

You might be thinking to yourself, “This is a pretty odd Biblical passage to hear during a series on Mutual Conversion.” The entire passage seems to depict a scene where two powerful parties – Jesus and the representatives of Jerusalem and Judaism’s highest levels of leadership – have a public clash... in the end, nothing changes, and no one seems to convert at all! In fact, not a single question that is posed by the parties gets a straight answer, and as readers we know that some questions don’t even get asked! Neither Jesus nor the coalition of Elders, Chief Priests, and Scribes seem persuaded by the other, their dialogue is filled with tension, and –on the surface – there’s no obvious conversion – mutual or otherwise.

BUT – as you may have guessed – there is more to this story than meets the eye. There are other parties involved, other dialogues hinted at, and an entire range of mutual conversions being affirmed... and the story connects in some powerful ways to one of the core, distinctive, theological convictions we Anabaptist/Mennonites maintain. Like the passage suggests it has to do with authority, authorization, and recognition – who is authorized... who authorizes them... and, in true Markan style – who has the eyes to see it, the ears to hear it, and the hearts open to it?

But, of course, some historical and literary context helps us see it more clearly. Jesus is BACK in Jerusalem. He arrived earlier in chapter 11, after a lengthy journey that began back in chapter 8. In chapter 8 Jesus had just predicted he would be killed by these three groups: the Elders, Chief Priests, and Scribes. Peter rebukes Jesus, Jesus rebukes Peter and tells Peter he’s thinking of human things, not Godly things. Then Mark, creatively, uses the journey to Jerusalem to present learning opportunities for Jesus’ disciples and Mark’s readers that consistently occurred, “on the way.” They day after arriving, Jesus goes to the temple, and famously interrupts its function- driving out merchants, overturning money-changers tables, impeding commercial traffic – disrupting the temple functions. The Chief Priests and Scribes witness it and Mark tells us they “KEPT looking” for a way to kill him. This wasn’t the LAST straw – they were plotting to kill him already... Mark has been hinting at that all along... this is simply the most blatant straw! So in this morning’s passage, when Jesus is BACK in Jerusalem, BACK in the Temple, and it occurs the day after his prophetic disruption of the temple.

As he was entering the temple, the Chief Priests, the scribes, and the elders intercept him. These are the most powerful, elite of Jewish society. The Chief Priests are the top of the Jewish political/religious hierarchy: Aside from Rome’s colonizing representatives like Pilate or Rome’s puppet kings like Herod, the Chief Priests are the Jewish people’s primary political powers. They control the Temple, and are the (self) designated and (self) proclaimed intermediaries between God and the people. They keep the political/religious systems running. They are the party traditionally tasked with mediating between God and his people, through the temple system. The High Priest and several other chief priests make up a substantial arm of the Jewish Sanhedrin, or ruling council. They’re joined by the scribes. These are the educated elites- the learned, the lawyers. The Priests may control the temple, but the scribes control the Scriptures. The scribes affirm the Priests role as mediators, and the priests affirm the power of the scriptures – and therefore the scribes who control it. Representatives of the scribes, therefore, also wield significant power in the Sanhedrin and benefit from the smooth operation of the temple system. Finally, the societal leaders, the Elders, are the economic, agricultural, and traditional leaders... these are the people with the right family names: the Rockefellers, Carnegies, Trudeaus, and Trumps. The Jewish Religious Leadership needs these Elders to maintain a smooth society... they’re too powerful to leave alone, so they too get absorbed into the Jewish leadership structures... they too have a vested interest in the smooth operation of the temple system.

The Temple isn’t just the most important religious site in Jerusalem and Judaism, it’s a critical economic site AND the central to numerous political, prophetic, and apocalyptic revolutionary imaginations. If and when the Jewish people revolt, the Temple typically plays a central role. The Roman overlords know they need the Sanhedrin to keep the people from rallying around the Temple. As a result, the Romans only tolerate those in Jewish leadership who can keep the Temple free of disruption and disturbance – especially during Passover – the time when the city is FULL of pilgrims and revolutionaries, for the celebration of the Jews’ revolutionary emancipation from the Empire of Egypt. There’s a LOT at stake when Jesus performs his prophetic actions in the Temple. SO the Jewish leaders HAVE to respond! So, just as Jesus walks into the temple we see this confrontation... they’ve had a whole day to come up with a trap, and now that Jesus is here they can spring it! They confront Jesus with what may seem to us as a fairly innocuous set of questions: “By what authority do you do these things? And who gave you this authority?” It’s a TRAP! It’s an ingenious trap!

