

Working Document on Authority in the Mennonite Church
By David Driedger

Authority is constantly being negotiated. Authority is never final. In the church God is evoked to authorize authority but God, it seems, can be an author of many genres. God has been evoked to authorize a particular people, a particular book, a particular reasoning, a particular tradition or order, etc. Typically what gives a particular expression authority is the belief that this form connects to, *mediates*, the transcendent reality of God. God is acknowledged as the authority, as the ultimate author, because God is believed to exist *outside* of and *other than* the 'fallenness' of lived reality as we understand and experience it. This forms the typical picture of God as *up above* able to see and understand the fullness of our reality. Whoever successfully attaches him or herself to this understanding often believe they have authority.

The trouble comes (and it comes early) when we find ourselves thinking we are specially aligned with God's transcendent authority. Despite all the safeguards we try to place against thinking we know the mind of God in the end it is surprisingly easy to take a god-like perspective on authority. It is no wonder that questions of authority quickly lead to confusion if not abuse.

I first began seriously reflecting on the role of authority in preparation for ordination with Mennonite Church Manitoba. Part of the process was to engage our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* responding to areas that we agreed with and addressing areas we had questions or concerns about. What emerged for me was the strange movements of authority within the confession. These movements, criss-crossing lines of authority are easy to summarize.

Already in the introduction to the *Confession* we find a puzzling statement,

[Mennonite confessions of faith] provide guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture. At the same time, the confession itself is subject to the authority of the Bible.

While I appreciate the openness of such a statement what is troublesome is that this irony, paradox, or conflict of interest is nowhere further acknowledged or engaged *within* the confession. Rather, the waters of authority are only further muddied in the Articles themselves. *Within* the *Confession* we now have authoritative statements on Scripture, Jesus, Holy Spirit, and the church that create additionally confusing lines of authority.

To summarize,

1. The confession teaches us how to read the Bible.
2. The confession is in submission to the Bible.

3. The Bible is the Word of God written and is authoritative for establishing truth and error.
4. Jesus is the Word made flesh and so the Bible finds its fulfillment in him.
5. Jesus is known in the words of the Bible.
6. The Holy Spirit continues to speak.
7. The Holy Spirit will not contradict the Bible's witness of Jesus.
8. The Bible is authoritative for the church.
9. It is in the church that the Bible must be interpreted.

Tracing these lines and thinking through each implication it was no wonder that such conflict and disagreement exists in how Mennonites attempt to express authority. And all of this does not even begin to address the role that social, cultural, psychological and interpersonal forces play in the formation and expression of authority. It was around this time that Mennonite Church Canada initiated the *Being a Faithful Church* (BFC) process. The BFC process began with a promising orientation acknowledging that discernment is the ongoing, lifelong activity of the church and that in light of this calling the church must decide if it will reaffirm its position, modify it, or change it. The BFC documents demonstrate that these three options have occurred historically both within the Bible and within the church. Therefore, the church should not be afraid, in principle, to change its mind or position on a given issue.

The BFC process was an intense and sustained attempt at holding the variables of authority together so that community discernment could occur. What did emerge as consistent in the documents was the notion that God has revealed *ideals* for God's people to live up to. This was most clearly demonstrated in BFC 5 *Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality*. This document proposed that God's ideals for human sexuality now lay on the distant and unreachable horizons of the Garden of Eden (Genesis) and the New Jerusalem (Revelation). While the authors of this document claimed their interpretation was only *one* approach to the topic among others it remains significant that it *was* the official document of the process and reflected a consistent tendency in how the church configures authority. Church authority tends to seek a distant untouched ideal from which to address present realities. One consequence of such an approach is the belief we, as the church, have the sufficient resources to pass judgment on issues related to people not currently acknowledged as being faithful members. Even if our ideals tell us to be loving what that love looks like remains in the hands of those holding the sources of those ideals (which for Mennonites is typically the Bible). On what basis then could someone claim that their present testimony of faith, a testimony that challenged those ideals, should be acknowledged as good and faithful? When ideals are the standard there is no recourse, no authority for someone who is not currently considered faithful.

