

## **Community Hermeneutics in Practice: Following the Interpretive Path Together**

*Doug Heidebrecht*

The practice of community hermeneutics is observable when the church gathers together around the Scriptures to listen for, and discern, the Spirit's guidance.<sup>1</sup> This practice is evident in the New Testament church itself (Acts 2:42; 15:6-29; 1 Cor 14:26, 29) and reflected in the gathering of the church over the centuries in councils, conferences, congregational meetings, and Bible studies.<sup>2</sup> In these various ways, the church gathers to interpret the Bible and engage in the hermeneutical task of discerning how to apply the message of the Bible as a word addressed to them in their context.<sup>3</sup> Tim Geddert states, "Hermeneutics is something that needs to be addressed in community. . . . The church, as a discerning community, under the guidance of God's Spirit and local leaders, must work toward consensus on 'what God wants us to do in response to what the Bible says.'"<sup>4</sup>

---

*Living out the Scriptures is the most difficult step because it entails the motivation to make new choices and the commitment to act differently.*

---

### **MENNONITE BRETHREN AFFIRMATION OF COMMUNITY HERMENEUTICS**

Mennonite Brethren, from their very beginning, have expressed a robust impulse to gather together to interpret the Scriptures and discern its application. Examples include the practice of a Bible study hour, which

---

*Doug Heidebrecht (PhD, Wales) serves as the Director of Global Training and Associate Professor of Mission and Theology at MB Seminary (Langley, BC) and also works in an international setting. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 2019 Equip Study Conference on October 24, 2019, at the Waterloo Mennonite Brethren Church in Waterloo, Ontario.*

became an integral part of early Mennonite Brethren discipleship, where members who lived close to each other would gather for a simple discussion of the Word of God.<sup>5</sup> “The spiritual life . . . among our Mennonite people, seems to have been in direct relation to the place which was given to the written Word in everyday life and in the church. . . . This is ‘listening as a disciple.’”<sup>6</sup> These small group Bible studies were expanded into regular Bible conferences that involved up to thirty preachers coming together to discuss a portion of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> They would sit in a semi-circle on the platform facing the audience; and, after taking turns to comment on the chosen passage, the congregation was free to ask questions and contribute to the discussion. The practice of gathering in yearly conferences, which began in 1872 in Russia and in 1878 in the United States, also reflects this impulse to seek the Spirit’s guidance through the Word as a community. In 1956, the Canadian and U.S. MB Conferences initiated regular study conferences, which continue to this day, to engage the theological and ethical issues challenging Mennonite Brethren as a community.

The 1978 Resolution on the Interpretation of Scripture recognized “the interdependence of the members of the body of Christ,” which implied a practice of “congregational hermeneutics.”<sup>8</sup> A decade later, the 1987 Resolution on the Confession of Faith explicitly described the practice of community hermeneutics:

We practice a corporate hermeneutic which listens to the concerns of individuals and churches, but discerns together the meaning and intent of the Scriptures. This safeguards our denomination from the extremes of individualism and private interpretations, but allows for free study and discussion.<sup>9</sup>

Mennonite Brethren in Canada and the U.S. continue to affirm the significance of the practice of community hermeneutics within their Confession of Faith: “We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit . . . who guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the ICOMB Confession of Faith, on behalf of the global Mennonite Brethren family, states, “Since the Holy Spirit is present and active in all believers, we read and interpret the Bible and its demands for today’s life in community.”<sup>11</sup>

### **THE CHALLENGE OF COMMUNITY HERMENEUTICS**

Despite these affirmations and the longstanding recognition of the need to engage in the practice of community hermeneutics, Mennonite Brethren have struggled to participate well together, particularly when facing divisive issues. In 1989, Geddert highlighted the challenge facing Mennonite Brethren regarding the question of women in ministry leadership:

Until we are willing and able to dialogue openly about our hermeneutics, without criticizing or judging each other, it is unlikely that we will move towards consensus on what God's will is for us on this question in our day. We want things to be simple . . . just listen to the Bible and obey. Our present confusion and misunderstanding comes in large measure because for too long we pretended we were doing just that. Really we were not. And now we know neither what we really were doing, nor what we should do to get out of the present impasse.<sup>12</sup>

The example of the Mennonite Brethren conversation regarding women in ministry leadership, which has been taking place for almost seventy years, illustrates well the complex and often difficult experience of participating in the practice of community hermeneutics as a denominational family of churches.<sup>13</sup> Several critical concerns arise from the experience of this lengthy conversation, which highlight this struggle.<sup>14</sup>

First, despite Mennonite Brethren's affirmation for the importance of understanding what the Bible says, they have struggled to arrive at a shared interpretation of the Bible's meaning. Mennonite Brethren could not find their way through the exegetical impasse reflected in the presence of both affirming and restricting biblical texts, which left the impression of contradictory messages regarding women's involvement in the church. This was compounded by the appeal to unarticulated assumptions that served as interpretive frameworks, which were then used to justify differing exegetical decisions.

