

being a faithful church



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Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment “Peace Church” as “Pacifist Church”¹

Background

This document builds on the first one: *Being a Faithful Church: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment* (cf: Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 09). That companion document, affirmed by the Assembly delegates, is an essential foundation for this effort to move forward some of the key points of biblical/spiritual discernment.

That first document indicated that:

The General Board [of Mennonite Church Canada] understands that the ongoing health of our church requires that we continue to strengthen our overall capacity to discern the mind of God as the church engages the critical agenda of our time (p.1).

Several themes were identified as critical in the life of our church at this time. These were (p.1):

- a) Unity and Diversity in the life of the Church;
- b) Being a Peace church;
- c) Confessing and witnessing to Jesus Christ as Lord in a religiously pluralistic context;
- d) Human sexuality in the life of the church;
- e) Ecological concerns from a perspective of faith.

It also outlined the commitment needed to discern together (p.1):

- 1) We covenant with each other to study the Bible together and explore the biblical teachings.
- 2) We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ. We are all sinners in need of God's grace and we know that the Holy Spirit can lead us to further truth and to repentance where needed.
- 3) We covenant compassion and prayer for each other.
- 4) We covenant to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other.

¹ The distinction between a “Peace” and a “Pacifist” church is made to honor the many in our ecumenical circles who readily identify with the “peace” agenda and understand themselves to be churches committed to peace, but who would not understand that to mean a commitment to nonviolence and pacifism. Indeed, for most in those circles, being a peace church is compatible with a firm conviction that violence and war can, under certain circumstances and according to certain criteria, be “justified.”

- 5) We covenant with God that as we discern his will for our lives and our fellowship we will seek to obey it, through his grace and strength.

And it explored the inevitable hermeneutical realities that we called “sufficient wisdom” and “spiritual surprise.” These mean that as we engage each other, our changing context, and our unchanging scripture within the embrace of the spiritual disciplines, the church has three interpretive options: to repeat what has been said; to modify what has been said; to change what has been said.

Purpose

In this second step we want to apply some of the principles of discernment to one of the themes that was identified, namely being a Peace Church. We trust that this can function as a helpful model for how other (many) issues can be addressed in the church.

It is important to emphasize and underline that the focus is to strengthen our capacity to discern God's will; it is not to resolve the particular case-study we are using to “practice.”

Process

The process will consist of four sections:

- a) Reflecting on “the signs of the times” (Luke 12:54-56): What is there in our 20-21st century - Canadian/global environment that places this theme on our discernment-radar in a new way? Can we identify the contextual pressures that urge additional discernment on this matter?
- b) Listening to the biblical “voices” that have been “sufficient” till now: How have we interpreted the Bible so that it has inspired and convinced us that being a “Peace Church” means being a “Pacifist Church?”
- c) Listening to the biblical “voices” that (according to some) challenge this “sufficiency.” Are there biblical voices that need to be given more weight in our interpretations? Does God want to break in to our “sufficiency” with “spiritual surprise,” a renewed awareness of biblical voices that have either been neglected or given less authority?
- d) Understanding and committing to some critical tools that help us live into what we have found.

Being a Peace (Pacifist) Church: Contextual Considerations from the 21st Century:

For Mennonites, being a "Peace Church" has meant:²

- a. Rejecting the many arguments that see violence, if used well, as necessary, redemptive, and a useful instrument for peace-building;
- b. Maintaining a pacifist ethic in the face of militarization of our world and our nation;
- c. Articulating the viability and relevance of non-violent ways, even in the face of the brutality of crime, genocide, and the horrendous incidents of abuse of victims.

It is not easy to maintain such a "Peace Church" identity and ethic in our time. Specifically, pacifists are challenged to accept more fully the social, moral, and human responsibilities to address the evils around us in "realistic" ways that go beyond pacifist responses. We are challenged to not simply cling to what some consider outdated, irrelevant, and ideologically-driven-pacifist convictions. Our context, we are told, demands a different response. Some contextual evidence pointed to is:

- a) The threat to freedom and life symbolized by Hitler/Nazism;
- b) The variously described threats of Communism, axis of evil, rogue states, New Axis Pact,³ and outposts of tyranny;
- c) The threat of terrorism and terrorist groups;⁴
- d) The evils of ethnic cleansing and civil war;⁵
- e) The brutal realities within the refugee camps where millions are subjected to the worst kinds of abuse and injustice;
- f) The brutality of organized crime, gang-related violence and drug cartels;
- g) The evil of human trafficking, for various purposes such as sex trade, prostitution, child soldiers, and body parts.