Church leadership (perhaps most leadership) tends towards a superiority complex. Put simply, we act as though we are sufficient and superior prior to contact with groups or individuals not

directly affiliated with those of us in positions of authority. When we are *in* positions of authority there is no *need* to consider and integrate perspectives beyond our resources. This is clear in our doctrine of scripture when we claim to possess the word of God (as opposed to those who do not) and this is often clear in our theology of mission believing that truth and salvation flow *from us* into the world (we have nothing to gain and everything to offer). In light of this heritage the church has often discerned issues relating to other groups without mutual consultation and engagement. This does not simply happen with groups outside the church (think dominant paradigms of indigenous/colonial missions) but this also occurs addressing those *within* the church. While the BFC task force did consult with LGBTQ identified individuals and LGBTQ individuals were heard (occasionally) from the floor of larger gatherings it remains the legacy of this process that *nowhere* was their testimony heard in the official documents and *nowhere* was their presence acknowledged formally on the stage of our sessions. This reality remains an indictment of a supremacist model of discernment. In light of these realities is there another intentional way of approaching the question of authority and discernment?

Another significant shift in the BFC process occurred when it *turned decidedly from discerning matters of marriage and sexuality to maintaining unity in the church*. Suddenly the *goal* of the process became maintaining unity. What does it mean for unity to suddenly become the goal of our discernment? To make unity a goal of discernment is already to cede ground *and authority* to established positions which are meant to be opened in the process of discernment. Unity is easily leveraged as authoritative in maintaining a group as it currently acts and exists in the world.

Questions of authority and discernment are rarely clear. Our *Confession* implicitly acknowledges how textured and difficult discernment is but in practice we tend default to established expressions of biblical reflection as well as privileging existing norms and practices. When confronted with the loss of using the Bible as a final authority in the way we have been accustomed the typical response is that we will then be at the whim of contemporary culture, subjective experience, or simple relativism. *Who then should we follow?*

There are of course several alternatives in matters of ethical discernment for the church. I want to suggest an approach to ethics and authority that is in fact fundamentally informed by scripture but that leads us to take greater responsibility for our decision making and shifts our theological orientation from seeking to mediate some distant ideal to attending to God in the midst of life.

It remains an unfortunate tendency within the church to either adopt a more literalist approach to biblical ethics on the one hand or to diminish or discard the role of scripture on the other. We limit ourselves by such understandings of the Bible. The literalist approach tends towards selective reasoning creating a tiny 'canon within a canon' in order to leverage whatever

assumed authority can still be granted to the Bible. This approach reduces the fiercely diverse reality of scripture to a handful of a key laws that neatly conform to already existing cultural or political preferences.

The other option is dismiss or diminish the value of scripture. Liberal theology is quick to elevate the role of science and the general enlightenment or evolution of knowledge in the West. In light of such advancements the Bible is considered quaint and nostalgic or outdated and dangerous. Here again the Bible, at best, is reduced to platitudes of love and grace with little context or clarity to specifically address issues and concerns.

While acknowledging that each approach has scholars and experts that create much more nuance and texture in their engagement on these matters it seems that both approaches end up doing more to preserve existing privilege or status within their respective congregational contexts then open up the possibility of substantive engagement with an ethic that can change both our beliefs and our practices.

Accepting that there is no static foundation of authority to Christian ethics what resources can be most helpful at this time? I remain committed to the Bible as an authoritative source for Christian ethics and of the priority of a faithful orientation to justice and healing. One approach to these commitments would be to stockpile verses that point to matters of social justice and care for the vulnerable. If indeed all conversation partners were rationally inclined in these matters significant headway in biblical ethics could be made in addressing matters of injustice. But to approach the Bible in this way is to already accept the methodological ground to those who wish to use the Bible as a citation for their own moral agenda. To approach the Bible in this way is to accept the never ending war and the inevitable causalities of proof texting as authority. This, plus I do not find this approach to scripture helpful or responsible to the text itself.

If I were pushed to outline a theology of the Bible I would gesture in two directions. First, *the Bible gives witness to the ways in which humans consistently mistake the movements and revelations of God*. The unfolding of the biblical story is the sending and resending of messages and messengers that attempt to course correct the people in their ability to live faithfully. And what is this faithfulness? The second theme of the biblical narrative is *the constructive call to worship the living God the God who is revealed as the one named by the unnameable expression I will be who I will be*. To worship the living God is to choose life (yes, not a self-evident command) and to resist the making of idols. It is this second command that can help orient us to a critical thread in the Bible. The Bible and the biblical law within it can become idolatrous. To take the Bible seriously as an authoritative witness to faith is *to understand how the Bible points away from itself towards a living and dynamic relationship with the God*. At the core of

the Pentateuch is the construction of the Tabernacle and the Holy of Holies from which the voice of God speaks. And the text clearly states from where this voice speaks.

