

being a faithful church4.1

2012

General Board
Mennonite Church Canada



Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment

Exercising our Interpreting Muscles: Testing our Interpretive Framework

Introduction and Background:

In 2011 we asked Mennonite Church Canada congregations, individuals, and scholars to be teachers to each other. The teaching question was:

What elements have you found useful in interpreting the Bible for faith and life?

Many – but not all – responded. The Being a Faithful Church Task Force compiled your teaching into a document that we called (in part) "*Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways*." (see www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1816). This document was presented to and discussed by delegates at the Vancouver Assembly 2012.

It is a remarkable document, identifying 12 helpful "paths" and 6 unhelpful "ditches" in interpreting the Bible. The delegates in Vancouver approved a recommendation that said (in part):

- a) We receive this summary report as a sign of the Holy Spirit's work among us, and will use this emerging framework in future efforts to interpret Scripture together for our faith and life.
- b) . . . congregations process this document carefully.
- c) . . . congregations highlight particular questions or issues they are facing that could benefit by using this framework of scriptural discernment.

Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways:

Listening to Each other:

Different starting points in our Bible interpretation lead us to different end results. For example, if we give priority to the voice of Jesus as the key to discerning the use of violence, we will end up at a different place than if we give priority to certain texts or voices from the Old Testament. The BFC 4 document makes us more aware of the starting points that we should all take seriously. The document identifies these as "paths." It also points to starting points that we should avoid. These are called "ditches."

We now want to listen carefully to what has been taught, thereby learning from each other.

To Begin:

- 1) Path #7 helpfully reminds us that: "It is the Holy Spirit who guides the interpretive community in faithfulness, and in faithfully understanding Scripture for our lives. This means that we must continually open our hearts and minds to the work of

the Spirit within and among us. Without this, 'the text is just black marks on the paper.'" As we begin another process of learning, listening, and responding, let us invite the Holy Spirit to be our host, our guide, our strength, and our companion. Let us pray that God's Spirit will make our spirits attentive to the will of God revealed to us through Scripture. In the same way that the Spirit was present at every step in creating the gift of Scripture, let us pray that the Spirit will now help us understand what is there and what it means for our lives of faithfulness today.

- 2) Make sure that members of your congregation have access to the BFC 4 document approved in the Vancouver Assembly 2012, available at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1816.

To Continue: Suggested Exercise:

We are asking that you engage together in an exercise of biblical interpretation. You are free to choose whatever question/concern would be most helpful to you.

- a) Sometimes it is helpful to explore a question that is not a "front-burner" issue for us, e.g., the Church's support for slavery (USA) or apartheid (South Africa). It allows us then to work more deliberately with the way the Bible was used and, perhaps, misused.
- b) For others, it may be more helpful to choose an issue that is still within easy memory of our church experience but which may not be as immediate as it was a short time ago, e.g., the role of women in the leadership of the church; the church's response to divorce and re-marriage.
- c) For still others, you may wish to tackle a question that is very current and on the actual agenda of the church now, e.g., participation in the Lord's Supper; co-habitation of church members; assisted suicide.

Whatever question/concern you choose, we want to encourage you to "test" the "paths" and "ditches" of the BFC 4 document to understand how these might have been (or are now) useful.

To help you get started, we are providing a brief sketch of two situations: the use of the Bible to support slavery in the USA, and its use to support Apartheid in South Africa. If you choose another theme, please also begin by understanding the way the Bible has been used in the question you are addressing.



This is the way it would work:

- a) As mentioned above, begin, end, and clothe your study in prayer.
- b) Examine the way the Bible was used in the question chosen (two cases are provided below).
- c) Apply each of the 12 "paths" to the interpretations by asking questions such as
 - Path #1: How is Jesus the key to interpretation?
 - Path #2: How are the contexts (biblical, historical, and contemporary) taken seriously?
 - Path #3: How do other parts of Scripture speak to the issue under investigation?
 - Path #4: How does Jesus use the Old Testament to speak to the question under consideration?
 - Path #5: Are there parts of the canon of Scripture that are not given sufficient attention and that could offer wisdom on the question?
 - Path #6: Should the cruelty of slavery and apartheid (in the cases below) have pointed to a need to re-examine the interpretation of the Bible that was used to justify them?
 - Path #7: How do we intentionally invite the Holy Spirit into our discernment?
 - Path #8: How might remembering the Exodus and the teachings about jubilee have helped the interpretations of slavery and apartheid?
 - Path #9: What difference does it make when experiences and biblical analysis (or interpretation) are allowed to impact each other?
 - Path #10: Is Scripture a "delight" for us as we interpret it and for those impacted by our interpretations?
 - Path #11: How do/did interpretations take seriously what others had said before and are/were saying?
 - Path #12: Does the interpretation pay special attention to the "least of these" as is the case in Jesus' interpretation of Scripture in his time?
 - Ditches: How does the interpretation avoid the ditches identified in the BFC 4 document?
- d) Would consideration of these "paths" and "ditches" have led to different outcomes? How? Why? Or why not?

