

# *Theodidaktos* *Taught by God*

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## **Pastor as Midwife: An Empowering Metaphor of Care** p.7

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**How Should a Christian React  
to Illness?**



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# Editorial

## Are you a *Pure* Mennonite?

**C**BC'S NEW TELEVISION SHOW *Pure* has received a significant amount of criticism from many Anabaptist and Mennonite scholars for its depiction of a Mennonite community in Southern Ontario that is a composite of several different Mennonite traditions. Therefore, none of the cultures and traditions is accurately represented.

The story centres around the pastor of a Mennonite church and his attempt to rid their community of the influence of the "Mennonite mob." After the local ringleader is put in prison, the higher up mob boss offers the pastor an ultimatum: become the new local ringleader or his family will be murdered.

The pastor decides to protect his family and enters the Mennonite mob, gathering evidence in hopes of bringing down the whole operation, becoming a confidential informant for a local detective. While there is, in fact, a sort of Mennonite mob that is run by people who have a Russian/Mexican Mennonite heritage, as my wife and I watched the program we identified distinct cultural and religious practices from no fewer than four different Mennonite groups.

My wife's family has their roots in Pennsylvania, and her religious and cultural heritage stems from one of the branches of Mennonites that have lived there for generations. She is very proud of her Mennonite

no shortage of discussion about the difference between cultural and doctrinal/theological Mennonites. While my wife and I come from two very different "Mennonite" cultures, we both love the Mennonite theology that the EMC embraces and so are also doctrinal/theological Mennonites.

These nuances are completely lost on the show *Pure*. By way of analogy, it is the equivalent of taking two cultures such as Japanese and Tibetan, making a fictitious composite culture and simply call them Buddhists. Even while personally loving the creative arts, it seems like it is taking artistic license a bit too far.

While it may be tempting to simply offer a scathing review of the show's cultural insensitivity, I think it presents us with an important opportunity: rather than lash out, we can practice what we preach. We can forgive those who offend us. We can engage in respectful dialogue with those in our society whose curiosity about Mennonites was piqued by *Pure*.

We can demonstrate that our faith leads us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (though I personally think it a stretch to call this persecution). Responding in the way Jesus taught us to respond is probably the best way to show others what it really means to be a Mennonite.

Additionally, this experience can serve to help us understand, in a very small and limited way, what Canada's Indigenous people often experience. Even though the term "Indigenous people" is accepted as a respectful term, our Metis, Inuit, and First Nations neighbours are often portrayed as a single people group in the media when, in fact, there are a great many cultures, languages, and practices that together make up what we refer to as Canada's Indigenous people. Furthermore, how often do we think of them and treat them as simply one people group without recognizing the great and beautiful diversity of our Indigenous friends?

While *Pure* may have badly bungled its portrayal of Mennonites and we may feel the need to protest or write letters of objection to the CBC, let us not stop there. May we take the log out of our own eye, so to speak, and recognize how we often treat our diverse Indigenous neighbours in the same way and stay silent as the media treats them that way. Let us live the call of Jesus in Luke 6:31, "Do to others as you would like them to do to you." 



Kevin Wiebe

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**We can demonstrate that our faith leads us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. [This] is probably the best way to show others what it really means to be a Mennonite.**

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heritage and has often been frustrated by how Canadian Mennonites with a Russian Mennonite heritage have made the assumption that because she is an American, she is therefore not a Mennonite.

While she was never directly asked if she was a pure Mennonite, people have often responded by saying, "So, you're not a *real* Mennonite then?" In our home there is

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## Puzzled by the Choice of Dilemma



### Terry M. Smith

Terry M. Smith was raised in the United Church, joined the EMC in 1979, was commissioned as an EMC minister in 1985 and ordained in 1995. He holds a two-year journalism diploma (SAIT), BRS degrees (SBC and MBBC), and an MACS (PTS).

This is a response to “The Evangelical Mennonite Dilemma” by Layton Friesen with reference to “An Interview About a Tri-Lateral Discussion” between Layton Friesen and Dr. John Rempel in *Theodidaktos* (November 2016), 27–34.

**I**AM GLAD THAT LAYTON Friesen, an EMC minister, values the wider Christian Church and decides to build stronger ties among us by presenting a thought-provoking dilemma.

We can applaud his desire for greater unity among Christ’s people, for there is, ultimately and only, one Church.

It appears that part of the pressure, or motivation, behind the framing of the dilemma stems from the simple awareness that we are, indeed, part of one Church that far exceeds our denominational and theological streams. In this aspect, I, again, support Layton’s perspective. I accept much of where he wants to go (acknowledging the wider

Church as being, indeed, the Church), but not how he appears to want to get there (by giving some validity to the practice of infant baptism).

I respectfully question Layton’s framing of the dilemma: either recognize some validity to infant baptism or rethink working together with people because they might not be real Christians. In my view, a mutual belief in Christ is not dependent upon the timing of baptism or upon recognizing differing views as valid.

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## The Need for More Unity

We should be concerned about the lack of charity that existed within the Christian Church in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. To me, a tragic moment during the Protestant Reformation occurred in 1529 when Zwingli and Luther met to talk about the Lord's Supper. They disagreed on whether it involved a memorial or Real Presence to such an extent that they went home barely able to recognize each other as believers. Though both claimed victory after the meeting, in reality both lost and we with them.

It is also regrettable that, reportedly, John Calvin called Menno Simons a dog. Despite this, my view is that Menno Simons recognized some other contemporaries as Christians, notwithstanding their baptism as infants. Simons held up some godly Old Testament rulers and leaders as role models for Christian magistrates in his time, and he was indebted to Martin Luther in his spiritual journey.

In reading his *Confession of the Triune God* (1550), it's evident to me how Menno used his earlier training as a priest—though he elsewhere lamented his lack of skills in Greek and Hebrew. While Menno left the Roman Catholic Church and was sharply critical of some of its teaching and practices, he still drew upon some of its fine teachings and good influence.

It's appropriate to strengthen wider Church relationships. That said, it's ironic that today, at the same time as some ties are being strengthened, they are being tested in some of the same circles by serious differences on doctrine (pluralism) and ethics (same-sex unions). Without going into detail, I oppose a devaluing of Christ as Saviour, Mediator, and Lord; and I do not support same-sex unions.

## A Personal Journey

To describe my journey in a manner faithful to Christ's grace, there is a huge

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debt to the wider Christian Church (within a mixed inheritance), a debt that includes but goes far beyond Evangelical and Anabaptist circles. My roots are in the United Church where I was baptized in infancy, but not confirmed. I was later baptized as an older teen in a Baptist church. A Presbyterian pastor and a former Lutheran pastor counseled me about my call to pastoral ministry, and my United Church pastor was not surprised when I entered pastoral ministry.

My journey includes parallel educations. The first education includes journalism studies; then studies at four Bible colleges (full-time at three); and, mostly much later, seminary (involving three institutions, but mostly PTS). The second education involves decades of personal critical study, reflecting my roots in the United Church and symbolized by a pile of United Church Observer magazines once explored at my grandparents' home. Over the decades, these educations have positively complemented each other and too often talked past each other.

Internally, I often engage in inter-church dialogue: I am a displaced mainliner re-rooted through Evangelicalism who is enriched by Anabaptism. While evangelical grounding is primary, the entire Christian Church is important to me both in its current reality and history.

On my shelves are many books by people baptized in infancy; their presence

is felt as I prepare to preach and teach. As well, my pastoral practice is to hold open communion for Christians while using, generally, the United Church's formula for invitation, though with a more Christ-centred focus than within some of its circles.

## The Basis for Unity

Layton seems to hold that it is biblical to work together based on a baptismal unity, seeing baptism as the way to enter the Church. However, pointing to what is a trifold unity in Scripture—confession, baptism, and entry into the Church—does not address the breakdown that occurred after the first century AD. Part of the Protestant (Radical) Reformation turns on the relationship between confession—what confession, whose confession, and when confessed—and who is fit for baptism. What Scripture says about water baptism and Spirit baptism (John 3:5, 1 Cor. 12:13, Titus 3:5–7) is complex and does deserve exploration in more depth (as is happening in the trilateral discussion). In a few words, in my view, one key conclusion is that the Spirit is not dependent upon the water.

When Emil Brunner pointed out years ago that even pastors who deviate seriously from Scriptural teachings retain the sacraments, he did not acknowledge that the meaning of the sacraments, including baptism, was changed in any way. Today, retaining the practice of baptism does not automatically give

us confidence in what is meant by it in certain circles.

A stronger case can be made to work together based on a confessional unity—a unity of core beliefs (Rom. 10:8–13, 1 Cor. 15:1–11, Eph. 4:4–5). Where trust in Christ and his grace exist, we can work together. Where the Apostles’ Creed is affirmed as summarizing God’s acts in history in Christ, not just as spiritual metaphors, there is a basis for cooperation.

Based on our common confession, we can work with people baptized in infancy without affirming their baptism. On a similar basis, we can work with the Salvation Army and some Quakers despite, and without affirming, their lack of baptism.

### **A ‘Legitimate Difference’?**

Thank you to Dr. John Rempel for being involved in the Tri-Lateral Discussion and for consenting to the interview about it. He suggests that just as we might acknowledge “a legitimate difference of interpretation” in the matter of war, we might acknowledge it in baptism. Perhaps. Yet what is meant is not entirely clear. It might mean we can accept that a position has its own logic, that its defenders are sincere, and that Scripture is unclear on a topic.

He seems to be saying that a difference of views on this point does not endanger the core of the Gospel. If it’s the final point, for some of us this is a current understanding; evangelical

Anabaptists and evangelical pedobaptists, as already indicated, work together and recognize each other. Sincerity and a form of logic, though, are not enough.

Further, Rempel says baptism is “the most important theological question faced by Mennonites in the trilateral dialogue.” Perhaps it is within the boundaries of this particular dialogue. Yet the boundaries seem unfortunate.

Some mainline churches in Canada are seriously declining in attendance and contain some clergy who call into question the authority of Scripture and central doctrines of the Christian faith (1 Cor. 15:1–6). Given that, there are more important issues to address than baptism. In this, I show my Low Church bias.

### **Baptism’s Proper Subjects**

Are we left with saying that Scripture’s teaching on baptism’s proper subjects is unclear? Before going there, I hold that Anabaptists can affirm some parts of the theology behind infant baptism because much of it applies to baptism in general: God initiates salvation and invites us to baptism; his grace is prevenient; Christ’s death must atone for sin; we are not saved by our faith, but by Christ; the Spirit is involved in the practice of baptism; the Spirit hovers over the entire worship service; children are precious to God; and children are part of the covenant. (Menno Simons affirmed that children are part of

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**There seem to be three possible relationships between water baptism and the Spirit: to bestow the Spirit (regeneration), to await the work of the Spirit (covenant), or to recognize the indwelling of the Spirit (believers). The final view makes the most sense to me (Acts 10:44–48).**

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God’s covenant, while not holding that children are to receive the ordinances.)