Second, Mennonite Brethren were profoundly unaware of the nature of the hermeneutical problem—the need to bridge the distance between the world of the Bible and our contemporary context. This was evident in their lack of critical attention to understanding how their own cultural context shaped how they made sense of what they read in the Scriptures. This lack of awareness at times deteriorated into a simplistic “culture vs. biblical authority” debate that failed to recognize that no one is immune from the influence of culture; nor does the affirmation of biblical authority automatically resolve interpretive differences.

Third, Mennonite Brethren were unable to achieve consensus as a denominational family. While there were many contributing factors, the lack of a shared consensus revealed differing, even conflicting convictions, which reflected not only increasing theological diversity, but also regional fragmentation and assertions of local church autonomy. The relational glue that underlies denominational unity was being stretched, revealing an ambivalence toward a covenantal understanding of the church.<sup>15</sup> The Mennonite Brethren conversation easily became politicized around identity markers external to the community (egalitarian and complementarian),

which created barriers within the church family that then focused on defending particular interpretive positions rather than on participating in a shared discernment process. Loyalty to these identity labels hindered the capacity of Mennonite Brethren to envision themselves in a unifying Spirit-led family conversation rooted in prayer, sustained through mutual listening, and striving toward shared understanding.

Finally, the practice of community hermeneutics in relation to the issue of women in ministry leadership operated for the most part in isolation from any significant biblical or theological reflection about the practice itself.<sup>16</sup> This absence meant that while Mennonite Brethren engaged in biblical interpretation, the hermeneutical task, and a process of discernment, they rarely appealed to any biblical support or theological vision that could sustain and guide their practice.

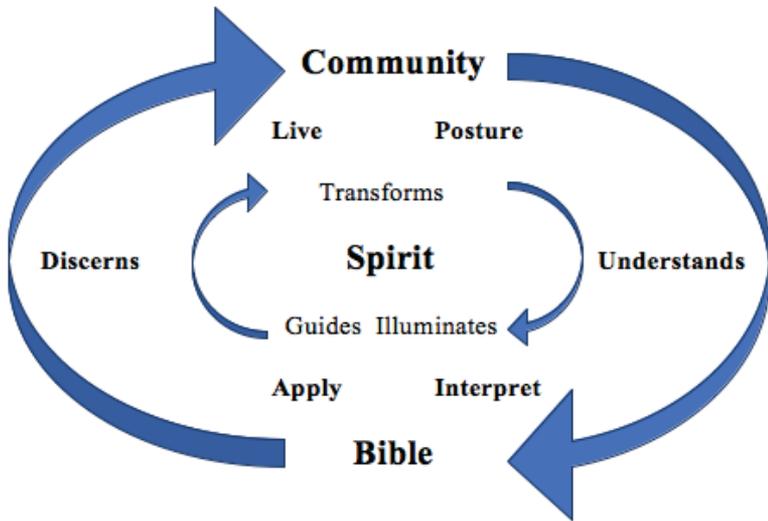
It would not be surprising if Mennonite Brethren's experience regarding the issue of women in ministry leadership might create a sense of apprehension, perhaps fear, or even cynicism regarding the practice of community hermeneutics. Is the notion of community hermeneutics simply an unrealistic ideal that is unattainable in the lived experience of the church?

Even in the face of this experience, however, the impulse to gather together to interpret the Scriptures and discern its application continues because Mennonite Brethren remain committed to the convictions that God reveals himself through the Scriptures to his people, that we are all members of the body of Christ, and that the illuminating, guiding, and transforming Spirit is present within each believer. The alternative is a stark individualism, presuming the objectivity of its own perceptions. Nevertheless, I suggest that the real challenge is not whether the community of faith should be involved in the interpretation and discernment of Scripture, but how. Is there a way forward that might enable Mennonite Brethren to engage in a healthy practice of community hermeneutics?

### **FOLLOWING THE INTERPRETIVE PATH**

The Interpretive Model presented by the Canadian MB Conference National Faith and Life Team (NFLT) identifies three core elements in the interpretive process—Community, Bible, and Spirit—thus affirming “the foundational authority of the Scriptures, the role of the Spirit, and the identity of the community as the primary interpretive context.”<sup>17</sup> The accompanying Interpretive Method identifies four steps in the process of what is involved when the church engages in interpreting Scripture. These steps present an intriguing pathway for Mennonite Brethren, either as local congregations or as a family of churches, which holds out hope for a healthy practice of community hermeneutics.

