Understanding of the Church as an Interpreting Community

## Background and Introduction

One of the things I'm discovering as I get older is that retirement can be more than relaxation, disengagement and "enjoying the good life." For many of us retirement may include two or more decades of time that need to be filled with meaningful activities and growing relationships, as well as becoming involved in the new curriculum for those in the last third of their lives.

Several years ago I had an interesting conversation with our oldest grandson, in his thirties at the time. The question posed by him on a visit back to Winnipeg from Ottawa was this, "So Opa, what's going on?" I have responded differently to this question at various times; honestly most of the time, but often incompletely. A short answer, in jest has been, "Nothing much, we're retired" but it's immediately obvious that I'm treating the question as a greeting rather than as a question. Whenever I took the time to respond to the question more fully, I had much more to say, than "Nothing much".

Another way in which I have responded to the question is, "Actually there's a lot going on. I'm enrolled in a new curriculum that focuses on an expanding inner life while my outer life shows more and more signs of aging, diminishment and limitations. Part of the expanding inner life includes consciously entering the "room called remember" (Buechner) to reflect repeatedly and deliberately on my upbringing as a child and youth, and how I've changed over the decades. In addition, I'm continuing to do some "desk work."

Since I've spent most of my adult life as a teacher, pastor and practical theologian my remembering often focuses on matters that have to do with faith and its expression. And, of course, how my faith and understanding have changed over time.

In my retirement years, my desk work has focused on a number of questions: how to read the Bible responsibly, revisiting Revelation, aging and mortality, forgiveness and forbearance, how to understand atonement, and most recently, how to understand the church as an interpreting community. This has been both a personal quest and an attempt to clarify for others how to read Scripture well. I am grateful for many groups, congregations and individuals with whom I have been able to speak about this process and these topics and test some of the conclusions I have drawn.

As I look back on these twenty years of work, I realize that underlying these topics and my journey are two key biblical passages: Acts 8 and Nehemiah 8. More specifically, the fundamental question I have been wrestling with is the one posed by Philip in Acts 8, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And, by extension, "How do you understand what you are reading?" The response of the Ethiopian eunuch was instructive, "How can I understand unless someone guides me?"

Nehemiah 8 has also been an indirect reference point for me in seeking to understand these larger issues. After returning from exile and settling in the promised land, the people asked Ezra, the priest, to bring the Torah and read it to them. "So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense so that the people understood the reading." (Nehemiah 8:8) What the leaders seem to have done was interpret and give the sense of the ancient texts they were reading in the light of recent experiences (in their case, the Babylonian captivity).

What I notice here is that though, ideally, the community as a whole is the discerning community (according to our Anabaptist tradition), not everyone expressed themselves and not all voices carried the same weight. Some voices, in this case, those of Ezra and his group of assistants, helped the people understand the law by interpreting the inherited law for the new situation in which they found themselves. They were giving instructive guidance so that the people would understand the relevance of the readings. And in Acts 8 Philip, a leader in the Christian movement gave the guidance needed for the Ethiopian to understand what he was reading.

While working on the theme of responsible Bible reading, I also reconsidered our understanding of "the church (the whole church) as the hermeneutical, or interpreting community". I had accepted this understanding as many others have, as the ideal, the norm that we traced back to our forebears in the 16th century, if not to the Bible itself.

Now I have questions regarding our apparent idealism about our understanding of the church as the interpreting community, and have also struggled with some seemingly overlooked assumptions and practices of that time. A recent article on the website of Mennonite Church Manitoba, "Community of the Book" continues to state, without question, the ideal that the "church interprets the Scripture together in community" and also, that the goal of the

interpretation is to “move toward harmony” (also an ideal of the Anabaptists). Are these assumptions valid? Are these phrases used as “clichés”? Is the practice of our forebears prescriptive for us? Have we accepted the value of this ideal too uncritically? Have we fossilized our heritage?

I am not challenging the assumption that the church is the interpreting community; not at all. I am affirming the church as a community of conversation and discernment, but I’m wondering whether we may have been uncritical about some of the details and whether we have assumed too readily that the Anabaptist experience is somehow normative for us. In the light of more recent historical research it seems doubtful that we can still speak of Anabaptist experience without clarifying to which group of Anabaptists we are referring. Is it time to reevaluate and reinterpret this important dimension of our understanding of church? This is not an urgent question that must be dealt with by some deadline, but it is an important issue that needs our attention.