What about a lack of clarity in Scripture? Life would be easier for me if I were to baptize infants. Water baptism is to me, indeed, a difficult issue, and the biblical description of its fitting subjects, beyond believers, is not as clear as I would wish (see Col. 2:11–12). On the balance of the biblical and historical

evidence, however, believer’s baptism makes the most sense to me.

Paul speaks of children within mixed marriages in Corinth as being “holy” with no mention of infant baptism (1 Cor. 7:14); the composition of the particular households of Cornelius, Lydia, and the jailer seem less than straightforward (Acts 10, 16, 18); and Peter affirms baptism as a pledge, which an infant cannot make (1 Pet. 3:21–22). The work of Kurt Aland challenges the notion that infant baptism was practiced in the New Testament period, though he favoured retaining the later practice for reasons based partly on a few more questionable statements by Luther.

There seem to be three possible relationships between water baptism and the Spirit: to bestow the Spirit (regeneration), to await the work of the Spirit (covenant), or to recognize the indwelling of the Spirit (believers). The final view makes the most sense to me (Acts 10:44–48). That said, as a pastoral response in a complicated world, I am prepared to accept some people into membership without rebaptism; this does not mean that their baptism in infancy is seen as valid.

### **Beyond Prejudices**

It is good that the trilateral discussion seeks to move beyond prejudices and misunderstandings. Believer’s baptism, as practiced by Anabaptists, has been viewed in some mainline circles, in the past and now, as an expression of works

righteousness. How, then, can mainline churches baptize a converted adult or a parent and child at the same time? If mainline Christians can baptize believers without it being an expression of works righteousness, so can Anabaptists. It’s likely that the dialogue has concluded this. At least, one hopes.

When it comes to misunderstandings and a lack of charity, mainline churches

and evangelicals have mutually sinned. Yes, the formal fragmentation of the evangelical church can be, at times, a confusing and sad witness. If mainliners want to dismiss us, there are enough variations among evangelicals to identify problems and avoid thoughtful interaction—as unfair as this is.

Evangelical (including Anabaptist) and mainline leaders would benefit from dialoguing about how best to study Scripture using scholarly tools, which can be done constructively or destructively (see *Hoffmeier and Magary, Lockhart*); how to value the sweep of church history and historical theology beyond our own circles; and the need to bring together conversion and social justice (not to be confused with the social gospel or charity).

In some circles, there are two easy answers. First, you are either a conservative or a liberal (held by some evangelicals). Second, you are either a progressive or a fundamentalist (held by some mainliners). Both answers are dogmatic, black and white, and simplistic. They reflect more prejudices than reality.

Let inter-Church discussions and efforts continue, especially if their focus is on Christ, his Word, and grace—and discipleship that flows into mission in his world.

Even within such inter-Church discussions, though, there sometimes is a bit of irony. Anglicans, Catholics,

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**[Evangelicals] often work together in many organizations, frequently move past denominational boundaries, worship, and serve together. Why? Ultimately, it's because of a rich confessional unity in Christ.**

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Lutherans, Presbyterians, and the United Church grapple with apostolic succession, orders of ministry, inter-communion and joint mission in a formal sense; and discussions seem to creep along.

Evangelicals are formally fragmented, yet we often get along better than in decades past (improvements, including denominational mergers, are welcome!). We often work together in many organizations, frequently move past denominational boundaries, worship, and serve together. Why? Ultimately, it's because of a rich confessional unity in Christ. Confessional unity, believing in and following Christ, is of “first importance” (1 Cor. 15:1–11, Rom. 10:8–13, Eph. 4:4–5).

As churches—mainline and Evangelical (including Anabaptist)—explore understandings and common ground, one can only hope for a richer sense of a common confession of Christ our Saviour and Lord; of being ultimately one Church in Christ; and a more united, challenging witness and example in Canada. 

## Key Resources

Aland, Kurt. *Did The Early Church Baptize Infants?* SCM, 1963; repr. Wipf and Stock, 2004.

Beasley-Murray, G. R. *Baptism in the New Testament*. Eerdmans, 1962.

Bridge, Donald and David Phipers. *The Water that Divides: the Baptism Debate*. IVP, 1977.

Brunner, Emil. *Our Faith*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.

Duplacy, J. “Salvation by Faith and Baptism in the New Testament,” in *Baptism in the New Testament*. Geoffrey Chapman Ltd., 1964, 113–158.

Hillerbrand, Hans. J., ed. *The Reformation: A Narrative History*

*Related By Contemporary Observers and Participants*. Baker, repr. 1987.

Hoffmeier, James K. and Dennis R. Magary, eds. *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*. Crossway, 2012.

Lockhart, Ross. “Throwback Sundays: The limits of suspicion and the necessity of grace,” *Presbyterian Record*, June 2015, 11–12.

Simons, Menno. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*. Edited by J. C. Wenger and translated by L. Verduin. Herald Press, rev. 1984.

# Pastor as Midwife: An Empowering Metaphor of Care

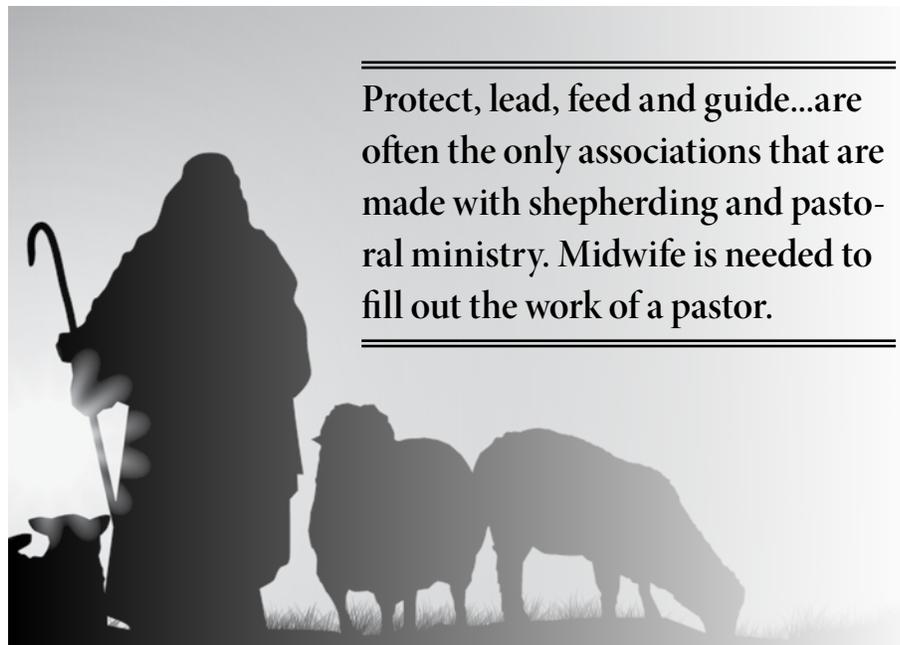


**Brian S. McGuffin**

Brian S. McGuffin is the pastor at Rosenort Fellowship Chapel and a part-time student at Providence Theological Seminary in the Graduate Certificate in Christian Spirituality program. He holds a BA in Religious Studies and an MA in Theology, both from Western University in Ontario.

**W**ITHIN SOME Christian traditions propositional language holds an important place in the study of Scripture and the Scripture's application to the field of ministry. This is not surprising since the Bible tells us that Jesus is the truth (John 14:6) and we are to worship in truth (John 4:24). Biblical language, in such traditions, is discerned as right rather than wrong, as true rather than false.<sup>1</sup> Thus, propositional language becomes the dominant mode of engaging the biblical text and of engaging the people to which the church ministers.

However, there are some elements of language within Scripture that, by their very nature, resist being reduced to proposition, to a truth claim. The most prominent one is that of metaphor.<sup>2</sup> Metaphors within Scripture are essential for pastors to wrestle with because they not only “structure what we perceive, how



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Protect, lead, feed and guide...are often the only associations that are made with shepherding and pastoral ministry. Midwife is needed to fill out the work of a pastor.

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we get around in the world, and how we relate to the world” but also form how we perceive ministry and how we relate and

care for other people.<sup>3</sup> The metaphor is not simply a trick or game of language, but a constitutive force that creates or at the very least organizes reality in different ways.<sup>4</sup>

For instance, the metaphor of pastor as shepherd occurs several times in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>5</sup> In fact, pastor as shepherd has been written, spoken and referred to so often that I believe that this metaphor has lost the tension between the “what is” and “what is not” component of metaphor, the essential quality through which the transformative power of

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1 W. Randolph Tate, Propositional Truth, in W. Randolph Tate, *Interpreting the Bible: A Handbook of Terms and Methods*, (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 284.

2 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 127–128.

3 George Lackoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

4 Nancey Ramsey, *Pastoral Diagnosis: A Resource for Ministries of Care and Counseling*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 117.

5 Bobby Jamieson, “Biblical Theology and Shepherding,” *9 Marks Journal*, (Summer 2014), 18. <http://dev.9marks.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/9MarksJournalSummer2014.pdf>.

metaphors shape people, including church leaders.<sup>6</sup>

Pastor as shepherd, in essence, has become one of the church's root metaphors, an unnuanced, often repeated cultural marker of commonly held belief.<sup>7</sup> As a root metaphor, shepherd organizes many subordinate images and thus acts as a point from which to mine other images that are included within it.

Shepherds are often thought of as those who protect, lead, feed and guide. These are all valuable images for congregational care but are often the only associations that are made with shepherding and pastoral ministry. These images do not address the fact that a shepherd also plays an important role in helping sheep to be born, especially when there are problems with the birthing process.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, a further metaphor needs to be included to fill out the work of a pastor. I suggest the metaphor of pastor/shepherd as midwife, that is someone who assists another in bringing forth life, goodness, spiritual fruit, or healing in another's life, as essential to balancing out the other images found in a pastor as shepherd.