Please send your responses, to:

c/o BFC Task Force, Willard Metzger, Executive Director, Mennonite Church Canada, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg MB, R3P 0M4
or email to: wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca

Two Case Studies:¹

- A. The biblical interpretations used to support slavery in the USA often included the following:
 - a) Genesis 9:22-27: Noah decrees that, as punishment for seeing him naked, Ham's descendants will be slaves for Shem and Japheth.
 - b) Genesis 24:35; 12:5; 14:14; 20:14: Abraham is blessed by God with male and female slaves as a wealthy slave-owner.
 - c) Genesis 26:12-14: Slaves were part of Abraham's estate as property he passed on to his son Isaac.
 - d) Exodus 21; Leviticus 25: There is provision in the laws of Moses for the Israelites to buy and sell slaves, and how to treat them.
 - e) Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-25; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-19: Slaves are told to obey their masters with enthusiasm as though obeying Christ.
 - f) Philemon 12; 1 Corinthians 7:20-24: Paul returns the runaway slave Onesimus to his master Philemon, and tells slaves who hear his epistles to remain in the condition in which they were called.
 - g) 1 Timothy 6:1-6: Paul instructs all who are under the yoke of slavery to regard their masters as worthy of all honour.
 - h) Romans 13:1-7: The appeal to proper law and order was understood as advising that things should stay the same as they were.
- B. The biblical interpretations used to support apartheid in South Africa often included the following:
 - a) Genesis 1:28: God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" included the separation of the diversity of peoples.
 - b) Deuteronomy 32:8-9: "fixed the boundaries of the territories" chosen by God;
 - c) Acts 17:26-27: "[God] allotted ... the boundaries of the places where they (the nations – *ethnos*) would live.
 - d) Acts 2:6-11: Pentecost produced the principle of everyone hearing "God's great deeds in our own language" – and this justified separate racial churches, according to language groups: an Afrikaans church, an English church, Xhosa, Zulu and so forth.
 - e) The Exodus story was persistently used to describe the amazing taking of the land in South Africa by the Afrikaner, who understood themselves to be God's chosen people of the Promised Land.
 - f) Galatians 3:28: The unity of slave and free, male and female, Gentile and Jew was seen as a "spiritual" unity, which continued to underline the need for physical separation.
 - h) Romans 13:1-7: Paul insisted on obedience to the laws of God and of human beings, with the state as the agent of God.

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Processed and approved by:

BFC Task Force and Mennonite Church Canada General Board

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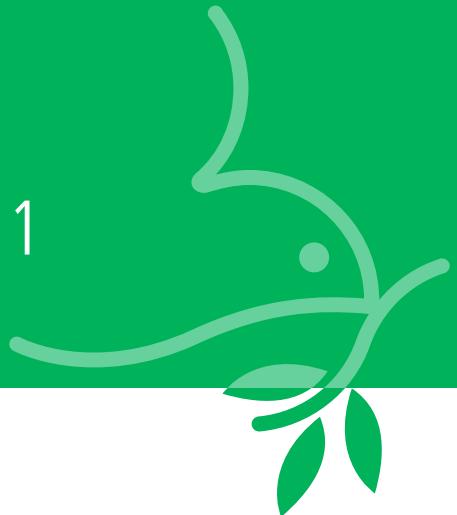


Mennonite Church Canada

BFC4.1:3

1 These case studies come from a South African scholar's article "*Being Biblical? Slavery, sexuality, and the inclusive community*," Richard A Burridge; Kings College, University of London (UK), 2007. (Note: Burridge uses the word "inclusive" to mean that all voices in the community have an opportunity to participate. It is not referring to a pre-determined outcome of the discernment).

