



Fall 2011 · Vol. 40 No. 2 · pp. 219–231

People of the Book: The Significance of Mennonite Brethren Biblicism and Hermeneutics

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Mennonite Brethren are biblicists. At the heart of Mennonite Brethren identity is an acknowledgment of the Scriptures as the authority in all matters of faith and life. This appeal to the biblical text has resulted in the characterization of Mennonite Brethren as “people of the Book.” To say that Mennonite Brethren are biblicists, however, does not provide a clear picture regarding *how* they read the Bible. How do Mennonite Brethren interpret the Bible? Is there a distinctive way Mennonite Brethren approach the Scriptures?

The lack of an explicit theological framework and an appreciation of the hermeneutical problem has hindered Mennonite Brethren from being able to discern what comes with the biblicism of other Christian groups.

Any endeavor to articulate a Mennonite Brethren approach to the Bible must take into account not only the dynamic historical development of Mennonite Brethren theology since their inception 150 years ago, but also their diversity as a people, reflecting distinct cultures and varied journeys. Within the confines of this paper my own attempt will be much more modest, limited both by my own Canadian context and the specific examples I’ve chosen. In the end I offer this description for you to test and weigh whether this describes your experience of the Mennonite Brethren.

While a profound biblicism provides the basic framework within which Mennonite Brethren read the Scriptures, they spend little time reflecting on how they actually interpret Scripture. I propose that it is in the interconnected and sometimes unintentional effects of this biblicism that a particular Mennonite Brethren approach to the Bible is revealed.

I will use two methods in an attempt to uncover a Mennonite Brethren hermeneutic. First, I will illustrate how two events, the emergence of the “exuberant movement” during the 1860s in Russia and the debate over the inerrancy of Scripture in North America during the 1970s, provide a window into how Mennonite Brethren approach the Bible. Both events highlight the way in which the experience of internal disagreement and external challenge provide a context where Mennonite Brethren need to be more explicit about how they interpret Scripture.

Second, I will explore the effects of Mennonite Brethren biblicism and how they can contribute to our understanding of a unique Mennonite Brethren hermeneutic. The resulting consequences illustrate how the journey of the Mennonite Brethren has shaped their particular approach to Scripture. Since I will be reflecting primarily from within a North American context, this will raise questions regarding the manner in which Mennonite Brethren around the world might be shaped differently by different contexts.

THE “EXUBERANT MOVEMENT”

It wasn’t long after the Mennonite Brethren established themselves as a distinct group in 1860 that the *froehliche Richtung* or “exuberant movement” arose within their midst, even



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though its origins can be traced to those who responded to the preaching of Eduard Wuest prior to the beginning of the Mennonite Brethren.¹ For some among the early Mennonite Brethren the liberating experience of God's grace accompanied by the assurance of salvation and a doctrine of freedom found expression in joyous shouting, unrestrained emotion, noisy musical instruments, and lively ceremonial dancing. This was not "a passing fancy or slight aberration among a few misguided and fanatically-inclined individuals" but was "promoted and defended" by the early Mennonite Brethren leadership.² This fanaticism culminated in despotism where leaders assumed "apostolic" authority, imposed restrictive rules, and arbitrarily banned those who challenged their decisions.³ While the factors contributing to the development of this movement are complex, my interest is in seeing how the early Mennonite Brethren articulated their approach to Scripture in the midst of conflicting interpretations.

Our primary accounts of this time period reflect a later and essentially negative assessment of the "exuberant movement," particularly from the perspective of Mennonite Brethren historian, P.M. Friesen. However, Friesen's documentation of the correspondence during this time demonstrates "considerable friction among the brethren...with regard to the interpretation of the Word."⁴ These documents also illustrate specific concerns regarding the engagement of leaders of the "exuberant movement" in what was considered an inappropriate use of Scripture.

For example, Abram Unger, one of the original signers of the Secession document declared,

Is there not a wise person among you? Do not approach the Word of God from such a one-sided perspective! Indeed, if the Bible were to contain nothing more than to say that one could dance, then one could quite frankly not reprove you; but it is also written: Let us walk respectably, or carefully before them who are without.... Were you to take the entire Scriptures, you could not prove such a thing; for you would have to take it out of context, and that is not permissible.⁵

Unger's concern about interpretations that reflect a "literal one-sided sense" highlights his own perception that this was uncharacteristic of Mennonite Brethren.⁶ In contrast he argues for reading individual texts within the context of the entire Bible where Scripture itself becomes the key to interpreting Scripture.