## **I. Pastor as Midwife and the Meaning of Congregational Care**

When we consider the work of "pastor" in the normal biblical understanding of shepherd (the English word pastor comes from the Latin word for shepherd, *pastor*) it is evident that pastor/shepherds are very active leading, protecting and feeding.<sup>9</sup>

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### **Listening is the work of the pastor/midwife, which does not control the conversation, but allows the Holy Spirit to work in the counselee.**

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Pastor/shepherds in these cases come from a position of power and authority which makes use of the experience they have gained through training at seminary or from their own experience in ministry. However, this creates a power imbalance, which if not rebalanced with another metaphor can create an unhealthy dependence of people in the congregation on the "professionals."

A dependence on professionals is not a unique facet of care in the church community. A modernistic worldview encourages a professionalism that is found in therapeutic and medical paradigms of health and care that assume the possibility of an objective care giver. These therapeutic paradigms focus on individuals and their problems and the professional's scientific approach to actively accomplish something to a passive patient.<sup>10</sup>

While these therapeutic paradigms are of great value to congregational care, they cannot be accepted without thought, rather they must be adapted through an "ecclesial lens."<sup>11</sup> This adaptation begins to occur when the pastor and counselee understand the pastor not as an objective knower, a naïve assumption we must carefully avoid, but as a subjective part of the helping relationship.<sup>12</sup>

With such an adaptation, a conversion if you will, the pastor is repositioned within a constellation of relationships with the one in need of care, God, the Scriptures, and culture. Through this repositioning the pastor is understood to be part of a process and context rather than an outside objective healer. As such the pastor's identity and therapeutic model come through the unity of their "embodied, affective, intellectual, spiritual, relationship, priestly-professional and cultural-historical self."<sup>13</sup>

And since both counselee and pastor are bringing a contextual reality of their own to the caring relationship, the very context and content of the new relationship will also impact both the one comforting and the one comforted.<sup>14</sup> The pastor as one who works with and assists the one who is healing, is now no longer solely responsible for healing but is part of a process accomplished in relationship. This new ecclesial therapeutic worldview takes a great weight from the pastor who can now simply "facilitate—to be midwife—to the new life that is happening."<sup>15</sup>

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6 Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 64–69.

7 Kevin Vanhoozer, "What is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture," in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, eds. Kevin Vanhoozer, C. A. Anderson & M. J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 52.

8 Susan Schoenian, "The Lambing Process," <http://www.sheep101.info/201/lambingprocess.html> (accessed November 20, 2016).

9 Jamieson, 18.

10 Rose Weitz, and Deborah Sullivan, "Licensed Lay Midwifery and the Medical Model of Childbirth," *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 7 no. 1, (1985): 48.

11 Ramsey, 25.

12 Ramsey, 38.

13 Ramsey, 76.

14 Carol L. Schnabl-Swcheitzer, *Song of Songs: A Metaphorical Vision for Pastoral Care*. *Interpretation*, 59, no. 3 (2005): 278–289.

15 Margaret Kornfeld, *Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 143.

As we can see, congregational care is not causing healing, but rather assisting someone else who is giving birth to healing.<sup>16</sup> This is “labour” intensive and the pastor is there to listen, and respond to needs without trying to take on the labour themselves.

Listening is the work of the pastor/midwife, which does not control the conversation, but allows the Holy Spirit to work in the counselee.<sup>17</sup> Just as life is not forced out of the womb by the midwife but rather anticipated, waited for and facilitated, so too is the healing of congregants supported and anticipated.

Pastors must not try to force people into healing against their will, as though that were even possible. This “labour” of healing, bringing forth of spiritual fruit, is not easy to facilitate because the people who come to us are often in pain, and pain is something instinctually pastors want to take away. But as the pain of a woman’s labour is good pain—an indication of how hard women’s bodies are working to do something incredibly difficult—we must realize that the pain that others are experiencing in the time of a counseling session can also be good pain.

All healing in the context of counseling comes at a cost, as body, mind, and spirit try to do something incredibly difficult—birthing new life.<sup>18</sup> As old wounds and old memories are brought into the light there is a time of reckoning, a time of acceptance; and this can be a great struggle that includes anger, tears,

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**Just as with a midwife, the larger concern must be about the one in need of assistance; we need to empower her in the process of birth, to give birth and not take the authority from her.**

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and pain. In both cases, whether the pain brings forth a baby or healing, the process can also bring a blessing of new life.

Pastoral care is difficult because the pastor must wait—wait for the signs of healing and new birth that God is accomplishing in the person they are helping.<sup>19</sup> In this time of waiting, this time of expectancy, there is great meaning, a kind of prayer, a praying without ceasing.<sup>20</sup> This waiting is not without its activity, nor is it without expertise. The active waiting of the pastor/midwife is what we look at next.

## **II. Pastor as Midwife: A Metaphor That Empowers Healing**

The most important work of the pastor as midwife is empowerment. In professional settings, such as a pastor’s office, the power and authority can be unduly weighted to the pastor. The pastor becomes the one who knows, performs, dissects, analyses and repairs the one who



comes for help. While these things are not bad in themselves, this is not the role of the pastor in congregational life.

Pastor as midwife corrects an imbalance of power by helping the pastor see that helping relationships are fraught with ambiguity. In such situations people want to release decisions and the work of healing into another’s hands. Because of this, it is often easier to just take the control offered and begin “fixing” and short-circuiting the healing process.

Just as with a midwife, the larger concern must be about the one in need of assistance; we need to empower her in the process of birth, to give birth and not take the authority from her. In the same way, a pastor’s concern cannot be to get to the healing as fast as possible as a way of being “successful” in counseling. The success of the person in need must become the pastor’s gratification; a pastor’s gratification comes from the success of the other in finding healing, and being invited to be part of the process!<sup>21</sup>

The pastor assists in the labour of healing by “exploring the process through asking questions and being curious.” In fact, “our curiosity...is the best resource” we can give to those we counsel.<sup>22</sup> This

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16 Ramsey, 119.

17 Ronald W. Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor’s Own Family*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 67.

18 Colleen Cullinan, In Pain and Sorrow: Childbirth, Incarnation, and the Suffering of Women. *Cross Currents*, 58 no. 1 (2008): 99.

19 Kornfeld, 114.

20 Kornfeld, 61.

21 Ramsey, 119.

22 Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor*, 24.

resource of curiosity allows people to hear themselves think aloud as they answer questions and respond with their own thoughts on the issues at hand. Jesus was a healer who asked a lot of questions such as in John 5:6: “When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be healed?’” The quick answer is that the man wants to be healed, yet Jesus seems to waste precious time in asking the question.

That we might think Jesus is wasting time in asking the question reveals how easy it is to slip into a modernistic worldview of an objective knower who can discern the truth immediately without engaging in relationship. Jesus’ question invites us to reflect on healing, not as a forgone conclusion, and a way to empower the one in need of healing. Jesus empowered him with the authority to decide what would happen with his body and we should do the same with those who come to us.

When asking questions, we are not a professional demanding conformity to our way of being. Questions are not meant to guide or direct down a particular path even though we listen with the hope of making some sort of diagnosis and point to a path of healing. In care ministry pastors might be tempted to embrace a medical model, to set the agenda, to diagnosis and try to solve the problem. This is a mistake since pastors do their best work when they simply stimulate thoughtfulness and trust that God is working in the process.<sup>23</sup>

This curiosity that is shown through our ability to ask questions will also let us know if there are issues that are much larger and more complicated than we had first anticipated, and thus our curiosity

will lead us to refer the counselee to others when more specialized care is needed. This is an important corollary to pastoral care—pastors are not specialists and should not attempt long and involved therapies.

A referral does not devalue the holistic approach with which the pastor approaches the one in need; it accentuates a central concern for their healing as priority, rather than one model of care over another. Instead of

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23 Ronald W. Richardson, *Polarization and the Healthier Church: Applying Bowen Family Systems Theory to Conflict and Change in Society and Congregational Life*. (San Bernardino, CA: Author, 2012), 147.

feeling unsuccessful as a pastor because they cannot perform a psychological intervention to repair a bad thought pattern or behaviour, pastors instead understand they are successful when they give resources to people for healing even as they help them think through their issues.

Present day midwives have become a valued part of the team of health professionals that care for women with low-risk pregnancies. This positive relationship of midwives and obstetricians is the result of many years of work where the health of mothers and babies were of

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24 Kornfeld, 111.

25 Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor*, 115.

26 Ramsey, 121–122.

27 Weitz and Sullivan, 49.

first priority so that when a mother was going to have a high-risk pregnancy or birth, midwives referred their clients.

In a similar way, pastors are part of the mental, physical, and spiritual healthcare team and when they become adept at recognizing the needs of those they care for and refer their “high-risk” congregants in view of the larger healing process they will be drawn into the wider circle of care.<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

Other metaphors exist within the scope of pastor such as coach,<sup>25</sup> friend, and servant.<sup>26</sup> However, none of them quite capture the essence of pastoral care that the metaphor of midwife does. A midwife attends to the one in need when they are the most vulnerable, when they are the most exposed, when they are in the most need to be supported in the task of

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**Pastors understand they are successful when they give resources to people for healing even as they help them think through their issues.**

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bringing new life to fruition.

In a similar way those that seek the pastor when they are in need of healing must open themselves and become vulnerable in order for the pastor to assist in healing. The metaphor of midwife is not one to take lightly. Pastor as midwife comes with a weighty responsibility not only to assist the one labouring to deliver, but also being ready to “catch”<sup>27</sup> and pass on what is brought to life. *Θ*

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# A Brief History of Deacons’ Ministry: The Role of Deacons Throughout the Centuries



## Dr. Darryl G. Klassen

Darryl G. Klassen is the senior pastor at Kleefeld EMC. He holds a BRS (SBC), MACS and DMin (both PTS). This paper draws upon his doctoral thesis: “The Calling, Giftedness, and Ministry of Deacons in the Evangelical Mennonite Conference: Developing a Biblical Understanding for Conference Practice.” Full documentation is provided there. This paper is the second in a three-part discussion.

**H**OW DID THE EARLY Church envision the roles and responsibilities of deacons within the life of the congregation? With scant guidance from the New Testament, church leaders relied on tradition and creativity to give definition to the role.

How then did the Church throughout the succeeding centuries manage to keep deacons’ ministry relevant for the benefit of the congregation? From generation to generation the Church may have deviated slightly from the original intent for deacons’ ministry, but they did maintain a

consistent theme.

This treatment of the history of deacons’ ministry throughout the history of the Church will be but a snapshot. Resources were few and what records there are did not focus heavily on this ministry. With a brief sketch of the

earlier centuries of church history, our main goal in this paper will be to examine the Mennonite use of the deacons' role in the church. From this material it will be shown that the EMC followed this pattern until a major paradigm shift took place in recent decades.