Notes



Being a Faithful Church: Twelve Paths of Biblical Interpretation

Introduction

Too often, Christians use scripture in unhelpful ways to advance a particular point of view. As Mennonite Church Canada we want to honour Scripture and use it with integrity.

Since 2009, Mennonite Church Canada has been on a journey of better learning the heart of God by strengthening our grasp of scripture for our time. The most recent leg in this journey took place at the July 2012 Mennonite Church Canada Assembly, where delegates approved Being a Faithful Church 4 (BFC4) for study by congregations, Area Churches, groups and individuals. BFC4 summarized the feedback received from congregations, scholars and individuals to the Scripture and Discernment Tool of October, 2011. BFC4 uses the metaphor of a hike, identifying 12 paths and 6 ditches of Biblical Interpretation. In September, 2012, an additional study tool was sent out to congregations and Area Churches to help guide the process. To further stimulate thought and discussion, the BFC Task Force is preparing a series of articles on each of the 12 paths of the Biblical interpretation hike.

If the BFC process is new to you and/or your congregation, you will find it helpful to review the progress that has led us to this point. Visit www.mennonitechurch.ca and follow the "Being a Faithful Church" links.

Path 1: How is Jesus the key to interpretation?

"The life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus are central and serve as the critical lens of interpretation that helps us understand all of Scripture."

Through the centuries Mennonites have been guided by Menno Simon's Christ-centred foundation for Scriptural interpretation and ethical discernment. The verse "For no other foundation can be laid, than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11) often found inscribed on the title pages of Menno's writings, gives focus to this conviction. It was no surprise then that when congregations and individuals were asked about the assumptions, principles, and guidelines that are helpful in the interpretation of the Bible, they pointed again and again to the centrality of Jesus. We highly value all Scripture but want to interpret it through the lens of Jesus Christ.

In responding to the tool that led to the formation of BFC4, one congregation wrote that "We must seek interpretations that mirror Christ himself." Another suggested that the early Anabaptists, perhaps more so than other Christians of their day, clung stubbornly to the life and teaching of Jesus, culminating in his death and resurrection, as the lens by which to interpret the rest of the Bible. In his context, Menno

Simons insisted that all prophecy had to be tested by Christ, and that Christians needed to look to what Christ had taught about warfare, violence, and vengeance. "If Christ fights his enemies with the sword of his mouth, if he smites the earth with the rod of his mouth, and slays the wicked with the breath of his lips; and if we are to be conformed to his image, how can we, then, oppose our enemies with any other sword?"

One respondent cautioned against disconnecting Jesus from his own Scriptural roots. BFC4 names that tendency as one the 'ditches' that we want to avoid. We can't understand who Jesus was, his teachings and life choices apart from the Old Testament. Even so, God's Son is the focal point for our salvation, for our ethical discernment and our understanding of God's purposes in creation. In the words of Hebrews 1:1-2, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." What difference does it make in our interpretation of Scripture if we hold Jesus in the centre?

Rudy Baergen
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 2: Context makes a difference

"Context makes a difference in how Scripture is interpreted, understood, and applied for faith and life. Context refers not only to the importance of understanding the time and place out of which Scripture emerged and to which it was addressed. It also refers to our time and place and how that impacts our understandings of Scripture."

In the weeks leading up to the 2012 American election, Barak Obama and Mitt Romney both protested that their comments were taken out of context. Words are given meaning by their context, both by the one in which they are spoken and the one in which they are heard. When a taxicab driver in Bogota, Colombia, where there are no seasons says, "we are having winter today" it means something quite different than when we say it in Canada!

By context we can refer to the whole conversation, its spirit and intent. Or to the broader things like historical and cultural environment which give life to a story, a teaching or a value.

When we study Scripture we must also be respectful of context. The words of Jesus in Luke 22:36, "And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one," are not calling Canadian Christians to trade in

their winter coat for a sword! We can't understand these strange words without looking into the context, which includes Jesus disallowing use of the sword by his disciples to protect him (22:49-50). Spoken and written words of Scripture belong to sentences, conversations, paragraphs and even a selected collection of books, all of which give shape to the particular meaning. Words spoken in one historical, cultural context will not necessarily allow for a simple application in another. And the blinders of our own context may make it difficult for us to hear the word of Scripture, as in the story of Lazarus and the rich man. What does it mean for us to remember the Sabbath in our post-Christendom time? How do we understand Paul's prohibiting women to speak in church (I Cor 14:34) given our own sociological context? What is the role of context when we consider the first Century tendency to merge mental illness with demon possession?

