

# being a faithful church

General Board  
Mennonite Church Canada

## Scripture Discernment & Feedback Tool

Oct, 2011



### Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment The Bible as our Standard for Faith and Life<sup>1</sup>: It is your turn to Teach

#### Situating Ourselves:

This document is the first follow-up to the Being a Faithful Church 3<sup>2</sup> (BFC 3) document, discussed and approved by the delegates of Mennonite Church Canada at the annual Assembly in Waterloo, July 4-8, 2011. The delegate approval states:

*We approve this document [BFC 3] as a framework and plan to guide the ongoing discernment in Mennonite Church Canada on matters of sexuality.*

*Our approval is also a commitment to encourage and support the General Board as it continues to provide the leadership needed to implement this plan, and to encourage our congregations and Area Churches to participate as fully as possible.*

*Action recommended by General Board,  
Mennonite Church Canada; July, 2011*

The approved BFC 3 document indicates what the next steps need to be. It states:

*September 2011- March 2012:  
Discussions of criteria to guide interpretation of Scripture;*

*July 2012 Assembly:  
Approval of criteria for interpretation.  
A study theme will focus on scriptural interpretation.*

This document, then, incorporates a feedback tool that will help take these next steps. It will help us all to identify the key criteria used to guide our interpretation of Scripture. It is hoped that from this feedback the "criteria for interpretation" will emerge. Those criteria will form the basis of a summary report for discussion and approval at Assembly 2012. This summary report, yet to come, can already be referred to as **"Being a Faithful Church 4."**

#### Reminding Ourselves:

The General Board of Mennonite Church Canada has initiated a process to strengthen our capacity as a church to discern the will of God through the church's efforts to interpret the Bible for our time. This initiative has been warmly embraced by pastors, congregations, Area Churches, and delegates of Mennonite Church Canada. It is evident that we are engaging a multi-step process. BFC 4 will be the fruit of what has been discussed and approved in BFC 1-3. We will, therefore, not repeat all that is said in these previous steps, but we will assume what is there.

In order to take another step forward, we do wish to remind ourselves of several key points we have approved up to now:

- 1) Discerning the will of God for our personal and corporate lives is the ongoing vocation of the church. We do this not because we are forced to, but because we want to be God's obedient, covenant people.
- 2) Scripture is the foundational source for us as we strive to be faithful.
- 3) Scripture promises that the Holy Spirit will be present when Christ's Body engages the vocation of being faithful. It is up to us to diligently, prayerfully and joyfully invite the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us and not behave in ways which shut the Spirit out.
- 4) Many factors contribute to the dynamic nature of discernment and understanding. Discernment is, therefore, an ongoing task of faithfulness. As the Holy Spirit guides us "into all truth" the church may want to repeat its understandings, modify them, or change them.
- 5) The outcome of this discernment will depend on how we read and interpret Scripture, and which of the biblical voices and perspectives are given more (or less) authority.
- 6) This need to "weigh the voices" of Scripture is, in turn, informed by criteria of scriptural interpretation that are shared in the Body (the church). It is important to identify these criteria as carefully as we can.

1 *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* states: "We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life" (Article 4).

2 Being a Faithful Church will be referred to as BFC. The numbers behind these letters refer to the sequence of papers that have been discussed and approved.

## Grounding Ourselves:

Our Confession of Faith states:

*The Bible is the essential book of the church.*<sup>3</sup>

*Since the beginning of the Anabaptist reformation in sixteenth-century Europe, Mennonites have sought to be a biblical people...*<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note the dynamic relationship of these two statements: the Bible is the *book of the church*, and the church is a *people of the Bible*. In a way, the Church gave birth to the Bible, and the Bible, in turn, continues to engender the Church itself. This inter-relationship points to the importance of interpreting the Bible in the community of faith.

We acknowledge that we are engaging a complex task. The history of the Church demonstrates that. It has been difficult to find common, acceptable interpretations for faith and practice. We should not be blind to this reality. However, history also demonstrates the miracles of common ground and understandings that have so often developed, not only with our contemporaries, but also with those who have gone before, and those of very different traditions, cultures, and contexts. The simple existence of denominations, such as Mennonite Church Canada, underlines this miracle of common ground. Other remarkable examples are our capacity to join together in ecumenical organizations<sup>5</sup>, generate international common statements of shared convictions<sup>6</sup>, and even inter-faith ventures of joining together around the "Common Word."<sup>7</sup> While there has been persistent complexity in coming to common understandings, we can opt for the positive confidence that God's Spirit does want to bring us together. Such common ground is not built on just anything. Good interpretation must be grounded on something. It is the search for this something that is featured in this document.