## I. Deacons' Ministry in the Early Church

If we take the Acts 6 account as a precursor to deacons' ministry, Paul gives us the impression that the office of deacon continued on for some thirty years after Pentecost when he mentioned "deacons" in Philippians 1:1. Paul then fleshed out the requirements for the selection of deacons in his letter to Timothy without telling the reader what the accompanying duties might be (1 Timothy 3:8–13). What we do know is that the office continued to be developed and recruitment standards were important.

### The Ante-Nicene Fathers Speak<sup>1</sup>

The Ante-Nicene fathers provided further evidence that deacons were a major part of church polity and the life of the congregation. Clement of Rome affirmed the existence of deacons as late as the close of the first century. Clement wrote:

And thus the preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first-fruits [of their labours], having first proved them by the Spirit, to be

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Having been condemned to death, Perpetua awaited her fate in a filthy dungeon together with her slave Felicitas and other Christian friends. It was at this time that two deacons came to minister to her and Felicitas.

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bishops and deacons of those who should afterward believe. Nor was this any new thing, since indeed many ages before it was written concerning bishops and deacons. For thus saith the Scripture in a certain place, "I will appoint their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith."<sup>2</sup>

Clement expressed the ongoing concern that church leaders, including deacons, be appointed for new churches and that they be properly examined. Clearly it did not take long for the fledgling Church to see the need for organization, especially as their numbers continued to mount. Another early Christian document, the *Didache*, supposedly the further teachings of the twelve apostles, urged churches to honor their deacons.<sup>3</sup>

Heading into the second century, we find that another Early Church Father, Ignatius, wrote of deacons warning the church to revere them. Writing to the Trallians in AD 105, he said:

It behooves you also, in every way, to please the deacons, who are [ministers] of the mysteries of Jesus Christ; for they



Mosaic of Saint Perpetua, Croatia.

are not ministers of meat and drink, but servants of the Church of God. They are bound, therefore, to avoid all grounds of accusation [against them], as they would a burning fire. Let them, then, prove themselves to be such... And do ye reverence them as Christ Jesus, of whose place they are the keepers, even as the bishop is the representation of the Father of all things, and the presbyters are the Sanhedrin of God, and assembly of the Apostles of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Ignatius implied that serving at the tables or distributing resources to the poor and needy were not the whole of the deacons' duties. We also do not know what he meant by deacons being the ministers of the mysteries of Christ. Does this mean that they did more in the realm of teaching? Or did they express the compassion of Christ in tangible ways other than giving alms to the poor? We are simply not told.

## The Story of Perpetua and Felicitas

A brighter picture of deacons in action comes to us in the outstanding story of the Christian noblewoman known as Perpetua. At the turn of the third century, Perpetua lived with her husband, son, and

1 The term *Ante-Nicene* refers to the period following the New Testament beginning of the Church and just before the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.

2 Clement, *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 16.

3 *Didache*, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles: The Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations*, vol. 7 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 381.

4 Ignatius, *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians*, vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 66–67.

her slave, Felicitas, in Carthage. When Emperor Septimius Severus came to power he sought to destroy Christianity because he believed faith in Christ undermined Roman loyalty.

Since Carthage in North Africa was the center of vibrant Christianity, he focused his persecution of the faith there. Perpetua was among the first groups to be arrested; she was preparing for baptism at the time. Her father implored her to renounce Christ for his sake and the sake of her nursing child. She refused.<sup>5</sup>

Having been condemned to death, Perpetua awaited her fate in a filthy dungeon together with her slave Felicitas and other Christian friends. It was at this time that two deacons came to minister to her and Felicitas, praying with them, arranging for better and more human conditions, and encouraging them in their faith. Eventually, Perpetua, Felicitas, and the other believers were sent into the arena where a wild heifer tossed Perpetua into the air. Then a leopard attacked. Finally, the crowd called for blood and the group was slain one-by-one by the sword.<sup>6</sup>

Cyprian confirmed that while the brethren waited for this systematic martyrdom, deacons were permitted to minister to believers. This was, of course, in the absence of presbyters and if time were a factor. These martyrs-to-be could even confess their sins to the deacons and receive intercession. Deacons were a great comfort in such times of terror.<sup>7</sup>

## The Council of Nicaea Rebuked Deacons

By the fourth century, however, it appears that deacons may have crossed the lines of purpose and authority. The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 set about to limit what deacons were allowed to do in the context of ministry. As the 300 bishops gathered at the beckoning of Emperor Constantine, they discovered that some deacons were administering the Eucharist to the presbyters, a rank that was above deacon and something that the canon did not permit. Deacons were even doing so in the presence of bishops, a great disgrace.

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The Council reminded the deacons of their place in the hierarchy of the church and chided them to remember that they were servants and inferiors to bishops and presbyters.

While this may seem petty, we need to consider that from time to time persons in positions of some authority will cross over into duties that are not their

responsibility and thus neglect the job they were originally called to perform. If we keep this in mind, we will agree with the Council that each role has its purpose and we must not assume that all are equal in calling and gifting. If a person has a gifting that spills over their original position, they may be elected or appointed to a higher calling, but only when the church recognizes the calling, gifting and ministry of that person.<sup>8</sup>

## II. Deacons' Ministry in the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition

From the Council of Nicaea until the Reformation (1200 years), deacons' ministry changed very little. Deacons continued to assist in communion, served the bishops in whatever way was needed, and represented the church to the people. The absence of documentation on the ongoing ministry of deacons leaves us to speculate on the exact details of their work.

With the advent of the Reformation came a return to Scriptural foundations for the church and her officers. For the Anabaptist-Mennonite wing of the Reformation this meant modeling their understanding and practices of the church on New Testament teachings.

### The Dordrecht Confession

After a century of intense persecution, several Mennonite congregations came together in Dordrecht, Holland, to write up a confession outlining a common vision for the church. Adrian Cornelis, bishop of the Flemish Mennonite Church in Dordrecht, wrote the first draft on April 21, 1632. With many divisions existing between the Mennonite congregations, it was hoped that this confession would restore unity.<sup>9</sup>

5 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/perpetua.html>

6 *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas*, vol. 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 700.

7 Cyprian, *The Epistles of Cyprian*, vol. 5 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 293.

8 Kevin W. Kaatz, ed., *Voices of Early Christianity: Documents from the Origins of Christianity* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2013), 110. These edicts are found in Canon 18 of the list of Canons written after the Nicene Creed was accepted.

9 John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1942), 246–247.

Article IX specifically detailed the election and offices of teachers, deacons, and deaconesses in the church. Deacons continued the ministry of seeking out and caring for the poor in keeping with their understanding of Acts 6. Contributions and distribution of the alms were entrusted to their care.

Deaconesses were to be selected from among aged widows who demonstrated honorable character. The implication appears to be that it was considered more socially acceptable for women to minister to women than for a man to visit either elderly women or young mothers.

Deaconesses were instructed to visit, comfort, and care for, the poor, feeble, sick, sorrowing, and needy, as well as the widows and orphans (1 Tim. 5:9; Rom. 16:1; James 1:27). The Early Church allowed deaconesses to baptize other women for propriety's sake and they were not permitted to serve men for the same reason. In certain contexts, deaconesses supervised hospitals and managed homes for the aged.

The election of deacons was an established process by 1665. With the Danzig Flemish Mennonite Church in need of a deacon, the congregation proceeded to follow the accepted custom of electing one from their number. Three months later, a minister was needed, and the same man who was just elected as a deacon was now elected as a minister. Consequently, a vacancy emerged among the deacons and another election was

held for that position.<sup>10</sup>

One might surmise that the position of deacon was a stepping-stone to a higher position, such as pastor or bishop. Indeed, throughout church history it certainly appears that way. Only recently have churches begun to appreciate the role of deacons seeing the position as an end in itself for service. But not all deacons became ministers in the Mennonite tradition, and not all were qualified for such a "promotion."

Some deacons were qualified to preach. Whether they were gifted or "good at it" cannot be known. Under the elders' authority, deacons could preach:

Furthermore, concerning deacons, that they, especially when they are fit, and chosen and ordained thereto by the church, for the assistance and relief of the elders, may exhort the church (since they, as has been said, are chosen thereto), and labor also in the Word and in teaching; that each may minister unto the other with the gift he has received from the Lord, so that through mutual service and the assistance of every member, each in his measure, the body of Christ may be improved, and the vine and the church of the Lord continue to grow, increase, and be built up, according as it is proper.<sup>11</sup>

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Allowing deacons to preach, especially in smaller congregations, assisted the elders whose workload was particularly heavy. If the elder/preacher was a self-employed farmer or businessman deacons could fill in with a sermon from time to time. Otherwise, deacons' ministry in the Mennonite church was primarily focused on the material needs of the congregants. As one historian wrote, "The poor among the Mennonites never suffer want; the Mennonite whose buildings have burned down, who has been robbed, who has met with an accident, can count on having nearly everything restored to him."<sup>12</sup>

### **III. Deacons' Ministry in the Kleine Gemeinde Era (1812–1952)**

By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century patterns had been firmly established among all Mennonite churches for elections and ministerial duties. Deacon elections continued to be based on need and were taken very seriously. In some cases, a brother could be elected as a deacon and an hour later elected as a minister. Despite the anxiety this may have aroused, every member was fully aware that this could happen and accepted it as the will of the Lord.<sup>13</sup>

The critical question regarding deacons' ministry at this time centered on purpose. How did the *Kleine Gemeinde* (KG) make efficient use of the office of deacon in the tiny brotherhood?<sup>14</sup>

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10 Delbert Plett, *Leaders of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia, 1812 to 1874* (Steinbach, MB: Crossway Publications, 1993), 19.

11 "Dordrecht Confession of Faith (Mennonite, 1632)." Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (1632), [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Dordrecht\\_Confession\\_of\\_Faith\\_\(Mennonite\\_1632\)&oldid=91587](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Dordrecht_Confession_of_Faith_(Mennonite_1632)&oldid=91587), Article IX.

12 P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1980), 75.

13 Harvey Plett, *Seeking to be Faithful* (Steinbach, MB: Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 1996), 19.

14 *Kleine Gemeinde* means "small church," a derogatory term applied to them by the main Mennonite church when a small brotherhood broke away from the larger body seeking to be faithful. The KG became known in the 1950s as the Evangelical Mennonite Conference.

As in the Acts account, or in the spirit of Deuteronomy 15 to be more precise, when there was a famine that affected a number of families, the deacons were in charge of gathering grain for the poor. People who had more than enough were encouraged to bring their contributions to the deacons who would then distribute the portions. Deacons would visit families to assess their needs and determine what resources would best help the family.

