

John Docherty, April 19, 2015

“Discerning the spirits”

I’m a bit nervous about bringing this meditation, because I know it risks opening a can of worms that I’d just as soon not open. The seeds of the message have been germinating since the publication in the Canadian Mennonite of an opinion piece written by a former MFMer, Steve Hoepfner.

The piece in question appeared in the February 2 issue of the paper, and deals with the struggle in the Mennonite Church over the issue of homosexuality.

(You can view this issue of the magazine by going to the following URL : <http://www.canadianmennonite.org/reader/4743>)

That particular issue, and the position taken by the writer of the piece, is not what I want to address in this message. I think we owe it to ourselves to visit that question at some point and clearly define where we as a congregation are comfortable, but I know we’re not on the same page as far as that is concerned, and I know that the issue risks being every bit as divisive for us locally as it is for us across the denomination.

I think we have enough on our plate for the moment without tackling something that the entire church can’t sort out.

What I want to do in this meditation is look at what appear to be the underlying assumptions of Steve’s piece, and examine the specific Biblical reference he uses. I also plan to send a copy of this meditation to Steve – not as an attempt to convince him of anything, but as a recognition of the fact that he *is* a former MFMer, and that he isn’t here in person to respond to what I have to say. I also recognise that it’s easy to build a straw man and pick him apart, so I’ve tried to structure this message to reflect how I hope I would say things if Steve were sitting here with us this morning.

Steve’s piece is entitled “Stand up for God’s truth”, and basically takes the position that God is angry with Mennonites for entertaining a discussion on the place of gays and lesbians in the church. He feels that the church in Saskatchewan that performed a wedding for two gay men on New Year’s Eve should be excluded from Mennonite Church Canada, and their minister defrocked.

Again, let me repeat that I don't want to use this meditation to examine that position, other than to state plainly, by way of full disclosure, that I disagree with it.

What I want to do, rather, is try to get behind the position itself, to look at what Steve says prompts his position and his decision to write to the Canadian Mennonite, and to point to those elements of the piece that I find unhelpful as we try to find common ground on the issue.

First, the title as it appears in the Canadian Mennonite. I assume it is Steve's chosen title, rather than an editorial stroke. That title is "Stand up for God's truth".

Apparent assumption number one : the position as presented in the piece is a correct, thorough, and faithful representation of "God's truth" on this issue, and that any other position is therefore automatically wrong.

The implication is also that we, as a church, are *not* currently standing up for God's truth; that we are compromising the truth by even considering the possibility that there is room for discussion on this issue.

My discomfort here is that this approach shuts down any possibility of actually discerning what God's truth is, on this or on any other issue. Once it is stipulated that *this* is the only way of understanding an issue, everything else is heresy.

Been there; done that.

We've lived with two thousand years of debates over what constitutes God's truth, and we have never yet been able to answer the question to everyone's satisfaction. Most of the really serious debates have almost unfailingly resulted in schisms and excommunications. Occasionally they have resulted in direct persecution of "heretical" minorities.

But the history of the church has been a history of at least *trying* to answer the question to everyone's satisfaction – and the only way you can do that is to listen to what the divergent views are, and to prayerfully consider whether we are getting closer to, or farther from, the truth.

Let me note one of my own assumptions here : and that is that we do not presently have a handle on God's truth. We are in the process of learning it, and in our choices we are either getting closer to, or farther from, that truth. As Paul says in

First Corinthians, "... For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully ..."

In many cases, churches have had their time of discussion, debate, and struggle, and have dealt with the various issues by defining their creeds; their articles of faith; their final word on the questions.

I'm very glad that the Mennonite church has had the wisdom to, by and large, avoid rigid creeds, and 'final words', and has instead produced their "Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective". My understanding of this document is that it is a declaration of what Mennonites have generally held to be true at that particular point in their pilgrimage, and that it remains a work in progress – open to being revisited as the body continues to mature and struggle with its changing environments.

The introduction to the Confession of Faith states, among other things, that it gives "... an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times ..."

Steve begins his piece by stating, in quotation marks, that "The Lord's patience is running out with Mennonites over the issue of homosexuality."

He then states that the message from our denominational leaders appears to be, "Let us continue to dialogue, to discern and to hear from God; and let us continue to show grace to one another, and learn to work through differences."

He then questions whether the leadership of the church is hearing this message from God or from mainstream culture.

Apparent assumption number two : that a message from mainstream culture is incompatible with a message from God.