I will explore how the steps along the interpretive path—Posture, Interpret, Apply, and Live—can provide a helpful guide for the practice of community hermeneutics that offers awareness, direction, and vision for what this might involve. The following diagram visualizes a “hermeneutical circle” that integrates the Interpretive Model and Method in a process that begins and ends with the community of faith (whether a denominational family or local congregation) engaging in understanding and discerning the message of the Bible. What is highlighted in the center is the active presence and work of the Spirit of Christ illuminating, guiding, and transforming the church through the practice of community hermeneutics as it seeks to listen and respond to God’s Word.



**POSTURE—HOW DO WE APPROACH THE BIBLE?**

How we approach the Bible begins with the humble recognition that we come to the Scriptures from who we are. We always read the Bible from within a particular vantage point or context (either as individuals or as a community) which has been shaped by our culture, history, traditions, experiences, and current situation. Acknowledging the interpretive lens created by these factors offers an awareness that enables us to reflect critically on how our assumptions, questions, and expectations shape our

reading of the Bible. On one hand, this awareness provides the capacity to recognize our susceptibility to powerful cultural values and attitudes, which may distort or domesticate the biblical message. As James McClendon warns, “Christians face an interior struggle, inasmuch as the line between church and world passes right through each Christian heart.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, our awareness opens the possibility for the Spirit’s transformation, not only of our cultural lens, but also of our own sinful self-centeredness that may subtly weaken our ability to hear God’s Word.

It is not easy to perceive how our particular context might influence our reading of Scripture. As J. Todd Billings notes,

Cultural exegesis is notoriously difficult. Culture is like the water fish swim in: it’s just “the way things are,” the lens through which we see the world. Because of this, one of the most effective ways of coming to know one’s own culture is to encounter another culture . . . This cross-cultural encounter provides both illumination and criticism of how one receives the Bible in one’s own culture.<sup>19</sup>

When we approach the Bible as a community, we have a “built-in” opportunity (whether locally or globally) to observe differing perspectives that reflect the shaping influences of our various cultures, traditions, and experiences. We can begin to posture ourselves appropriately by openly sharing together how these factors have contributed to our current perceptions, questions, and understanding. This may be challenging since our capacity to learn from each other emerges out of relationships that reflect a mutual willingness to listen to each other as well as an openness to reflect honestly regarding why we perceive things the way we do. At times, we may have the tendency to share our perspectives and opinions in an attempt to persuade others of their legitimacy rather than consider how they may have been formed within ourselves. Acknowledging that we all read the Bible through a particular cultural lens is not an embrace of relativism—where all perspectives somehow represent equally valid interpretive options. Rather, it is appreciating that we can better recognize how our own individual contexts shape how we make sense of what we read when we talk together in community.

Approaching the Bible in community also recognizes that no one is a solitary reader. We always read the Scriptures through the lens of shared convictions that have been formed through collective traditions and experiences, which also create an interpretive framework for making sense of what we read. Just as there is no escape from our particular cultural perspective, so too there is no reading of the Bible from a neutral theological position.<sup>20</sup> While experiences of coercion or legalism may contribute to the illusion that reading the Bible is best done from a detached vantage point, Trevor Hart cautions,

A totally “free” (i.e., autonomous) thought, liberated from all inherited influences and determinations, or a critical thought which is genuinely critical with respect to anything which it cannot itself demonstrate to be the case is self-deception which simply leaves those who embrace it as an ideal cruelly exposed to the manipulation and buffetings of the spirit of the age which they mistakenly embrace as the voice of “objective reasoning.”<sup>21</sup>

Our response to tradition is neither uncritical acceptance nor passive dependence. Paradoxically, our willingness to be nurtured within tradition provides the “mature ability to discern the extent of our indebtedness to it,” thus enabling us to evaluate critically its capacity to effectively engage our own contemporary questions and reality.<sup>22</sup> The “beauty” of traditions is that, by setting us within a larger community’s journey and joining us with the Christian “cloud of witnesses” over the centuries, “they open up deeper, more penetrating possibilities for textual understanding than we could have on our own.”<sup>23</sup>

The challenge for Mennonite Brethren is that they live within and identify with overlapping convictional communities, which represent differing theological traditions.<sup>24</sup> While this has contributed to the difficulty of succinctly defining Mennonite Brethren identity, the presence of differing assumptions and ways of reading the Bible also offers underappreciated opportunities.<sup>25</sup> Diversity within the Mennonite Brethren community enriches the depth of insight and understanding of the Scriptures and must be welcomed as a gift from God. Yet this same diversity may tend to create “us-them” distinctions (Gal 3:28) unless the relational glue of love, trust, and belonging binds people into a family of disciples on a journey together. Local churches and conferences must work hard at building loving relationships across the perceived “barriers” that might divide us.

