

BEING A FAITHFUL CHURCH (BFC) 4.1

Exercising Our Interpreting Muscles: Testing Our Interpretive Framework

Individual Study Material

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INTRODUCTION: ORIENTING OURSELVES¹

Biblical hermeneutics, the art and science of the study & interpretation of scripture, is one of the core spiritual disciplines of the Christian faith. In times of cultural ferment such as the Reformation or the present-day, it is often a renewed focus on scripture that plays a major role in renewing the church. Yet biblical hermeneutics is only one landmark, albeit a crucial one, along our journey of faith. We must not lose sight of the forest for the trees.

Scripture is a witness to the story of God's ongoing redemption of the cosmos in and through human history, but this redemption is an act of God and not scripture. Scripture may plot part of the history and trajectory of God's redeeming acts, but it is not the primary cause of those acts. At best, the word of scripture becomes transformative when inspired by the Holy Spirit. Personal transformation through God's revelation is the goal of all good biblical hermeneutics; in the Bible, we seek a real-time encounter with God.

As already noted, Western culture has been changing rapidly since the mid-20th century. The Being a Faithful Church (BFC) process affords us as a national church, and as individual churches, the opportunity for sustained reflection on the meaning of this cultural transformation for our identity and mission as Anabaptist-Christians. As historical "people of the book" in terms of our general identification with the Judeo-Christian tradition, and in terms of our particular identification as children of the Reformation, we believe that we are guided through such reflections by reflecting on the Bible. However, we are aware that postmodernity has led to an almost infinite variety of ways to read the Bible, with varying degrees of legitimacy. How do we discern between faithful and unfaithful readings of scripture? When we are unable to achieve consensus on the meaning of scripture, we can seek additional guidance from our faith tradition. Together, scripture and church history constitute one continuous and unified witness to the history and trajectory of God's redeeming acts. At times like this, it is appropriate to "ask" the forefathers of our faith, both Anabaptist and other, how they understood scripture and used it to respond to the concerns of their times. By setting these three "hermeneutical horizons" side-by-side – the horizons of scripture, church history, and the concerns raised by contemporary culture – this material aims to be both educational, and to plot a sort of "interpretive trajectory" which might help clarify how we might see God's kingdom take shape in the present. In short, scripture and tradition provide a more diverse and complete toolkit for discerning how God would have us respond to the challenges of postmodernity, such as changing understandings of human sexuality and relationships, changing views on (religious) truth (i.e. pluralism), and an increased awareness of our complex relationship with creation (i.e. ecology).

Our national BFC task force, together with the national assembly delegates at Vancouver 2012, have compiled a list of interpretive principles (the "paths" and "ditches") that they suggest guide faithful Mennonite-Anabaptist readings of the Bible.² These paths

¹ I am grateful to Ryan Dueck and Michael Pahl for the helpful discussions we were able to have regarding this material. Their practical wisdom is reflected throughout this entire document.

² If you do not already have it, this resource can be found online at <http://resources.mennonitechurch.ca/FileDownload/16231/BFC-4.pdf>.

and ditches are fully rooted both in scripture (“scripture interprets scripture” – Path 3) and in our Anabaptist-Mennonite faith tradition (Path 11; also see Appendix I). Because Anabaptists have historically believed that God’s guidance is best discerned by community consensus rather than in isolation by church leadership, we have been given the opportunity to provide feedback and guidance regarding this list of principles in an effort to make the list stronger, a more faithful reflection of the trajectory of God’s redeeming acts as charted through human history in both scripture and church history. The present material has been developed with an eye toward facilitating our collective engagement with this list, which it attempts to do by allowing each student to explore the witness of both scripture and tradition for him or herself, and weigh this witness against BFC’s 12 paths and 6 ditches. Are these paths and ditches an accurate reflection of God’s coming kingdom as spoken of in scripture and church history? Do they help us make well-informed and firmly grounded decisions about the issues facing us today? Can they be improved? Such are the types of questions we should be asking ourselves.

Although ideally we would spend a significant amount of group time together discussing such issues, the reality of our lives is that most of us are simply too busy to be able to co-ordinate our schedules for such sustained engagement. Thus, this material is designed primarily for individual study (although it may be useful for group study as well, and in different contexts from the present one). This individual study is an important first step toward intelligent and thorough community conversation on these issues, which should take place by at least January, 2013 in preparation for submitting the final results of our engagement to Mennonite Church Canada by January 31, 2013. This is the deadline provided by Mennonite Church Canada, so they have sufficient time to process and compile the results in preparation for the next step in the BFC process. Leaders in each church will arrange and notify you of the time and venue for public discussion, but if you are unable to attend your church’s meetings, unable to prepare your thoughts in time, or simply prefer to provide individual feedback directly to Mennonite Church Canada, simply ask your church leadership for the appropriate contact information.

A final word on this type of theological engagement. A common criticism of the BFC material thus far has been that it expects too much of our church-goers, both in the theological language used as well as in the complexity of the issues engaged. This material has been designed with such criticisms squarely in view, but no doubt many will continue to find the language at least stretching. This should not be viewed detrimentally. First of all, struggle is a necessary prerequisite to the achievement of anything of real value, and so the student is encouraged to view unfamiliar or difficult terminology and concepts as further opportunities to learn. Particularly with the resources available online, basic definitions and explanations of any concept are readily available. Secondly, biblical and theological concepts serve as a sort of short-hand description of the nature and meaning of our faith. The extent to which we fail or refuse to understand ourselves will be directly reflected in our surrender to other forms of media with less faithful definitions of God and humanity at their core. But thirdly and most importantly, God’s Spirit is not limited by our lack of understanding, or, to put it another way, one need not be a theologian or biblical scholar to be a Christian. This material was developed with the firm conviction that every single person who engages it will be able to draw something of significant value from it, as well as contribute something of significant value to the broader conversation of which this is a part. So don’t let anything you don’t completely understand become a barrier to your participation. Listen for God’s voice behind, within, and through every scripture, reading, and question contained below, and share what you hear with the rest of us!