The communities of faith, both in Israel and in the church have demonstrated that they (as a whole, or at least some within them) took seriously the task of being in conversation with their scriptural canon and with each other, seeking to discern how an ancient, inherited word addresses and sheds light on the issues facing them in new circumstances. The impression I have is that neither the church, nor Israel before it, were ever static or fixed, either in their understandings of faith or in how the faith was to be expressed in everyday life. Both understanding and application were developing, changing and evolving over time.

This is evident within Scripture as we become aware of the variety of voices (intra-textual tensions) speaking differently about similar issues (exclusion and inclusion, understanding of God, etc.) and as they searched for new expressions of the faith in the emerging and diverse communities of faith (Acts 10-11, 15) which threatened to destroy the ideal presentation of the early church as all being together and “of one mind.”

I am wondering whether we have over-emphasized the conviction that the whole church together is involved in biblical interpretation without asking, how did the church actually go about interpreting Scripture? I am questioning whether there is a model or paradigm from the past that can serve as a blueprint for all time. Such an assumption about the church as a whole may have given the church unrealistic and unattainable goals and led to frustration and discouragement, even a sense of failure, of falling short of the ideal.

Before I propose a model of the church as an interpreting community for our time, I want to raise some specific concerns about the common understanding rooted in our Anabaptist tradition, that the whole church is involved in the work of interpretation:

- a questionable ideal
- a questionable view of Scripture
- a questionable response to diversity

## A questionable ideal

The impression I have had (and many others have) is that everyone in the believers' groups was actively involved in study, debate, and discernment. It may be that early Anabaptists were so highly committed to the Lord and each other that they were of one mind and practice and totally involved, but I have my doubts.

Anabaptists wanted to model the church according to Scripture's depiction as given by Luke in Acts 2:42, "they [the 3000!] devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, fellowship, and the prayers, all who believed were together and had all things in common." Acts itself and the letters of Paul show that "all being of one mind," etc. was actually not a sustainable practice. Various levels of commitment, diverse understandings of faith and a variety of expressions of discipleship became the norm in a relatively short time. In addition, I wonder whether Luke may have been overstating the level of participation in the early church.

How realistic and normative then is the understanding in our congregations that in early Anabaptism the whole church, gathered, was involved in scriptural interpretation and discernment?

Over time, both in the first and in the 16th centuries the reality of church life became much more like that reflected in Paul's letters and congregations, including considerable diversity and disunity (See Corinthians, Romans and Galatians as examples). This was a far cry from the ideal claimed at the outset. Actually, the ideal early church as depicted by Luke was impractical and unsustainable over any longer period of time. This is evident also in the short-lived "community of goods" experiment.

Let me be more specific about the Anabaptist experience. First, I am sure that some believers did not participate actively in the interpreting process, and so less than full participation has always been the reality. This became evident in a short time. Second, the assumption that everyone's voice needed to be heard, was heard, and that it mattered equally, was not sustained for long either. Was it actually practiced at all? Soon, some voices became dominant, like Menno's and Marpeck's, and others, but most of the others, men and women, remained silent. Third, it seems to me that soon diversity expressed itself as a direct result of claiming three things: sola scriptura, a simple and straightforward view of Scripture, and the concern that the church be "without spot or wrinkle." Without reviewing the details, disagreements and factions, divisions and ex-communication arose early and often in the Anabaptist movement.

The early Anabaptists sought to follow the model of church as presented by Luke, but their attempt was doomed to failure even as the early church succumbed to the realities and demands of real life. The reality of church life in the first century is evident in Paul's letters and congregations. These historical and human realities in the first and in the sixteenth centuries alert us not to attempt to follow the ideal, but rather to enter a life-long, complicated and difficult, as well as hopeful journey of stumbling together as followers of Jesus in the world.

As I have argued, the early church in Acts initially attempted to live an impractical and unsustainable ideal as described by Luke and evidenced in the letters of the New Testament. For us to uncritically claim this ideal or that of the early Anabaptists without having an appropriate model of implementation inevitably becomes a source of frustration, discouragement and sense of failure.

We may want to cherish the ideal, either of the early church or of the Anabaptists, but we will have to accept the fact that it is impossible to develop a functional model based on it. Our interpretive model must make sense to us in our time and be sustainable in actual congregations.