The acknowledgement that we read the Bible from who we are enables the community to affirm how its convictions and expectations about the Bible are grounded in a shared relationship with the Triune God. Mennonite Brethren are committed to reading the Bible as “the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice.”<sup>26</sup> This commitment not only affirms the inspiration and authority of the Bible as God’s revelation but also our willingness to live according to its teachings.<sup>27</sup> As committed readers, Mennonite Brethren read the Bible as part of the process of discipleship through which “we bring our whole lives to our reading of Scripture, so that the whole of our lives may be addressed by God through Scripture.”<sup>28</sup> Preparation for reading the Bible together includes a listening stance but also spending time in worship and prayer together, which orients the community toward the Living Word in a posture of openness and dependence. We come to the Bible expecting

to be addressed by God through the biblical text. Not only is the Jesus we read about in the Bible the Lord we now follow in daily life, but he is also the Head of the Church. As a community we need to find ways to facilitate approaching the Scriptures as listeners who are open to learning and to being led and transformed by Christ's Spirit.

### **INTERPRET —WHAT IS THE BIBLE'S MEANING?**

To interpret is to ask the "meaning" question—that is, to understand what "an author actually does communicate by intention in a text."<sup>29</sup> God chose to use human authors to express his divine revelation as they communicated with particular audiences or addressed specific situations or concerns. Therefore, reading the Bible as a book must involve the use of general interpretive practices—we need to understand the meaning of words, grammar, sentences, and paragraphs as well as the form and purpose of different literary genres.<sup>30</sup> A close reading of the Bible requires reading the text within its context through an exploration of the historical setting, cultural background, and situation of both the writer and the audience.<sup>31</sup> The meaning of what an author intended to communicate is embedded in the literary form and broader context of what was written. While the Holy Spirit inspired biblical authors, he did not extract them from their culture or historical context or dictate his message in a language they never learned to speak.

At the same time, the Bible is not like any other book since the Spirit's inspiration has formed the Bible as an instrument of divine revelation, which leads people into a knowledge of the Triune God through Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup> The Bible is not a disparate collection of ancient books but a unified witness to Jesus as "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6).<sup>33</sup> On one hand, we listen carefully to the diversity of texts (and voices) within the biblical canon lest we "succumb to the temptation of flipping to some comforting cross-reference to neutralize the force of any particularly challenging passage."<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, we seek to hear the whole message of the Bible by synthesizing these texts together to discern their unity and shared themes. The practice of seeing how "Scripture interprets Scripture" enables us to understand how to interpret "difficult" texts within the broader canonical perspective. Reading the Scriptures also involves much more than simply comprehending words, sentences, or overarching biblical themes, for it is the inspiring Spirit who continues to illuminate the meaning of biblical texts as his "instrument for transforming God's people into Christ's image."<sup>35</sup> While "the Spirit does not create new meaning" outside the intent of the biblical authors, he does provide awareness, insight, and perspective in the process of reading and interpreting the Scriptures.<sup>36</sup>

Mennonite Brethren typically engage the Scriptures at three general levels: individually through devotional reading or personal study; as a local church through Bible studies, preaching, or teaching; and as a family of churches addressing relevant ethical questions or confessional issues. The usual experience of how the community engages the Scriptures is often through one person to the rest—a pastor preaching, a teacher teaching, or a leader presenting. This common practice creates a challenge regarding how the whole community might fully participate in the experience of interpreting the Scriptures themselves. At one level, this common practice may be reasonable because the attempt to understand the meaning of the biblical text requires good interpretive skills and practices as well as significant time and effort. However, the joy of discovering the Bible’s meaning should not just be a second-hand experience.<sup>37</sup> For the Word of God to be understood within the community, leaders must also seek to invite the whole community into the actual process of interpreting Scripture.

Although church leaders may regularly encourage community members to read their Bibles, rarely does the church provide a setting for teaching people how to do this well.<sup>38</sup> The challenge for leaders is both to model good interpretive practice and to facilitate the community’s involvement in the process of a close reading of biblical texts. A person’s understanding will be deepened when they have engaged in reading the Scripture for themselves, rather than always having others tell them what the text means. Community engagement with the Scriptures encourages people to be participants, not just observers. As the Spirit did not bypass the original human authors but worked through them, so too the Spirit continues to work through the time, effort, and attention we commit to studying the Bible. When leaders teach inductively and facilitate a process of active learning, the community is able to move toward a shared interpretation, which lays a foundation for the community’s full participation in discerning the application of Scripture to their own lives.

### **APPLY—HOW DOES THE BIBLE RELATE TO US?**

Meghan Larissa Good offers a popular distinction between interpretation and application—“interpretation is the art of discovering what the Bible meant” (emphasis on the past tense), whereas “application is the art of discerning what that message means for me today, how I’m meant to respond to it.”<sup>39</sup> She insightfully observes that application “lies at the critical juncture between learning and lived response.”<sup>40</sup> Richard Hays describes this as the hermeneutical task, which entails the “cognitive or conceptual application” of the Bible’s message to our situation.<sup>41</sup> To apply a biblical text does not mean that you have actually done anything yet in response, such as obey or follow what it says. Rather application highlights

the necessity of bridging the distance between the biblical authors and contemporary readers by identifying the significance of what they wrote for a different time and place.

