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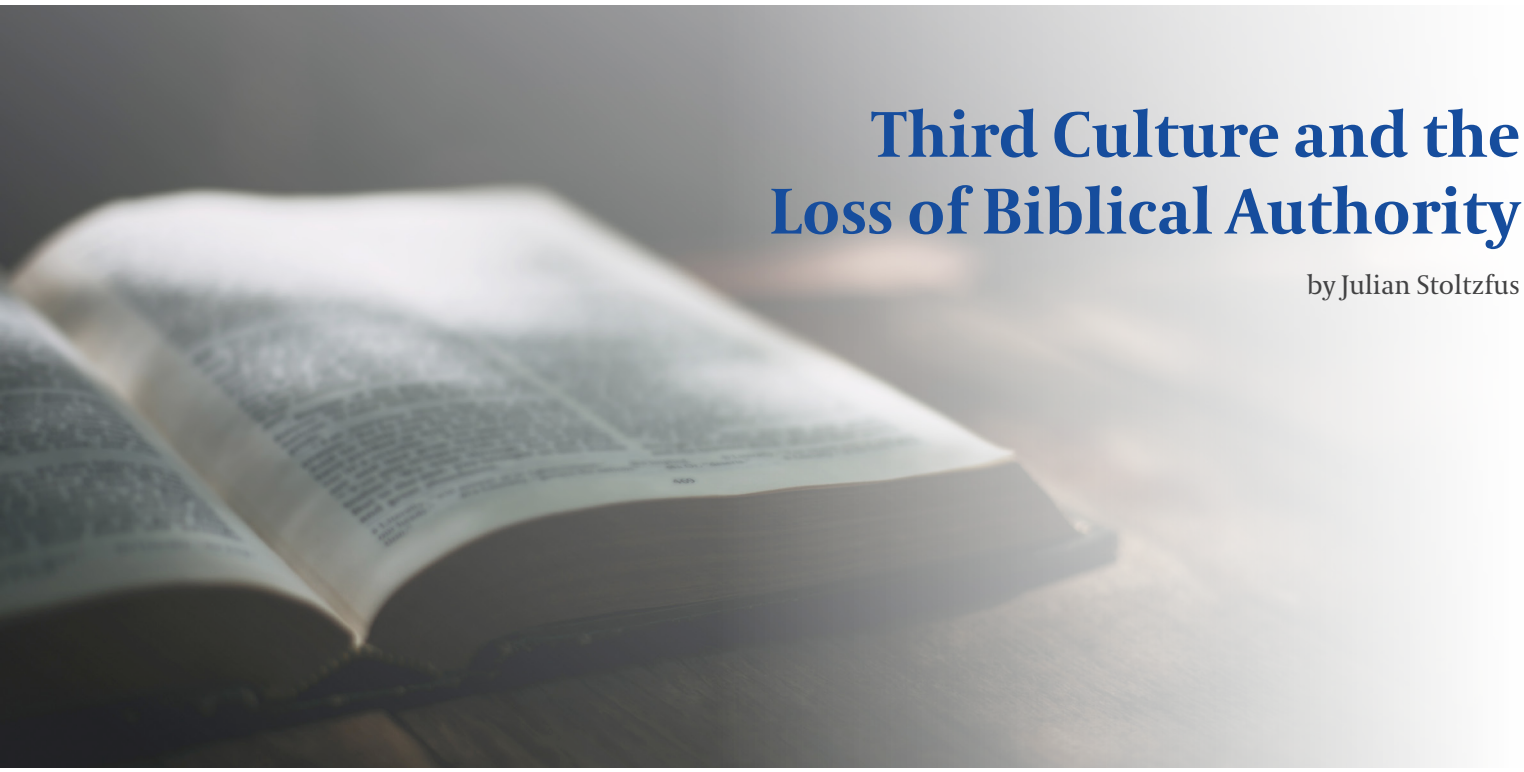
The ADC Disciple

Anabaptist Disciples of Christ is an affiliation of Conservative Anabaptist churches seeking likeminded fellowship, instruction, and accountability in church administration and congregational life in the Biblical pattern of the Apostolic church.



Third Culture and the Loss of Biblical Authority

by Julian Stoltzfus

Carl Trueman, in his book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, says that there are essentially three ways societies justify their morality, three authorities which are ultimately operative in the culture.[(1)] In the first, morality is based on myth or legend. These are pagan cultures; the example Trueman gives is of Sparta, whose laws were thought to have been delivered by the Delphian oracle. The laws—and the morality they represented—were given authority because they were received from a superhuman source. "It is not God as some transcendent being who is in charge, but it is still a force prior to the natural order and beyond the control of mere men and women."[(2)]

In the second, morality is based on the revelation of a transcendent being. Religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all fall into this category. Western culture has been largely shaped by the principles of Christianity. "Law codes [in the West] were rooted in the will of God revealed in the Bible."[(3)] Until modernism and post-modernism, most westerners saw themselves as ultimately accountable to God, even if they were unbelievers. Transcendent authority normed individual thoughts or preferences.