## **A questionable view of Scripture**

In the 16th century several early Anabaptists argued that Scripture was clear and simple. Here are some surprising (to me) quotations from Anabaptist writers:

Felix Manz: "I do, however, know for sure that if the only Word be allowed to speak for itself freely and simply, no one will be able to withstand it."

Schleitheim Confession (1527): "Christ is simply yea and nay, and all those who seek him simply will understand his Word."

Balthasar Hubmaier: "Judge in your consciences according to the simple word of God. Allow it alone to be the mediator and judge, and you will not go astray."

Pilgram Marpeck: "Thus everyone who really desires it may read only the plain texts of biblical Scripture, omit the additional notes, and thus make his judgment."

Melchior Hoffmann: "For surely the Lord Jesus Christ does not deal with his people other than a bridegroom with a bride – with straightforward simple words...Therefore I warn all lovers of truth that they do not give themselves over to lofty arguments which are too hard for them, but that they hold themselves solely to the straight-forward words of God in all simplicity."

Menno Simons: "Above all, brethren, I want you to understand that I do not tolerate human doctrines, clever reasonings, nor twisting of the scriptures, nor glosses, nor imaginations in regard to this matter, but only the plain Scriptures."

Our forebears in the 16th century were inspired and blessed by the availability of Scripture in their everyday languages and devoted themselves, as the early church had done, to examining the scriptures to see if what was being preached was so (Acts 17). No longer did they feel bound by nor dependent on, the priests or the popes to read for them and explain the meaning of the text.

Accompanying this devotion to being people of the book was the conviction of the clarity and simplicity of Scripture. This is evident in the quotations above. Every person capable of reading, it was assumed, was able to read and understand biblical texts.

They were committed to following Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) but failed to see that this was actually inadequate and impossible to do. In recent decades many of us have come to understand that in addition to *sola scriptura* we need to use reason, experience and tradition to interpret ancient texts. Furthermore, many careful readers no longer claim (as some Anabaptists did) that the Bible is simple and clear. The Bible is not only inspired and valued but it is seen as a complex body of ancient literature that needs to be interpreted, not only read. We have come to depend very much on the insights gained from scholarly work.

## **A questionable response to diversity**

Looking back to the 16th century it seems obvious that the default position of many was one of defensiveness and over-against-ness, rather than communal searching and co-operative discernment. This meant that the intent of study was not really to explore new insights and perspectives jointly, but to demonstrate that others were wrong and you were right. The disputations and debates between various reformers were not primarily searching for new light to benefit all, but seeking to disprove the contentions of those on the other side.

It is striking to me that although Anabaptists wanted to distinguish themselves from the Catholics and from the other reform movements and be free of tradition and authority, they could not resist the cultural pressure to adopt attitudes of defensiveness and over-against-ness. They also succumbed to the pressure of needing to be right and showing others they were wrong, just as the Catholics and the other reformers had done.

While the others used the authority of the state to persecute, imprison and execute those who dared to differ, Anabaptists also dealt harshly with dissenters and those who disagreed with their understandings and practice, not by appealing to the power of the state, but by churchly excommunication and the ban. Orthodoxy (right believing) as well as orthopraxy (right living) trumped the diversity that emerged in their communities of discernment and among their leaders.

Many in the state churches and in the free church tradition failed to love their neighbours who disagreed with them and no one seemed to notice the insights of Scripture that pointed in fresh directions, like affirming diversity and celebrating differences (Jesus and Paul). (See Note 1 on diversity.) Everyone appeared to be devoted to, and insist on, conformity no matter where they found themselves on the theological spectrum.

Certainly we have inherited some worthy insights, convictions and practices from the 16th century but uncritically repeating slogans like *sola scriptura*, and the church is the interpreting community, is unwise and untenable.

We can appreciate our forbearers' commitment to Scripture alone, but must be willing to recognize that their sincere commitment was seriously limited and flawed, seriously tainted by attitudes rooted in their culture and time (over-against-ness and enforced conformity). Scripture alone was a necessary corrective for their time, but the way in which it was practiced can no longer be viewed as being in harmony with the spirit and teaching of Jesus.

We may appreciate their conviction that the Bible was simple and straightforward, but must reject their approach as no longer convincing nor tenable. We need to re-assess and revise our understanding of the church as the interpreting community. We need to take Scripture seriously. And we need to recognize that an uncritical acceptance of and affirmation of our tradition no longer serves us well. (See also Note 2)

## **Traits of the Interpreting Community - Summary and Preview**

Even though I am not an historian I will risk naming some of the dominant traits of the interpreting community both in the 16th century and in the 20th-21st centuries. These traits have a bearing on the model I will propose.