While we believe that God's Word transcends time and culture we also know that our human language and concepts, as well as our scientific and political world views, are shaped by our context. Context is the water that we swim in. God's Word waits to be transposed from its Scriptural context to the one in which we move, live and have our being.

Rudy Baergen
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Taskforce

Path 3: Scripture already interprets scripture

"Scripture already interprets Scripture. It is very important to pay close attention to this inter-textual interpretation, because this already gives us essential clues in the ways we need to understand how various passages relate to each other."

This is wise counsel. It recognizes that the Bible is not a "flat" book. Each verse and story gains meaning in relationship to other verses and stories. The church, in its wisdom, has collected a "canon" of literature that all together has been understood to be an authoritative source for Christian faith and life. This means that it behooves us to be alert to the ways in which different parts of Scripture relate to each other.

Many examples could be given. One is the appropriate understanding and the proper use of power as God's people relate to each other and to the world. This concern relates to family, marriage, community, and nation. Multiple voices speak to this concern; sometimes they nuance what other voices have said before them. This has raised the questions related to the use or rejection of violence in the life of discipleship. It has also raised questions about the best way to structure and organize the life of the church. Another example is the concern about inclusion and exclusion in the life of God's people. Whereas Deuteronomy 23:3 teaches that "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord," Matthew includes the Moabite Ruth in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah.

What makes these scriptural connections even more interesting and complex, is that it is not simply a matter of chronology, i.e., the last voice is not necessarily the definitive voice. If that were the case, we could simply do away with the Old Testament, or the letters of Paul. But this is not necessarily the case and, again, it behooves the Christian community to be alert to the mind of God as revealed in Scripture.

For some, these inter-textual relationships may seem daunting and frustrating, and might prefer something simpler. But God, through the

Holy Spirit, has determined that this kind of Scripture is best for us. It is a record of God's presence with God's people and the world. Both the good and the bad are included, as unsavoury as it may seem to us at times. Scripture does not avoid the realities we experience. It does provide counsel and wisdom to be faithful within our realities as it did to the people of old. God blesses our capacity for discernment and it is an honour to be part of God's gifted in this way.

Robert J. Suderman
for the Being a Faithful Church Taskforce

Path 4: How does Jesus use the Old Testament to speak to the question under consideration?

"Jesus also interprets Scripture. One response focused exclusively on trying to understand the 'hermeneutics of Jesus,' i.e., how the Gospel writers portray the way Jesus uses and interprets the Old Testament. It is evident that we can learn much from that in our own reading of Scripture."

At Hagerman Mennonite Church, the adult Sunday School Class is working through the BFC4 paper on the paths and ditches of Biblical Interpretation. In the discussion of how Jesus interprets what we know as the Old Testament, (Path #4), Pastor Gary Harder drew attention to the Isaiah 61 passage verses 1 and 2, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..."

We then compared this with what Jesus says in the Luke 4:18 passage. We saw that Jesus leaves out the phrase "... and the day of vengeance of our God."

Gary went further and pointed out that at the same synagogue service in Nazareth (verses 25-30), Jesus tells two stories. First Jesus says that in the day of Elijah there were many widows, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months , when there was a great famine over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none (of these widows) but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Second, there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha and none of them was cleansed but only Naaman the Syrian. These two stories were deeply offensive to those listening. In the Luke account, Jesus takes the Isaiah message of preaching the good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and setting at liberty those who are oppressed, and he gives to it a new and expanded interpretation which now draws the Gentiles into the story.

In another example is the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), where Jesus speaks not of abolishing the law or the prophets but of fulfilling them. Then he declares: "You have heard it said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but I say unto you..." In so doing he finds the heart of the Scripture and he gives it a new life-giving interpretation.

Having a good understanding of how Jesus uses and interprets Old Testament Scripture will strengthen our overall capacity to understand God's purposes over time.

Andrew Reesor McDowell
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 5: Consider the entire canon of scripture

"It is important to take the entire canon of Scripture as our base of operations for healthy hermeneutics. The fact that Scripture already interprets Scripture compels us to use the whole of Scripture in order to better understand each part."