The first place to look for possible criteria or guidelines for interpretation of Scripture is in Scripture itself. For the sake of brevity, we will review only one – but a very well known – passage.

### II Timothy 3:14-17:

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

<sup>3</sup> Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective: Article 4, p.22.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: Article 4 (commentary), p.23.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of Mennonite Church Canada, we are members of the Canadian Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and the Mennonite World Conference.

<sup>6</sup> Mennonite World Conference delegates from 99 national churches approved a statement of 7 "Shared Convictions" in 2009.

<sup>7</sup> This is an initiative in which theologians of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian faiths signed. It is a statement of common understanding of scripture. The Faith and Life Committee of Mennonite Church Canada encouraged Mennonite Church Canada to sign this statement. The General Board approved this initiative in 2009.

This short passage is substantive in terms of the task that is before us. Let's take a closer look.

- 1) It refers to having "known the sacred writings" from childhood and that "all scripture is inspired..." At the time of writing, this would have referred to what we now call the Old Testament. The New Testament was incorporated as Scripture during several centuries after the writing of II Timothy. For us now, the Bible is the canon of the church, made up of the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>
- 2) This passage goes on to identify important features of the intention of scripture. These essential intentions can also serve as criteria of good interpretation for us. Our reading and interpretation of Scripture are meant to:
  - a) Instruct us (and others) for salvation – through faith in Jesus Christ;
  - b) Teach;
  - c) Reprove (rebuke);
  - d) Correct (improve);
  - e) Train for justice (righteousness; uprightness);<sup>9</sup>
  - f) Make us proficient and equip us for good work.

Negatively speaking, this passage suggests that any interpretation of scripture that does not train us for justice, does not equip us for good work, does not help us toward salvation, does not understand Jesus Christ as foundational, is not a good interpretation of Scripture. Even more strongly stated, according to this well-known passage any interpretation that supports injustice, ignores Jesus, equips us for evil work, or diminishes God's hope for the salvation of the world is not a good interpretation.

Mennonite Church Canada has tried to articulate this important instruction about the use of the Bible for the church.

### Our Confession of Faith says the following:<sup>10</sup>

*We accept the Bible as the Word of God written. God has spoken in many and various ways through the prophets and apostles. God has spoken above all in the living Word who became flesh and revealed the truth of God faithfully and without deception. We also acknowledge the Scripture as the fully reliable and trustworthy Word of God written in human language. We believe that God continues to speak through the living and written Word. Because Jesus Christ is the Word become flesh, Scripture as a whole has its center and fulfillment in him.*

<sup>8</sup> Confession of Faith, Article 4 (commentary), p.23.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek word dikaiosune is variously translated as justice and righteousness.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: Article 4, p.21-22

*We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture.*

*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 commit ourselves to persist and delight in reading, studying, and meditating on the Scriptures. 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.*

Some of the key features of this statement in regards to the task before us are:

- 1) It identifies a Living (Jesus Christ) and written (Scripture) word. The written word has its centre in the Living Word.
- 2) Scripture, as the written word tested against the Living Word, is sufficient to test other sources of information and interpretation.
- 3) It is the task of the faith community to test interpretations.

## The Nature of the task:

### We are now situated, reminded, and grounded. Now what?

We know that the key ingredients for the task are:

- the Living Word;
- the written Word;
- the Spirit of the Living and Written Word;
- the people of the Word;
- our context that deserves faithfulness and witness;
- questions, concerns, and agenda that we bring.

And above, around, and underneath these key elements - permeating everything - is, of course, the God of creation whose intentions and key strategies now become our own passion. The hope of God is that creation can be liberated, restored, and reconciled to its original design. This is God's mission and it now becomes the mission of the church.

And so let us bring our context, our questions, and our challenges to this same God and engage these elements of discernment that we have been given. God desires our hopes, and hopes that our desires align well with the divine intentions for our world. Discernment is an ongoing part of our missional vocation.

While we use a variety of things for discernment (tradition, culture, life experience, reasoning), the focus of this Scripture Discernment & Feedback Tool is to look at how we currently interpret Scripture. When we receive your input, we will compile it for Assembly 2012.