Such a context, it is argued, demands initiatives and intervention that are deemed to be more "socially responsible" - but that challenge a "Peace (Pacifist) Church" identity. Some of these intervention strategies are:

- a) Increased military spending, and the resulting legitimization, attraction, and support of military recruitment, resulting in military intervention;
- b) Pre-emptive action/strikes/war to gain advantage in an inevitable conflict;
- c) Legitimization of torture;⁶
- d) Support for the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine (R2P);⁷
- e) Renewed eloquent and careful articulation and defense of "just war;"⁸
- f) Support for capital punishment and other "get tough on crime" initiatives;
- g) Justification of arms/weapons manufacturing and trafficking.

Biblical voices that have under-girded our Peace (Pacifist) Church identity:

The church's convictions that a pacifist ethic is faithful to the biblical witness, and is needed and possible, come out of a history of reading the Bible and, in turn, inform our reading of it. It is too much to say that we have created a canon within a canon. It is true that we have understood the biblical canon to contain within itself an ongoing debate about power, i.e., the appropriate kind and role of power in God's plan for the salvation of the world. As we view this debate within scripture itself, we have detected voices that, in our interpretation, lead us to understand that God's original and final strategic will is for the full reconciliation of the world (as seen in the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem). We further have come to believe that the fruit of the peace, justice, and reconciliation that God wills for creation must already be present in the seeds sown to achieve it. The congruence between original seed and ultimate fruit is a lesson applied to understanding the appropriate use of power. Some of the ways we have come to this reading of scripture are:

- a) Reading of the holy war tradition of the Old Testament alongside the voice of Isaiah who suggests that the Suffering Servant (not King David, Joshua, et.al.) is the paradigm that best reflects the will of God for his people's use of power (Isaiah 40-55);
- b) Reading the experience of the Exodus through the voices that suggest that we need to "stand still" and "see the mighty acts of God" (Deut. 4:34; 5:15; II Chron. 20:17), rather than engage in violent revolutionary activity for the purpose of liberating the oppressed;
- c) Reading the canon through Christo-centric lenses: namely that the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the normative paradigm for social, political, and ethical action;
- d) Focusing on key teachings of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said... But I say to you: Love your enemies;"

6 We remember the nuanced distinctions of torture made by George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

7 The United Nations, the World Council of Churches, and the United Church of Canada are but some of the organizations that have formally adopted the R2P doctrines. Many who have not formally done so would resonate very much with them.

8 Note President Obama's speech in Norway upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize (December/09).

2 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995), Article 22, p. 82.

"As followers of Jesus, we participate in his ministry of peace and justice. He has called us to find our blessing in making peace and seeking justice. We do so in a spirit of gentleness, willing to be persecuted for righteousness' sake. As disciples of Christ, we do not prepare for war, or participate in war or military service. The same Spirit that empowered Jesus also empowers us to love enemies, to forgive rather than to seek revenge, to practice right relationships, to rely on the community of faith to settle disputes, and to resist evil without violence. Led by the Spirit, and beginning in the church, we witness to all people that violence is not the will of God. We witness against all forms of violence, including war among nations, hostility among races and classes, abuse of children and women, violence between men and women, abortion, and capital punishment."

3 These include states such as: China, North Korea, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Myanmar, Zimbabwe, Belarus.

4 Most readily symbolized by Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden.

5 Key examples being: Darfur, Sudan, Rwanda, Congo, Colombia.

- e) Understanding the baptism/commissioning of Jesus as clarifying that God's preferred way is to combine kingship (Psalm 2: a royal Psalm) with suffering servant-hood (Isaiah 42: a Suffering Servant), as indicated by the voice from heaven;
- f) Understanding the temptations of Jesus as refusing the Davidic assumptions for Messiah-ship, or more strongly stated, understanding the Davidic assumptions about ruling the nations as satanic (Mt. 4:1-11);
- g) Taking the lengthy and very detailed ethical and life-style instructions in how to live a life "not conformed to this world" (Romans 12) as authoritative and normative for the life of Christians now;
- h) Taking seriously that "the Lamb that was slaughtered" is the image that best defines the vocation and "the power of the Lion," and the only one "capable of opening the scrolls" of history (Book of Revelation).