### **I. Looking Back to the 16th century**

Agenda on the table

- Scripture and its interpretation
- faithful discipleship

Specific issues

- believers baptism
- communion
- non-resistance

Criteria (underlying concerns)

- orthodoxy (being right and showing others to be wrong)
- orthopraxy (being faithful in living out the faith)
- over-against-ness and defensiveness; need to be right and prove others wrong

Assumptions around the table

- all believers were involved
- all believers had an equal voice (against bishops, popes and councils)
- however, some voices (leaders) gained greater credence than others
- clarity of scripture

Conversation outcomes

- clear statements, boundaries and limits, certainty
- consensus and acceptance, or separation forming new groups

- Confessions (e.g. Schleithem) and Catechisms
- dissenters labelled, excommunicated and banned

## II. Looking Around in the 20th and 21st centuries

### Agenda on the table

- Scripture and its interpretation
- sola scriptura expanded by adding reason, experience, tradition and scholarly insights to the discussion
- relevance of ancient texts sought for new circumstances and challenges
- faithful discipleship

### Specific Issues

- theology - liberalism/fundamentalism, etc.
- diverse approaches to Scriptural interpretation
  - Conscientious Objectors and enlistees during war-time
  - end-times, dispensationalism and other views
  - involvement in social and state-related issues
  - separation and divorce, remarriage
  - conversion
  - women in ministry/leadership
  - music and worship styles
  - understandings of sexuality (Mennonite Church Canada's *Being a Faithful Church* process, 2009-2015)

### Criteria (underlying concerns and culture)

- being faithful to scripture, tradition, experience, reason
- clarifying our understandings
- increasing diversity, learning to accept others without unanimity
- Confessions of Faith
- discipleship
- agreement of the majority, consensus, abstention, or vote

### Increasing role of pastors, leaders, scholars, teachers, various voices

- preaching and teaching, itinerant resource people
- adult education
- *Der Bote, Canadian Mennonite, etc*
- denominational events, church-wide decisions
- multi-year processes like *Being a Faithful Church*

### Assumptions brought to the table

- everyone welcome to participate, yet limited participation
- scripture is complex rather than simple; background and genre matter
- pastors, scholars, leaders often have weightier insights than laity

## Outcomes

- agreement on many issues; changes in faith formulation and expression
- disagreement on many issues; diversity and individualism
- dissenters' options: stay as a minority, leave congregations and go elsewhere
- non-involvement by many

## III. Looking toward the future

The church's basic agenda as the interpreting community will continue to be faith and its expression in life. The questions focus on how the faith is understood and expressed, as well as how the faith is considered relevant for life. Everyone is invited to participate in the ongoing conversations in which Scripture is the dominant (but not only) conversation partner at the table. Reason, personal experience and tradition will also be taken into account. Clarification, discernment and inevitable diversity will emerge as a result of multiple conversations in a variety of conversation circles. Not everyone will be personally and actively involved in every circle, but over time, everyone will benefit from the contributions of each circle.

Everyone is uniquely gifted to contribute to growth in the Body. By this I mean that leaders, clergy, scholars and laity, women and men, younger and older, have roles to play in the process of interpretation. No one's voice, perspective or approach can be ignored. I see the interpreting community as the living, vibrant Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12) in which the contribution of each member is valued and considered. Rather than working toward uniformity, exciting and challenging diversity will be expected, affirmed and celebrated. In addition, I want to say that the ongoing conversations do not anticipate arriving at definitive answers for all time, but are an integral dimension of the community's journey of faith in the world.

Let's envision the church as a lively, interacting group of circles that invites all believers to become involved wherever they feel comfortable and curious. Rather than being over against others and wanting to be right while showing others to be wrong, we will commit ourselves to being open to fresh insights and understandings, as well as willing to consider new ethical discernment on specific issues as they arise. (E.g. William Wilberforce (England) and the Quakers (USA) in relation to slavery.) Let's assume that God's Spirit will continue to teach us new things as we converse with each other, seeking to understand the ancient word and the Living Word in our time.