STUDY #1: WORD AND SPIRIT

Bible Study

Spend some time reading each of the following scripture passages, paying special attention to the relationship of Word and Spirit, the internal and external dimensions of Christian faith. Use the following questions to help focus your reflection.

Ezekiel 36:22-37:14

John 2:13-3:15

2nd Corinthians 3:1-18

- Consider the relationship between Spirit and the Word (whether Ezekiel's prophetic word, the word of scripture itself, Jesus as the incarnate Word, or other aspects of God's Word) in each of these passages. What is the individual role of Spirit? Of Word? What is the result of their co-operation?
- Write down all the similarities and differences you can identify between the activities of Word and Spirit in each of these three passages. How do Jesus' and Paul's words maintain the truth of Ezekiel's (and each other's) perspective? What do they add or subtract from it?
- What does Paul teach us about applying Christ's truth (Word, scripture) to the life (Spirit) of the church? Write down all the principles that you can identify for applying scripture faithfully.

Anabaptist Origins

The sacramental theology characteristic of the medieval Roman Catholic church believed that God's grace was transmitted to human beings through objective acts such as baptism and the Eucharist, with little emphasis on the subjective attitude or orientation of the recipient. This explains the importance of the priesthood and the ritualistic form of such acts. There were medieval precursors to the Reformation's focal shift to the inward attitude of the individual, but the Reformation represented the first broad cultural reaction against grace conceived sacramentally in favor of grace conceived in relation to individual piety. Still, early Anabaptists such as Conrad Grebel and Pilgram Marpeck complained that the reformers were not wholly consistent in their application of the principle of sola fides ("by faith alone") to deconstruct sacramental theology. Grebel, Marpeck, and others argued that the reformers did not consistently apply their critique of sacramentalism to areas such as church-state relations and the Lord's Supper. Early Anabaptists put forth a radical theological critique of every transmission of grace by external form alone, and developed their own theologies with an emphasis on the internal disposition (faith) of the recipient of grace. However, they did not go as far as the spiritualists, who denied any importance to external form. Early Anabaptists developed a theology of Word and Spirit such that God's kingdom was present when God's objective revelation of grace (for example, in scripture) was met with an individual's subjective faith, which could be defined as having the Holy Spirit's presence within oneself. This theological stance attempted to maintain the importance of traditional Christian institutions such as

scripture, baptism, the Lord's Supper, doctrine, and tradition, while not allowing these tangible realities to displace the individual's role in their own journey of faith. It also provided the basic principle on which the Anabaptists constructed their church practices. Despite their radical critique of the traditions of the Roman Church and the Reformers, Anabaptists were not willing to reject the central elements of Christian tradition, including scripture, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. However, the Anabaptists reinterpreted the meaning of these traditional elements of Christian faith in a way that they felt did the most justice to both the widespread desire for increased individual freedom in their culture as well as to the witness of the New Testament regarding the requirement of individual faith for the full realization of God's grace. While the results of this reinterpretation were not immediately unanimous nor even consistent with each other, gradually a consensus emerged.

- Consider the tension inherent in the early Anabaptist position on Word and Spirit, and the attempt to steer themselves between over-emphases on Word (mainline Reformers & Catholicism) or Spirit (Spiritualists). Do you think our churches are faithfully maintaining this tension, or are we losing the delicate balance of faith by over-emphasizing certain external or internal dimensions of faith? What cultural influences are unbalancing our churches?
- The importance of an individual's religious freedom and the importance of personal faith are more or less taken for granted today. In many ways, postmodern culture poses the opposite problem, individualism taken to the extreme. In this context, the challenge of our world seems to be finding ways to unite individuals for a common purpose. What does early Anabaptist theology have to say about this problem? How does it contribute to this problem? Finally, how has the widespread cultural acceptance of individual faith and religious freedom contributed to the loss of the delicate balance between Word and Spirit?
- The Reformation was a reaction to a widespread cultural movement away from central principles of the gospel over a number of centuries. The Reformation was effective because everyone in European culture broadly accepted the basic principles of the Christian gospel. It is no secret that our culture, which is commonly referred to as 'secular' or 'post-Christian', is moving away from the gospel as well, but people no longer necessarily accept our values. How can the church issue a prophetic call to a culture that does not accept our values in the first place? How can the church foster internal unity within this broader atmosphere of cultural pluralism (i.e. acceptance of the legitimacy of many different value systems)?

🌐 Contemporary Application

Both the New Testament and our Anabaptist origins are built largely upon a recognition that human nature seems to often gravitate towards visible, tangible elements of faith, avoiding the hard work required to discern the hidden inner witness of God's Spirit within and among us. God's Spirit speaks to individuals personally, through the church, through nature, and through broader culture. How have we

become a people walking by sight rather than faith, focusing too much on one sphere of God's speech that we have become blind to it in other areas? A correct answer to our present difficulties will be heard when we can discern a growing consensus between the voices of scripture, culture, and personal faith. Then we will be able to say with confidence that "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28) God is speaking, and correct hearing will require cultivating habits of receptivity and openness. Each day, try to find ways to listen for God's voice in areas where you do not typically think of God speaking.