All interpretation of the Bible gives greater or lesser weight to the particular voices found in scripture. The canonical reading of scripture that has become sufficient for the Peace (Pacifist) Church has, in effect, taken weight away from the biblical voices that can and have been interpreted as justifying Christian support of violence that promises to be redemptive, thereby urging Christians to take on the social, humanitarian, and religious obligation to become involved in it.

This interpretive process acknowledges that the reading of the Bible cannot be fully objective and unbiased. But, at the same time, it has integrity because it is transparent in the way biblical voices are acknowledged, and it is thus open to challenge, correction, and new insight. This transparency means that we acknowledge which biblical voices have been softened. Some of these are:

- a) The many references in the Bible that indicate that human participation in war, killing, pillage, and revenge are God-ordained and God-blessed;
- b) The classic interpretation of Romans 13 that appears, at first glance, to support the legitimate authority of government to insist that Christians participate in wars and conflict;
- c) The two-kingdom interpretations that suggest that scripture advocates for us to be citizens in two kingdoms at the same time, always obeying the ethics of the heavenly kingdom in our private and personal lives, and those of the earthly kingdom in our social and political lives;
- d) An ethically dualistic understanding of spiritual warfare that, similar to the two-kingdom perspectives, suggests that the preferred ethics of pacifism need to be suspended when dealing with the overwhelming power of Satan, the evil adversary;

- e) The multiple millennial views of scriptural interpretation that would see the spiritual struggle that moves history toward its culmination as a violent one that obligates Christians to participate in it, thereby postponing the non-violent strategies until the coming of the new age.

In this method of interpreting the voices in the Bible, scripture does not remain "flat." In other words, every small part of the Bible is read in light of the whole of scripture. This means that some voices gain greater or lesser weight. Not only is this inevitable, it is desirable, and it demands constant discernment and attention. This does not mean, however, that any voice is less canonical or less inspired by God to be present in scripture. Each voice plays a critical part in light of the whole, and in each case it is important to ask what we need to learn from it and what it contributes to our understanding of God's will. It is important to note that the "scripture" that is recognized by the church as "holy" [an authoritative source and standard] is, exclusively, the entire "canon," i.e., when all the voices of the Bible are in relation with each other. The church has not authorized as "holy scripture" the individual voices of the Bible when they are isolated from each other and from the whole. This preference of "canon" makes discernment more complex but it also guards against scripture being used simply for ideological purposes.

This paper and this process are but one example of how we engage in this permanent discernment activity as a church.

The Peace (Pacifist) Church identity has been bolstered and under-girded by many voices from beyond the Bible. Some of these are:

- a) The post-New Testament church had a pacifist understanding of faithfulness during the first centuries before the Christian faith became obligatory in the Roman Empire (late 4th century A.D.). The witness of these early (and first) Christians has convinced the Peace Church of today that this was indeed the intention of Jesus and his disciples.
- b) The Peace Church understandings had important homes throughout the centuries before the emergence of Anabaptism in the 16th century, perhaps most evidently within the monastic movements and in the Eastern traditions of the church. The writings and witness of these early Christians have inspired the Peace Church of today in its interpretation of scripture.
- c) Key to our understandings of being a Peace Church is the recovery of this earlier vision of the church's vocation during the 16th century, especially by the Anabaptist movements in Europe. The Anabaptists understood faithfulness as radically following Jesus as Lord, and they were convinced that the non-violent, love-ethic of Jesus was normative also for his church. This teaching was perceived as a serious challenge to the state and the state-church and resulted in severe persecution of those who believed in this way.
- d) There are key persons, not all Christian, who have given voice to a pacifist understanding of life. Prominent among these are Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the Dalai Lama. This is encouraging while not authoritative for the Peace Church position.

Biblical voices used to challenge the Peace (Pacifist)

Church identity:

The biblical interpretations indicated above have not been accepted, by and large, either within the larger church or beyond it. Indeed, while individual Christians may lean in these directions, it is rare to find a denomination that has an unequivocal stance as a Peace (Pacifist) Church. What has happened is that churches have advocated for “selective pacifism” based on “unjustifiable violence.” For example, some denominations say that nuclear war can never be justified because it meets none of the criteria normally used to justify the use of force.

