CHAPTER 4
PEOPLE OF THE WORD

Mennonite Brethren have always been "people of the Word." Study of the Bible sparked the renewal movement that birthed the MB church. Envisioning those earliest days of Mennonite Brethren life, various scenes come to mind.

First, one sees small groups of people in some of the Mennonite villages of southern Russia meeting in homes for Bible study and prayer. There is a lively give-and-take around the selected Scripture texts. Discussions are informed by reading materials provided by the Christian Literature Society organized by schoolmaster Tobias Voth. Issues that prompt further study include evangelism, world mission and a growing personal relationship with Christ. The writings of Menno Simons instruct the study. There is a decidedly intellectual stimulus, but the Bible study is not merely academic. It leads to repentance, conversion, revival.

Next, one sees two MB ministers meeting in the fields as they go about their farming. A controversial question is troubling the young church. How will they find direction? The two ministers lean against a fence post and reach into bulging coat pockets to retrieve their New Testaments. There are no WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets on their wrists, but both assume that the practical solution to a real problem will be found in this book. What Jesus teaches through his life and the Sermon on the Mount is the starting point for their search for direction.

Later, we see Bible conferences. Here dynamic preachers expound the Scriptures. High excitement is evidenced by standing-room-only attendance. Tents are erected to
contain overflow crowds. The Bible conferences are popular, not only in the Russian colonies, but in the Mennonite Brethren congregations of North America.

Finally, we see the church struggling for clear interpretation of biblical passages. Bibles are open, and faces are taut with tension. Biblical study has not produced the expected consensus over the difficult question of freedom in worship. Elders have banned other leaders. Interpretation of Scripture promises unity even as it seems to provoke disintegration. Further study, further work together, is required. Eventually, it is community discernment in the Word, led by respected elders but including all members, that produces consensus, unity and satisfaction that the Spirit has illumined the church community’s understanding.

These scenes from the past continue to be replayed in contemporary settings in the Mennonite Brethren church. Commitment to studying and obeying the Word of God is at the core of who we are.

This chapter reflects on this important quality of our family life. What characterizes our understanding of the Bible? What do we have in common with other evangelical churches regarding biblical interpretation? What perspectives are distinctly Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren?

**Evangelical Pietist Influences**

Mennonite Brethren share with Protestant reformers like Martin Luther the formula *sola scriptura, sola fide*: the Bible alone, faith alone. The early Anabaptists agreed that a hierarchical church authority, headed by the pope in Rome, had no right to decree Christian doctrine. Like Luther, early Anabaptist Bible students were experts in reading the Bible in their original languages, and they agreed that the Bible should be translated into the common language of the people. Mennonite Brethren, while lacking the academic sophistication of Luther, shared the reformer’s confidence in the Bible as the only guide for faith and life. They also accepted the Protestant canon of 66 books.

Several influences are evident in the Mennonite Brethren use of Scripture. The Mennonite Brethren have been particularly open to outside theological influences. Perhaps this is due to the circumstances of their birth. The relatively closed Mennonite society of mid-century Russia was opening to a larger world of technology, education, literature and religious ideas. This opening coupled with an intense desire for a deeper experience of God marked early MB experience. Among the movements that have affected MB interpretation are sixteenth-century Anabaptism, nineteenth-century European Pietism and mainstream evangelicalism (including fundamentalism, Baptist theology and charismatic movements). More than most other Anabaptist-Mennonite groups, the Mennonite Brethren have been influenced by conservative Christian sources. This openness
has both strengthened faithful discipleship, and threatened it.

Eduard Wuest, a Lutheran Pietist, contributed significantly to the religious awakening among Mennonites in Russia, and Pietism continues to influence the Mennonite Brethren experience oneand-a-half centuries later. An explanation about the term “Pietism” is in order. Piety, usually a word with positive connotations, describes holy living. Piousness, on the other hand, has negative overtones, and is associated with Pharisaic self-righteous hypocrisy. Pietism is a movement that emphasizes the personal religious experience. It carries the expectation that the Holy Spirit is present, active and powerful in producing spiritual growth.

In their book, *Only the Sword of the Spirit* (1997), Jacob Loewen and Wesley Prieb summarize the positive themes for which Mennonite Brethren are indebted to the Pietist movement. They include personal and small group Bible study; the call for a conscious and personal decision to accept salvation; a deeply-felt encounter with God; warm Christian fellowship; an emphasis on grace, Christ’s return, personal evangelism and Christian unity; and a personal sense of God’s call to congregational leadership.

Historically, the Baptist influence on Mennonite Brethren can be identified as a separate force. Theologically, however, the Baptists hold enough in common with the Pietists that their influence can be included under that broad stream. Like the Pietists, the German Baptists were accepted because they shared the German language and culture with the Mennonites. Like the Pietists, they encouraged personal conversion, Bible study and evangelism. The Baptists were also important to Mennonite Brethren for influencing a congregational model of church governance, supplying an early confession of faith (that was informally accepted for a time) and reinforcing the decision to institute immersion as the mode of baptism.