✂ BFC Application

BFC will only be successful if it has no predetermined outcome, but rather attempts to be an exercise in open discernment of God's will for us in the present. As you consider the paths and ditches listed in the BFC 4 document, do you think they encourage openness and receptivity to God's Spirit in the ways we approach scripture? Are these paths and ditches a faithful expression of the trajectory of Word and Spirit outlined in Scripture and in our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition?

STUDY #2: SOLA SCRIPTURA?

Bible Study

Spend some time reading the following scripture passages and consider especially the relationship between God's Word (or scripture) and God's will, purpose, and intentions. Use the following questions to guide your reflection.

Isaiah 55:1-13

John 5:30-47

2nd Timothy 3:10-4:8

- Consider the comparisons which each of these passages draws between different forms of revelation or witnesses to God, and God's Word. What are the similarities between all forms of revelation? What constitutes the uniqueness and special importance of scripture as God's Word?
- Each of these passages has something to say about God's purpose or will for His Word. What is that purpose? How do each of these passages teach us to discern God's purposes? What role do other forms of revelation (e.g. nature, through fellow believers, "gut" instinct, etc.) play in God speaking to us? Think of as many ordinary features of daily life as you can through which God reveals His intentions to us.
- Try to write a definition of revelation, including your thoughts on its origin, its external forms, and its ultimate purpose or intent from both human and divine perspectives. What do you think it means that God chooses to reveal Himself to us in such a way? Does your definition of revelation coincide with your understanding of the nature and purpose of Christ, the core of your faith?

Anabaptist Origins

Along with the Reformation's increasing emphasis on individual faith for the incarnation of God's kingdom came a corresponding questioning of the authority of institutions such as the priesthood. As Luther's 95 theses illustrate, it was becoming much more acceptable for individuals to question the validity of traditions, institutions, and received interpretations of scripture. But in order for this questioning to avoid turning the truth of God's revelation into whatever each person wanted it to be, some external criteria was needed by which to judge all interpretations. The Reformation principle of sola scriptura indicated that the unchanging words of the scriptural canon were to be that standard. While early Anabaptists agreed with the principle of sola scriptura, they felt that the Protestant outworking of this question gave too much authority to scripture itself and begged some important questions regarding the role of the church and individuals for good scriptural interpretation. For the first Anabaptists, God's word to the church in scripture could only be properly heard when the words of scripture were received in faith. The faithful reception of scripture involved at least two things. First, although it presumed individual study and attention to scripture, it also understood the human propensity to error and to hear what we want to hear, and so early Anabaptists took seriously the principle of

Matthew 18:20, that Christ is especially present where two or three gather. Among other things, the Anabaptists took this to mean that scripture was best read and discussed together so that the group could correct individual misreadings of scripture. Second, the Anabaptist emphasis on individual faith meant that a willingness to obey scripture was always necessary and implied in any good interpretation. Faith could not be divorced from good works, and good scriptural interpretation could not just be a matter of good theory, but required enactment. This is most evident in the distinctive Anabaptist perspective on the Sermon on the Mount, but extends to all scripture. Together, these two aspects of faith defined early Anabaptist readings of scripture and led the early Anabaptist communities to their reputation for integrity and faithfulness, even in the face of severe persecution.

- The Anabaptists attempted to find a third way beyond the Protestant emphasis on scripture itself (every Christian was qualified to interpret scripture for himself) and the Catholic emphasis on priestly authority (only certain Christians were qualified to interpret scripture), by placing the correct interpretation of scripture in the hands of the church community. To understand scripture as a community presupposes the unity of the group, a unity which is reflected in consensus regarding the meaning of scripture. Such consensus is not easily won, but it is crucial to communal unity. Reflect on what might be required to achieve such unity in your church, and among our broader church family. Are we willing to commit the time and individual energy to achieving such unity? If not, why not? Is Anabaptist theology irrelevant at this point, or have we become too conformed to the “pattern of this world” (Rom. 12:1-2)?
- The Anabaptist understanding that scripture is best read in community in order to protect against individual misreadings can be applied more broadly to the church through history. We can enter into conversation with other church groups, other denominations, and even scriptural interpretations from other times throughout church history in order to weigh our own readings of scripture. How open do you think our churches are to this type of conversation? Are there any dangers inherent to such conversations? How open do you think the early Anabaptists were to dialoguing with other Christian traditions?
- The early Anabaptist way of binding scriptural interpretation to the concrete church and to individual and communal discipleship provides an organic means of “practicing what we preach”, something many Christian groups have been criticized for throughout church history. In what ways have we lost this focus on the unity of belief and practice in our churches? How are we still faithful to this principle?

🌐 Contemporary Application

Scriptural study is important, and is in some ways the subject of the entire BFC process. Yet Jesus’s words in John 5:39 must serve as a continual warning for us in the present to not lose sight of the forest in our focus on the trees. Scripture is not ultimate, but is ultimately only the witness to Christ. As such, our interpretation of scripture is

important for maintaining and developing our relationship with Christ but can never take the place of the relationship. Several of the Paths outlined in the BFC document, as well as some of the principles that have guided this process from the start, make it clear that we as a church have consistently been aware of this danger. Yet the human tendency to seek firm universal laws to live by in place of a spirit which responds to each situation individually remains a primary danger. In what ways have we neglected the Spirit for the Word? How is it liberating to understand scripture as a witness to Christ rather than another incarnation of God (bibliolatry)? What difficulties does such an approach have? In your own spiritual life, take time to reflect on the sorts of things that distract you from following Christ, particularly the ways in which the forms and emphases of your religion or faith tradition serve as a hindrance rather than a help. In what ways does your faith tradition serve to enhance your discipleship? Since Christian faith is intended to promote conformity to the model of Christ and non-conformity to the world, be vigilant for ways that your faith has been modeled on the world rather than Christ.