Robert J. Suderman expressed it well in *God's People Now*, Scripture and "our Confession need to be a tool that allow us to be flexible, not entirely definitive; humble and not too dogmatic, relationally compassionate and not doctrinally cold; more relational and less propositional; more contextual and less categorical." (p. 71, *God's People Now* – [www.commonword.ca/go/1695](http://www.commonword.ca/go/1695))

The model is historically and theologically related to the Anabaptist model but will not be limited by it, neither by its assumptions nor by the level of implementation possible in the 16th century. In other words, I suggest the church, in order to be faithful, needs to be both, “rooted” and “winged”. “Rooted” suggests being grounded in a specific historical and theological tradition and “winged” suggests “going beyond”. Roots, paired with wings, does not simply allow for an uncritical idealization of the past (fossilization) but insists on repeated clarification of an earlier vision in the light of current understandings, needs and challenges. In the light of historical developments and contemporary needs, the Anabaptist vision of the church as the interpreting community provides significant but limited insights.

My earlier example of the experience of Israel in Nehemiah 8 as well as the experience of the early church in Acts 10-11 and 15 serve as biblical examples of being both rooted and winged. The apostle Peter is an example of someone who was rooted and grounded firmly in the theology and culture of Israel of his time. But prodded by the Spirit Peter had an unimaginable experience in the home of Cornelius, a Gentile. He struggled against the invitation but “took wing” in the presence of Gentiles, later declaring that he now “truly understood that God showed no partiality” (Acts 10:34-35). Peter’s experience is akin to that of Jonah as well. Jonah expressed anger with God as he confessed a daring theological and practical truth: “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:2). Israel preserved this “winged voice” that challenged the narrower view of many of his fellow Israelites.

Here are some specific ways in which the approach I have sketched will take wing and “go beyond”:

#### Beyond sola scriptura

- affirming the contributions of reason, experience and tradition alongside Scripture

#### Beyond a simple Bible

- affirming the contributions of research/scholarship that have helped us understand the nature of Scripture, taking the original historical settings into account as well as literary genres and inter-textual conversation preserved in the canon

#### Beyond defensiveness and certainty

- overcoming the stance of over-against-ness and welcoming the contributions of others engaged in Biblical study, interpretation, etc.
- overcoming the need to defend one’s own interpretation other than in a confessional way and not needing to come to definitive and certain conclusions; being able to live with uncertainty, ambiguity and diverse understandings

#### Beyond egalitarianism

- accepting the variety of gifts and levels of expertise and no longer thinking that everyone’s voice matters equally
- appreciating and accepting the insights that scholars bring to the table

Beyond conformity, condemnation and rejection

- the goal of being involved in Scripture study, interpretation and application is not that everyone agree and become uniform, but recognizes that understandings may differ and expressions of faithful discipleship will vary
- to resist the tendency of condemning those who differ, persecuting them or shunning and avoiding them
- to celebrate diversity rather than sameness, as the evocative images of the garden (1 Corinthians 3), the body (1 Corinthians 12) and the table (Romans 14-15) suggest. (See my 2015 presentation here – [www.commonword.ca/go/1687](http://www.commonword.ca/go/1687))

Beyond arriving to being on a journey

- the goal of engaging Scripture with others is not to finally arrive at the right interpretation but to be faithfully involved in the journey of active participation. (See also Note 3)

## Overlapping Conversation Circles

The church viewed as five overlapping and interacting “circles” helps clarify how interpreting community actually functions. The model assumes that the church is made up of several communities of ongoing conversation, discernment, and inevitable diversity. The conversations take place in each of the circles of the diagram. Each of the circles is important within the whole. It is not a matter of superiority but of differences and unique contributions. Each of the circles is in conversation with Scripture (using reason, experience and tradition as well as imagination) and contributes to the outcomes over time.



One of the church's circles of conversation and discernment is the limited but important conversation among scholars in academia, using the language they love. This happens in private studies and classrooms and in smaller and larger, formal and informal, groupings of biblical, theological and historical scholars. Very often the ongoing conversations are in written form.

A second circle of discernment is the gathering of scholars and researchers at professional theological and biblical conferences like SBL (Society of Biblical Literature) and AAR (American Academy of Religion), denominational conferences, as well as via journals. A variety of ideas/proposals are presented for peer testing and review. Papers are presented, drafts critiqued, etc. This circle is national and international as well as ecumenical. The "cream will rise to the top" and best insights will be published, primarily for other scholars. Reviews will be written and books will be used as textbooks in courses. (E.g. Waldemar Janzen's *Old Testament Ethics*, Harry Huebner's *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, or J. Denny Weaver's, *Nonviolent Atonement*.)