Similarly, Johann Wieler appealed to the model of the early church as a guide for present behavior:

The examples of believers of the body of Christ, with Christ himself the head, concerning which the New Testament gives considerable information, will remain for us the sole standard for our particular life style, and to the extent we have the same spirit, will be normative for us in establishing the patterns of life that will guide us in gaining a right church order as well as the right order in our private life.⁷

P.M. Friesen himself concludes,

All these people, who brought with them this new element or attitude were indescribably narrow and intolerant...these people never seemed to harbour a thought about church history that went beyond the borders of a common Mennonite framework...nor had they ever read a serious book on theology. But they did have warm blood and healthy nerves.⁸

Friesen valued an awareness of the broader Christian community, which could provide a helpful perspective as a conversation partner in the study of Scripture.

In 1865 Mennonite Brethren gathered together in a series of meetings, which later became known as the June Reform, in order to address the concerns raised by the practices of the "exuberant movement." While expressions of joy were not categorically condemned, such demonstrations were to reflect sensitivity to others and the leading of the Spirit. The havoc

created by dictatorial leaders was countered with an insistence on congregational participation where no “leader could act independently of the church.”⁹

The ongoing practice of engaging in regular Bible study by early Mennonite Brethren reflected a deep appreciation for congregational involvement. Weekday Bible studies often involved several families gathering to read Scripture together followed by an open discussion regarding their understanding of what was read.¹⁰ Another regular practice involved several villages hosting a Bible conference where visiting teachers along with local ministers would take turns commenting on the meaning of a particular passage. The congregation was actively involved in asking questions and contributing to the discussion.¹¹

The example of how early Mennonite Brethren leaders eventually responded to the “exuberant movement” brings to the surface several ways in which Mennonite Brethren biblicism was expressed. A clear commitment to the Word of God as the authoritative guide for life in the church did not mean that one could then embrace a wooden literalism. Rather Mennonite Brethren were concerned that an appropriate approach to the Bible involved reading individual passages in their context and in light of the rest of Scripture. Reading the Bible together in the church, furthermore, provided a check and balance on individualistic and arbitrary interpretations.

THE INERRANCY DEBATE

A second window into how Mennonite Brethren approach Scripture emerges from the debate over the nature of biblical authority that swept through North American Evangelicalism during the 1970s and caught Mennonite Brethren by surprise in the ensuing conflict. Much of the hype surrounding this debate was initially fuelled by Harold Lindsell, who in 1976 challenged evangelicals to embrace inerrancy as the defining criteria for evangelical identity in his book, *The Battle for the Bible*.¹²

In the April 1977 issue of *Direction*, Howard Loewen and David Ewert assessed Lindsell’s contention that inerrancy is the “watershed between faithful evangelicals and those who have no right to use the name.”¹³ In Ewert’s brief review, he states,

It is disheartening when brothers within the evangelical tradition confront each other as enemies or rivals when they discover that not everyone understands the Bible exactly as they do. But it strikes me as unspeakably sad when someone feels “called” to divide the evangelical movement, in which the Bible is confessed to be inspired and authoritative for doctrine and practice, by demanding that everyone use the same vocabulary when defining inspiration.¹⁴

Ewert goes on to state,

The real test of whether we hold to the doctrine of inspiration is not to be found in man’s inadequate attempts to define the mysteries of God’s revelation in the Scriptures but in our willingness to live according to the teachings of the Word of God...Lindsell’s book is of no help in this arena. Indeed, the reader can easily be deceived into thinking that if only he has the right definition of inerrancy, he is already a true and faithful follower of Jesus, Lord of the Scriptures.¹⁵

Ewert’s response emphasized the historic Mennonite Brethren assertion that the Bible’s authority is best defended by the evidence of newness of life and humble obedience rather than a creedal or doctrinal statement.

