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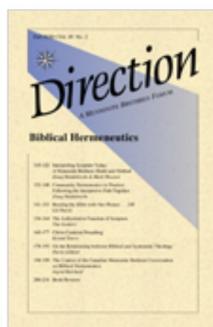
The Context of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conversation on Biblical Hermeneutics

Ingrid Reichard

The choice of biblical hermeneutics as the main topic of the 2019 Equip Study Conference was nearly inevitable in light of denominational conversations in the last ten years. The most recent Canadian Mennonite Brethren (MB) study conferences—on atonement (2011), sexuality (2013 and 2015), and discipleship (2017)—all highlighted the need for clarity around hermeneutical practice. Differing approaches to interpreting biblical texts were frequently seen as the root cause of the ongoing theological friction experienced in our MB community—not only around these conference topics but also around other areas of theological divergence. Theological friction is certainly not to be avoided or feared, but clarity around the reasons behind the friction is helpful in finding a God-honoring way forward. The National Faith and Life Team (NFLT) therefore charged the 2019 Equip planning team to facilitate a nation-wide conversation on the discipline of biblical interpretation.

My hope is that the MB interpretive model and method will help us in our core call to make disciples. {195}

As Mennonite Brethren, we have made previous attempts to clarify how we build a bridge of meaning as we read, interpret,



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apply, and live out God's Word. The *Family Matters* introduction to MBs in Canada, for instance, contains a brief description of our hermeneutical habits, highlighting the importance of the authority of Scripture, centrality of Jesus, and role of community discernment.¹ Numerous other Mennonite Brethren writings contribute valuable insights into the art and science of biblical hermeneutics. While this body of work offers a breadth of informative material, it is accessible only to those with time and skill for research. As such, it is not a ready resource for those whose life's work is centered around biblical interpretation: pastors, teachers, and ministry leaders in MB churches, camps, and other ministries. In addition, there exists no synthesis of this work to which we can collectively turn for answers to our hermeneutical conundrums.

The goal of the organizers of the 2019 Equip Study Conference was to develop an explicit hermeneutical model and a clear method for our interpretive efforts. In turn, as the NFLT Director, I posed a challenge to the planning team: develop an MB hermeneutical model that can be drawn on a napkin. The model was to be descriptive of how MBs in Canada interpret Scripture with the hope that, through community agreement and widespread adoption of the model, it would gain instructional authority in our denominational family. Doug Heidebrecht drew the first iteration of the model for me in a restaurant, on a napkin. T. Anderson at MB Seminary turned that sketch into a professional image. In the following months, Doug Heidebrecht, Mark Wessner, and I became close hermeneutical companions as we midwived the twenty-seven iterations of the model to the point of presentation at Equip 2019. The iterations were shared freely with pastors and leaders in the Canadian MB community throughout 2019. Their thoughtful critique, valuable suggestions, and Spirit-led discernment resulted in the model that was presented at the study conference in October of that year.

Most encouraging is the engagement that this model continues to enjoy among our churches. Sunday school classes, small group discussions, youth group gatherings, Bible college lectures, and even Sunday services have been devoted to understanding how Mennonite Brethren interpret Scripture. The

model is also being used to guide Bible study and curriculum development. This ongoing engagement by MB churches across Canada led to a few more tweaks to the model since the study conference (as I write, we are at iteration thirty-three), but the essence of the model remains unchanged. It is encouraging to see MBs continue to be enthusiastic about faithful biblical interpretation. {196}

Our biblical hermeneutic—how we read, interpret, apply, and live out God’s Word—is important because it is a key influence on how we follow Jesus personally and corporately. It is reflected in our Confession of Faith, our denominational identity, and our discipleship practices.

HERMENEUTICS AND THE CONFESSION OF FAITH

A backdrop to the development of the hermeneutical model is the present review and revision of the Canadian MB Confession of Faith. The review has been met with lively engagement by MB pastors and ministry leaders. Our passionate interest in the Confession of Faith is part of our Anabaptist DNA. Karl Koop, in *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition*, comments at length on the proclivity of the early Anabaptists, and specifically the Mennonites, to produce an unusually high number of confessional statements. In 1527, only two years after the first adult baptism, the Swiss Anabaptists adopted a seven-article statement of faith, the Schleithem Confession.²

In the roughly fifty years that followed (1577-1632), Mennonite communities in the Netherlands continued to produce confessional statements. Even when the “confessional age” in Europe subsided, Mennonites in Russia continued to generate an abundance of confessional statements.³ Cornelius Dyck proposes that “It is possible that adherents to Anabaptism produced more confessions of faith than any other Protestant stream.”⁴

Koop observes that Mennonite communities formulated confessional statements for several reasons, two of which are especially significant now.⁵ First, confessional statements reinforced internal doctrinal cohesion. The proverbial “large tent” is well known among the Canadian MBs. Positively, it refers to our generous capacity to be theologically inclusive. Our Confession aims

to split hairs *only* on those matters that we believe the Bible does. We welcome, love, and fellowship with brothers and sisters whose interpretations differ considerably on issues that we do not hold to be confessional. Such inclusion trains us in hermeneutical humility and inhibits our human tendency toward pharisaism—that is, tightening boundaries beyond the lines drawn in the Bible.