Debt was considered a serious issue in the KG. Deacons were not permitted to be indebted to Russians (i.e., outsiders) and were counseled to quickly settle matters in this regard. So too with others in the fellowship, deacons would help members to find other ways of procuring loans within the brotherhood.

Where there was an absence of a minister due to an illness or death, deacons were allowed to step into the pulpit to preach. When the KG moved to Manitoba in the 1870s, the congregation that settled at Scratching River found itself without a minister. There were, however, two ordained deacons who each took on leadership roles of varying responsibility. Although they were allowed to preach, an elder from the Steinbach area needed to come and serve the congregation with communion and baptism.

The matter of deacons preaching arose several times over the centuries. On October 23–28, 1937, members of the Manitoba KG met with members of the Kansas KG in Meade, Kansas, to discuss twenty-three questions pertaining to the disciplines of the church. The final question was this: Are deacons obligated to preach? The answer: According to the example of Philip in the Book of Acts, deacons, upon request, are also to serve by the preaching of the Word.<sup>15</sup>

Primarily, however, deacons were considered “helpers” who had oversight of the poor in the community of believers. During the early years in Canada, sickness and death were common among the Mennonites as they encountered new challenges to life and health. Deacons, just as in Russia, bore the responsibility to address the deprivations that resulted from tragedies. Additionally, deacons had a special responsibility in mediating difficulties between members and assisting in reconciliation. Most members of the church recognized the authority of the deacons to enter into disagreements and make peace. Peace-making required wisdom and courage when two parties had a lot at stake in land, property, or personal issues.

#### **IV. Deacons’ Ministry in the EMC from 1952 to the Present**

Following a wave of evangelical fervour in the mid-twentieth century, the KG reevaluated their calling in the world and began to move towards being a missional church. Until this time, the Great Commission had been misinterpreted and the KG did not regard

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**Most members of the church recognized the authority of the deacons to enter into disagreements and make peace. Peace-making required wisdom and courage when two parties had a lot at stake in land, property, or personal issues.**

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the unconverted.

With a new appreciation of the Great Commission, the KG, consisting of five congregations in southern Manitoba, decided to engage their Canadian context by changing their name to the Evangelical Mennonite Church in 1952, and later to the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC) in 1959.

#### **Deacons as Treasurers and Benefactors**

As the EMC began to plant churches outside the original five congregations (Kleefeld, Blumenort, Steinbach, Rosenort, and Prairie Rose), distributing alms and other monies became a larger financial concern. Deacons now sat on a treasury board and administered funds for the whole conference. Sometimes they deliberated over how much money each member of the EMC was required to contribute for the pastors’ travel fund; other times they oversaw loans pertaining to church building projects. Deacons were acting as a board of trustees for the conference.

A shift in responsibility took place in 1959 when the general assembly of EMC members elected an EMC Treasury Board. No longer were members of this board required to be deacons, but were elected based on their ability to handle finances. As far as financial concerns on a national basis were considered, deacons were out of a job.

#### **Publishing Responsibilities**

Prior to the paradigm shift of the 1950s, deacons were responsible for publishing the conference yearbook, booklets, and periodicals pertaining to conference matters. As the demand for higher quality publications increased, this work was given over to a conference committee. Once again, deacons were set aside and deemed unnecessary for these particular responsibilities.

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<sup>15</sup> *Diener-Konferenz der Kleingemeinde* [Ministers Conference of the Kleingemeinde], booklet, October 23–28, 1937, Folder 4, Box 16, Evangelical Mennonite Conference Archives, Steinbach, MB, 18.

## Alms Distribution

Certainly one of the traditional duties of deacons through the centuries was the administration of funds to ease the suffering of the poor. Deacons in the KG and, for a time, in the EMC, were responsible for the financial well-being of members in the church. One church member fell behind in his property taxes and accumulated a three-year back-debt of sixty-six dollars. This sum seems paltry today, but in those days it crippled the church member's ability to farm and provide for his family. Deacons from the Steinbach EMC church agreed to pay the sum and clear the debt. No mention is made of the member having to pay back the money.<sup>16</sup>

Whether the deacons paid someone's rent, assisted in the travel of a member coming home from Alberta, or provided transport fees for mentally disabled persons, deacons were intimately involved in the life of EMC congregants. However, around 1960, Canada began offering social assistance to families in need and by doing so ushered in a period of upheaval for deacons' ministry.<sup>17</sup> The Canadian government, rightly or wrongly, instituted a welfare system that forced deacons to rethink their role as servants in the church. Any significant support system that deacons provided was rendered null and void by the welfare system.

## Conclusion

Where does that leave deacons today? If boards and committees have taken over the tasks that the KG/EMC had traditionally given to deacons, what do we do with deacons now?



EMC ARCHIVES

Lewis Anfinson was elected as a deacon on August 18, 1967, and ordained for service within Pelly Fellowship Chapel. He and his wife Vivian, shown here with their family, have served for a half-century.

Taking some of these responsibilities away from deacons should be seen as an act of grace. As the conference grew, deacons could no longer handle the greater task of financial management as budgets increased. Publishing should never have been placed on the shoulders of deacons. And though the Canadian government instituted a flawed system of caring for the needy, EMC deacons and other denominations' deacons could not handle the present milieu of crises that afflict the impoverished Canadian home as they did in the past. So we ought not to grieve this transition for the deacon.

In fact, what we are faced with as a conference is an opportunity to re-

imagine the calling and ministry of deacons for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. We can return to the original template in a manner of speaking and, at the same time, be innovative with the role so that it both fits the biblical vision and be applicable to our context.

In the present tense, everything we have inherited from our forebears in the Christian faith is a gift to us. And we are obligated to make it our own. Investigating the history of the church will reveal that "there is nothing new under the sun," and to continue the traditions of the Early Church and beyond does not make the current version of the church unimaginative. Instead we find ourselves carrying on the mission of the church with the time-tested wisdom of the original church.

Next issue we will look at the EMC deacon for the next century and explore the possibilities. *Θ*

<sup>16</sup> Minutes, Steinbach EMC Deacons Meeting, 08/13/1959, folder 68, box 299, held at P. L. Penner's home.

<sup>17</sup> Allan Moscovitch, "Welfare State," *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (February 7, 2006), <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/welfare-state/> (accessed November 18, 2014).

# The Importance of Biblical Inerrancy



## Michael Zwaagstra

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ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT theological issues for Evangelical Christians is the authority of the Bible. While virtually all Christians agree that the Bible should be authoritative in the lives of believers, there is significant variation when it comes to defining what biblical authority actually means. Some Christians believe that the Bible is truthful and accurate in everything it affirms while others limit the Bible's authority to areas of faith and practice and suggest that historical and/or scientific errors may have crept into the text.

Ultimately the debate centres on whether or not the Bible is inerrant. This paper will show that biblical inerrancy is the historic position of the Christian Church and that the abandonment of this doctrine by many churches and institutions in the twentieth century led to bitterly divisive debates and opened the door to theological liberalism in a variety of doctrinal areas.

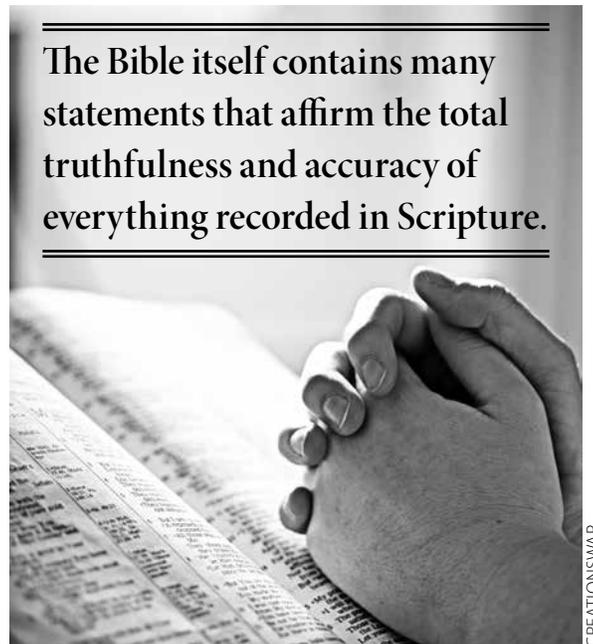
### I. Biblical Inerrancy Defined and Explained

Inerrancy simply means to be without error. To state that the Bible is inerrant

is to affirm that it is without error. Biblical scholars who support inerrancy are quick to point out that this does not mean that modern-day copies and translations of the Bible have no errors since minor errors of transcription and translation have crept into the text.<sup>1</sup> Instead, biblical inerrancy means that the original manuscripts of the Bible are without error. Fortunately, this is a relatively minor distinction since the overwhelming textual evidence shows that “we have something exceedingly close to the unerring texts of original Scripture.”<sup>2</sup>

A second important qualification is that inerrancy does not deny the reality of different genres within the Bible or the fact that literary conventions have changed over time. Sections that are written as poetry need to be interpreted as poetry while narrative sections should be looked at as more

The Bible itself contains many statements that affirm the total truthfulness and accuracy of everything recorded in Scripture.



CREATIONSWAP

historical in nature. As Gregory Beale explains, “Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.”<sup>3</sup>

The Bible itself contains many statements that affirm the total truthfulness and accuracy of everything recorded in Scripture. For example, Paul states in 2 Timothy 3:16 that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”<sup>4</sup> The fact that Scripture

1 Craig L. Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 124.

2 Ibid.

3 Gregory K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 277.

4 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

is breathed out by God makes it clear that he directly inspired every word that appears in the Bible. While God used human authors and allowed their unique personalities and writing styles to influence the text, he ensured that every word appeared exactly as he wanted it.<sup>5</sup>

Paul believed in the inerrancy of Scripture so strongly that he built an entire argument around the identity of Jesus on the absence of one letter from one word in the book of Genesis (Gal. 3:16). In the same vein Peter writes, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). When Peter writes about men being carried along by the Holy Spirit, he makes it clear that God superintended the entire process and did not allow the Bible writers to write anything that was false.

## Inductive and Deductive Arguments

In addition, there are strong inductive and deductive arguments for the inerrancy of Scripture. The deductive approach begins by noting God is the author of Scripture. Since God cannot err, it is logical to conclude that God’s Word does not contain error.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the inductive approach begins by defining what would

constitute an error. Then the Bible is examined carefully from beginning to end for any errors.