✂ BFC Application

BFC is a practical process intended to help us make faithful decisions by improving our ability to hear God's voice in scripture. Take time to consider the 'paths' and 'ditches' outlined in the BFC 4 document, and consider if they adequately express an openness to the spirit of the Word, as well as adequately guard against our enduring tendency toward different forms of legalism, and our seemingly innate desire to have scripture say what we want to hear.

STUDY #3: CHURCH POLITICS

Bible Study

Spend some time reading each of the following scripture passages with a special sensitivity to teachings on human and divine forms of power and authority, and their relationship to our individual ability to judge truth. Use the following questions to help focus your reflection.

1st Samuel 8:1-22

Luke 23:1-56 (cf. Luke 20:19-26)

Romans 12:1-13:14

- Each of these scripture passages has a great deal to say about the nature of individual freedom/faith, political power, and their relationship. Write down as many principles as you can find in each passage about these three dimensions of human existence. Especially reflect on the paradox implicit in Samuel's warning to the people, that through their choice of a king – a choice borne out of a desire for greater independence (v.7) – they will lose a great deal of their freedom and independence. How have we given up some of our religious freedom in our desire for more worldly forms of independence?
- 1 Samuel 8 and Luke 23 develop stark contrasts between the kingdoms of God and the world. How can we reconcile these teachings with the apparently contradictory teaching of Romans 13:1-7? Does such a reconciliation respect the authority of Romans 13:1-7, or does it subject it to our own personal biases and desires? Does reading Romans 13:1-7 in the context of Paul's preceding and following words help resolve this difficulty?
- In John 5 above (Study #2), Jesus teaches that genuine authority comes by making true judgments. There are several contrasts laid out in Luke 23 that can help us further develop our understanding of the connection between personal judgment and authority. Consider the two thieves' differing judgments of Jesus in relation to their perceptions of their own situations, or reflect on the ease with which everyone throughout this passage seems to judge Jesus, but no judgment is offered by his closest companions (v.49). Finally, think about Jesus' various responses to the judgments others make of him. What do you learn about the nature of human judgment and its connection to authority, both divine and human? Reflect on the ways in which Christians tend to use the authority of scripture, and whose kingdom such uses reflect.

Anabaptist Origins

Ever since the Roman Emperor Constantine had given the Christian church a royal mandate in 330 AD, a great deal of overlap had developed in peoples' political and religious lives. To a great extent, religious and spiritual status gradually came to be defined by geographical location and by certain cultural and political actions. The

Protestant Reformers sought to renew the difference between church and state by demarcating the roles of each from the other, but continued to believe the purposes of church and state were essentially in harmony with each other, and that both had important roles to play in bringing about God's kingdom. The early Anabaptists held adamantly to the view that church and state were two entirely different kinds of kingdom, and thus that they had entirely different rights and responsibilities. Although certain monastic orders and late medieval brotherhoods may have served as examples for the new Anabaptist communities, the key paradigm was always the New Testament church. While the Reformers seemed to make excuses for an impotent church with their doctrine that the true church was the invisible church, and that the visible church was inevitably a mixture of holy and profane, the Anabaptists argued that the visible church should be the true church, an accurate representation of the New Testament prototype. The Anabaptist emphasis on the church's opposition to the state provided a rationalization for the persecution 16th century Anabaptists received, and their emphasis on visible holiness led to a theology of strict church discipline and the infamous ban. While the legacy of the Anabaptist doctrine of church and state is varied, their emphasis on unequivocally making the Christian a citizen of God's kingdom first, and the state second, was built on their reading of the New Testament and particularly the gospels and Christ's encounter with Jewish and Roman authority.

- Do you think that the Anabaptist theology of church and state has outlived its usefulness? In a world where there is already so much division and violence, perhaps our focus needs to be on working together as much as possible rather than criticizing each other? Given that historical Anabaptist readings of the New Testament are so bound up with this political doctrine, how could we hope to reinterpret our tradition and our understanding of scripture faithfully, were we to change our view on this topic? Or, to put the same question another way, can we remain Anabaptist if we change the nature of our relationship with the state?
- In the present, the separation of church and state is most often a right granted the church by the state, but in the 16th century this principle was seen as a call to action by and for the church. How are the two views of the origin and purpose of church/state separation different, and how might they create different types of churches? How can our churches continue/recover faithfulness to the biblical teaching on the two kingdoms in this new context?
- How do we maintain our separation and independence from the governments of our day? Do our associations and para-church organizations compromise our witness and our ability to be faithful?
- Doesn't our Anabaptist theology of the opposition of church to world perpetuate a form of violence, since the world cannot help but understand our criticism of them as an attack? Are our theologies of peace and politics in conflict at this point in our system of belief? Is there a better way to understand the relationship of church and world that does more justice to Anabaptist-Mennonite peace theology?

📍 Contemporary Application

As the first verses from Romans 12 illustrate, conformity to the world is an omnipresent danger for the Christian in every era of history, yet the specific issues and temptations to conform are always different. While the desire or temptation to conform seems to be a universal feature of human nature, the particular areas where we must combat conformity are determined by our individual personalities and tendencies, as well as by the changing “personalities” or tendencies of our churches and our culture at large. In the 16th century, one prophetic warning against conformity took the form of a critique of the state. This makes sense largely because “the state” can be understood as shorthand for the entirety of culture, since political and ecclesiastical governments determined the shape and context for virtually every major dimension of human life. In the 21st century however, church and state contribute to the shape of individual existence but are not nearly as all-encompassing as they were 500 years ago. Consider the roots of the Anabaptist principle of non-conformity. How might the Reformation-era critique of the state be translated into today’s vernacular? How are today’s dominant cultural influences such as entertainment, consumerism and economics, information and technology, and hyper individualism, simply different expressions of the same phenomenon which the 16th century Anabaptists described as “the state”, and which Paul speaks of in Romans 12? According to Luke 23, what might Christian non-conformity to such phenomena involve? As you walk your journey of faith today, consider how you are living in conformity to the world, and try to imagine ways in which your habits of conformity might be broken. How can the life, death, and resurrection of Christ liberate us from our conformity in a true Christian eschatological sense, that is, not just in the future but in the present as well?