However, a theologically large tent also creates the problem of theological distance between those on opposite sides of the tent. The generosity of our Confession can go only so far before the boundaries of what we believe are so stretched that we lose our doctrinal cohesion. An explicit hermeneutic is a step toward strong theological cohesion within our tent. It is less an attempt to tighten boundaries than a step toward heating up the center and inviting those on the fringes to move closer together. {197}

A second reason why Mennonite communities formulated confessional statements is that they facilitated discussions between groups seeking to unite. Early Mennonites were known for their openness to learn from and collaborate with other Christian streams. We owe much to the influences of the Puritans and Baptists.⁶ But not all Christian streams were compatible with the Anabaptist way of interpreting the Bible. It was not possible, for example, for sixteenth-century Anabaptists to form ministry partnerships with Catholic or Lutheran Christians.

Today, Canadian MBs continue to value a kingdom perspective. Our local churches, national office, MB seminary, and Multiply mission agency partner with non-MB groups to further our common mission. However, as in the past, there are Christian streams today whose approach to Scripture and way of following Jesus are not compatible with the MB DNA. A statement explicitly describing our hermeneutical approach would help us determine our theological compatibility with potential ministry partners.

Hence, our Confession and the discipline of biblical hermeneutics are closely related. Anabaptist and Mennonite confessions of the past reflect a thoughtful theology deeply concerned with the lived-out witness of these communities of Christ's redeemed people. Moreover, the confessional nature of our theology has always been profoundly context-sensitive, answering

the ultimate hermeneutical question, “How ought we to live out, in this present day and in this very place, what we believe the Bible says?”

We stand today in a long line of confession-writers. As we engage with our Confession of Faith here in Canada, we remember that the Confession is neither a collection of doctrinal favorites nor a collection of ideas borrowed from our Anabaptist siblings, evangelical cousins, or Catholic neighbors. It is a product of direct Mennonite Brethren interaction with Scripture through study and community discernment, guided by the Holy Spirit. It is the result of our current best efforts to interpret the Bible responsibly and faithfully.

HERMENEUTICS AND IDENTITY

The 2018 Preface to the Confession of Faith asserts that the Confession defines the corporate theological identity of Mennonite Brethren in that it describes what we believe the Bible teaches, and as a result what kind of people MBs are to be as we follow Jesus.⁷ Our biblical hermeneutic forms the confessional statements that describe what being part of the MB family looks like.

The Confession of Faith’s statements form theological identity because those statements are derived from a shared understanding of {198} the Bible. Of course, the authority of the Confession is not on par with that of Scripture. The Confession is authoritative only to the degree that it faithfully reflects our collective current understanding of how to live out the Word of God in our context. To the extent that the Confession faithfully interprets Scripture for our day, it shapes Mennonite Brethren identity.

However, the Confession forms theological identity not only by the Confession’s content—that is, by the wording of the Articles—but also by the community hermeneutical process that produces those statements. The process speaks to what kind of Christ followers we are. The value of our Confession, therefore, lies as much in the process that keeps it current as in the declarations it contains.

Ignorance and confusion around one’s identity as an individual are signs of spiritual immaturity.⁸ Similarly, uncertainty about our shared identity hampers our ability to discern God’s

transforming work in our past and its continuation in the present. And this, in turn, obscures the unique contribution we are to make to the world-wide body of Christ.

We are Mennonite Brethren. We have fathers and mothers. We have a past. We have strengths and weaknesses. We are one beautiful expression of the body of Christ. Our particular contribution to that body is much needed in the world. A clearly articulated biblical hermeneutic identifies that essential aspect of our identity, of our self-knowing.

HERMENEUTICS AND DISCIPLESHIP

I trust that every person connected to an MB church in Canada makes it a practice to read their Bible daily and gains such knowledge and spiritual understanding that they follow Christ more closely every day. Each time they open the Bible they build a bridge of meaning between the world of the text and their own world. A tool that helps Christ's followers intelligently and faithfully translate the intent of the ancient text into the nitty-gritty of their lives here and now is most welcome. It is my hope that the MB interpretive model and method presented in this issue of *Direction* will be that tool, helping us in our core call to make disciples by teaching them to obey all that God commands. Moreover, I hope that this tool will help us to grow those disciples beyond infancy, to a maturity that does not leave them tossed about by the waves of changing cultural influences and trendy doctrines.

NEXT STEPS

I am immensely grateful to all those who contributed excellent content to the 2019 Equip Study Conference discussion on biblical hermeneutics. However, the work on our interpretive model is not yet done. The model continues to be refined; further supporting material still needs {199} to be developed. This issue of *Direction* and the next are a step in that direction. Next planned steps include the production of short and accessible instructional videos on the MB method of interpretation and the inclusion of teaching on hermeneutics in the annual Pastoral Credentialing Orientation. I foresee this collection of articles forming a basis for an MB hermeneutical primer—a supplementary mini-textbook on the MB interpretive approach. With the Lord's help such a primer

would be a gift not only *to* the Mennonite Brethren in Canada, but also a gift from Canadian MBs to the international community of Mennonite Brethren churches.

NOTES

1. Andrew Dyck, ed., *Family Matters: Discovering the Mennonite Brethren* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2017), 25-26.
2. Karl Koop, *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527-1660* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2006), 1.
3. Koop, 1.
4. Cornelius J. Dyck, "Foreword" in Howard John Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 17.
5. Koop, *Confessions of Faith*, 1-2.
6. Dyck, *Family Matters*, 13-14.
7. "Preface: Nature and Function of the Confession," *Confession of Faith of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2018), 5-11.
8. Cf. St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castles*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1946), 16.

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