Bridging the cultural distance between the world of the biblical authors and ourselves is a process of contextualization. First, in order to interpret the meaning that an author intended to convey, contemporary readers need to enter into the cultural and historical world of the Bible as well as the situation of the author and audience.<sup>42</sup> It is only after understanding the meaning of a biblical text in its context that it can then be brought into our own cultural setting or situation, which has been shaped by our history, tradition, and experiences. William Webb's distinction between "kingdom values" (that transcend any culture and time) and "cultural values" (that reflect a particular place and time) highlights the challenge of discerning what in Scripture continues to be significant for our lives today.<sup>43</sup> While everything we read in the Bible is culturally embedded, not everything an author intended to communicate should be applied directly into a new cultural context—Paul's command to "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Cor 16:2) is a simple example. To apply this command, contemporary interpreters identify a principle underlying the cultural practice (such as, greet one another warmly), which is then contextualized into a Canadian setting as a handshake or appropriate hug. While this principle directly reflects the meaning intended by the author, its expression within a different cultural context will not necessarily look the same.<sup>44</sup>

A key to bridging the distance between the biblical writers/audience and contemporary readers is their shared identity as the people of God, where "the church now is the primitive church; we are Jesus' followers; the commands are directly addressed to us"; "we participate in the ongoing biblical story and are formed and informed by it."<sup>45</sup> This identification functions as a hermeneutical strategy enabling the current faith community to enter into the biblical narratives to hear the message the Spirit inspired in the original authors as a continuing word for them. As God's people, not only do we participate in the continuing story of what God is doing, but through the Spirit "the text becomes the subject in the reading relationship; we are the object that is shaped by the text."<sup>46</sup>

When we as a faith community attempt to enter the biblical story, we bring with us our own story—who we are—which has already powerfully shaped the interpretive lens through which we approach the Scriptures. This lens may be "invisible" in our unarticulated, or perhaps even unconscious, assumptions and values, or it may be "visible" through our theological doctrines or commitments, our practices, and how we live our lives. Our interpretive lens not only focuses what we "see" in the text but also creates an interpretive framework by which we make sense of what we

read. To be clear, the influence of our interpretive lens is inescapable; and its impact should not be prejudged as either solely positive or negative. Rather, it is in the process of applying the biblical text to our lives that we are called to discern or “weigh” (1 Cor 14:29) together how we perceive what we read or hear in the Scriptures. Our lack of critical awareness of what we bring to the text (Step 1) will become a hindrance at this point.

The challenge is how do we experience the Spirit’s guidance (John 16:13) in discerning Scripture’s application? On one hand, we are called to a humble posture of “standing under” the text in order to hear, understand, and apply it faithfully. Hart warns of the

fatal step of identifying our interpretations (however careful they may be) with the text itself, or with “the meaning of the text itself.” To do so is to bestow upon them a finality, a sufficiency, which lifts them above the text and out of the reach of criticism. Far from establishing the text’s authority, therefore, this is a strategy which effectively overthrows it, and enthrones our interpretation in its place. . . . [We] are no longer genuinely open, therefore, to consider it afresh, or to hear it speaking in any other voice than the one which [we] have now trapped, tamed, and packaged for observation.<sup>47</sup>

Our openness to hear the Spirit speak afresh through the text affirms that the Spirit’s leading will always be consistent with the meaning of the written Word as he brings the text to bear on our questions and in our lives. The application of Scripture involves the Spirit actively charging it with significance by encouraging (John 14:16), prompting (14:26), teaching (14:26), testifying (15:26), convicting (16:8), and declaring (16:15) Scripture’s application within the community of Jesus’s disciples. Discerning a text’s application requires the active leading of the God’s Spirit since the things of God are spiritually (that is of the Spirit) discerned (1 Cor 2:14), thus also reflecting the mind of the Living Word (1 Cor 2:16).

The process for discerning the Spirit’s guidance in community is modeled for us by the early church through the intentional example of the Jerusalem Conference, which Luke describes in Acts 15. The Spirit led through the gathering of the whole community where both sides of the debate were heard, experiences were shared, Scripture was appealed to, and consensus was sought.<sup>48</sup> The opportunity to engage in conversation as a community should not be downplayed since it is through talking together that the Spirit is able to speak through various perspectives and bring different gifts to bear in the discerning process. The discernment process must also be grounded in conversation with God (prayer) as we seek his wisdom and leading. Through this conversation, the strengths

and weaknesses of various interpretive options along with the interpretive frameworks we use can be “weighed” in light of the entire Scriptures and the present experience of the Spirit’s guidance.