There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites. (Ex 25:22)

If the people are to have any hope of hearing God's voice they must keep that space *empty*. To already fill that space is to assume to know the voice of God. The biblical text points to what is not there, to what is possible when we give our attention to the living God. But of course the living *is* known in particular ways as a God who has called a particular people.

How has this worked itself out? Consider just a handful of themes. There are the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27) who turned the attention of the religious leaders to their situation and forced the leaders to consider the insufficiency of their current theology and the injustice of their situation. This tradition continued with Job who needed to insistently turn his friends' attention away from their established theology to simply sit with him in his suffering and refuse any attempts to make sense of it. Then prophets came and said to those calling for a high view of scripture saying, *Do you not understand? The point is not to follow the law but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly*. The same was true with Jesus who responded to questions about his authority as Messiah by telling people to see and hear what is happening around them (Matthew 11; Luke 18). When addressing the authority of scripture Jesus also says, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:48). Peter was asked to turn his attention away from a belief deeply and thoroughly informed by scripture to consider that God was asking him to do a new thing (Acts 10). And finally the Revelation to John on the island of Patmos came when he *turned* his attention away from his worship and looked behind him to see the Son of Man (Revelation 1:12). There a major streams in the Bible in which it is clear that fixation on the Bible in itself as the final authority is a quick path to unfaithfulness.

So we study scripture. We discern patterns; patterns that show a consistency of practices and beliefs as well as patterns that show a posture and calling to openness. This is how I understood the opening of the BFC process. This was implicitly indicated in the messiness of authority in our *Confession*. So why do these conditions so easily collapse when we are called to consider a major revision in our beliefs? When our ethics and authority flow from a distant and untouchable ideal we are caught continuing to believe that we have a sufficient authority without being given any criteria for accepting something that challenges our current belief. Somehow our notion of God and authority must be based in our present attentiveness and responsibility. Here again there could be many ways to proceed. I will pursue one approach.

If we want to maintain the notion of a *living God* then a basic choice will always be placed before us. Will our sense of authority be informed with those most vulnerable and threatened

by death or will our authority be informed with those most powerful, those (apparently) most *full* of life. While there are biblical traditions of flourishing that can lend themselves to endorsing expressions of privilege and power it would be difficult to assert this above the transgressive traditions that are willing to undermine power in the name of privileging those who suffer or are vulnerable to abusive powers. Further, it is not difficult to see how wealth and privilege easily consolidate or crystallize into forms of idolatry. Whereas justice, according to Simone Weil, must remain fugitive.

The Mennonite church has taken some steps in this direction. Many churches have ‘created space’ for a level of diversity. Mennonite Church Canada has ordained women and now allowed congregations to discern on matters of same-sex marriage but this permissiveness has *not* led to actively dismantle what we now consider unethical positions. We do not discipline churches that will not hire female ministers. We remain largely silent on issues of racism and colonialism. It would be an offense to say that we have *dealt with* these issues. Most often the church has (often unwillingly) conceded passively to these issues. Here again our liberalism or conservatism gets reduced to isolating rejection or passive hope for unity. So while some positive changes have been made I want to suggest that this incremental change remains measurable only on an unjust scale. What is needed is a change in our sense of authority in matters of ethics and discernment.

To transition from a conservative or liberal approach to scriptural authority and to model an authority flowing from our attention to vulnerability and suffering it is helpful to observe those theologians who have already committed to a form of faithfulness and authority outside traditional norms.

1. James Cone and Black Theology in *God of the Oppressed* – “I still regard the Bible as an important source of my theological reflections, but not the starting point. The black experience and the Bible together in dialectical tension serve as my point of departure. . . . The Bible therefore is one witness.”
2. Delores Williams and Womanist Theology in *Sisters in the Wilderness* – “Jesus is whoever Jesus has to be to function in a supportive way in the struggle.” The experience and reality of struggle and suffering are equally important in understanding the Bible (and in understanding the blind spots and limitations *within* the Bible).
3. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Feminist Theology in *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* – Advocates an ‘Open Christology’ that remains in process in which “the bodies of women must be the first interpretive clue in understanding Christ and theological discourse.”

4. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Majuerista Theology¹ in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy* – “In saying that [the poor] are the source of mujerista theology, we reject the traditional division of the sources of Christianity into primary sources – scripture for all Christians, to which Catholics add tradition – and secondary sources.”
5. Randy Woodley and Indigenous Theology in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry* – “As a follower of Jesus from a Keetoowah Indian heritage, my ‘canon’ consists of Scripture, creation, and the ‘Native American Old Testament.’”

Once we have allowed ourselves to be unmoored from a false notion of ‘biblical authority’ or fixed ethical idealism there remains several ethical methods that allow us to maintain a rigorous and attentive approach to questions of faithfulness, love and justice. Ted Jennings in *An Ethic of Queer Sex* calls Christians to a ‘responsible freedom’ that acknowledges the Apostle Paul’s dilemma of being unable to legislate faithfulness. Love and faithfulness therefore require a level of *improvisation* which is “in one way unpredictable, unprogrammable, and yet, in another it is also reliable in that it genuinely seeks to benefit the other, each other, all others” (36). Traci West in *Disruptive Christian Ethics* offers concrete engagement with the lives of women of colour on questions of racism, sexual violence, incarceration reminding us that ethics is a “normative project. Its major purpose is not only to analyze existing practices that inhibit and assault the social and spiritual well-being of persons, but also to specify how those practices should be transformed to provide or support socially just and spiritually nurturing relations among us” (37). Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite has put it bluntly advocating for a *critical physicality* when approaching ethics. This approach is constantly tracking the relationship between social expressions and their effects on bodies. As Thistlethwaite traces what she calls the war on women she exposes traumatic manifestations, skin colour, bruising, deaths, and disfigurement. Ethics can never be removed from skin, bone, blood, and mind which are the materials of spirit and faith.

There is therefore no shortage of authority and accountability when we are committed to ongoing attentiveness to violence, suffering and vulnerability. We are not doomed to relativity when we allow the Bible to point towards other forms of authority. Why then does the church remain so insistent on divorcing ethics and authority from the lived reality of those vulnerable and suffering? Why can we no longer recognize the Messiah by what we see happening around us?

What I hope is clear is that those who have had the most ‘skin in the game’ when it comes to ethics are those who have also developed theologies and ethical methodologies discarding simplistic notions of biblical authority that always tend to enforce the status quo. This of course

¹ The term majuerista was coined by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and refers to her commitment to the liberation of Latino women.

is not true of all individuals or communities that I have represented above.² Given the inevitable diversity within any tradition it is difficult to ignore that it is precisely from these communities that such alternative models of authority have emerged. Taking this reality alongside the persistent theme *within* the Bible itself calling attention to such individuals and communities for the sake of the Gospel should be enough. It should be enough as a call to repentance, an *authoritative* call for us to change our thinking and practice; to reconsider our faith. But if there is a consistent theme in biblical theology it is that idolatry has proven absolutely gripping.

What difference does all this make? Shifting our understanding of authority inevitably means shifting our attention. Consider the possible changes of focus. Instead of debates on whether divorce and remarriage, women in leadership, or same-sex marriages are 'right' we would actively create safe spaces to hear stories of domestic abuse and incest, re-examine our ideas of family and kinship, teach how to identify coercion and manipulation by church leaders, explore supportive ways of navigating gender, sexuality, and desire. What if instead of trying to promote a 'third-way' approach of mediating conflicts we decided that we needed to commit to those with the least access to power and stability knowing that in the future things might change and therefore so would our approach. What if instead of pitting science and faith against each other we clarify the manner in which each of them served life or death. What if instead of only debating the punitive weight of individual actions and moral character of individuals we addressed the historic and systematic abuses faced by certain groups in relation to matters of policing and incarceration.

Even if these shifts are made ethical dilemmas and conflicts will arise. I am not suggesting that clarity will suddenly emerge when our attention shifts. In theological terms attention is ultimately a matter of worship. Gods are calling for our attention. Time and attention results in devotion. In this way attentiveness to those most vulnerable, those who suffer most is our way of joining ethics and worship. It is how we keep our sense of authority accountable to Jesus's Gospel. This does not offer a fixed horizon of ideals, or a static sense of law from which we abstract principles. This is ethics as discipleship, as following. This is ethics as worship, as drawing and training our attention. This is ethics as accountable to the authority of those who pay the price for the decisions of our time and place.

² I do not wish to impose one theological grid on any historic faith community. I only want to draw out the consistency and rigour of those groups who have not historically been given access to theological authority.