These more common understandings of selective pacifism or justifiable violence are also defended from a scriptural base within the Christian world. Indeed, the assumption is prevalent around (and within) us that Christian scripture allows and even advocates for a non-pacifist position. Others will readily agree that Pacifism is the ideal that Jesus and scripture point to, but it is not yet realistic to engage it fully.

Some of the biblical voices used to under-gird a call for a reinterpretation of the Peace (Pacifist) Church understandings are:

- a) The Old Testament concept that “sanctuaries” are needed to protect victims of abuse and violence. It is then assumed that sanctuaries will need to be protected with police and/or military power.
- b) The interpretations of Romans 13 continue to be important in pointing to a God-given obligation of the state to exercise authority for the sake of protection, and for the Christian’s responsibility to obey the authorities in exercising this task, even if this includes the use of lethal violence through military force.
- c) Jesus’ commitment to the poor, the marginalized, and the victims of oppression is used to justify the use of redemptive violence for the welfare and benefit of victimized persons. The overturned tables of money-changers in the temple, some say, is an indication of how Jesus’ wrath against victimizers is “holy wrath” that justifies extreme, and potentially violent, measures also from the church.
- d) The fact that eschatology (the focus on the future) pervades Christian scripture has made it possible to believe that ethics (e.g. Pacifism) can also be postponed for a future time when things are like they are meant to be. By the same token it is suggested that these ethics are not designed to live in the world as we experience it today.
- e) It has also become common to separate “creation ethics” from “redemption ethics.” This is very similar to the two-kingdom theory mentioned earlier, namely that there is one ethic needed for creation (the laws of nature that allow us to live in this world) and another for redemption (the laws of Christ that allow us to live in the world to come). Given that we live in the present creation as redeemed people means that we engage each ethic in its proper place. The implication, of course, is that redemption ethics are unrealistic for creation living.
- f) A good example of theological justification of military intervention for redemptive purposes can be seen in the World Council of Churches statement on R2P: “The responsibility to protect the vulnerable . . . is an ecumenical responsibility, conceiving the world as one household of God, who is the creator of all.”⁹

9 Mennonite ambivalence on our pacifist stance can be seen in the approved *Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic*

The Bible as a Window and a Mirror:

The steps taken thus far are very important in order to be a community of discernment. By engaging seriously in careful description of context and biblical interpretation, we more fully understand the dynamic, interactive relationship between the two.

Holy Scripture serves as a window for us. We can look into and learn from the lives of others as they struggle to be faithful. Even though they lived in different times and places and dealt with agenda that is not immediately ours, we can learn. For example, we can see the words of Jesus: “but I say unto you . . . , love your enemies” as a spiritual surprise spoken into a world that assumed that the holy desire of David for kingly rule had rightfully overshadowed the holy insight of the prophet Isaiah that the real paradigm for healing and salvation is to bear the sins of others, and to be willing to suffer and even die for them. These words continue as a spiritual surprise when spoken into our own dominant Christian and secular contexts. Yet, this spiritual surprise flung into that context by Jesus has become the argument for sufficiency for Mennonites in our history.

Holy Scripture also serves as a mirror for us. We can see our own struggle for faithfulness mirrored in the lives of others in spite of the distance of time and space that seems to separate us. We experience in our context the seductive promise and the enslaving power of the dominant cultural/political/religious myth that lethal violence can be the seed of redemption and liberation. And we wonder how to respond when this enticing promise seems so logical to others. We hear the words of Jesus to “love your enemies,” and we understand his words as being spoken to us.

Church and Mennonite World Conference: Called Together to be PeaceMakers (1998-2003). In summarizing Mennonite understandings of “Church and Society” and “Nonviolence and Just War” it states that Mennonites “tend to mistrust the state” and “they tend to be critical of Christian involvement in government because of the use of violence involved and the possible corruption of power” (Art. 186). It then affirms that: “In situations of conflict . . . both Catholics and some Mennonites acknowledge that when all recourse to nonviolent means has failed, the state or international authorities may use force in defence of the innocent. For Mennonites, however, Christians should not participate in this kind of action” (Art. 187). This surprising affirmation is based on one of the few references to the *Schleitheim Confession* (1527) and not on the very frequently cited *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995). Interestingly, the *Report* then continues: “Mennonites hold to non-resistance on principle without exception, while Catholics affirm non-resistance, but allow for exceptions” (Art. 188).