Today, Christians who stress conversion, the authority of Scripture, atonement through the cross, and ministries of care and evangelism are called “evangelicals.” Mennonite Brethren share with evangelicals a concern for personal evangelism, conservative biblical interpretation, personal piety and salvation by grace. We promote evangelical cooperation by joining national evangelical and mission organizations. We cooperate in broader evangelistic outreach and parachurch agencies.

The historical emphasis on experiential faith and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit has also opened Mennonite Brethren to continuing charismatic influences. Many MB churches have adopted much of the music and theology of these movements. Charismatic sign gifts, post-conversion experiences of the Holy Spirit and spiritual warfare have attracted interest. Mennonite Brethren continue to converse with one another about the compatibility of these influences with our distinct theological perspective.
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Not all aspects of Pietism and evangelicalism have positively influenced the MB church. Loewen and Priebe, for example, identify the following concerns. Emphasis on a personal conversion experience at a specific date intensifies the emotions involved and misunderstands the fact that coming to faith usually involves a process. Emphasis on personal spirituality suggests a private faith and erodes Anabaptist understandings of the New Testament, which places obedience and discipleship within the church community. Historically, the MB church’s Baptist connections created various ethical and doctrinal tensions between Mennonite Brethren and other Mennonites. Finally, the militaristic orientation of the German Baptists and some of the Pietists is alien to the Mennonite understanding of Jesus’ teaching.

THE ANABAPTIST INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Mennonite Brethren recognize and appreciate that Pietism and conservative evangelicalism have shaped their interpretation of the Bible. But Mennonite Brethren also hold that their approach to Scripture is distinctive because they retain an Anabaptist “hermeneutic” or method of interpretation. This is seen particularly in their approach to the Bible and in interpreting Scripture as a faith community.

The early Anabaptists practised a “focused canon,” in contrast to a “flat canon” (Loewen and Priebe).

The flat canon argues that, since the Bible is the Word of God, every word must be given equal weight. This approach therefore concludes that the Old Testament primarily addresses nation states and sanctions the use of military force. The same approach sees the New Testament as addressing primarily individuals and reinforces the pietistic emphasis on individual encounter with God. The flat canon fails to give primary weight to the life and teachings of Jesus, who is seen by Anabaptists as the canon’s centre. The flat canon also distorts or misses the Old Testament emphasis on covenant relations, justice and concern for the stranger.

Mennonite Brethren follow the focused canon approach. This practice does not relegate parts of the Bible to secondary status; rather, it reveals the unity of the biblical message. Christ is at the heart of this message. Nothing in the canon is ignored in the interpretive process, but the meaning of all parts is understood through the life of Jesus.

Mennonite Brethren also accept the Anabaptist notion of “community hermeneutics,” also known as “community interpretation.” This means that our interpretation of Scripture depends on the process of reading and discerning the Bible together as a Christian family.

Community hermeneutics was important in the early days of the Anabaptist reformation and in the birth of the MB church. It was the issue that caused the Anabaptists to split with the reformer Ulrich Zwingli in the Swiss reformation
of the early sixteenth century. Zwingli allowed civil authorities to limit the
church's practice of, and understanding of, the New Testament. The Anabaptists
insisted that the community of faith should read the Bible together, then put its
understanding of the Bible into practice.

Similarly, the 1850s renewal in the Russian Mennonite communities was born
of Bible study in small groups. The early Mennonite Brethren settled controversial
questions by deliberating together as a community of faith and limiting the authority
of individuals, even if they were leaders. They developed the practice of Bible study
conferences, in which biblical texts were explained and studied together.

**MB Principles of Interpretation**

The MB Confession of Faith recognizes three specific principles of biblical
interpretation. First, the entire Bible is Spirit-inspired. Second, the Holy Spirit
guides the community of faith to interpret the Spirit-inspired text. Third, Jesus is
the lens through which all Scripture is to be interpreted.

Let us consider these three principles by referring to the MB Confession of
Faith (Article 2).

1. "We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy
Spirit.... We accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative
guide for faith and practice" (Matthew 5:17-20; 2 Timothy 3:14-17). When we
confess that the Bible is inspired, we are speaking about the authority of Scripture.
The Bible is our guide because it is God's Word to us.

Mennonite Brethren accept traditional, orthodox categories to describe the
revelation of God. We recognize that God speaks through creation, God's judgments
and grace, and human conscience; this is called general revelation. But only through
God's special revelation do we learn that God initiated a covenant relationship
with Israel through Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah and others. Through special
revelation, God communicated the very being of God in the person of Jesus Christ.
The written Word, the Bible, makes God's special revelation available to us.