In his next book, *The Bible in the Balance* (1979), Lindsell harshly critiqued the Mennonite Brethren in general and David Ewert in particular for being “infiltrated with a view of Scripture which impugns inerrancy,...limits the trustworthiness of the Bible,...and lays down the dictum that the nature of biblical authority is such that it can never be satisfactorily formulated by an

assertion regarding the accuracy of textual details.”¹⁶ His critique brought the larger evangelical debate into the Mennonite Brethren conference, with a particular focus on the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, where Ewert was teaching. Ewert prepared a brief statement of defense in which he declared,

For thirty-five years I have preached and taught the Word in the Mennonite Brethren Church...Never once have I even suggested that the Scriptures may be in error. Indeed, when faced with what appear to be insoluble problems of interpretation (and every sincere and informed Bible reader knows about such), I have always proceeded on the assumption that the Bible is correct, even though my understanding of it may be far from perfect.¹⁷

Eventually, the Mennonite Brethren General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel addressed the question of the inerrancy of Scripture in a resolution in 1987.¹⁸ They affirmed the 1975 Confession of Faith which declared that “all Scripture is inspired by God” and “the Old and New Testament...[is] the infallible Word of God and the authoritative Guide for the faith and life of Christian discipleship.”¹⁹ While they identified “with those who confess the inerrancy of the original documents of the biblical books” they also recognized “that the precision of any person’s definition of revelation and inspiration is not necessarily an index of his or her spiritual depth or faithfulness to God and his Word.”²⁰

J.B. Toews contended that the evangelical debate regarding the inerrancy of the Bible was historically foreign to Mennonite Brethren, whose inherent biblicism did not question the trustworthiness of the Scriptures.²¹ “To accept the Bible as the Word of God was...an exercise of faith that found its verification of genuineness in a life of obedience to the teaching and life of Jesus.”²² Ewert’s engagement in the debate typifies Mennonite Brethren aversion to grounding faith in abstract doctrinal formulations rather than directly in the biblical text. He also reflects the belief that discipleship, not just a simple intellectual affirmation, is the proper response to biblical revelation.

These two examples represent an inductive attempt to articulate how Mennonite Brethren approach the Scriptures as evidenced in their response to internal disagreements and external challenges. Both examples reflect a consistent underlying biblicism, even though these events were separated by over a century. When confronted, Mennonite Brethren are able to articulate a particular approach to reading the Scriptures, which informs their biblicism.

THE EFFECTS OF MENNONITE BRETHERN BIBLICISM

A second method I wish to use in an attempt to articulate a Mennonite Brethren approach to the Scriptures is to explore how Mennonite Brethren biblicism gives shape to a particular way of interpreting Scripture.

1. An Implicit Theology. First, the direct appeal by Mennonite Brethren to the Bible in all matters of faith and life has contributed to the development of an implicit theology. When faced with a question or issue in the church, Mennonite Brethren insist it must be answered from the Bible—“What does the Word say?”²³ They assume that a careful study of the Scriptures will persuade all of the truth. Consequently, Mennonite Brethren have not been concerned with creating a systematic doctrinal framework that could make sense of the content of faith. The Bible itself is their guide, not a set of doctrines derived from the Bible. The truthfulness of Scripture is supported by the evidence of new life and a walk of discipleship, not by a memorized faith.

Yet J.B. Toews acknowledges, “an implicit faith can be sufficient for a church movement as long as it exists in the context of a homogeneous culture with a prescribed lifestyle that expresses the movement’s understanding of faith and practice.”²⁴ The cultural isolation of Mennonite Brethren in Russia did not force them to delineate their theological commitments. It took forty years before Mennonite Brethren felt compelled to write their first Confession of Faith. However,

the experiences of migration, acculturation, and mission continue to challenge the capability of an implicit faith to provide adequate theological boundaries for Mennonite Brethren. Even though Mennonite Brethren have not developed a systematic theology, the ongoing need to articulate an understanding of their faith in changing contexts has pushed them to define more clearly how they read the Scriptures. The ongoing development of the Confession of Faith and the adoption of a biblical theology approach illustrate how Mennonite Brethren have wrestled with the implicit nature of their theology.

The 1902 Confession of Faith acknowledges that “every confession of faith, as every other teaching and exposition of Scripture, is subject at all times to examination and estimation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, according to the Holy Scriptures.”²⁵ While Mennonite Brethren understand their Confession of Faith to be descriptive of their corporate understanding of the message and intent of Scripture, they also recognize that their perspective at any given time is always limited. Consequently, the Confession of Faith is never given equal status with Scripture since it is necessarily open to periodic revision.

The Confession of Faith not only represents core Mennonite Brethren convictions, such as Christology and ecclesiology, but also particular concerns at a given time and place. Various concerns, such as leadership models, may change over time or reflect issues particular to a specific context. For example, the Colombian Mennonite Brethren conference added four articles requiring special attention in their context to the 1999 General Conference Confession.²⁶ In this way the Confession can function as a bridge connecting biblical principles with contemporary concerns.