In addition to the ambivalence indicated in these statements, it is also instructive to note the authoritative – yet fluid – use of “Confessions of Faith,” in this case our present *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and the *Schleitheim Confession*, even though they focus the same issues in vastly different ways. Added to those is the “*Report*” itself that, in some ways, is now considered as an “official” statement of Mennonite confession, even though it is ambivalent to both the *Schleitheim Confession* and our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

Now what? Living with the Process:

The discernment steps suggested thus far are not the only ones needed, but they are critical ones. We now understand more fully why we experience the pressure to re-examine what we have taken to be sufficient in our confession. We know now that this pressure does not emerge out of a desire to be less faithful but a sincere conviction that we can and should be more faithful. We know that it is not motivated by a desire to water down the gospel, but to grow in awareness of how to live it out more fully. We know that it is not inspired by a disregard for sacred scripture, but by paying attention to the passionate debate within scripture itself.

The discernment brings us to the point of sober reflection and prayer. We see with new eyes the significance of the matter before us. Indeed, it is so important that we know we should not rush to judgment. After all, we are standing on a strong foundation that has been discerned within the life of the church, and that has been "sufficient" for us. Only the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of our Body - leading us to "greater truth" - based on our immersion in biblical wisdom - as it relates to our context - is enough to change or modify the "sufficiency" we have known till now. This is not an invitation to complacency or stubborn self-preservation; it is an invitation to trust that God's strategic plan to transform the world via the faithfulness of people within people-hood is sufficient. Our friends in Colombia used to say: "This is so urgent that we need to go slowly." This is wise counsel.

Our concern is to strengthen our capacity to discern the will of God for our lives. In the companion paper to this one¹⁰ we suggested that discernment inevitably leads to one of three options for the church: repeating, modifying, or changing what it has said. And so, where does this discernment take us now?

Are we confident and joyful in repeating what we have said? Have we seen or heard enough that would suggest modification? Are we convicted by the Holy Spirit, our context, and scripture that we need to change? Together we must develop the criteria that would inform our next steps. For now, we will leave this here.

But leaving it here does not mean dropping the agenda. The spirituality of discernment must continue, and to encourage that we could suggest several important things:

- a) **Take time:** personal time and Body of Christ time. We all know the important role that time plays in our efforts to move toward good discernment.
- b) **Pray:** alone and together. Articulating to God, in the presence of others, the essence of our search allows us also to listen to the voice of God within and among us.
- c) **Focus on faithfulness not fear:** This requires courage and transparency. Most of all it requires that we trust the work of the Spirit of God in our midst.
- d) **Cloak this process in the warmth of worship:** The key to communal worship is two-fold: acknowledge always that we seek the mind of God, and confess that we are in need of revealed wisdom that is rooted in God's transcendence.
- e) **Continue to listen to the biblical voices,** alone and together: Understand the voices as best we can. Make sure the voices are interpreted in light of the entire canon of authoritative scripture, especially also in light of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- f) **Allow the voices to speak from their time:** By looking into the window of scripture, we will surely discover dynamics of sufficiency and surprise that will be instructive for us.
- g) **Allow the voices to speak to our time:** By allowing scripture to function as a mirror for our context, we may be surprised at the sufficiency of what we understand or the newness based on the sufficiency we discern in scripture.
- h) **Continue to listen to the voices from our context:** The voices internal to the Body, by definition, are a very high priority. Among these will be those sensing the need for change and those committed to the paradigm of sufficiency that characterizes our people-hood. As a Body we also continue to listen to and engage the voices from beyond ourselves, because God's wisdom is not limited to the life of the Body.
- i) **Cultivate the virtues of humility and confession:** The track record of the church in history points clearly to the need for both.

Above all, let us embrace our vocation for discernment with joy and trust. It is our task. Let us: delight in scripture; become connoisseurs of context; embrace the pleasure of challenge; and cherish the journey. We have never yet fully "gotten it right," and we never will. We will indeed see only "through a glass dimly," which is another way of saying that we permanently live the holy tension of sufficiency and spiritual surprise. Yet God's track record is not fickle. God continues to extend forgiveness and, despite the church missing the mark, God continues to invite and welcome us to the table. Within this reality we are committed to discerning faithfulness approved by God. May it be so.

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¹⁰ Cf: *Being a Faithful Church: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment* (Mennonite Church Canada Assembly, July/09)