✂ BFC Application

BFC is supposed to help us critically engage our culture, and discern answers to the issues it raises for our churches. Please consider carefully the ‘paths’ and ‘ditches’ outlined in the BFC 4 document, and identify whether or not they faithfully guide our interpretations of scripture in a direction that allows us to perceive both the dangers of culture as well as the ways God may be speaking to us through culture (cf. the blessing God bestows upon Judah through the Persian king Cyrus in Is. 44-45). In terms of the pitfalls of our culture, do the ‘paths’ and ‘ditches’ of BFC help to guide us around those pits, and to plot an alternate path for the church?

STUDY #4: THE NARROW, WINDING PATH

Bible Study

Spend some time reading the following scripture passages, especially in terms of the concepts of holiness and discipleship. Use the following questions to guide your reflection.

Leviticus 19:1-18

Matthew 10:16-39

1 Peter 1:13-25

- Write down the different ways in which each of these passages characterizes the distinction between God's holy people, and the world. As Mennonite-Anabaptists, we often consider the New Testament as our main witness to the gospel of peace, but out of these three passages, the two New Testament scriptures are characterized by much more violent or oppositional language than the Leviticus passage. How can we explain the opposition between church and world that Jesus and Peter describe, while remaining faithful to our identity as a peace church? Are there particular verses within the Matthew and 1 Peter passages that help us resolve or at least understand this tension? Consider how Leviticus helps us answer these questions.
- From your reading of these passages, define in your own words what it means to be "holy". After you are finished writing your definition, think about whether your definition of holiness focuses more on concrete, well-defined thoughts and actions, or on more generalized tendencies of thought and action. What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of thinking about discipleship in either of these ways? How does focusing too much on either the present or the distant future diminish the true meaning of discipleship and holiness?
- Leviticus was a priestly document written to govern the internal behavior of a community in the wilderness, under no immediate threat from other cultures or religious practices. Matthew was written to a predominantly first-century Jewish audience who was grappling with the meaning of Christ's life, death, and resurrection for their own historical religious traditions. And 1 Peter was written to a group of churches suffering persecution in the Roman Empire. With these differing historical contexts in mind, reflect on each passage's particular teaching about holiness and discipleship. Do these historical contexts help you answer questions #1 & 2 above? Does the particular context of each passage help you perceive an underlying, universal principle to which all three passages testify?

Anabaptist Origins

Genuine Christian faith has always conflicted at key points with the expectations and demands of the world. In the early Christian centuries, this conflict often arose around the emperor cult, where once a year every citizen of the Roman Empire was required

to burn a pinch of incense to Caesar as an act of worship. Because of their understandings of the essence of Christianity (spirit & freedom, Study #1) and the relationship between church and world (Study #3), early Anabaptists placed a great deal of emphasis on practical discipleship, the day-to-day living out of the gospel. Although Anabaptist theology was not opposed in principle to the earthly “principalities and powers”, in practical terms there could not help being spheres of life where the nature of state and culture demanded a conformity that the church could not give. Claus Felbinger wrote in 1560, “The government should be a shield for the just. For this reason the Lord has placed a sword in its hand...that it may be able to execute its office and protect the just. If it does not do so, God will punish it the harder. Therefore we are gladly and willingly subject to the government for the Lord’s sake, and in all just matters we will in no way oppose it. When, however, the government requires of us what is contrary to our faith and conscience – as swearing oaths and paying hangman’s due or taxes for war – then we do not obey its command. This we do not do out of obstinacy or pride, but only out of pure fear of God. For it is our duty to obey God rather than men.”³ Thus the life of the believer was one of reasoned discernment and deliberate choice rather than unquestioning acceptance. An individual’s choice to be (re)baptized was the paradigmatic act of such discipleship, and represented a personal understanding that the way of Christ was a path of discerning non-conformity which would necessarily precipitate persecution at certain points. Discipleship was thus quite literally understood as the way of the cross, and baptism signified the believer’s conscious choice to turn from the way of the world, take up her cross, and live a life of fidelity to God, the church, and all of humanity.

- Key areas of discipleship for any age arise at junctures where the world challenges core Christian claims. In what spheres of human life in 21st century North America is the world challenging the church? Are such challenges directed at the inner dimension of personal faith or are they directed at the external expression of faith? What is the relationship between Christian faith and Christian ethics?
- In the 16th century, adult (re)baptism was an act of radical non-conformity just like the early church’s refusal to engage in emperor worship. What concrete acts might play a similar role in the present? Consider which types of actions might most raise the ire of our surrounding culture. Does this give us clues to the areas in which non-conformity might be required?
- Throughout church history, redefinitions of the central acts of the church – baptism and the Lord’s Supper – have served as a sort of shorthand for a great deal of a particular denomination’s theology. Early Anabaptists sought to redefine the theology and practice of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in keeping with their attempt to re-appropriate their understanding of the heart of the gospel from the New Testament. Do you understand the symbolism and theology underlying these acts as

³ Quoted in William Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 196.

they are practiced in your church today? Is it desirable or necessary to translate or “update” our theology and practice of these acts in order for them to be a more meaningful expression of faith in the 21st century?