Since nothing has been discovered in the Bible that would qualify as errant, the Bible is therefore without error.<sup>7</sup> Throughout church history, the longstanding and nearly unanimous view of prominent Christian leaders was that the Bible was completely inerrant.<sup>8</sup> This was considered a key standard of theological orthodoxy until the inerrancy debate broke out in the twentieth century.

## II. History of the Inerrancy Debate

The debate over biblical inerrancy began at the end of the nineteenth century when Charles A. Briggs, a professor at Union Seminary in New York, publicly challenged the doctrine of inerrancy.<sup>9</sup> During a chapel address on January 20, 1891, Briggs claimed that biblical

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**Throughout church history, the longstanding view of prominent Christian leaders was that the Bible was completely inerrant.**

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inerrancy was a false notion that served as a barrier to people accepting the gospel. According to Briggs, higher criticism revealed many errors in the Bible that could not be explained away and that ignoring this reality undermined the credibility of Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

This challenge by Briggs provoked a strong response from Princeton scholars Benjamin Warfield and A. A. Hodge, both of whom strongly upheld biblical inerrancy in their writings.<sup>11</sup> Briggs also found himself at the receiving end of sharp criticism from his own denomination, the Presbyterian Church. In 1893, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church voted to excommunicate Briggs for heresy. However, shortly before that vote, Union Seminary had already voted to separate from Presbyterian Church and keep Briggs on its faculty.<sup>12</sup>

## Divisions

However, divisions in the Presbyterian Church over the inerrancy issue did not go away. By the 1920s, theological conservatives in the Presbyterian Church became convinced that their denomination had moved away from biblical orthodoxy. In particular, Princeton Seminary, previously a bastion of biblical inerrancy, came under the control of theological liberals. As a result, J. Gresham Machen, a popular Princeton professor who continued to affirm biblical inerrancy, left the seminary and founded the more conservative Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929.<sup>13</sup> Under Machen’s leadership, Westminster stood firmly in favour of biblical inerrancy and provided scholarly support for this doctrine.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most significant battles over biblical inerrancy took place at Fuller Theological Seminary. Founded in 1947 under the leadership of Charles Fuller, a well-known radio evangelist, Fuller originally adopted a statement of faith that firmly upheld biblical inerrancy.<sup>15</sup> However, by 1962 the school needed to wrestle with the fact that several of its

5 Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God At His Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2014), 37.

6 Craig L. Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* 121.

7 Ibid.

8 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 17.

9 Ibid., 19.

10 Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 188–89.

11 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 19.

12 Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*, 193.

13 George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 33.

14 Ibid., 34.

15 Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*, 106–07.



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## *The Battle for the Bible* launched a vigorous debate on inerrancy among evangelicals and laid the groundwork for the efforts of the scholars involved in the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy.

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faculty members no longer believed in biblical inerrancy and were willing to go public with their views.<sup>16</sup>

During a planning conference in December of that same year, the faculty engaged in an extended debate on biblical inerrancy, and this meeting later became known as “Black Saturday.”<sup>17</sup> In the following year, a deeply divided board ultimately invited David Hubbard, a faculty member who denied inerrancy, to assume the presidency of Fuller. Shortly afterwards, the remaining faculty members who supported inerrancy, such as Harold Lindsell, Wilbur Smith, and Gleason Archer, submitted their resignations.<sup>18</sup> Since that time, Fuller has no longer officially included biblical inerrancy in its statement of faith.

### **The Battle for the Bible**

In 1976, Harold Lindsell published a passionate defense of inerrancy

entitled *The Battle for the Bible*. This book launched a vigorous debate on inerrancy among evangelicals and laid the groundwork for the efforts of the scholars involved in the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI). In 1978, several hundred scholars met in Chicago and drafted a set of nineteen affirmations and denials regarding biblical inerrancy.<sup>19</sup> The ICBI has served as the definitive statement on biblical inerrancy for many years and led to additional biblical scholarship on the inerrancy issue. Scholars such as Gleason Archer, a former faculty member at Fuller, devoted considerable energy to exploring and resolving alleged contradictions and errors in the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

### **Southern Baptist Convention**

The ICBI also played a role in reversing the trend towards theological liberalism in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Like many other large

denominations, SBC had been drifting towards theological liberalism for many years and tolerated seminary professors in its midst who denied biblical inerrancy.<sup>21</sup> Shortly after the ICBI conference, a small group of SBC leaders met and formulated a plan to take back their denomination by electing regional presidents who believed in biblical inerrancy and were willing to take action on this issue.<sup>22</sup>

Once these new presidents were in place, they began appointing board members who believed in inerrancy to the board of SBC seminaries. These board members then hired inerrantist seminary presidents who, in turn, made sure to enforce biblical inerrancy among faculty members.<sup>23</sup> Today the SBC has a statement of faith that firmly entrenches biblical inerrancy as a core theological belief.<sup>24</sup>

### **III. Critics of Inerrancy**

Some of the strongest critics of inerrancy today can be found among self-professed evangelicals. Clark Pinnock, a former professor at McMaster School of Divinity, became famous for his shifting theological views. While Pinnock started out his career as a strong supporter of inerrancy, he eventually came to adopt a limited view of biblical authority that amounted to a virtual denial of inerrancy, even though he professed to remain an inerrantist.<sup>25</sup> In *The Scripture Principle*, Pinnock made it clear that he thought there were many factual errors in the Bible.

Serious differences in the numbers in parallel accounts in Samuel/Kings and Chronicles have been noted for centuries. How many men, chariots, and horsemen were there, anyhow? It would seem not only possible but even likely that some of these discrepancies may be explained by assuming that the inspired writer took the figures as found in the official records and copied them out for his own purposes. It was enough for the chronicler, let us say, to acquaint the returning captives with their

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16 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 20.

17 George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 213.

18 *Ibid.*, 222–24.

19 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 25–26.

20 Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982).

21 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 34–35.

22 *Ibid.*, 35.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, 36.

25 Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), 224–25.

heritage to publish this material just as it was, and not necessary for the Spirit to rectify any mistakes in it. Inspiration can make use of ordinary channels of information without raising them to a standard of complete perfection.<sup>26</sup>

Based on these and other statements made by Pinnock, there was a concerted effort to remove him from the Evangelical Theological Society, since membership in that organization required a commitment to biblical inerrancy. Although 63 percent of that organization's members voted to expel Pinnock in 2003, this vote fell short of the required two-thirds majority.<sup>27</sup>

A more recent evangelical critic of inerrancy is Christian Smith, a sociology professor at the University of Notre Dame. According to Smith, too many Christians in North America hold to an unscriptural biblicism that places an unhealthy emphasis on the allegedly error-free nature of the Bible.<sup>28</sup> Smith denies that he is a theological liberal and argues that he is simply seeking to restore the church to a healthy view of biblical authority.<sup>29</sup>

Like other deniers of biblical inerrancy, Smith holds that there are some errors and contradictions in the Bible that are impossible for scholars to adequately explain.<sup>30</sup> Smith concludes that evangelicals need to take a more Christ-centered approach to biblical interpretation that places more emphasis on Jesus and less on a supposedly error-free Bible.<sup>31</sup>

A third contemporary critic of biblical inerrancy is Peter Enns, currently a professor at Eastern University in Pennsylvania. Throughout his seminary studies, Enns claims that he came to realize that the traditional view of inerrancy was not the proper way to interpret the Bible. In *The Bible Tells Me So*, Enns outlines three key reasons why he cannot accept inerrancy.

1. God does a lot of killing and plaguing, orders others to do it (usually the Israelites), or stands by watching as the Israelites go ballistic on their own. Exhibit A is God's command that the Israelites exterminate the inhabitants of the land of Canaan so they could move in.
2. What the Bible says happened often didn't—at least not the way the Bible describes it. And sometimes different biblical authors have very different takes on what happened in the past.
3. The biblical writers often disagree, expressing diverse and contradictory points of view about God and what it means to be faithful to him.<sup>32</sup>

As a result of his unorthodox views, Enns was forced to resign from his previous faculty position at Westminster Theological Seminary.<sup>33</sup> Enns claims that he does not regret adopting his new views on biblical authority and that this has helped him to trust in God rather than the Bible.<sup>34</sup>

#### IV. Problems with Denying Inerrancy

While critics of inerrancy may think they are helping to bring evangelicals to a more realistic understanding of biblical authority, there are serious consequences that come with denying biblical inerrancy. One of the most significant is that allowing for errors in the Bible opens up the possibility of mistakes in important areas such as the gospel itself. If the Bible is wrong in its historical facts, there is little reason to assume that it could not be wrong in other areas as well.

As Jesus stated to Nicodemus, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:12). Opponents of inerrancy may think they are helping to clear away objections to unbelief, but they are really undermining the many solid reasons to trust in God and his inspired Word.

Denying inerrancy also undercuts the work of many scholars who are doing important biblical and theological research to resolve the alleged contradictions and errors. For example, Enns claims that the Bible promotes genocide since God commanded the Israelites to kill the Canaanites. "It's hard to appeal to the God of the Bible to condemn genocide today when the God of the Bible commanded genocide yesterday. This is what we call a theological problem."<sup>35</sup>

However, this simplistic analysis of the biblical text overlooks the fact that there are solid answers to this so-called theological problem. For example, Paul Copan, a professor at Palm Beach Atlantic University in Florida, has pointed out that evidence from both archaeology and the biblical text reveals that the destruction of Canaan was not nearly as complete as widely assumed and that most of the cities destroyed by the Israelites were military posts rather than communities with a large civilian population.<sup>36</sup> In other words, Enns and other critics of

26 Ibid., 117.

27 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 60.

28 Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), viii.

29 Ibid., ix–x.

30 Ibid., xi.

31 Ibid., 115.

32 Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 25.

33 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 99.

34 Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 21.

35 Ibid., 30.

biblical inerrancy are too quick to assume that a problematic text in the Bible is automatically an intractable error.

Another problem with denying biblical inerrancy is the way in which it inevitably leads to theological liberalism. Once someone concedes that there are mistakes in the Bible, it does not take long before that person rejects doctrines clearly taught in the Bible because of personal discomfort with them. Lindsell gives the example of his encounter with a church leader who rejected penal substitutionary atonement and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead because he disagreed with these doctrines even though he fully conceded that the Bible clearly taught them.<sup>37</sup> Only by consistently affirming biblical inerrancy can a Christian be guaranteed to fully submit to what is clearly taught in God's inspired Word.