As good Mennonite Anabaptists - people raised on the notion that we are inherently counter-culture, that we should always be going against the stream, that 'the Church' and 'the World' are two separate domains, one under the dominion of God and one under the dominion of the devil - it may seem obvious that we should not be tainted by 'worldly' tendencies.

I've certainly preached that much of what we are called to be and do as the Body of Christ is to resist the 'powers that be'; the 'powers of darkness'; the tendencies of cultural pressures that draw us away from God and away from each other.

But there is a corollary to this assumption that a message from mainstream culture is incompatible with a message from God : and that is that we are the only ones who are trying to do what is right; that everyone else is hopelessly lost and incapable of choosing to act in good and responsible ways.

But this is surely a problematic position. We all know people who are not Christians, but who live with integrity, seek to be in right relation with their neighbours, and live out what we say *we* are trying to live out. Even Paul, who is no friend of those who are not of the faith, says in Romans chapter 2 "When Gentiles who do not have the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law."

A further corollary to this assumption is that we can somehow remain insulated from the cultural norms that surround us and from the issues that the broader society is struggling with;

that we stand outside the common humanity of which we are a part;

that we are capable of establishing a culturally-neutral understanding of what faithful behaviour looks like.

I would submit that, like it or not, we are products of our cultural environment. Whether we are absorbing the cultural values that surround us, or whether we are reacting to those cultural values, the issues of our day, and how we respond to those issues, are what contribute to make us what and who we are.

Mennonites today are not struggling with the issue of slavery; we are not concerned with whether or not it is permissible for us to eat pork; we don't particularly care whether or not statues and stained glass are appropriate adornments for a church.

But we have always struggled to find a clear measure of what it means to be faithful, and, quite frankly, we've sometimes taken the lead from our surrounding culture.

We have incrementally allowed ‘the world’ into our barns; we’ve abandoned the horse and plough for the tractor and the combine; we’ve adopted modern clothing and, in direct defiance of the apostle Paul, we’ve stopped asking our women to wear prayer bonnets and no jewellery; long hair for women and short hair for men is no longer a requirement for acceptance as a faithful Christian; we now accept the possibility that a woman not only has the right to speak in church, but that she might actually have something to say that’s worth hearing – even from the pulpit!

Some, of course, will say that some or all of these things are abominations, and not all Mennonites have gone along with all of these developments. But the vast majority of us have. And we have done so, in the firm belief that God was leading us, even if we were lagging behind, and sometimes following, the cultural mainstream of our time.

And we firmly believed that God was leading us precisely because we continued to dialogue, to discern and to hear from God and each other; because we continued to show grace to one another, and because we learned to work through differences.

Following his challenge to the leaders of the church, Steve then states that he has been hearing a very different message from the Holy Spirit, and *that* message is one of warning because we are being unfaithful.

Apparent assumption number three : that this message received in dreams is the direct word from the Holy Spirit, and that all those who maintain an openness to dialogue (i.e. those who are open to considering some other version of truth) are either wilfully deaf to the Holy Spirit, or are simply disobedient and rebellious.

Again, my discomfort here is that when we have diametrically opposing points of view on an issue, and we are convinced that we are on the side of God, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to find a resolution short of going our separate ways.

This is perhaps the most difficult obstacle to unity that any group has to deal with. When we are convinced that we are absolutely in the right, it is the height of betrayal to compromise in any way, shape, or form. I understand that.

How can you *possibly* agree to a position that you *know*, in your heart of hearts, is contrary to the will of God?

Unfortunately, the most common resolution for that kind of situation *is* for each to go their own way. If opposing sides of an issue hold fast to their conviction that their message is from God, and if God cannot be sending contradictory messages, then we are at an impasse. The risk that this, or that, issue may split us apart may be inevitable when we are incapable of the humility required to accept that we are, all of us, influenced in our thinking by a multitude of factors, including our own history with God, and our own personal history, with all of its healthy and unhealthy experiences.

Mid-way through the piece, Steve shares what he believes to be his most recent message from the Lord, and this is an admonition to read the Book of Jude.

Apparent assumption number four : by placing our focus on one small section of scripture, we have a better chance of understanding faithfulness than if we try to read that scripture within the broader context of the entire Bible. In other words, if we run with this letter of 25 verses, as though it were the only scripture we have, we will hit the mark more truly than if we try to understand it when it is set against other scriptures that appear to be contradictory.