Contemporary Application

Holiness and discipleship are complementary concepts that help us understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and that help us understand how to lead a faithful life, that is, a life of integrity in belief and action. One of the dominant themes throughout scripture is the engagement of God’s people with their surrounding culture, whether that culture is one that looks very similar or very different to themselves. Regardless of the precise nature of their surroundings, God’s people are called to incarnate God’s kingdom faithfully. This mission is an act of worship and faith, but it is also a very human act, requiring thoughtful discernment about precisely where the kingdoms of God and the world most diverge from each other, as well as where they might converge. Especially in contemporary Western culture, which has experienced two millennia of Christian influence, we should expect many areas of our culture to mirror elements of the gospel. But we must also be “wise as serpents”, understanding that human nature tends to twist even the most beautiful truth to suit our own purposes. The Reformation identified within the extreme convergence of culture and the medieval Catholic church an extreme divergence between the witness of scripture and the holiness of the church. All Reformation-era theology must be understood within this context, as an attempt to reform the church, or recover something that had been lost via the guidance of scripture. The story of Anabaptism often emphasizes persecution, martyrdom, and its opposition to the ruling authorities – whether Catholic or Protestant – but as Claus Felbinger illustrates, early Anabaptists were not necessarily opposed to their surrounding culture in principle, but sought to thoughtfully discern where culture remained faithful to the gospel, and where it departed, always using scripture as their guide. Reflect on your own life and identify the areas in which you experience the most difficulty in maintaining the integrity of your faith. Why are these particular areas challenging? What is it about human nature, your particular personality, and/or the nature of our culture in the present that erects a wall between your beliefs and your actions? Now consider the areas in which the church is most struggling to maintain a faithful witness. Are these areas the same ones identified as some of the challenges that got the BFC process started (see page 3 this document: http://resources.mennonitechurch.ca/FileDownload/16087/BFC-1_2_3_4_4.1.pdf)?

BFC Application

The stated purpose of BFC is to facilitate our unity as a church, more so than solving particular problems or learning to interpret scripture together more effectively. Re-read the ‘paths’ and ‘ditches’ of BFC 4, and think about whether their collective trajectory or combined witness promotes an approach to scripture that you can agree with. Is this a solid approach to our unity as a national church, at least in terms of our approach to scripture? Are there particular ‘paths’ or ‘ditches’ that you don’t agree with, or that seem to promote conflict or disunity?

STUDY #5: SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT

Bible Study

Spend some time reading the following scripture passages and consider especially what each passage has to say about peace (either implicitly or explicitly), and the relationship of peace to historical time (in other words, is peace described as a present reality, a future hope, or both). Use the following questions to guide your reflection.

Psalm 34:1-22

Matthew 5:2-20

Colossians 3:1-17

- Use the internet to look up the meaning of the Jewish concept of ‘shalom’. With the results of your research in mind, consider whether these scripture passages echo this concept or modify it in some way. Try to identify how the teaching of the Old Testament is modified or developed in Matthew 5, and then again in Colossians 3. What stays the same in all three passages?
- The Psalms are ancient Jewish wisdom literature, a unique synthesis of teachings about God and advice for daily living. Several of Matthew’s Beatitudes are quotes taken directly from the Psalms and other parts of the Old Testament, and the entire scripture passage from Matthew 5 (as well as the whole Sermon on the Mount) is a practical teaching on the relationship of Christ and the Jewish religion. Colossians teaches the nature of wisdom modeled after Christ rather than either Greek philosophy or Jewish wisdom. Considering the common themes of wisdom that underlie each of these passages, what is it that Matthew and Paul tell us about Christ that leads Paul to say that there is no longer “Greek or Jew” but that somehow, these two conflicting forms of wisdom are now both reconciled and fulfilled in Christ? Is anything lost of Jewish or Greek traditions when they are translated into the wisdom of Christ? Is any such loss brought about by peace or by violence?
- Considering especially scripture passages like Matthew 10:16-30 from Study #4 above, we must acknowledge that violence in certain forms will always be part of our Christian experience. Indeed, Mennonite Scholar Tom Yoder Neufeld has recently written a book (*Killing Enmity*) that frankly acknowledges the difficulty of the New Testament witness for straightforwardly justifying a pacifist theology, since there are many passages that either seem to promote types of violence (e.g. John 2:13-22) or, even when speaking about salvation, peace, or reconciliation, do so using militaristic imagery or other forms of language rooted in violence. Think about the biblical teaching on peace in relationship to its admonition to be prepared for violence. What does this teach you about where peace begins? Is there a legitimate place for violence in the Christian life – that is, can some (or all) forms of violence serve redemptive roles in our lives? How so?

- 20th century Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has argued that peace was not simply a matter of the absence of war and physical violence, but is a much deeper experience of human existence, a basic feature of created human nature that can be experienced in every face-to-face encounter with another person, since such encounters – even if they end in violence – require an initial openness or receptivity to another person as an individual with something new and important to teach us. Levinas suggests that this version of peace (“shalom”) lies at the heart of Jewish religion, and is also the fundamental teaching of Christ, and so Levinas argues that Christ actually didn’t reveal anything to us but what was already present in the Old Testament. What do you think of Levinas’ understanding of peace and human nature? How would you respond to Levinas’ defense of Judaism over against Christianity? What does Christ contribute to our thinking about peace that Levinas fails to acknowledge?