Finally, denying biblical inerrancy undermines the character of God. As noted earlier, the Bible makes it clear that God is wholly true and cannot err. "Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar" (Prov. 30:5–6). Since the Bible is God's Word, it cannot contain errors. If it does, then God must have erred since every word that appears in the Bible was directly inspired by him. Geisler explains it well:

What is more, limited inerrancy is an attack on the very nature and character of God. After all, if God is omniscient, and the Bible is God's Word, then the Bible cannot contain any errors on any topic it addresses? Why? For the simple reason that an omniscient Mind cannot be wrong about anything. In short, the

nature of truth has strong implications for the whole inerrancy debate.<sup>38</sup>

It should come as little surprise that every so-called open theist (e.g., Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Gregory Boyd) who believes that God does not infallibly know future events, also denies the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as defined by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy.<sup>39</sup> Considering how many times the Bible proclaims God's absolute foreknowledge of the future (Psalm 139:4–6), the only way to embrace open theism is to claim that the Bible writers may have been in error when they predicted future events.

## Conclusion

Biblical inerrancy is an important doctrine for all Christians. Affirming the inerrancy of the Bible is consistent with acknowledging that God, the ultimate author of the Bible, does not err in anything he says or does. While some Christian scholars have sought to promote the notion of an errant Bible, the fact remains that a Bible that contains errors is a Bible that lacks the necessary authority to equip new believers and rebuke false doctrine.

Christians are commanded to put on the full armor of God and a key part of this armor is the "sword of the spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17b). Just as a warrior would not go into battle with an imperfect sword, so should a Christian reject the false doctrine of biblical errancy and instead equip himself with the Word of God, which is without error. Biblical inerrancy is a watershed issue and all Christians should stand firm on the side of God's absolute truthfulness. **✠**

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36 Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 184–85.

37 Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*, 206.

38 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 253.

39 *Ibid.*, 54–56.

# A Private Member's Bill



## Terry M. Smith

Terry M. Smith was raised in the United Church, baptized in a Baptist church in 1976, joined the EMC in 1979, was commissioned as an EMC minister in 1985 and ordained in 1995. He holds a two-year journalism diploma (SAIT), BRS degrees (SBC and MBBC), and an MACS (PTS). His cultural background is mostly linked to the British Isles.

**W**HEREAS REGARDING the term *Mennonite* within EMC use in Canada,

- Only 22 of 64 EMC churches have it in their local names
- No EMC Spanish church uses it
- Many churches have dropped it
- Churches who seek to reach out to non-Dutch-German people avoid it
- Western Gospel Mission churches did not use it
- After 205 years we do not have a single church with both Mennonite in its name and a majority of non-Dutch/German people
- It is often viewed by church members and public as a cultural term
- Many people claim it as an identity though uninvolved in church life
- Non-Dutch/German people often see it as a reason why they cannot fit into an Anabaptist church

And whereas,

- It is clumsy for a believers' church to use a term that includes or excludes people by birth
- The Word has final authority in faith and practice, not culture
- There is a confusing public relations reality
- An Anabaptist conviction is not decided by the term Mennonite
- Many Canadians of many cultures need the gospel

And whereas *Mennonite* is in the middle of our denominational name,

Be it resolved that the EMC's General Board authorize an efficient process to seek out and propose a new name for our conference that:

- Is positive
- Is clear
- Honours our theology
- Honours our commitment together
- Is not culturally excluding

### Rationale

Is there a contradiction between valuing the Evangelical Anabaptist faith in a focused way in 2017 and the call for a name change? Not really. A name change honours early Anabaptists who sought to reflect early Christianity, which is intended for everyone whatever their culture.

Consider this analogy: the Roman Catholic Church is a faith of many cultures, languages, and nations. The Ukrainian Catholic Church is a part of it, but seeks to minister primarily to people of a particular cultural background. The EMC has a background akin to the Ukrainian Catholic Church; yet, in past decades and currently, it has consciously sought to move beyond this. If the Ukrainian Catholic Church decides to seriously reach out to non-Ukrainians, it can drop the term *Ukrainian* without giving up the *Catholic* faith.

The EMC Vision Statement says that our conference is to advance "Christ's kingdom culture," not a particular ethnic culture, however rich it might be.

*Mennonite* will continue to be used by people whose culture it is and by local churches where the faith-culture mix is a



draw and not an impediment. It is for the local church to decide what fits and works in its context and mission.

Make no mistake. Simply changing our conference name will not result in many people immediately flocking to join local churches who have fostered a Dutch-German ethnic identity for generations. And on a national level, a cluster of factors—not just one—are involved in whether a conference grows, plateaus, or declines.

A name change can be a superficial act or it can be tied to a deeper work. A name change would, at a minimum, remove a confusing double message—Mennonite as faith *and* culture—at the centre of our denominational name. (Please, don't bring up the MWC reality. Much as I respect it, MWC means little to the average Canadian and not all MWC-related conferences use *Mennonite*. Its largest affiliate, the MKC in Ethiopia, does not.)

As a small conference whose growth has stalled, the EMC has a fresh desire to be "a movement of people advancing Christ's kingdom culture." This requires being intentional. **o**

# Book Review

**The Unintended Reformation: How A Religious Revolution Secularized Society**, Brad S. Gregory (Harvard, 2012). \$25.60 CDN. ISBN 9780674045637. Reviewed by Kevin Wiebe, assistant editor of *Theodidaktos* and pastor of New Life Christian Fellowship (Stevenson, Ont.). He holds a BA (Communications and Media) from Providence University College.

**T**HIS IS A SOBERING volume that examines the ways in which the Protestant Reformation influenced Western history in ways that the Reformers never could have never imagined. The book is long and very dense, but remarkably well researched. It is not for the faint of heart. However, it is a most worthwhile read.

Gregory looks at how the Reformation functioned throughout history to relativize doctrine and how it disrupted the balance of power. It shows how the Reformation began a series of events that resulted in modern realities like subjective morality, consumerism, and the secularization of both knowledge-based institutions and society as a whole.

Prior to the Reformation, Roman Catholic Christianity was the state mandated religion, and there was no separation between one's national affiliation and religious affiliation. To be a member of a Western country meant

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**Gregory shows how the myriad of Scriptural interpretations among in the various Christian groups led to various ideas about what was right and wrong.**

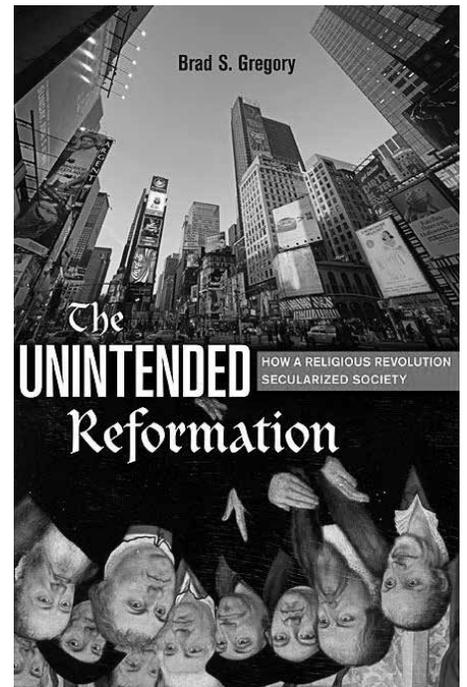
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that one was also a member of the Roman Catholic Church. As the Reformation changed that reality, some groups going so far as to believe in separation of church and state, power dynamics changed, and it came to pass that people could be members of their nation without claiming religious affiliation. Thus there were people that chose this option, an option that would not have been available had it not been for the Reformation. The consequences of this are vast. This is an over-simplification, of course, but summarizes the basic idea.

## **Differences Led to Liberalism, Subjectivism**

Another thing Gregory does is to demonstrate how the differences in Scriptural interpretation during the Reformation period led to modern liberalism and subjective moral values. Gregory shows how the myriad of Scriptural interpretations among in the various Christian groups led to various ideas about what was right and wrong.

The Church was no longer viewed as the clear authority on such matters, since there were multiple *churches*, with multiple views on moral ideas. Gregory traces this reality historically, with the solution that was by and large chosen being liberalism—the elevation of individual liberty above and against other virtues.



## **A Rather Bleak Look**

Given the purpose and scope of the book, as it examines the *unintended* impact of the Reformation, one can get the impression that the author thinks very little of the Reformers and their movement. This is understandable, as Gregory writes, “Judged on their own terms and with respect to the objectives of their own leading protagonists, medieval Christendom failed, the Reformation failed, confessionalized Europe failed, and Western modernity is failing, but each in different ways and with difference consequences, and each in ways that continue to remain important to the present. This sums up the argument of the book” (365).

Indeed, the book is a rather bleak look at the impact of the Reformation. This work is a sobering contrast to the perspectives many grow up having of the Reformation as an event where the Reformers were spoken of as courageous heroes of the faith. Readers should be reminded, however, that to examine any

historical event's *unintended* consequences often results in rather gloomy subject matter. Towards the end of the book Gregory writes, "I wish this book could have had a happier ending" (381).

## Unsettling Depictions of Reformers

Some of the conclusions of the book are indeed troubling. Gregory does his homework in tracing the history and makes a powerful case for each conclusion. His work is not what is bothersome. What is unsettling, however, is that Gregory demonstrates how individuals like Martin Luther, often thought of as faith heroes, were part of a movement that also served as a catalyst for things that neither modern Christians nor the Reformers would have approved of.

The movie *Luther*<sup>1</sup> tells the story of Martin Luther and the Reformation. Luther is depicted as a righteous hero facing evil persecution from the all-powerful church and his work as serving to emancipate the Church from the hands of corruption and greed. Gregory says that this is only one part of the picture, and demonstrates the other side, which is much darker and more troubling.

An old adage says that the end does not justifies the means. In other words, one must not compromise principles in order to achieve one's goals. One must wonder, however, about the Reformers themselves: if they would have known that their actions would have functioned as a catalyst for the secularizing and liberalizing nature of the Western world for centuries to come, would they have still held so strongly to their beliefs? This leads to the question, does the means justify the ends?

## A Critique

Was it selfish of the Reformers to hold so tightly and unwaveringly to their beliefs

when doing so fractured the Church, split apart societies, and reduced the Bible's credibility among much of the globe? I do not know if Gregory intended his book to result in such questions, which are indeed perplexing, but one must remember that the Reformers had no way of knowing what would happen in the future.

Also, Christians are surely called to follow in the example of the Apostle Peter, who said, "We must obey God rather than human beings!" (Acts 5:29 NIV). Interestingly, the context of Peter's comment was when the religious establishment of the day tried to silence him when he proclaimed the truth, an event that has some stark similarities to the Reformation.