First off, Jesus’ actions in the temple the day before may be the most blatant confrontation of the religious elite, but it’s not the only one – Jesus had declared people clean and forgiven without the priests or temple involved; he’s healed on the Sabbath; he’s flaunted purity laws and the traditions of the elders; he’s challenged the interpretations of the scribes... Jesus has made his positions clear... so when they talk about “These things” that Jesus has done, it certainly

culminates in his temple disruptions, but there are many other activities they could be referencing. Jesus has a LOT to answer for.

Secondly, the brilliance of the trap is the very fact that any answer Jesus gives will get him in trouble... even the TRUTH! We the readers, if we've been persuaded by Mark, know the answers to these questions. By what authority does Jesus do these things and who gave it to him? By God's authority, of course! Bestowed on Jesus at his baptism when the Spirit of God descended INTO him, and as Jesus lives out the roles as God's son, the Messiah, and the prophetic Son of Man, ushering in God's kingdom. That's the TRUTH! But Jesus can't very well give that answer... they'll kill him! If Jesus says, "God authorized me." The Chief Priests and Scribes will respond, "No God didn't!" They're God's mediators, God's representatives on earth, they're the ones who confirm or deny people's claims about God's actions and they can easily reject Jesus' claim. Jesus could be convicted of blasphemy on the spot and immediately be imprisoned or even stoned to death. Either way, his ministry would end then and there. So the TRUE answer is suicide. Now, in their defense, the religious elite truly seem to not recognize Jesus as God's authorized mediator... they're not simply "out to get him," or "corrupt" they truly think they're protecting God's systems – which makes them even MORE dangerous. Bad theology, truly adhered, is more dangerous than good theology corrupted.

So Jesus is trapped. The truth will get him killed (and eventually it does anyway). But, there are no safe lies either. He obviously can't claim to be a Priest, Scribe, or Elder...they KNOW he's not one of them. But he also can't claim "NO authority." He can't simply have performed these disruptive, prophetic temple actions without any authorizing party. If he did it under his own authority, of his own volition, then he's a disruptive, insurgent, bent on destabilizing the temple in the midst of the Passover festival. He'd be instantly handed over to the Roman authorities as a terrorist and surely imprisoned, and likely crucified alongside bandits like Barabbas later that week. It's a trap. Jesus is in trouble. He has to respond... what's he to say?

Now, what happens next is especially confusing to our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes. We don't have an understanding and appreciation for their 1<sup>st</sup> century societal norms to see how Jesus' response gets him out of the trap and launches his own counter-trap. Jesus asks a counter question about the authority of John the Baptist, the religious leaders debate how to answer and after their response Jesus refuses to answer their question and the scene ends. For this we need a little help from 1<sup>st</sup> century, Mediterranean scholars like, Bruce J. Malina, Jerome H. Neyrey, and Joseph Hellerman, to whom I'm indebted for many aspects of this sermon. They remind us that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Ancient Near east the most important social value – the primary societal motivator – was not wealth or family or truth or love... it was honor! Gaining honor and avoiding shame –is what motivates the behaviors of people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century more than anything else. Wealth was important, but only as a mechanism for maintaining or gaining honor. Wealth wasn't something to retain, it was to invest in sponsoring festivals, feasts, parties, civil construction projects like temples, synagogues, and palisades, and especially clients who would sing their patron's praises. THAT'S what wealth is good for – getting honor! It was not unheard of to defend family honor to the death; OR to completely abandon family members who brought shame to the family. Truth and falsehood were flexible... certainly if one was caught in a lie, it would be shameful, but if one could retain honor by lying and get away with it, the truth was an easy sacrifice. So, whenever we read the Bible, it's beneficial to remember how central the pursuit of honor and avoidance of shame is to their 1<sup>st</sup> century context.