In the first and second ways, men and women see themselves as ultimately subject to an authority outside themselves. They are not self-governing nor self-determining; rather, they are subject to the dictates of an outside force. They have a "moral…stability because their foundations lie in something beyond themselves. To put it another way, they do not need to justify themselves by themselves."[(4)] But in the third way (what Trueman calls "third world" or "third culture"), cultures do not define morality by referencing a transcendent authority. Rather, they are self-referencing and self-regulating. They define morality by something within themselves. That can be pragmatic (whatever works),

(1) Trueman pulls from the work of Philip Reiff in this section of his book.
(2) Trueman, Carl, The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self (Crossway, 2020), 75.
(3) Ibid., 76. Brackets mine.
(4) Ibid..

consensual (whatever benefits the most people), or most commonly, emotional. In the last, what I feel to be true about myself ("I am a woman trapped in a man's body") is considered a more significant referent for what is moral and immoral than any objective standard. Thus it becomes immoral to tell a man who feels like a woman that he cannot undergo surgery to make him appear to be a woman. A third-world culture sees him as self-regulating, and thus there is no higher authority beyond himself to tell him what he may and may not do with his body.

My point in introducing you to Trueman's work is not to draw from his analysis of the culture but to look at what I believe is a parallel in our churches. Trueman traces America's shift from a second-world culture (Christianity as a moral authority) to a third-world culture (humans as their own authority) with view to understanding the sexual revolution and current LGBTQ+ trends. It is a move from subjection to an outside authority to self-regulating authority. Put summarily, what the individual feels to be true is seen as more authoritative than any objective, absolute source.

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While Trueman is helpful in understanding shifts in Western culture, I think he also helps us understand issues within our Mennonite culture, especially regarding our formulation of Christian doctrine. Recent doctrinal controversies over sin, substitutionary atonement, hell, open theism, critical race theory, et al., reveal that we are losing our understanding of biblical authority. Orthodox beliefs are compromised to make room for other views, other ideas, other interpretations—many of which have been rejected time without number by Christians historically.

In third-world cultures, authority is within the culture rather than outside it. The seat of epistemology and morality is man himself. What is true and what is right is ultimately determined, not by what the Bible says, but by what one believes to be true. This can be true—and often is—even within Christian circles. When the seat of authority is oneself—my conviction, my opinion, my experience—we are operating as a third-world culture. Where Scripture is used to validate one's preconceived opinions, rather than as the authority which shapes one's opinions, we are operating as a third-world culture.

I believe we have lost our moorings, lost our reference point, lost the reflex of checking every truth claim against Scripture. This happens before the Bible disappears from our lives and churches. The question is not whether we are using the Bible. The question is, what is determinative in the final analysis? If our preconceptions are at odds with biblical revelation, will we change our minds or just dismiss the biblical evidence? Are we actually Bible people or are we just traditionalists who happen to retain some biblical ideas? If we are not allowing our beliefs to be corrected by Scripture, we are not truly biblicists. The Bible is often sidelined—even as it is read and preached—long before it is rejected. It is my belief that many of our churches are suffering from a man-centered approach to Scripture, where Scripture is used to validate our ideas, not to form them.

In fact, we have become so accustomed to defining truth according to our own ideas that it is impossible to correct faulty theology without causing offense. We think of truth as connected to ourselves and not as connected to an outside authority. Let me explain. If those in a Christian culture see themselves as subject to Scripture in all things, they will be willing to hear from others—even those with whom they disagree—if that interchange will help them grow in their knowledge of Scripture. Their ultimate authority is not personal, but biblical. But if we define the truth according to our own ideas, we take personal offense whenever someone disagrees with us. The seat of authority is not extrinsic, but intrinsic, and thus we feel personally threatened when our ideas are questioned.

21st century Mennonites operate somewhere between second-world (transcendent authority) and third-world (imminent authority) cultures. But the trend, it seems, is toward third-world. In this, we are more like the world than we think. We see ourselves as non-conformists because we look different and prioritize different things. But in this area, I believe the world's current is pulling us away from biblical fidelity.