Mennonite Brethren have struggled to find the proper terminology to
describe their high view of Scripture. In the fundamentalist evangelical debate of
the 1970s, some argued for use of the phrase "inerrancy of the Bible." For most of
those favouring this term, inerrancy described the original documents (as penned
by the biblical authors) as including truth about science, geography and history,
in addition to theological truth. Other Mennonite Brethren argued in favour of a
different terminology. They pointed out that the original documents are no longer
available to us. They noted that the Bible does not claim authority in matters such
as science and geography. In fact, biblical authors seemed to adopt the conventions
of their day in speaking about the universe.
Mennonite Brethren have settled on the language in our Confession of Faith to make two emphases. First, the Bible is “the infallible Word of God.” This term supports the understanding that the Bible cannot mislead us regarding God’s will. It is a completely reliable source for revealing God’s Word to us. Second, the Bible is “the authoritative guide for faith and practice.” Our emphasis is not simply on right doctrine (orthodoxy), but on faithful obedience (orthopraxis) as well. The Bible has the authority to call Christians to follow the way of Jesus. The authority of Christ’s life and teaching is passed to the church as a call to church discipline (Matthew 18:15-20). The Bible guides the faithful practice of the redeemed community.

2. We believe that “the same Spirit guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture.” As stated earlier, community hermeneutics is a central and distinctive element in our understanding of Scripture.

In practical terms, Mennonite Brethren community hermeneutics means that Christians are encouraged to study the Bible in personal reading and in small groups. Teachers who have learned to discern God’s will by living in the community of believers and who have received interpretive tools – such as an understanding of biblical languages and literary styles – assist in the interpretation process. However, teachers do not have greater authority because of their academic preparation; they serve the community together with all who contribute their God-given gifts.

When an issue becomes too complex or divisive to resolve in a local congregation, we consult our brothers and sisters. We try to follow the model of Acts 15, where delegates gathered in Jerusalem to discuss the entrance requirements into the church. Mennonite Brethren have traditionally depended on a group of leaders (called by various names in the past such as General Conference Board of Faith and Life or Board of Reference and Counsel) to identify issues in need of broader discussion. The board members study the issue, then call for a study conference, where members are invited to study the Bible through small group discussions, written papers and spoken messages. The board then discerns a consensus, which they present as a resolution to delegates from all churches at a convention, where the resolution undergoes further discussion, leading to a decision.

Community hermeneutics operates with several assumptions. First, we assume that the Holy Spirit is active within believers to illumine the Scriptures. We do not expect new revelation or a new authoritative word from God, but we do expect illumination and fresh insights. Second, we believe it is the role of the community to test illumination against Scripture. Is it consistent with Jesus’ teaching, the New Testament, the Bible as a whole? Third, we can expect differences of opinion. Community hermeneutics is tested in times of conflict. While conflict may be healthy (1 Corinthians 11:19), communication in these situations must be characterized by charity and mutual trust. Fourth, community
hermeneutics calls for faithful practice, not simply true doctrine. The test of a biblical people is their lifestyle.

3. We believe that “God revealed Himself supremely in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament.” Here our Confession reminds us that we hold to a Christ-centred interpretive strategy, one of the distinctives of Anabaptist theology. Jesus’ person, life and teaching reveal God, and thus Jesus is the lens through which all Scripture is to be interpreted, and the authority by which it is to be obeyed.

This interpretive principle has sometimes been called “progressive revelation.” Some scholars use this term to mean that religion generally, and Israelite religion specifically, began with crude ideas about God that were refined through an evolutionary process. This is not the view of Mennonite Brethren. Rather, we see the Bible as the story of God’s work in the world. As the story progresses, so does our understanding of God’s purpose. From the beginning, God works as Creator and Redeemer. As God’s work unfolds, we are better able to interpret God’s purposes. In the person of Christ, we gain significant new insight into God’s will. This new Word, Jesus Christ, enables us to make better sense of parts that were formerly unclear.

We understand that the place to begin biblical interpretation is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and its parallel texts. We take these texts as Jesus’ challenge to the church today, not as an idealistic program for some future kingdom of heaven.

Jesus develops three themes in his proclamation of the kingdom of God in which we participate. First, he blesses the poor. Jesus’ message is that God’s rule is good news for the poor (Luke 4:18-19). He speaks frequently about freedom from the attachment to things. He calls for radical generosity. Generosity as an expression of simplicity is one of the themes of Anabaptist Christ-centred interpretation.

Second, Jesus calls his followers to peacemaking. When we confess our sins, we have peace with God. That inner peace motivates us to pursue peaceful relationships with those around us, beginning with our families, our communities and even extending to our enemies. We see this as a vital part of Christian discipleship.

Third, Jesus calls for community. Jesus teaches that the only way to practise his impossible ethic is together with our brothers and sisters. Being salt and light in the world is not a call to radical rugged individualism. It is an invitation to a covenant community, the church family.

The Mennonite Brethren interpretive strategy reminds us that the end of Bible study is not simply knowledge or understanding, but faithful obedience to the example of Jesus. We meet Jesus in the text and discover he asks for extravagant generosity. He models life-giving peacemaking. He invites be part of a family that teaches and practises this kingdom lifestyle.