A third conversation circle of the interpreting community includes scholars who have the gift and calling, not only to write technical scholarly commentaries and texts (intended for academia), but also have the gift of writing for a wider audience of believers. I think here of Peter Enns's *Inspiration and Incarnation* as well as his *The Bible Tells Me So*, and his blogs and podcasts. Or, of Scot McKnight, who wrote a scholarly commentary on *James* but has also written for a much wider audience in *The Jesus Creed* or on biblical interpretation in *The Blue Parakeet*. In this circle, foundational scholarly work and research is expressed in language that is accessible to many.

A fourth conversation circle of the interpreting community is situated in local congregations throughout society. Here the mode of communication is primarily oral and secondarily written. In this circle pastors play a unique role as translators and bridge-builders. Pastors, because of their formal academic and professional training and their close involvement with laity in all walks of life, live in multiple worlds – the academic and the pastoral, the intellectual and the practical. Pastors are the essential bridge-builders between scholars and laity.

When pastors discover new insights in theological books that emerged in previous circles of discernment and from more widely-read popular books their own imagination is stimulated and their knowledge base is enlarged. They are inspired and instructed by fresh insights and new formulations and gradually incorporate new perspectives in their preaching, educational and pastoral work, in ways that are helpful and accessible to lay persons in the church. Many within the congregations will recognize and appreciate the value of new insights and approaches in the light of their own experiences and knowledge of Scripture. Some within the congregations will also enquire about further reading on topics that interest them. (See Note 3)

A fifth conversation circle of the interpreting community is found among church members who have heard new ideas from pastors and others persons they know and trust, and are inspired by them. They receive fresh insight that is relevant to their experience. Many of them will reflect further on what they have heard, some will have serious questions and reservations,

some will discuss new insights and approaches with others in their congregational or in trans-congregational and wider church contexts. A few will sit down with a pastor/teacher/scholar to explore the issues in greater depth. Some will attend courses like *Xplore: Keep Thinking* at CMU, or participate in public events and lectures at CMU or other school settings.

The cumulative and powerful impact of the process within these five conversational circles will probably never be quantified or recorded.

The work of this functioning five-circled interpretive community is to be wholeheartedly affirmed, encouraged and supported. All believers have opportunities to enter the conversation circles wherever they feel comfortable and where and when they have access and opportunity. (See Note 4)

Let's not lament the fact that only relatively few are actively involved in this hermeneutical process in all or even in several of the circles. There is no other way of working at it. We affirm, support and appreciate the contributions, perspectives and questions being shared in every one of the conversation circles: the tentative forays into new areas by scholars in academia; the fruit of discussions at theological conferences, the benefit of reading those who write for a wider audience, the important work being done by pastors in congregations, and the ongoing interaction among laity in local churches. We trust the process that is at work in every circle. The fruits of this incredible process of conversation and discernment in every circle will eventually become accessible to all. In these various ways the whole church becomes involved in the dynamic of an interpreting community.

Over time, this ongoing, patient process leads to fresh insights, new approaches and the realization that the church is more alive than asleep, more on a journey than at a destination, more flexible and changing than rigid and static. By engaging consciously, deliberately and with imagination in this five-circle process the church responds to contemporary challenges, well-rooted in the inspired ancient narrative, but never limited by previous generations' insights and practices.

From time to time the church will be able to conclude, as the church did in Acts, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." (Acts 15:28) Previous embryonic truth surfaced and flourished and the church was enabled to grow in its understanding and its faithful practice for the good of all.

May those who are involved and impacted by such an ongoing process, come to react the way Israel did in Nehemiah 8. Israel heard the engaging conversation with their inspired ancient texts and came to fresh understandings for their own time. May we, like them "rejoice greatly" because we are on a journey together with many others, and are growing in our understanding of the inspired ancient word in the light of changing circumstances!

## Notes

1. I gave a presentation affirming diversity in the church at a study Conference in Morden, MB on Sept 26, 2015, entitled, "On Being the Church: A Garden, A Body, A Table." This paper is available online at CommonWord under *Seeking to Be Faithful Together: The Bible and Same Sex Relationships* – [www.commonword.ca/go/1687](http://www.commonword.ca/go/1687).