Douglas B. Miller is the writer of the *Ecclesiastes* (the Believers Church Bible Commentary). Miller writes in the introduction that the basic theme of Ecclesiastes is that "... life brings the unexpected, the tragic, and the confusing - and (readers) have found in the author a trustworthy companion for walking through such experiences." Ecclesiastes "... may be the most personal book of the Bible, revealing the author's frustrations, indignation and reflections on mystery"

On page 244 of the commentary, Miller nicely outlines how Ecclesiastes "reflects a contentious conversation with traditional wisdom," and gives the following examples.

- Proverbs makes high claims for wisdom, something worth the discipline necessary to attain while (*Ecclesiastes*) emphasizes the limits and pain of wisdom which can never guarantee safety, success or the respect of others;
- Proverbs praises diligence while (*Ecclesiastes*) emphasizes the hardship and futility of toil;
- Proverbs anticipates a glorious life for the wise and righteous and destruction for the fool and wicked while (*Ecclesiastes*) insists that all people die regardless of their character and that the wicked sometimes thrive;
- Proverbs stresses the importance of timeliness and is particularly confident that those who speak wisely will achieve success or bless others whereas (*Ecclesiastes*) questions whether discerning the appropriate moment give humans an advantage and is sensitive to the limits of speech.
- Proverbs and Psalms had a creed that the wise and righteous live on through the memory of others though the wicked are forgotten whereas (*Ecclesiastes*) insists that the dead are not longer remembered.

By taking the entire canon of Scripture in Biblical interpretation we can benefit by the conversations that happen among the writers of what has been called the 'Wisdom literature' of the Old Testament (e.g. Psalms, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes). In addition to listening in on the conversation among the wisdom writers we then include what the New Testament writers say regarding the difficult questions of life and see for example in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and how he trusted God in spite of pain, humiliation and lack of immediate success in this life.

Listening in on these conversations and then making application to our lives as congregations and individuals is an exciting and awesome task.

Andrew Reesor McDowell
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 6: Scripture is a living word

"Scripture persistently hopes that the letters of its words will become a living word in a world in need of redemption. This does not diminish the authority of Scripture, but sharpens it and makes it real in our community and to the world. This pathway indicates that other sources can illuminate what Scripture also teaches."

This pathway wants to teach us that Scripture is not a fossilized, time constrained library of ancient literature. It's not a quaint museum piece which tells us how things used to be or how people used to think. Rather, we believe it contains the living Word of God which through God's Spirit brings new life to humans wherever they find themselves. Sometimes the new listeners can easily apply its stories or teachings. The parable of the Good Samaritan in any setting readily finds new characters that re-enact the roles of the ill-fated traveller, the robber, the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan. In other cases a story in Scripture speaks in ways that the author could never have foreseen, as in the story of King Ahab's appropriation of Naboth's vineyard. Ahab's action becomes a prophetic word against speculation in our capitalistic economy. Or when Jesus' exception clause allowing for divorce and remarriage in some situations (Matthew 19:9) might give other new insight on how to deal in a redemptive way with divorce and remarriage in the 21st century. Whenever Jesus clarifies the law with his pronouncement "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you" he does not negate or diminish the authority of the law, but he goes to the heart of its intent and brings it to life in his own setting. Amazingly, Jesus, in turn, gives the task of sharpening the authority of the scripture to his disciples: "Again, truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).

The stories and teachings of Scripture, while offered in a pre-scientific age, continue to reveal and guide in an age where humans now know that the earth is round and circles the sun. Scripture's insistence on the sanctity of life continues to be authoritative even in a time of accessible abortion and difficult questions around the end of life. New sources of information from scientific research, the social sciences, medical studies, etc. will not negate the authority of Scripture but can help us to sharpen the intent of Scripture and make wise applications.

Rudy Baergen
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Taskforce

Path 7: Holy Spirit Guides

"It is the Holy Spirit who guides the interpretive community in faithfulness, and in faithfully understanding Scripture for our lives. This means that we must continually open our hearts and minds to the work of the Spirit within and among us. Without this, the text is just black marks on the paper."

I'm glad the congregational responses to our invitation for feedback on the BFC process identified the work of the Spirit in the hermeneutic community as an important key to using the Bible well.

A story comes to mind. As General Secretary of Mennonite Church Canada in 2006, I led the *God's People Now* tour during which I personally visited virtually every one of the 225 congregations across Mennonite Church Canada. One congregation pushed the question of where "hermeneutical authority" lies in Mennonite Church Canada. This congregation had recently revamped its leadership structure so that the pastor was the authority for biblical interpretation in the community, and the role of the community was to obey the discernment of the pastor. I responded by saying that our understanding is that there are three essential ingredients to interpretive authority:

- a) Scripture is open before us;

- b) A reading and interpreting community gathered around open Scripture with the gifts that the Spirit has given it;
- c) The Holy Spirit guiding our discernment.