One thing that Gregory does not address much is that, while the past influences and shapes us, each generation and each individual also has the freedom to choose some things for themselves. The results of our modern world, while shaped by the past, were not directly determined by the past, as if the countless choices of many generations between then and now had no impact on what would come about. To be fair, however, it should be noted that the scope of the book was not the more general purview of why things are the way they are, but specifically about how the Reformation has shaped and influenced our reality half a millennium later.

## The Blame

Additionally, one is left with the impression that Gregory places a disproportionate amount of blame for the unintended consequences of the Reformation on the Reformers, rather than on the corrupt system and leaders that transformed those events from internal reforms of the system to a thorough splintering of the system.

Furthermore, it is fairly easy to examine and be critical of events with half a millennium of historical distance between us and the actual events, which affords us the clarity of hindsight which is

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## One is left with the impression that Gregory places a disproportionate amount of blame for the unintended consequences of the Reformation on the Reformers.

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never available in the moment. I was left wishing that more grace would have been offered to the Reformers.

In the scope and intended goal of his book, however, who gets the blame is largely irrelevant because the events happened and the full magnitude of how the Reformation functioned would not be fully realized for decades and even centuries. The book focuses on how the events of the Reformation functioned over the course of history, and blame or offering grace to people of the past, while personally relevant for any individual Christian, is not crucial for the purposes of an academic study of this sort.

## An Incomplete Picture

In the end, Gregory's book left me impressed with his academic rigour, and with a more robust understanding of how the Reformation functioned despite the intentions or desires of all those involved. It is a very sobering view of the Reformation. However, taken on its own it is an incomplete picture of those events.

It is a book with a specific purpose, though it does have a fairly large scope in that it examines the Reformation's unintended consequences for religion, politics, nationalism, economics and culture. Furthermore, the title is somewhat misleading, as it examines primarily the *negative* unintended consequences, without giving as much attention to ways the Reformation functioned in positive ways that were also unintended and unforeseen. It is well worth the read, but keep in mind its focus and purview or it may leave you frustrated by what is specifically and intentionally left out. *o*

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1 *Luther*, directed by Eric Till (Eikon Film, 2003), DVD.

# Feature Sermon

## How Should a Christian React to Illness?



**Eric Isaac**

Eric Isaac is the pastor of Morweena EMC in Manitoba's Interlake region. He holds a BA (Pastoral Ministries) from SBC.

### HOW SHOULD A Christian react to illness?

Should we ignore it and pretend it's not a problem in this world? Should we vehemently oppose it and pretend it's the biggest problem in this world? Should we celebrate the good things it does in us spiritually? How should a Christian react to illness? It's an important question because illness is everywhere. Therefore, it makes sense that Christians know how to deal with it.

This morning I want to look at some Bible passages that help us answer this question and some other questions related to it.

### Where Does Illness Come From?

I thought the best place to start might be to briefly answer the question *where does illness come from?* If you're like me you've heard Christians make statements like "God gave me cancer." Is that true? Does God give people illness?

If you go through the Bible carefully you'll find times where God sent an illness to punish people (see 2 Sam. 12:15). However, the biblical message as a whole and experience tells us that illness is rarely a punishment from God. In the book of Job we see that his illness came from Satan (Job 2:7).

In John 9 Jesus met a blind man and some of the 12 disciples asked if the blindness was a result of the blind man's sins or his parent's sins. Jesus' answer was, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." In Romans 8 Paul wrote that creation is groaning and subjected to frustration. God's initial plan for creation didn't involve illnesses and epidemics.

### How I See Creation

Here's a picture that might help you see I how see creation. Imagine you're a small business owner. Once your business is big enough for several computers you'll bring in an expert to set up a network, some security measures and so on. Let's say the expert did an excellent job, but someone still hacked into your network and created electronic chaos. Do you blame the chaos on the One who created the perfectly functional network or the one who hacked the system and brought chaos?

God created the universe and after every day he said it was good (Gen. 1). It couldn't have been more beautiful. All the different parts and pieces couldn't have fit together more perfectly. It was a masterpiece, but then Adam and Eve

did what you and I would have done—they sinned. My perspective of Genesis 3:14–24 is that sin created a wide open door for Satan and his chaos to enter an otherwise perfect universe. Among other things, that chaos has led to much illness.

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### 'God Made Me Sick?'

So is it correct to say "God gave me cancer" or "God made me sick"? I don't think so. God originally created a universe without illness. There are rare instances in the Bible when God made someone sick as a punishment, but I think it is rarely correct to say "God made me sick." Sickness wasn't a part of God's original plan. Whenever I encounter illness I always assume it is *not* a punishment and not from God.

So where did sickness come from? It seems to me that the Bible tells us that it came from Satan and it exists in our world because of Adam and Eve's first sin.

### **How Should Christians React to illness?**

So that is why illness exists, how should we react to illness? Of course, going to hospitals and clinics are always good ideas, but what do we do when modern medicine can't heal us? When modern medicine cannot heal us there are two ideas Christians need to remember. I

would argue that a balanced, biblical faith believes and lives out both of these ideas. The first idea is that trials lead to spiritual maturity and the second idea is that God miraculously heals physical illness.

#### **Trials Lead to Spiritual Maturity**

In James 1:2-4 it says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Trials lead to spiritual maturity. Whatever that trial is—illness, persecution, or something else—if we persevere through that trial it will lead to spiritual maturity.

Perseverance is important because God doesn't always heal. Experience teaches us this as do some examples from the New Testament. One example



is found in 2 Timothy 4. We learn of one of Paul's traveling and ministering companions named Trophimus. Paul had healed people before, but Trophimus stayed in Miletus sick. Though he worked side-by-side with the powerful Apostle Paul, he wasn't healed. Timothy's stomach problem and other illnesses would be another example (1 Tim. 5:23).

Therefore, it's natural to ask, what is a Christian to do when they aren't healed? They are to persevere knowing this will lead to spiritual maturity.

#### **God Miraculously Heals Physical Illness**

The second idea is that God sometimes miraculously heals physical illness. There are twenty-three specific healing miracles and three resurrections (four, if you include Jesus') recorded in the Gospels. On top of these twenty-seven miracles, there are five more times in the Gospel of Matthew where it says something like

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"large crowds followed him [Jesus], and he healed them there" (Matt. 19:1a). The other four times are Matthew 4:23–24, Matthew 12:15, Matthew 15:30–31 and Matthew 21:14. What's my point? During Jesus' three years of ministry miracles were common. Just another day at the office, we would say.

This trend continued in the Early Church after Jesus' ascension. The book of Acts records Peter, John, Paul, the other apostles and Philip the deacon healing the lame, the paralyzed, and others. We also read that Peter and Paul both raised

someone from the dead with their prayers (Acts 9 and 20).

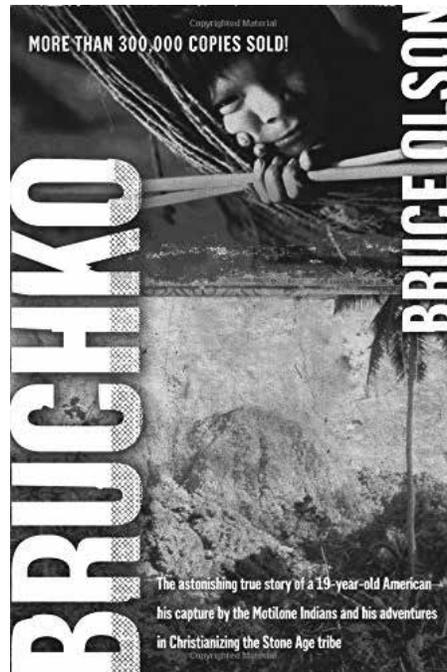
### **Bruce (Bruchko) Olson**

Now most Christians in our time and in our nation see less healing miracles than in those times, but we know that God still miraculously heals physical illnesses today. Some of my favourite examples come from Bruce Olson's book called *Bruchko* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 1978, 147–148).

Bruce, or Bruchko as he is called, was a missionary to the Motilone tribe in the jungles of South America. One of the miracles he wrote about was a man who had been bitten by a snake. The man was in a remote location and they had no snake anti-venom so they gave him antibiotics and prayed for him. He recovered.

I want us to remember that God is still a healing God and that healing physical illness is one of many things that God enjoys doing for people. So when you ask God for physical healing you shouldn't feel guilty or like you're doing something unspiritual. When you come across physical illness, pray boldly that God will heal. Sometimes he won't heal, sometimes he'll heal through modern medicine, and sometimes he'll heal through miraculous intervention. Pray boldly. God is our loving Father—He enjoys doing good for us.

We have to remember that Jesus encouraged us to ask for good things. In Matthew 7 he said, "Ask and it will be given; seek and you will find; knock and



the door will be opened... Which of you if his son asks for bread will give him a stone or if he asks for a fish will give him a snake? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good things to your children how much more will your Father in Heaven give good things to those who ask" (7:7–11). Asking God to do the impossible in our world is good.

So to summarize this section: how should a Christian react to illness? Because we aren't always healed, we should remember that trials lead to spiritual maturity. We should also remember that God can miraculously heal physical illness. These two ideas need to be together. Either one of these ideas

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without the other will slowly lead us away from a God-honouring Christian walk.

### **Responding With Compassion**

There's one more thing I want to say about how Christians should react to illness and this is so simple, so uncontroversial, and so important. When you encounter someone who's battling illness, have compassion.

As Christians the mission isn't to see healing miracles; the mission is to love people.

So this is my challenge for you: if your neighbour or your sister or your co-worker is battling with illness, have compassion. Pray that her body will be healed. Other things Christians should do include: fix her car if it's broken, bake her some muffins if her cupboards are empty, and visit her if she's lonely.

I believe that healing miracles happen today when God's people pray with faith. However, I don't want us to only focus on the miracles. I want us to see miracles as one part of the compassion ministry that Christ has called the church to do.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude I will give you these instructions. Remember that God heals today and that trials lead to spiritual maturity. These two ideas need to be held together. Secondly, let's ask God to do the impossible in our world. Thirdly, let's be people of compassion to all people, including those battling with illness. ☉

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## The Final Word

*I*T IS SIMPLY A TRUISM, THAT THERE IS nothing more important, more urgent, more helpful, more redemptive and more salutary, there is nothing, from the viewpoint of heaven and earth, more relevant to the real situation than the speaking and the hearing of the Word of God in the originative and regulative power of its truth, in its all-eradicating and all-reconciling earnestness, in the light that it casts not only upon time and time's confusions but also beyond, towards the brightness of eternity, revealing time and eternity through each other and in each other—the Word, the Logos, of the Living God.

— Karl Barth

From *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1935; Peter Smith, 1958), 123–124.

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