While the revision of the Confession may reflect new questions and perspectives, the process represents the Anabaptist practice of community hermeneutics, where the church seeks to discern together the meaning and intent of Scripture.²⁷ This process of community discernment allows for free and open discussion and safeguards against individualistic and private interpretations.²⁸ However, once the process has been finalized, the Confession becomes normative, since it now summarizes what Mennonite Brethren believe the Bible teaches. Leaders and churches do not have the liberty to disregard or teach doctrines that are not in agreement with the Confession.²⁹

In practice the Confession functions as a hermeneutical guide for how Mennonite Brethren approach Scripture. On one hand, where there is agreement among Mennonite Brethren, the Confession provides an interpretive framework for how to read the Bible.³⁰ On the other hand, if an issue is not explicitly addressed by the Confession, there may be freedom to hold a variety of interpretive positions.

The embrace of biblical theology, particularly by the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno (MBBS), also is an attempt to address the presence of an implicit theology among Mennonite Brethren. During the 1960s, then president J.B. Toews began to refocus MBBS from being a fundamentalist institution to one with an Anabaptist orientation.³¹ As part of this process, the MBBS adopted biblical theology as its defining approach to the study of the Scriptures. In contrast to the philosophical categories employed by systematic theology to construct a logical doctrinal system, biblical theology seeks to synthesize the biblical material using biblical categories.³² This sensitivity to the language, literary forms, and themes used by the biblical writers themselves reflects an attempt to hear the Bible in its own terms, without imposing foreign categories and assumptions onto the text. Rather than defending polarizing positions based on different perspectives or theological camps, biblical theology seeks to take into account the whole of biblical teaching on a subject, despite the tensions that may exist within the text.³³

The often contentious issue of eschatology illustrates well how a biblical theology approach shapes the way Mennonite Brethren interpret the Bible.³⁴ Attempts to make sense of the Bible’s teaching on the end times have resulted in numerous conflicting eschatological positions: pre-millennialism, post-millennialism, amillennialism, pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, post-

tribulation. Biblical theology seeks to move beyond these debates by listening to all of Scripture's teaching without forcing every verse into a prescribed position. Preoccupation with the "how, when and where" questions of eschatology can deflect us from proclaiming key biblical themes like "the return of Christ, his ultimate triumph, and the final judgment."³⁵ Mennonite Brethren have sought to define their understanding of the end times using biblical terms rather than systematic categories.³⁶

Both the Confession of Faith and a biblical theology approach may contribute to the perpetuation of an implicit Mennonite Brethren theology, particularly with their encouragement to keep returning to the biblical text. However, they also take a step toward a more explicit articulation of how Mennonite Brethren read the Bible by providing an interpretive framework.

2. The Hermeneutical Problem. A second effect of Mennonite Brethren biblicism is a naivety about the hermeneutical problem. The hermeneutical problem emerges as one seeks to discern how best to bridge the distance between the world of the Bible and one's own contemporary context. Mennonite Brethren biblicism, with its emphasis on a straightforward reading of the biblical text, has tended to ignore the significance of either context as well as the gap that may exist between them.

The incarnational nature of God's revelation calls us to be careful to read each passage in its literary context (what precedes and follows a specific text); its situational context (for example, what was going on in Rome when Paul wrote his letter); and its cultural/historical context (the larger background behind what was written). A literal reading of the Bible seeks to understand the original author's intent, which is grounded within the particular context in which it was written. This is very different from a literalistic approach, which extracts words from their biblical context thus severing them from the meaning the author intended.³⁷ With a literal reading, if the author intended to use a figure of speech or a symbolic picture, then that is how it should be read.

On the other hand, perhaps the more difficult hermeneutical task is to recognize how our own context influences, sometimes unconsciously, our reading of the Bible. We also bring to the biblical text our experiential context (experiences that shape who we are); our situational context (what is going on in our lives); and our cultural/historical context (often reflected in our unstated assumptions, values, and attitudes). How do these factors influence our reading of Scripture?