This response generated much dis-ease in that congregation. They responded by saying that if interpretive authority cannot be focused in one person, effectively it means that "there is no authority at all."

Path #7 reiterates an understanding of the authority of the Spirit-guided community in scriptural discernment. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* underlines this perspective. It states:

The Bible is the essential book of the church. Through the Bible, the Holy Spirit nurtures the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ and guides the church in shaping its teaching, witnessing, and worship... We participate in the church's task of interpreting the Bible and of discerning what God is saying in our time by examining all things in the light of Scripture. Insights and understandings which we bring to the interpretation of the Scripture are to be tested in the faith community.

While some Christian groups may prefer to give more authority either to a Pope, a Presbytery, the Clergy, a Learned Seminary, or the Elders, this path suggests that we need to look to the discerning wisdom of the gathered community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Robert J. Suderman
Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 8: Scripture calls us to remember that we are a part of a larger story of "God's love affair with the world."

"Scripture calls us to remember that we are a part of a larger story of God's love affair with the world. The Gospel's command to go and baptize and the invitation to remember the Lord's Supper are prime examples of when we "do not forget" how God has accompanied us. The yearning to know God is inseparably connected to remembering the story of God, a story that we now acknowledge as our own."

This is a path that is particularly missional in focus. The missional church discerns the activity of God and then aligns itself to that activity. Although the church is God's premier vehicle for restoration and reconciliation, God's activity is not limited to the church. God's passion to restore a world in need of healing and hope is always active.

Scripture describes how God has been active in the past – from the creation narrative in Genesis to God's redemptive initiative in the Gospels. Jesus also promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to help the community of faith remain active in God's redemptive activity.

It is exciting to be reminded that we are part of God's larger intent. When our efforts are aligned to God's activity we become an integral ingredient of God's responsive recipe. From the wellbeing of the earth to the health of our relationship with God and one another, we become active participants of the continuing story of God's love.

Scripture invites us not only to experience God's love for ourselves but also to be an expression of God's love for the world.

Willard Metzger
Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 9: Knowing, Hearing, Acting, and Practice

"Knowing is inseparable from doing, hearing is inseparable from acting, and praxis [practice] is indispensable for gnosis [knowledge]. Jesus' hermeneutic also repeatedly indicates this critical connection between works [erga] and faith [pistis]. In other words, on a hike we need to walk and not just sit on the path and contemplate the map."

Discernment can be intellectually active but remain practically passive. We can determine what a correct course of action may be, but until we activate that action, practical impact will not be realized. It is important to actively display the impact of our discernment.

This summer I witnessed the ceremony of the first woman to be ordained within the fellowship of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Congo (CEM). In conversation with CEM President Benjamin Mubenga, I applauded this historical event. He responded by reminding me that the decision to ordain women had been processed several years earlier. However, this was the first woman to actualize a much earlier decision. It could be argued that the decision had not become real until this ordination.

Discernment can also be participatory. As we exercise our pursuit of faithfulness we may acquire a better understanding of what God requires of us. The understanding of faith for many in Scripture was not fully understood until it was accompanied by action. The disciples expressed and experienced faith as they began to pass out the small portions of food to feed the thousands (Matt. 14). They did not understand how the crowd of people would be fed until they began to distribute the food.

We too are invited to be transformed by faith as we proceed in faithful obedience. The full understanding of how God will work may not be fully comprehended until we are in the process of acting on that which is discerned to be faithful activity.

Willard Metzger
Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 10: Delight in Scripture

"Scripture is a delight that serves also for devotional refreshment and daily inspiration. The delight of Scripture is even greater when we can hike together rather than going out on a lone trek."

When reading a letter from a lover or a beloved friend, the experience is more than an intellectual exercise of reading words. The letter contains deep relational meaning. It ignites emotions of endearment – both towards the author of the letter and from the author of the letter. Because of this, such a letter is often reread several times.

God's people are especially nurtured by Scripture. Like a cherished letter, reading Scripture is a relational experience. It contains words of the One we love and cherish. It describes sacrificial love for us. Reading and studying Scripture is more than an intellectual exercise. It is a deep communication of the soul. Because of this, any process that draws us to study Scripture is welcomed by God's People. The psalmist reflects this engagement well in Psalm 119, especially vs 97-104.

