# The darkness around us is deep

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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Ephesians 4:1-16

## Introduction

Francis Bacon, the contemporary of William Shakespeare who is often considered the father of the scientific method remarks that Pilate asked “What is truth?” but would not stay for an answer[[1]](#endnote-1).

We will spend a little time today meditating on this question. It’s the third in our series on Ephesians 4:1-16, and in this passage Paul confidently states many truths, moral and spiritual and social. We are called to live worthy lives. Lives that live up to high standards of humility, gentleness, patience, and peace. We are called to live lives worthy of the profound truths of our baptism and faith, of our one Lord, Savior, and Spirit. We are called to exercise the gifts of the Spirit for the common good, to grow up in full maturity, as God’s church, into Christ.

And Paul speaks of truth itself.

**The winds of doctrine**

I am particularly taken by this phrase: “we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine.” He goes on to say “by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.”

The winds of doctrine have been blowing for two millenia, and we have been greatly knocked about. The winds of doctrine have blown many out of the church altogether, either because they have believed and acted on things so false that it’s taken them out, or because of disgust at the hot mess the church is in.

(In, even back in the 1600’s Francis Bacon was saying that nothing keeps and drives people out of the church than breaches of unity, when there are so many “discordant and contrary opinions in religion”[[2]](#endnote-2)).

But what does Paul mean?

By these “winds of doctrine,” I think it’s clear that, in this context, these are *disuniting* beliefs and practices. Remember, Paul writes so eloquently on our unity, and on the diverse gifts of the Spirit given to unite us under, and to grow into, one Lord.

*Let’s name some of those things that blow us about …*

And so he takes threats to this unity very seriously. The goal of God is to have us grow into maturity “into him who the head, into Christ.” It’s very interesting that the example that Paul gives of immaturity, of childishness, is being tossed about false beliefs and practices.

If we are not going to be tossed about, what are we going to be? I think we want to be rock solid. We want to be unmoved, steady, resolute.

And there are some things which we affirm, along with Paul, that are non-negotiables. “Here we stand,” we can say along with Martin Luther, “and we can’t do anything else.” Among these are our foundational beliefs that Paul describes here as “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” Perhaps we can extend that to the beliefs in the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds.

And I would add to these basic beliefs certain basic practices of our new life in Christ. We won’t look into this today, but Paul immediately follows this section by calling us to live in “true righteousness and holiness.” For Paul, and for us, it is not enough to strive towards right belief. We also must strive towards right action; what some call orthodoxy and orthopraxy. “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord” and “Love the Lord your God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength and your neighbor as yourself.”

So, standing in the shelter of this rock, we will not be tossed about. You want me to deny the deity of Jesus? I’m willing to talk, and I’ll even admit that I might be a complete and utter fool and be wrong about it, but don’t expect to shake me. You want me to go out and get drunk with you? No thank you, this is part of the world’s life I have put away.

And maybe you’ll come to me and say it is of vital importance that you get one of these beliefs exactly right. Take, for example, baptism–affirmed by Paul, affirmed by the Apostles’ Creed, affirmed by the Nicene Creed as one of the “ones.” You must be in the water once or twice or three times;,you must wait until you’re an adult, or aware of your need, or baptized as soon as possible; you must prepare deeply or not at all; you must be immersed or aspersed or affused; you must be confused and tossed about.

And I think there are two equally good ways to respond to this.

One is to say, “Oh, that’s interesting!” Let’s talk about the theological understanding you have of baptism, what the advantages and disadvantages are, what the history of your tradition is. And together, we might learn to more deeply appreciate the underpinnings of our understanding, and so grow more fully into Christ together as a body. We Anabaptists have a particular history and set of beliefs surrounding baptism that is really rich and important, and I would be loathe to lose that.

So one reaction is to think and pray and journey together.

But the other is to laugh, and laugh, and laugh. Do you think it really matters to God if you are baptised face-first or back-first? I believe in “one baptism” and I find it extremely amusing that extremely particular doctrinal and historical winds could threaten that.

This is why the following joke by Emo Philips was voted the funniest religious joke of all time[[3]](#endnote-3):

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912."

I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

But there is another class of disagreement that matters, where the “winds of doctrine” are driven by large forces and changes in culture, in which the substance of disagreement is not a matter of the basic creeds, either in the large or the small, but about, say, big societal issues. Some of these were hot issues once, and are not so much today; for example, can a Christian in good conscience enslave another person. There is no belief so outrageous that I don’t doubt that someone doesn’t believe it, but I think we’d agree that the church’s consensus is that it’s a very bad thing for a Christian (or anyone, for that matter) to enslave another.

But, of course, there are other issues which remain hot: the right ways of including LGBTQ people in the church being a current, and important, example. Note that even here there is some consensus that didn’t exist even twenty or thirty years ago. Most (not all, but a large majority) American Christians do not believe that being attracted to others of the same sex is inherently sinful.

What does it mean to not be not tossed about by these issues?

We talked about some of this a few weeks ago: we can take a stand of *forbearance*, of putting up with others (and hoping that others will put up with us).

We can remind ourselves, again and again, of what is crucially important, the crucially important beliefs and practices we are called to, as we discussed before. And because they are of such importance, we should focus much of our time and energy on these things, even as we do not neglect the very real challenges that face us.

We can remind ourselves that we are ourselves in need of salvation, that we ourselves are not as mature as will once be, but that God’s work is to bring us into the fulness of Christ. In this reminding, we can hold some beliefs and practices more lightly–perhaps they will be blown away, but we will not.

“On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.” On these disputed questions we will (I believe) in the end come to a “yes” or a “no.” But I stand on Christ, and am willing to say “maybe,” unperturbed by my not knowing, recognizing my own limits, immaturity, and fallibility.

The poet William Stafford wrote a poem called “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,” that has been important to Bess and me over the years. A dear friend gave us a copy of it as a gift, and it speaks of the importance of considering the kinds of people we are and how easy it is to remain sleepy and ignorant of why we are who we are, and do what we do. It’s really a poem for two people, but I think it applies, in many ways, to the church as well. And I will finish with the last stanza[[4]](#endnote-4):

It is important that awake people be awake,  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
the signals we give–yes or no, or maybe–  
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

1. Francis Bacon, *On Truth*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Francis Bacon, *On Unity in Religion*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Emo Philips, “The best God joke ever–and it’s mine!” *The Guardian*, September 28, 2005, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>, accessed August 1, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. William Stafford, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,” *The Way It is: New & Selected Poems*, <http://www.williamstafford.org/spoems/pages/ritual.html>, accessed August 1, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)