✚ Anabaptist Origins

No single idea is considered more characteristic of Anabaptism and Mennonites than pacifism. Yet even though contemporary Anabaptist churches have become known as “peace churches”, the history of Anabaptism is not entirely unified on this issue. To begin with, there are what most Anabaptists consider aberrations of faithful Anabaptism, such as the apocalyptic violence of Anabaptist rule in Münster from 1534-1535 or Mennonites participating in active military service in the 20th century. John Howard Yoder describes many different traditions that influenced early Anabaptist perspectives on war and peace, a diversity that has not lessened in the intervening years since the Reformation.⁴ Despite this diversity though, a strong case can be made that pacifism is the majority position of the Anabaptist tradition since its inception. Early Anabaptist stances on war and peace were strongly influenced by their experience of coercive religion, as enforced by both state churches (whether Protestant or Catholic) and the state per se. The early Anabaptists argued that religion cannot be coerced, nor is coercion an accurate expression of true religion. Although coercion was fundamentally an assault against freedom of conscience (see Study #1 above), it almost always manifested itself in more concrete forms of violence. State churches believed they possessed the sword as part of their divine mandate, and wielded the sword readily as long as the end justified such means. In contrast, many Anabaptists argued that such violence was a primary example of the way in which the church had become bewitched by the world, resulting in theological abstraction that justified non-Christian practices instead of fidelity to biblical revelation. By the time of the Schleithem Confession in early 1527, only a couple years after Grebel and company’s break with Zwingli in Zurich, the Brethren stated in Article 6 their unanimity that “[t]he sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ.” The faithful practice of non-resistance that characterized early Anabaptist responses to their

⁴ See John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, edited by Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), esp. chapter 12.

persecutors spoke much more clearly in many instances than their biblical arguments in disputations with their theological opponents.

- Do you think the Anabaptist understanding of peace is faithful to the Bible's teaching on peace? Did the early Anabaptists over-emphasize certain ideas, and miss others? Does early Anabaptist peace theology, a response to a concrete historical situation, still apply with equal relevance today?
- Consider the connection between early Anabaptist theological reflection, their cultural situation that called for such reflection, and their practical living-out of their theology. What can we learn from our forefathers about the role and importance of theology, as well as the connection of theology to everyday life?
- If you have access to it, read the first few pages of Menno Simons' "Brief and Clear Confession" ("Brief and Clear Confession" in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c.1496-1561*, translated by Leonard Verduin and edited by J.C. Wenger, Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956, p.422-425, or online at <http://www.mennosimons.net/ft121-preface.html>). Does the vision of peace put forth in Simons' text reflect our contemporary Mennonite notion of peace? Is there a different tone or emphasis to either one? What sort of relationship is there between peace and salvation for Simons?

Contemporary Application

Many Anabaptist groups have done a remarkable job of translating their understanding of the gospel of peace into a social gospel – that is, in translating theology into a concrete ethics that extends well beyond the more obvious forms of violence such as war. Even if organizations like MCC, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, MDS, and other less “organized” responses to genuine need do not get as much public attention as other forms of Christian social or political activism, at least in our churches we are well aware of the remarkable work that is done by such groups in the name of bringing peace on earth. However, certain Anabaptist groups, including our own denomination, have been subject to criticism for our lack of attention to the more personal dimensions of the gospel and Christian spirituality. Some “outsiders” that have attended Mennonite churches have commented that while the church is friendly and does many “good” things, there is little personal spiritual nourishment to be found. Many of the issues we debate internally within our church are cited as examples of a failure to adequately emphasize individual faith, examples such as our inability to come to a resolution on issues such as human sexuality or pluralism. Another example can be cited from the material made available for our worship services this past summer called “Seek Peace and Pursue It”. Some church members noticed that there was no emphasis on inward or personal peace, and instead a complete focus on various forms of the social gospel. Turn as much of an objective eye inward on our churches as you can for a moment, and consider whether we have devalued or even missed an important dimension of Christ’s teaching on peace. Is this criticism valid, or is it a result of a misunderstanding of Mennonite theology and practice? How can we

preach peace publically if we cannot even keep our own house in order? Early Anabaptists initiated our focus on peace and social ethics, but they were also charismatically evangelical, strongly emphasizing personal faith and spirituality. Are we conforming to the “pattern of the age” by de-emphasizing personal faith?

✂ BFC Application

Consider the “paths” and “ditches” outlined in BFC 4. Do these principles of biblical interpretation promote an unbalanced view of the gospel of peace? Do you think that different rules of scriptural interpretation apply to individual (“devotional”) and communal (“ecclesial”) readings of scripture? Do the “paths” and “ditches” of BFC 4 allow room for both types of reading, or do they favor one in particular?

STUDY #6: "...THAT THEY MAY BE ONE, EVEN AS WE ARE ONE."

Bible Study

Spend some time reading the following scripture passages and reflect on the manner in which love describes both God's inner nature and humanity's fundamental response to this reality. Use the following questions to guide your reflection.

Exodus 33:12-34:9

Mark 12:28-34

1 John 4:7-5:5

- Each of these passages is rooted in profound encounters of individuals (and communities) with God. Reflect on what each of these passages reveals about God, and the individual human responses to this revelation. How does the human understanding of God change from the Old Testament to the New Testament, and how does the human response to God correspondingly change? What are the differences between human and divine love? How can humans most clearly reflect love as God's divine essence?
- Consider the scribe's dialogue with Jesus as a bridge between the passages from Exodus and 1 John. How does this encounter account for the paradoxical realities of God's love for, and judgment of, humanity? Does 1 John 4-5 provide any clues? How does God's judgment differ from human judgment?
- Meditate on the recurring refrain throughout scripture, that "the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love." Contrast this creed with the teaching of love and fear in 1 John 4:18. Do grace, compassion, and slowness to anger sufficiently define love? How does fear cause us to refrain from loving our neighbors? What happens to the things we fear, and to ourselves, if love becomes our primary focus? With these notions of love and fear in mind, write your own definition of church unity (cf. John 17:20-26).