One of the benefits of a letter from a lover or a beloved friend is that it reminds us we are not alone. We are cherished and valued by another. The community of God's people also supplies this. It counters the loneliness of isolation and provides a context of mutual support. It is

often through the embrace of others that we more fully understand the embrace of God.

To study Scripture together as a community of faith provides the fullest experience of what God intended. First, we hear and reflect on the words expressing God's affection and love. And then secondly, we experience God's love through one another. This provides a much fuller experience of the relational character of Scripture than reading it in isolation.

Willard Metzger
Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 11: Many Gone Before Us

Path 11: *"We need to see our interpretive community as larger than the people we can see around us. The hiking trail we are on has already been forged by many who have gone before us. They have left markers on the trail to help those who come after . . . (T)he interpretive community extends geographically beyond those in our hiking group; it is not restricted to our hiking group; it is not restricted to our choice of time and schedule; and it is not constrained by our particular agenda. We must affirm the critical importance of those on the trail with us at this time, those who have gone before, and those who are hiking at the same time, but on trails that may be geographically and culturally distant from us. . . ."*

This path teaches us that there are others on our hike who interpret Scripture very differently from how we might.

One of the most passionate cross-cultural debates in our Scriptures is found in Acts 15. For a people who had been commanded that male circumcision was a non-negotiable sign of one's commitment and obedience to God (Gen. 17:10, Exodus 12: 43f; Joshua 5;), and who had obeyed that commandment for centuries, it was unthinkable that the law of Moses could be broken. Salvation came through obedience to the law (Acts 15:1). After considerable debate among the apostles and elders, Peter acknowledged to those gathered that God's Spirit was at work in the lives of the new folks on the hiking trail, the gentiles, and that circumcision was not central to salvation. God's act of salvation was an act of grace, and it extended beyond the Jewish race.

The example of slavery is an illustration of a discussion that took centuries to bring us to where we are today in our interpretation. We have abolished slavery, and in those instances where child slavery or the enslavement of women for the benefit of the sex trade takes place, we believe that a terrible wrong has occurred. In our scriptures, slaves are told to obey their masters with enthusiasm as though obeying Christ (Eph. 6:5-9, Col. 3:22-25, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Peter 2:18 – 19).

There are other Biblical texts that support the practice of slavery. And yet, there are also texts which suggest that as followers of Jesus, slaves were to be treated more as brothers and sisters than as property one owned (Philemon 1:8f). In the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that all believers are children of God. There is no differentiation between Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (Gal. 3:25-29). While Paul's context can be seen as maintaining the status quo regarding slavery, we also note that a shift in the relationship between owner and slave is beginning to emerge. As Anabaptists, the life and teachings of Jesus are central in our discernment and therefore the commandment "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you . . ." (Matt. 7:12) already suggests a

world view where there is no master/slave relationship.

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Path 12: Law of Grace and Justice

"Jesus is portrayed as "consistently interpreting Scripture in reference to, and with regard for the needs/realities of 'the least' – the most needy and vulnerable (the poor, the sick, the foreigner/outside, women, social outcasts)." God's intention through Scripture is to bring wholeness to creation, justice to the orphans and widows, sight and healing to the blind and the lame, reconciliation and salvation to the sinners."

There are many examples given in the gospel writings where Jesus follows a law of grace and justice rather than the legalities of the law as practiced by the Pharisees. For example, healing on the Sabbath was considered as breaking the law (Ex. 20). And yet, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-6), as well as a crippled woman (Luke 13:10f) on the Sabbath. His response when he was criticized for his actions was that observing the Sabbath was not intended to keep us from doing good.

On another occasion a woman, who was caught in adultery, was brought to Jesus as way of entrapping him (John 8). According to the law this woman should have been put to death (Lev. 20:10). In fact, the Scribes and Pharisees quoted this law to Jesus in front of the crowd. But Jesus saw the hypocrisy in this action and challenged those who had not sinned to throw the first stone. Jesus would also have noted that only the woman was brought before him. Where was her partner? To the woman, the person with the least power in that particular setting, Jesus' challenge was to go and sin no more. Jesus did not condone her action, but neither did he choose to condemn her. He chose the path of grace.

As we discern our responses in difficult relational situations, a good foundational scripture text is the Great Commandment as found in Matthew 22: 37-40 which calls us to ". . . love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

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Notes