One of the best ways to become aware of our own pre-understandings, as David Ewert calls the influence of our experience, situation, and cultural setting, is to study the Bible "in the context of the Christian community, where our interpretations can be challenged, affirmed or corrected."³⁸ Mennonite Brethren have sought to "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."³⁹ This practice is modeled after the early Anabaptists, who appealed to Matthew 18:18-20 (the Rule of Christ) and 1 Corinthians 14:29 (the Rule of Paul) as the basis for engaging in congregational discernment.⁴⁰

One of the dangers of ignoring the significance of the hermeneutical problem is that we might be tempted to identify our interpretations with the biblical 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.⁴¹

In hindsight, Mennonite Brethren have admitted that they have promoted, at times

legalistically, a culturally informed set of values as if they were clear biblical principles.⁴² It is sometimes easier for a later generation to recognize how a limited cultural perspective has been conflated with our reading of Scripture. The awareness of the hermeneutical problem does not diminish the clarity of Scripture, but it does call us to walk with humility in recognition of our own limitations, especially when we find ourselves in disagreement with other believers.

3. Affinity with other Evangelicals. A third effect of Mennonite Brethren biblicism is the willingness to associate with other believers who share a similar biblicism. Since the criteria of faith for Mennonite Brethren rests primarily “in the evidence of a new life based on repentance and an experience of personal conversion,” they have liberty to fellowship with people from other denominations whom they considered “true believers.”⁴³

On one hand, exposure to various denominations and movements has been a tremendous gift for the Mennonite Brethren because it has enriched them with what God has been doing within the larger Christian community. Mennonite Brethren have much to learn from others. On the other hand, Mennonite Brethren have tended to borrow freely, and often uncritically, from many different theological traditions. The lack of both an explicit theological framework and an appreciation of the hermeneutical problem has hindered them from being able to discern easily what lies behind or comes with the biblicism of other Christian groups. This has caused confusion at times when Mennonite Brethren have too quickly adopted new ideas that later were discerned as incongruent with long-held Mennonite Brethren convictions.

A further complicating factor is that Mennonite Brethren identity has always reflected a unique blend of perspectives. Initially Mennonite Brethren represented a mixture of Anabaptist, Mennonite, Pietist, and even Baptist influences. Today in North America, Mennonite Brethren identify themselves as both Evangelicals and Anabaptists. Numerous attempts have been made to highlight the uniqueness of the Mennonite Brethren, often with a set of distinctives that highlight differences in comparison with other groups or denominations. I would suggest that a more helpful approach would be to take up the challenge of articulating a set of core Mennonite Brethren convictions, which would reflect their own theological center and offer a vision for shaping their continuing journey together.⁴⁴

As a result of this affinity for other evangelical groups, Mennonite Brethren are becoming increasingly diverse and varied in their approach to biblical interpretation. Unless there is a shared set of core convictions, which could provide both a discerning and integrating function, the assimilation of a wide range of influences will continue to present a challenge to clarifying Mennonite Brethren identity.

CONCLUSION

We began by asking whether there was a distinctive way Mennonite Brethren approach the Bible. This is difficult to answer, because even though their biblicism has profoundly shaped their journey over the last 150 years, Mennonite Brethren have spent little time reflecting on how to interpret the Bible. Even so, their hermeneutical approach emerges through their practice, particularly when faced with theological challenges. Mennonite Brethren traditionally express an interpretive approach that rejects a wooden literalism and embraces the role of the community in the process of interpretation. When the trustworthiness of the Bible is questioned, Mennonite Brethren point to faithful discipleship as evidence for Scripture’s authority, rather than appeal to abstract doctrinal statements.

A unique Mennonite Brethren hermeneutic also emerges through the effects or consequences of their biblicism. In light of the implicit nature of Mennonite Brethren theology, both the Confession of Faith and a biblical theology framework function as hermeneutical guides when reading Scripture. However, Mennonite Brethren continue to face the challenge of adequately addressing the hermeneutic problem and of reading the Bible in the midst of increasing theological diversity.

The difficulty in identifying a particular Mennonite Brethren approach to the Bible is the

same dilemma we face when attempting to articulate a unique Mennonite Brethren theology and identity. Perhaps the tension itself highlights the nature of what it means to be Mennonite Brethren. Mennonite Brethren appeal directly to the Scriptures as the authoritative guide for faith and life and at the same time read the Bible as a people embedded within a particular cultural context that shapes their awareness and understanding of what the text says. Nevertheless, at the heart of a Mennonite Brethren hermeneutic is the desire to live out what the Bible says, that is, to be “people of the Book.”

NOTES

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