Anabaptist Origins

It is well known that the original impetus of the Reformation was "reform" rather than division. This is true of Martin Luther's initial proposal for church reform nailed to the door of the church in Wittenberg, as well as for early Anabaptist expressions of faith. The Swiss Brethren only separated from the Zurich reformers after their pleas for a more consistent outworking of the gospel went unheeded. Yet as children of the Reformation, Anabaptists often seem to carry a "genetic" disposition toward fragmentation and division. But consider the issue of Reformation-era church division in more depth. Various expressions of Christian faith including Anabaptism diverged from these major streams of faith only because they did not find a hospitable reception in their "home" churches. Perhaps if the established churches had been more willing to engage in conversation and more reticent to judge, some division could have been prevented. Furthermore, another perspective is provided once the early Anabaptist

movement began to coalesce. Again, the Schleithem Confession illustrates the early leaders' great emphasis on a "pure" or unified church. This is the impetus for their theology of the ban (excommunication), the imposition of extreme church discipline in the place of political or external violence. Consider how the call to Christian unity looks much different to insiders and outsiders. For those who are largely outsiders in their own tradition, the call to purity becomes a type of prophetic proclamation intended to recall their brethren to faithfulness. But for those who make themselves outsiders to the tradition per se, often the tradition is forsaken completely and the call to purity is redirected toward those who have likewise 'given up' on the tradition. In this second context, the call to purity assumes a priestly function, serving to demarcate the lines of belonging and exclusion within their own community. Ironically, once such lines of demarcation are drawn, those who were 'outsiders' in their broader tradition have become 'insiders' in their own community, and have gone ahead and made 'outsiders' of those in the tradition from which they have departed. This progression from the attempt at prophetic renewal to a break and the perpetuation of a new priesthood is evident in the development of early Anabaptism. Consider the tension that lies between prophetic renewal and a priestly maintaining of the status quo, particularly in light of the story in Acts 5:17-42.

- It is often said by historians that "those who do not understand history are doomed to repeat it." Is there a better way to understand the development of 16th century Anabaptism and its relation to the established Roman church (as well as the mainstream Reformation) than the usual story of division and discord? How have our perceptions of our own history been conforming to the pattern of this world (Rom. 12:1) rather than our own theology? How might we re-describe our historical origins in keeping with a theology of peace, as well as in keeping with the unity of love that scripture depicts, so that we can avoid perpetuating division and discord in our own churches today? Does thinking along these lines help to imagine a way we can agree to disagree, or even go our separate ways, without such a divergence becoming a negative thing?
- How can we be faithful judges of ourselves, others, our churches, and our culture without usurping Christ's role as the final judge? What sorts of attitudes or actions should characterize our attempts to acknowledge Christ's right to judgment? What do you make of our difficulties in being both gracious and truthful (cf. John 1:14)?
- The church is hearing many voices advocating prophetic renewal, but these voices are being countered by other voices that are suspicious of these "prophets" and wish to maintain the status quo. Is there a way to understand both types of voices as equally faithful witnesses to God's truth? How might the church do justice to the concerns of both points of view?

Contemporary Application

In his book After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity, Miroslav Volf examines the nature of the church in postmodern culture. Volf concludes that the

believer's church is the best form of church to address the needs of a postmodern culture. In particular, Volf suggests that while a Christian unity based on individual choice is the hardest sort of communion to achieve (as opposed to, say, a communion based on priestly authority or other "top-down" models), it is the most authentic sort of unity. Furthermore, Volf argues that such unity does not require theological conformity but in fact must allow theological diversity, since true Christian unity is built not on doctrine or other beliefs, but on an openness to the ongoing work of the Triune God in our midst, an ongoing work that does not (usually) come 'out of the blue' but rather through the concrete people and situations which we encounter on a daily basis. Volf's argument, though expressed in the language of theology, echoes the centrality which the New Testament gives to the concept of love. The witness of scripture and church history are unified in affirming the centrality of love for our faith. Of course, scripture and church history illustrate many ways to understand love, and as Christians we must decide which of these aspects of love are legitimate, as well as which to give pride of place in our theology and practice. However, as humans love is something we seem to understand somewhat intuitively, something that – it might be said – we are created to experience and to give. Yet we can all point to aspects of our individual experiences that keep us from experiencing love, and from giving love to others. Psychologists tell us that such experiences are rooted in fear. In both psychological and theological spheres then, there are very close parallels between fear and division on one hand, and love and unity on the other. Consider how fear drives us inward and away from those different from us, while love promotes openness and receptivity to those who are different, and what we have to learn from them. Refer to famous biblical passages like Col. 3:14, 1 Cor. 13, and 1 John 4:18. Consider how (and who) we fear, and what those fears tell us about ourselves. The point of the entire BFC process is to promote an intelligent and proactive engagement with postmodern Western culture, a culture that poses distinct challenges for our faith. How can we engage our culture proactively, and not out of a spirit of fear of difference, but out of love and a desire to learn together.

✂ BFC Application

Consider the "paths" and "ditches" in the BFC 4 document. Do you think these principles of Biblical interpretation are borne out of a spirit of genuine Christian love for each other in our church, and for our surrounding culture, or can you detect elements of fear? If so, where? Are there other principles that could express helpful guidance for loving individual and collective readings of scripture in the context of postmodern Western culture? Do these principles allow for sufficient diversity, while providing enough focus to achieve unity?⁵

⁵ Please feel free to forward any questions or comments on this material to your pastor, or to me at kerby.redekop@gmail.com.