## Using the BFC Scripture Discernment Tool

**Setting:** A Sunday School class or discussion group. Approximately 2 hours. (If only 1 hour is available, concentrate discussion on points 2 and 4. The leader and secretary for the group should take responsibility for point 5; sending feedback to Mennonite Church Canada.)

**Leader Prep:** Choose a leader who is familiar with the BFC process. (BFC 1-3 are available at [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1630](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1630)). Read this Being a Faithful Church: Scripture Discernment Tool carefully. Appoint a secretary to record your stories and comments. (The secretary should also read this document ahead of time). If possible, line up one or two people to share their experiences of the church using scripture in decision making. Have flip-chart paper and a marker ready.

**Introduction:** A brief explanation of the BFC process. (5-10 minutes)

The BFC process is about building the church's capacity for faithful discernment on issues of faith and life. The goal is to develop a conscious strategy to help us, in congregations, Area Churches, and in Mennonite Church Canada, to speak and listen to each other in a way that builds up the body of Christ. This is accomplished through Bible study and interpretation, prayer, consideration of past and present realities, and practicing loving dialogue.

## BFC Scripture Discernment Tool

**Purpose:** to engage congregations in examining the use of scripture in their decision making. To share stories that help the wider church gain insight into how scripture is used in discernment today. The BFC committee will use this feedback to compile a list of the criteria of interpretation currently in use.

1. Invite the group to share stories of personal experience with the use of scripture. It may be helpful to have asked one or two people to briefly share their stories. (20 minutes)
2. Read II Timothy 3:14-17 out loud. Present the commentary on the passage (page 2). What resonates/does not resonate with your experience? Are there any insights this passage provides for your group? (20 minutes)
3. Read the section from the Confession of Faith and name the key features as identified (page 2-3). It may be helpful to have copies of The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective on hand. What resonates/does not resonate with your experience? Comments? (10-20 minutes)
4. As a group, brainstorm the ways in which your congregation uses and interprets scripture. How does your understanding of scripture enter into decision-making in your congregation? Write comments on the flip-chart. (20 minutes)
5. Responding to Mennonite Church Canada: From your discussions, what would you like Mennonite Church Canada to know about how your congregation interprets scripture?  
Use the following questions to guide this feedback. The designated secretary should read their notes back to the group to test for accuracy. (20 minutes)

## BFC Feedback Tool:

### It is your turn to teach: How do you interpret Scripture?

We need to hear from you:<sup>11</sup>

Our focus is being a faithful church and how Scripture helps us in this vocation. We want to hear from you. Please identify yourself (see footnote 11) and answer the two questions below. Refer to the sub questions as you find them helpful. If you have a particular concern, issue or decision in mind as you respond please provide enough background to understand your contribution well.

- 1) Tell us what you have learned about the use of the Bible in your Christian life and what you think others might learn from your experience. You may want to share something that has come to you slowly through a lengthy time of reflection, prayer, and interaction. Or you may want to share some experience that has dawned on you more suddenly – perhaps a new insight or perspective that has clarified things for you.
  - a) Are there any particular passages, stories or images from the Bible that help you in a special way? Please explain.
- 2) What are the underlying and over-riding assumptions, principles, and guidelines that you believe are helpful in the interpretation of the Bible and its use in your faith and life?
  - a) Are there elements identified in the document above from II Timothy and from the Confession of Faith that are helpful to you? Are there additional elements that should be considered?
  - b) Are there some characteristics of the Bible itself: e.g., of how it came to be, how it is organized, or dynamics within Scripture itself that are helpful to you and that you think would be helpful to others?

## Next Steps:

Thank you for your response and for your teaching. We know that compiling the results will not be easy. But we will do that with as much integrity and transparency as we can. We hope to have the compilation completed by March 15, 2012.

### Please send in your responses by January 31, 2012.

We will submit a full report to the Assembly/Study Conference in July/2012. We trust that the Spirit will guide us as a Body to see what “the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

### Please send your responses to:

**BFC Feedback c/o Willard Metzger**  
Mennonite Church Canada  
600 Shaftesbury Blvd; Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3P 0M4

Or email it to:  
wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca

You can also use an online tool here ([www.surveymonkey.com/s/BFCFeedback](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/BFCFeedback)) to submit your responses.

Thank-you

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<sup>11</sup> Respondents can be: individuals, groups (e.g. Sunday school classes, Bible-study groups, book clubs, etc.), congregations, church councils, advocacy/interest groups, Area Churches, youth groups, young adults, etc.