Let me give a few examples. First, our preaching. Many sermons I have heard from fellow Anabaptists are not textually-grounded, exegetical, and biblically-faithful, but rather are an arrangement of the preacher's own thoughts around the text. Faithful biblical exposition is preaching which takes its form and its content from the sermon text. The main point of the text is to be the main point of the sermon. But in many cases what I hear is the preacher's thoughts foisted upon the text. The biblical text is before us, but the preacher's ideas—not God's—are in fact central to the sermon. Yes, the Bible is right in front of us, but the preacher uses it as an accompanying authority, not as the absolute authority. Whatever our lip-service may be to the doctrine of biblical authority, the way the Bible is handled in the pulpit reveals what we really believe. And when the preacher's own opinions are presented as the final authority (or even as an authority alongside Scripture), we are functionally operating as a third-world culture. In biblical terms, we have rejected Scripture's authority.

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(5) Ransom simply means "the price paid for the freedom of a captive." Its use in Matthew does not imply that Christ was given as a ransom to Satan, but just that He did what was necessary to free us from sin. As Ephesians 5:2 tells us, "Christ…gave Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God." God's justice was satisfied on the cross (cf. Rom. 3:21-26).

(6) For more on this, reference my paper "Is Hell Eternal? A Biblical Examination of the Conditional Immortality View of Hell", https://theologicaltouchpoints.com/is-hell-eternal/. The content is also available in podcast form.

Second, the aforementioned doctrinal issues of our time. Substitutionary atonement, which has historically been understood as essential to the gospel itself, is questioned, mocked, and rejected. But substitutionary atonement is not something the Bible is unclear about. This is not the place to defend the doctrine, but suffice it to say that a diligent study of all of the biblical evidence makes unquestionably clear that Christ died on the cross in our place, for our sins. This is summarized in 1 Peter 2:24: "[He] Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (NKJV). Those who want to gut the gospel of substitution are in fact in disharmony with the Bible's clear teachings. Sure, Ransom Theory can spin a great yarn from "the Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28), but the substance of that theory is at odds with the teaching of Scripture.[5] The Christus Victor Theory is right in saying that Jesus defeated sin, Satan, and death; it is wrong when it indicates that He could do that without dying as our substitute. It is His substitution whereby He dies for our sins that is His defeat of sin, Satan, and death. These theories can be fit into certain passages of Scripture, but they do not stand when considered against the entire light of biblical revelation.

Another issue is our beliefs about hell. Recently, the Conditional Immortality view (a resurrection of the Annihilationist view) has taken hold in our movement. Again, this issue deserves more space than we have here.[6] Conditional Immortality is the belief that sinners will cease to exist when they are cast into hell. Immortality (eternal life) is conditional based on faith. Those who believe live forever; those who do not are destroyed in hell. This, like the alternate atonement theories, can be deduced from parts of Scripture, if we approach it determined to make it fit with what we would like to believe about hell. But Conditional Immortality is not compatible with the whole of biblical revelation, nor with two millennia of church history.

The fact that we are so easily duped by this doctrine reveals that our Bible knowledge is dreadfully insufficient. Our neglect of Scripture (either by not studying it or by refusing to allow it to shape our beliefs) has left us vulnerable to unbiblical doctrine. Our movement can survive for a time on the momentum of previous generations—those before us who were Bible-minded. But when we ourselves cease examining Scripture and submitting ourselves to it, we jeopardize the faith. When we don't submit to Scripture as the sole authority, the absolute authority, we open ourselves to various errors.

One more example of how I believe we have drifted toward a third-world mindset. The shift from second-world to third-world is fundamentally a shift from being in submission to God's authority to being our own authority. Another way of thinking about this is that it is a change from God-centered thinking to man-centered thinking. We are becoming more individualistic, and with that, how we understand the Bible is changing. Historically, Christians developed beliefs in community. They worshipped together, heard the Bible preached together, thought together, and learned together. Any one person's interpretation was considered in light of the church community. On the main, beliefs were formed by the group—the church—and not by isolated individuals.

While I think it is true that large shifts in doctrine and practice still happen in the group, our mindset concerning truth has become more individualistic. If a person feels

We are becoming more individualistic, and with that, how we understand the Bible is changing.

strongly about an issue but is at odds with the consensus, he feels free to stick to his conviction rather than consider the wisdom of others.[7] He defers to himself over and above outside authority. That is, his normative authority is within himself, not within an outside, objective reality. That is third-world thinking—defining the truth based on what I feel or what I believe. I am not saying that Christians should not develop personal convictions. What I am saying is that those convictions ought to be developed in community under the authority of God's word, and not by free-wheeling individuals.

The authority of Scripture is unquestionably one of the fundamental issues of our time. Other presenting issues (such as those mentioned above), in my judgment, reveal the underlying issue. We don't think of ourselves as operating under the authority of the Bible. Sure, we reference the Bible when it supports our view. We use it to validate our opinions, but we don't allow it to shape them. Until Scripture is the absolute, unquestioned authority, we still have work to do.