The “person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ,” God’s supreme revelation, provide the pathway through which the community is able to discern faithfully the application of Scripture.<sup>49</sup> As the “interpretive key” to making sense of various voices within Scripture, Jesus is also the standard or guide by which the community as the church is able to discern how to apply and then live out the Scriptures. It is the Spirit’s guidance in discerning the application of Scripture that represents the church’s practical experience of Christ’s leading. Mere lip service to this conviction will neither challenge our own assumptions and perspectives nor be capable of drawing us together into a consensus that can shape our very lives (Matt 18:19-20).

If Jesus is both the “interpretive key” and standard by which we interpret and apply the Scriptures, then the community must intentionally engage in this discernment process as the entire body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27). This “body” metaphor offers a picture of how to value the diversity of gifts and contributions among the members of the body and also provides a vision of one body, unified around Christ by one Spirit (1 Cor 12:11-14). While all may participate, differing perspectives and conflicting convictions are discerned by the whole community as they seek consensus (1 Cor 14:29, 31).<sup>50</sup> Paul’s appeal to “speak the truth in love” with each other (Eph 4:16) reflects the way of Jesus who is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The strength of a community’s relationships, infused by love for one another, will enable them to walk together in discerning how to live out the Scriptures.

### **LIVE—HOW DO WE THEN LIVE?**

The goal of interpreting and applying Scripture is not only knowledge and understanding about God but also following Jesus in all of life as disciples who are being transformed into his image. The Bible is “the instrument of the triune God to shape believers into the image of Christ in word and deed, by the power of the Spirit, transforming a sinful and alienated people into children of a loving Father.”<sup>51</sup> Billings contends that “Christians should not read Scripture in order to master the biblical text . . . . Rather, reading Scripture is about being mastered by Jesus Christ.”<sup>52</sup> He cautions us that “In our sin, we still often hear God’s word through Scripture in a way that is one-dimensional—an abstract, mildly interesting word about God. But we do not receive it as a word that announces a new state of affairs, implicating our lives and action through God’s promising, asking, electing, and commanding actions.”<sup>53</sup>

Reading Scripture is not just about hearing God speak but also about encountering God acting. God's Spirit illuminates our understanding of Scripture and guides us in discerning its application in order to call us, confront us, encourage us, and guide us along the discipleship journey. It is this same Spirit who also lives within each believer, enabling them not only to hear God's Word but also to put it into practice.

While a preacher may insightfully expound the biblical text and relevantly apply the text to listeners' lives, nothing has changed until people respond by actually living out what they have heard. Jesus cautions his disciples that hearing his words but not acting on them will sabotage their ability to follow him (Matt 7:24-27; cf. James 1:22-25). There is an integral yet reciprocal relationship between understanding the meaning of Scripture and living it out, as Anabaptist Hans Denck declared: "No one can know Christ unless he follows after him in life and no one can follow him unless he first know him."<sup>54</sup>

The Spirit's transforming work addresses both our inner life and our outer behavior. The Spirit uses Scripture to "judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12), challenging our perceptions, values, attitudes, and motivations. The Spirit also uses Scripture for upbuilding, encouraging, and consoling God's people (1 Cor 14:3) in a process of inner renewal day by day (2 Cor 4:16). We recognize that our hearts need to be changed and our minds renewed through Scripture, which will then be expressed in how we live. This recognition suggests that opportunity and space should be provided for God's Spirit to work in people's hearts and minds as the community discerns how to respond to the Scriptures.

The movement in the whole process of interpreting and applying the Bible is toward a response in our actions, our practices, and how we live as a community. This focus assumes a dynamic relationship with the living God who is present within his people and actively transforming them into a new creation reflecting the image of Christ. This relationship calls for a willing submission to the Lord's will (Rom 12:1-2), reflected in obedience (Luke 11:28) as an expression of our love for God (John 14:15; 2 John 1:6). The church is commanded to submit to the ongoing transforming work of the Spirit, which results in changing not only our perception but also who we are.<sup>55</sup>

How we initially approach the Bible, shaped by our self-awareness and expectations, will influence how we put into practice what we hear. When we posture ourselves as a community of disciples, we frame our response in terms of how we will follow Jesus together in our decisions and daily life. As we live into what we have heard, understood, and discerned, our initial perceptions, attitudes, and values may be challenged

by our encounter with God through the Scriptures. This ongoing process of renewal is enabled by our willingness to humble ourselves and follow in obedience.

How we live shines a light on our shared convictions as a community by making visible either the consistency or disconnect between what we say we believe the Bible teaches and how we actually live. The Spirit will always challenge us to “live what we preach” because our convictions must be lived out in our actions for them to be truly our convictions. However, we also recognize that we are on a journey together where our expressed convictions shaped by the Word also function as a vision for faithful discipleship within the community.<sup>56</sup> Discipleship is a journey along which we are still being formed as a people.