My own understanding of how to read scripture is quite the opposite. I believe that if I am to make sense of Jude, I need to set it alongside other passages that call for more inclusion, compassion or mercy. I must read it as part of a collection of writings that approach faithfulness from a variety of angles; from a variety of viewpoints. And I try to read scripture bearing in mind that the writers embodied a host of cultural assumptions of their own.

But, I will admit that I don't read all passages of scripture with the same enthusiasm. I selectively give great weight to those passages that resonate with me, and tend to give less weight to those passages that seem questionable. I have my own sense of what feels right, and I suppose I'm no different from most others in that respect. We gravitate towards those things that echo what we believe to be true, and we avoid those things that make us uncomfortable.

But Jude, in particular, is a tricky choice for a focus. It is a small letter, 25 verses, as I said, tucked immediately before the Revelation of John. It is a part of our canon, but was not brought in without controversy and resistance.

In fact, the letter was almost rejected from inclusion in the Bible because he makes very clear use of quotes from a couple of apocryphal books – the Assumption of Moses, and the Book of Enoch.

The first reading today was taken from the Book of Enoch. It's not in any version of the Bible, with the exception of the Scriptures recognised as authoritative by the Ethiopian Church. I chose to have it read simply to give a bit of a taste of the underpinnings of the Book of Jude, to give a hint of the kind of influences that coloured Jude's thinking.

The Book of Enoch is a book that is full of visionary images, not unlike John's Revelation. It has lists of angels by name with their roles and their faults. It's a book that details which angels sinned in which way, and how they contributed to the Fall of mankind.

I particularly like the part of the passage that was read today in which Enoch describes the sin of Penemue who "... taught men to understand writing, and *the use of* ink and paper. Therefore numerous have been those who have gone astray from every period of the world, even to this day. For men were not born for this, thus with pen and with ink to confirm their faith ..."

There's something almost charming about a writer using ink and paper to denounce the use of ink and paper.

Commentators on Jude will suggest that his use of these apocryphal writings is not meant to give credence to the writings themselves, but to use cultural references that would have been familiar to his readers. He is trying to establish his own "street cred" and transmit his message in a language and with content that will resonate with his hearers.

I'm not underlining his use of the Book of Enoch to discredit Jude or suggest Jude shouldn't be in our canon of Scripture.

I'm underlining it to highlight the fact that Jude was a creature of his time. As am I. As was the apostle Paul when he made his pronouncements in the first letter to the Corinthians on the degradation of men with long hair. As was Isaiah when he decried the religious hypocrisy of his day. As was Ezra when he called on the Israelites to divorce their Moabite women in obedience to God. And as was the writer of the Book of Ruth when he, or she, spoke out to seek to reconcile the message of Ezra, a message of harsh, unyielding obedience to one way of understanding God's will, with the consequences of this understanding on his, or her, flesh and blood neighbours.

We are creatures of our time. We share, to greater or lesser extent, the prejudices and petty ego-centrism of our contemporaries.

We rightly resist those cultural pressures that push society in destructive and painful directions, and we do this in the hope of forcing our communities to examine their blind spots; those areas where injustice and inequality reign.

But sometimes ... sometimes ... if we can find the humility to do so, we might rightly allow some cultural pressures to force us to examine our *own* blind spots; those areas where *we* have been guilty of destructive and painful behaviour.

And that surely should push us closer to God's truth.

Enoch Chapter 68

3These are the chiefs of their angels, and the names of the leaders of their hundreds, and the leaders of their fifties, and the leaders of their tens.

4The name of the first is Yekun: he it was who seduced all the sons of the holy angels; and causing them to descend on earth, led astray the offspring of men.

5The name of the second is Kesabel, who pointed out evil counsel to the sons of the holy angels, and induced them to corrupt their bodies by generating mankind.

6The name of the third is Gadrel: he discovered every stroke of death to the children of men.

7He seduced Eve; and discovered to the children of men the instruments of death, the coat of mail, the shield, and the sword for slaughter; every instrument of death to the children of men.

8From his hand were *these things* derived to them who dwell upon earth, from that period for ever.

9The name of the fourth is Penemue: he discovered to the children of men bitterness and sweetness;

10And pointed out to them every secret of their wisdom.

11He taught men to understand writing, and *the use of* ink and paper.

12Therefore numerous have been those who have gone astray from every period of the world, even to this day.

13For men were not born for this, thus with pen and with ink to confirm their faith;

14Since they were not created, except that, like the angels, they might remain righteous and pure.

15Nor would death, which destroys everything, have effected them;

16But by this their knowledge they perish, and by this also *its* power consumes *them*.