What then is the solution? Change begins when we return to the Word of God. Read it—not to inflate your ego, not to shore up your self-righteousness, not to validate your perspective—but rather to be brought closer to truth and to the God of the truth. Ask yourself, "Am I regularly allowing Scripture to shape and change my beliefs?" The Bible is only truly our authority if we are submitting ourselves to it and allowing ourselves to be changed by it. And let us not only grow personally; let us bring others to the truth. If you are a preacher, preach the Word. If you are a counselor, counsel the Word. If you are a father or a mother, teach the Word to your children. Whatever your role, the call is the same. Know the Word. Love the Word. Teach the Word. Live the Word.

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Julian Stoltzfus lives in Elnora, Indiana, with his lovely wife Ruthie and their sons Corin and Bennett. He stays busy writing for and editing the Sword and Trumpet monthly publication, recording the Theological Touchpoints podcast, teaching and preaching at Truth and Grace Mennonite Church, keeping up with the various opportunities of his business, and loving on his family.

(7) This is not to say that the community consensus is always correct, but rather to say that we ought to think of Christian doctrine as something developed in community and not something we develop in isolation from the group.
All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from The New King James Bible (Thomas Nelson, 1979).

PASTOR SPOTLIGHT

Jerry and Ellen Kline serve at Agape Christian Church in Berlin, Ohio. Jerry was ordained as a Deacon in 2001 and as Lead Pastor in 2021. Jerry and Ellen have six children – Lois, married to Matt Kline; Anita, married to LaVern Yoder; Karolyn, married to Lael Stutzman; John LaMar, married to Becca; Loren, married to Debbie; and Lisa. They have nine grandchildren and are expecting their tenth.

Jerry is a farmer and also an Amish taxi driver.

Jerry reflects on his pastoral journey – "Serving the Lord through ministry has been a tremendous blessing in my life. During these years, the Lord has shown Himself faithful both in the good and difficult times.

During the difficult times, leaning on the Lord has shaped me into who I am today, and through this the Lord has given me compassion for hurting and struggling people.

I enjoy a good heart-to-heart conversation and getting to know people on a more personal level.

I have a passion to share the Scriptures, giving guidance and teaching the more conservative people while doing taxi driver work.

I've been blessed to work alongside Luke Stutzman over the last ten years. His faithful servant leadership and shepherd's heart has been a consistent example for me throughout the years."

A book that Jerry enjoys for his personal devotions is *Sparkling Gems* by Rick Renner.

Thank you Jerry and Ellen for your service to the Church of Christ!

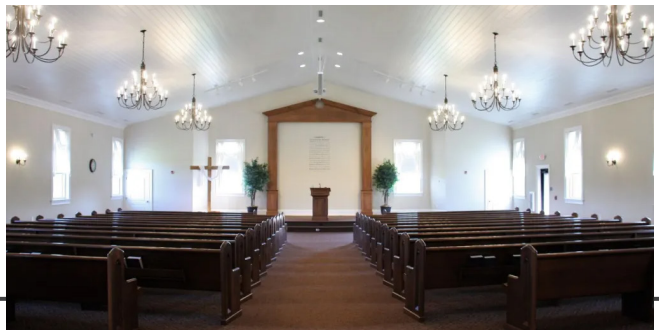
ADC Church Profile —

Bethel Christian Fellowship, located in Narvon, Pennsylvania, has a membership of one hundred fourteen and was established in 2000. The current pastoral team consists of James and Mary Ellen Stoltzfus; John Lee and Verna Stoltzfus; Omar and Naomi Stoltzfus; and Michael and Kathryn Esh. BCF also has a pastoral advisory team that consists of Jonathan and Marilyn Zook; Merv and Carol Lapp; and Jake and Rose King.

In the fall of 2000, approximately twelve to fifteen families left the Summit View congregation and started meeting at the chapel facilities of Sunny Crest Home. John U. Lapp from the Weavertown congregation provided leadership oversight for fourteen years until intrachurch leadership was fully established. After many municipal and congregational challenges, BCF members were able to build and move into their own facility in 2016 and joined ADC in 2021.

BCF is located on the south side of Churchtown, PA. Churchtown is on the eastern edge of Lancaster County and is in what is known as the tri-county region. BCF has members from three counties – Chester, Berks, and Lancaster - and is surrounded by Old Order Amish and Mennonite families.

While BCF is not located in the heart of Lancaster County, the church is clearly inside the popular tourist area and has many opportunities to engage the tourists visiting this area as well as the local community. BCF has supported children's ministries in nearby cities, including Lancaster Bible School, Kids Clubs, and summer camps. With the assistance of Blessings of Hope, BCF recently started a food bank outreach. The church currently has several families and young people working in southern Thailand under Global Tribes Outreach.



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