In many ways, living out the Scriptures is the most difficult step because it entails the motivation to make new choices and the commitment to act differently. This hurdle is further heightened in the context of a community response because it also requires mutual submission along the pathway towards consensus and unity (Eph 5:21; Phil 2:1-4). Nevertheless, living as community of disciples also offers the opportunity to learn from each other. Imitating the example of those who are faithfully imitating Jesus is a powerful way for the Spirit to transform how we live (1 Cor 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6-7).

## CONCLUSION

While Mennonite Brethren have struggled in their practice of community hermeneutics, a clear interpretive method—posture, interpret, apply, and live—offers a pathway for understanding and discerning the Scriptures together. This journey can facilitate Mennonite Brethren’s experience of the Spirit’s illuminating, guiding, and transforming work among them as they listen to and study the Scriptures in community. The challenge of community hermeneutics centers around Mennonite Brethren’s active participation as a community in the practice of interpreting, applying, and living out God’s Word to us. ✱

## NOTES

1. See Doug Heidebrecht, “Gathering around the Word to Listen to the Spirit: Community Hermeneutics Explained,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, May 2011, 8-9, <https://mbherald.com/gathering-around-the-word-to-listen-to-the-spirit/>. I have chosen to use the language of “community,” which accentuates its active role as the subject in the practice of interpreting Scripture, while at the same time not limiting this practice to the realm of a local congregation. I have also chosen to use the language of “hermeneutics” rather than “discernment” to focus on the

- application of Scripture rather than more generally on the Spirit's guidance. There are variations in terminology to refer to this same practice, such as "hermeneutical community" (Ens), "interpreting community" (Driver), "communal hermeneutic" (Cartwright), "hermeneutic of community" (Hartshorn), "congregational hermeneutics" (Murray), "communal discernment" (McClendon), "discerning community" (Gish), or "congregational discernment" (Glick). See Adolf Ens, "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought," in *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1990), 69; John Driver, *Becoming God's Community* (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press, 1981), 90; Michael G. Cartwright, "The Practice and Performance of Scripture: Grounding Christian Ethics in a Communal Hermeneutic," in *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics 1988* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1988), 31; Leo Hartshorn, *Interpretation and Preaching as Communal and Dialogical Practices: An Anabaptist Perspective* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 7; Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), 157; James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 137; Arthur G. Gish, *Living in Christian Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 93; and Sally Weaver Glick, *In Tune with God: The Art of Congregational Discernment* (Scottsdale, PA: Faith and Life Resources, 2004), 12.
2. For a review of the literature on the practice of community hermeneutics, see Doug Heidebrecht, "Contextualizing Community Hermeneutics: Mennonite Brethren and Women in Church Leadership" (PhD thesis, University of Wales, 2013), 11-26.
  3. Richard B. Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 5.
  4. Tim Geddert, "The Ministry of Women—A Proposal for Mennonite Brethren," *Direction* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 66. James Wm. McClendon, Jr. makes a distinction between "primary theology," where the church engages in reading, discerning, and teaching the Scriptures; and "secondary theology," which involves scholars critically examining the interpretation of Scripture. See James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 328, 329; and McClendon, *Doctrine*, 24, 33. For a reflection on McClendon's practice of "communal discernment," see Doug Heidebrecht, "James Wm. McClendon Jr.'s Practice of Communal Discernment and Conflicting Convictions among Mennonite Brethren," *Baptistic Theologies* 7, no.1 (Spring 2015): 45-68.
  5. A. J. Klassen, "The Bible in the Mennonite Brethren Church," *Direction* 2, no. 2 (April 1973): 43-44, 45.
  6. David Ewert, "Reflections on Bible Reading in the M.B. Church," *The Voice* 9, no.1 (Jan-Feb 1960): 4.
  7. Klassen, "The Bible in the Mennonite Brethren Church," 47.
  8. "Resolution on the Interpretation of Scripture," *Yearbook: The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 67th Convention* (Winnipeg,