2. Diversity (rather than uniformity and conformity) is a contentious issue in the church even though diversity has been affirmed. Jesus chose an unlikely group to form his disciple group and Paul proclaimed diversity by using powerful metaphors. I mention three of them: In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul speaks of the church as a garden and I assume he was thinking of a garden plot in Corinth in which an amazing variety of plants, flowers and vegetables grew, drawing sustenance from the same soil and water and sunlight. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul uses the metaphor of the Body, telling a diverse group of believers that they were in reality one body, though the individuality of each member had unique gifts given by the Spirit. The diversity in the body was not to foster division but to lead to a profound interdependence for the good of all. The third metaphor used by Paul is the table, the table of fellowship as shown in Romans 14:1-15:7. The obvious reality in the church was diversity. In this case he mentions the differences having to do with eating meat or eating vegetables only. Paul labels them as being either weak or strong and all being tempted either to judge the others (what the more conservative would do) or to despise the others (what the more liberal-minded would do). What is included in Paul's estimation was diversity in two spheres: the realm of faith and conviction and the realm of faith expression or discipleship. Paul did not urge them to come to agreement on matters of faith and discipleship but to each be convinced in his/her own mind before God (after theological reflection). Paul is so committed to affirming diversity under Christ that he then urges everyone to welcome and accept each other "at the table" not because they were of one mind, but because they were diverse in understanding and in discipleship, and most importantly because all of them, on the whole spectrum were welcomed and accepted by God through Christ. These three metaphors - garden, body and table - continue to shape the vision for the church in the world today. We are called to affirm and accept the diversity and learn to wholeheartedly accept everyone else who is also committed to following Jesus.

3. On a personal note I might mention that I wrote a series of three articles for *Canadian Mennonite* in 2008, entitled "Do you understand what you are reading?" – [www.commonword.ca/go/1688](http://www.commonword.ca/go/1688). The denominational paper was given an award for this series. John H. Neufeld's three-part series, *Reading the Bible for all its Worth*, earned first-place honours for *Canadian Mennonite* at this year's Canadian Church Press (CCP) convention and awards banquet, held in Toronto from May 13 to 15. "Neufeld's phenomenal ability to discuss sensitive theological matters in plain, down-to-earth English" was a deciding factor for the judge. This informative series of articles seems like a helpful, easy-to-follow beginner's introduction to reading the Bible as well as a healthy corrective for the rest of us. The layout of the article, including subheads, pull quotes and highlighted discussion questions helps greatly in making this a very readable series of articles."

4. Not everyone is ready to consider approaches and ideas about matters of faith and biblical interpretation that are different than how they were raised. They are comfortable with how they have understood faith and discipleship. In fact some may feel threatened by new approaches and fresh insights. Patience and wisdom may be called for. For some a biblical example or two might be of help. Jonah's angry reaction to God's abundant mercy (Jonah 4) may help some. Peter's change of theology and practice (after initial resistance) as reported by Luke in Acts 10-11, as well as Luke's account of the contentious issues that were debated at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) may help others. These biblical precedents give permission for adults to move to fresh understandings of faith

and discipleship. Others may be freed from a restricting past by public self-disclosure by a leader who is already trusted. Recently I read Brian McLaren's *The Great Migration* in which he affirms the "practice of corrigibility," the willingness to re-think and re-evaluate, as being a better alternative than digging in one's heels as if one has arrived at final truth. Some feel comfortable with an expression in Jude, "to contend for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints." (Jude 3) It seems obvious that neither Jonah nor Peter seemed to have agreed with Jude, nor did Ezra when he and his assistants read the ancient Torah "with interpretation." (Nehemiah 8)

5. During the drafting and re-drafting of this essay I shared earlier versions of this essay with the following: Jake Harms, Victor Kliewer, Waldemar Janzen, Anne H. Neufeld, Doug Klassen, John P. Klassen, Karl Koop, Rick Neufeld, Ryan Siemens, Tim Wiebe-Neufeld, Garry Janzen, Lisa Neufeld, Mark von Kampen, Erika Enns-Rodine, Kathy Koop, David Driedger, Henry Neufeld, Frank Derksen, Deb Froese, April Yamasaki, George Wall and Arlyn Friesen Epp. The responses I received were encouraging and motivated me to revise a number of things, thus improving the essay. Thanks to all who responded.