- MB: Christian Press, 1978), 12-15.
9. "Resolution on the Confession of Faith," *Yearbook: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 57th Session* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1987), 69.
  10. "Article 2: Revelation of God," *Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2000), 23.
  11. "What We Believe," ICOMB, <https://www.icomb.org/what-we-believe/>, accessed August 11, 2020.
  12. Geddert, "Ministry of Women," 67.
  13. The MB conversation regarding women in ministry leadership focused around eight conference conventions, four study conferences, and the development of nine conference resolutions. For a description of this conversation, see Doug Heidebrecht, *Women in Ministry Leadership: The Journey of the Mennonite Brethren, 1954-2010* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2019).
  14. These are adapted from Heidebrecht, *Women in Ministry Leadership*, 298-304.
  15. This concern was expressed poignantly by Edmond Janzen in "A Covenanting People," *Direction* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 32-44.
  16. One exception was the 1967 paper by Frank C. Peters, which was later developed into a resolution approved at the 1969 General Conference convention. See F. C. Peters, "Consensus and Change in Our Brotherhood," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* Supplement, 12 January 1968, 2-8. For the General Conference resolution, see "Consensus and Change in Respect to Ethical Issues," *Yearbook: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 60th Session* (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1969), 11-12.
  17. "Interpreting Scripture Today" (National Faith and Life Team, Canadian MB Conference, 2019). For a description of the Interpretive Model and Method see Doug Heidebrecht and Mark Wessner, "Interpreting Scripture Today: A Mennonite Brethren Model and Method," *Direction* 49, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 115-122. The use of these three elements is not unique to Mennonite Brethren. For examples of Pentecostal perspectives see Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002); and Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2009).
  18. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Ethics*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 17.
  19. J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 137; loc. 2031 of 3291, Kindle.
  20. Billings, 52; loc. 774 of 3291, Kindle.
  21. Trevor A. Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 178.
  22. Hart, 175, 179.
  23. Billings, *Word of God*, 48; loc. 720 of 3291, Kindle.
  24. See Bruce L. Guenther, "Reflections on Mennonite Brethren Evangelical Anabaptist Identity," in *Renewing Identity and Mission: Mennonite Brethren Reflections after 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck, Bruce L. Guenther, and Doug Heidebrecht (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2011), 47-82.

25. For a helpful summary regarding how Mennonite Brethren have attempted to articulate a shared identity, see Brian Cooper, "What's in a Narrative? Canadian Mennonite Brethren and the Struggle for Identity," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 267-85.
26. "Article 2: Revelation of God," 23.
27. See "Resolution on Inerrancy," *Yearbook: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 57th Session* (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1987), 44-46.
28. Billings, *Word of God*, 41; loc. 634 of 3291, Kindle.
29. Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 22.
30. Billings, *Word of God*, 36; loc. 561 of 3291, Kindle.
31. Brown states, "Exegesis is the task of carefully studying the Bible in order to determine as well as possible the author's meaning in the original context of writing." *Scripture as Communication*, 23.
32. Billings, *Word of God*, 32, 33; loc. 516, 523 of 3291, Kindle.
33. See "Article 2: Revelation of God," 23, which affirms, "The person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament bears witness to Christ, and the Christ is the One whom the New Testament proclaims."
34. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 188.
35. Billings, *Word of God*, 36; loc. 561 of 3291, Kindle.
36. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 209.
37. There is significant value in "hands-on" inductive study as Oletta Wald has been promoting for decades. See *The New Joy Teaching Discovery Bible Study*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).
38. Several helpful resources include Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word*; Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017); and Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017). For a Mennonite Brethren contribution, see David Ewert, *How to Understand the Bible* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000).
39. Meghan Larissa Good, *The Bible Unwrapped: Making Sense of Scripture Today* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2018), 222.
40. Good, *Bible Unwrapped*, 222.
41. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 7.
42. Mennonite Brethren missiologist Paul Hiebert advocates the practice of "critical contextualization," which involves four steps: (1) exegesis of culture, (2) exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge, (3) critical response, and (4) new contextualized practices. See Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (July 1987): 104-12. See also Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *Missiology* 12, no. 3 (July 1984): 287-96.

43. William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 23. See page 30 where Webb advocates a “redemptive-movement” hermeneutic, which envisions “movement beyond the original application of the text in the ancient world.”
44. Webb notes that “a component of a biblical imperative may be culturally relative if the pragmatic basis for the instruction cannot be sustained from one culture to another.” *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 210.
45. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., “What Is a ‘Baptist’ Theology?” *American Baptist Quarterly* 1 (1982): 26; McClendon, *Doctrine*, 462.
46. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 57. The ICOMB Confession of Faith begins with the overarching biblical narrative, “How Does God Work in the World?”, which then invites the global Mennonite Brethren community to participate in God’s continuing story. See “What We Believe,” ICOMB, <https://www.icomb.org/what-we-believe/>, accessed September 24, 2020.
47. Hart, *Faith Thinking*, 138.
48. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 96-106.
49. See “Article 2: Revelation of God,” 23.
50. For a practical example of this process, see Brad Sumner and Keith Reid, “Discernment in the Local Church: What Our Congregational Discussion on Women in Ministry Leadership Taught Us about the Anabaptist Practice of Community Hermeneutics,” in Dueck et al., eds., *Renewing Identity and Mission*, 201-14.
51. Billings, *Word of God*, 199; loc. 2569 of 3291, Kindle.
52. Billings, *Word of God*, 203; loc. 2612 of 3291, Kindle.
53. Billings, *Word of God*, 209f; loc. 2695 of 3291, Kindle.
54. Quoted in Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), 189.
55. See Doug Heidebrecht, “Be Transformed,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, July 2015, 12-14.
56. See “Nature and Function of the Confession,” *Direction* 48, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 178-79.