Now imagine a societal continuum of honor. There are TWO primary ways of having honor. There is hereditary honor, honor one has simply because they're born with it – this is "ascribed honor." You start off at a certain point on the honor/shame continuum based on who your family is and what they'd done in life before you. SO, the emperor's family starts off with massive ascribed honor, the beggar's family, with little. The second way to have honor is to gain it (or lose it) – this is achieved honor. By making the right choices, behaving in the right fashion, and playing your societal cards correctly one could, feasibly, achieve honor and move up the social and societal honor/shame spectrum. But this maneuvering was incredibly hard to do, since people protected their honor carefully. Honor and shame were contained in a finite, closed system, a zero sum continuum. If one person had a lot of honor, someone else had little. Honor wasn't being manufactured anywhere. It was traded, not created.

SO, in order to achieve honor, it must be taken from someone else in an honor duel. Dueling for honor typically followed a recognizable pattern. Someone makes a public claim for honor; the claim to honor is either affirmed by the public (because without the public affirmation, a claim is useless) OR opposed by a challenger. If the claim is challenged the claimant must respond to the critiques of the challengers and then the public gives their verdict by acclaiming whoever they deemed to have won the duel. Claim; challenge; response; verdict. THAT'S precisely what's happening in this morning's passage.

Jesus has made a claim to honor – he’s acted as God’s divinely authorized representative. His claim to honor has been challenged by the Ruling Elite in a deadly series of trap questions. Jesus responds with a trap question of his own. Honor Duels allow Jesus to respond with a question so he does... he offers a reasonable path to fulfilling their request, he invites them to simply exercise their position:

“I will ask you one question; answer me and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the Baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin? Answer me.” Jesus is asking the religious authorities to publically declare their verdict on John the Baptist’s ministry... was John divinely inspired, or was he just a human nutcase out in the wilderness? (We the reader have Mark’s answer)

NOW – here’s where the story gets interesting... we the readers are given an over-the-shoulder view into the secret debate amongst the ruling elite. They argue with one another, but Mark tells us they’re NOT concerned about what the RIGHT answer is... they’re not trying to determine what’s true... they’re trying to figure out which answer will be the least damaging to their position.

“If we say, ‘from heaven,’ he’ll say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’” They’ve identified a dangerous response, they can’t give Jesus the opportunity to challenge. If they affirm John’s ministry as divine, they put themselves at risk for Jesus to critique their inaction. BUT they ALSO put their Temple system at risk for being bypassed! John’s ministry was about repentance, forgiveness, and identification as God’s people – three central activities of the Temple – occurring outside of and away from the Temple. If one could receive forgiveness by some hermit named John at the Jordan river (for free), who needs the temple? If God authorizes OTHERS to mediate between God and humanity... who needs Priests and Scribes? They CAN’T give that answer, it’s too damaging– even though Mark’s readers see it as being true.

“But shall we say, ‘Of human origin?’” A question that they ask among themselves, which Mark gives background to. The crowd of pilgrims have already determined that John’s ministry was divinely inspired. John was a prophet in the eyes of the people. Not only do they fear the upheaval that might occur if they denounce John’s ministry – the people may riot, the elite might lose their positions, their clout with the Romans, or, if it’s bad enough, even their lives, this whole confrontation of Jesus was designed to avoid that outcome... so they can’t say that... it’s too dangerous (even if they think it’s the truth). THEY’RE trapped. They came to trap Jesus where any answer will get him killed... they’ve been trapped BY Jesus where any answer will lose them their standing with the people. SO they answered Jesus, with the answer they THOUGHT would do the LEAST amount of damage – and it’s an incredibly damaging answer! “We do not know.”

You don’t **KNOW**?! **YOU** don’t know!? It’s your JOB is to know! That’s literally the only reason we have you! The whole point of the Priest, Scribe, and Elder system is to mediate between God and the people – to identify what God is authorizing and communicate it to the people. This is akin to confronting a Supreme Court Justice about the contents of the constitution and getting the response, “Well, actually, I’ve never actually been able to read the constitution.” Then, you’re clearly not qualified to be in this position – that’s the most important job requirement! It’s like an appraiser who can’t identify the value of things. That’s the essence of the position.

They thought they were giving the least damaging answer to Jesus, but they have given up the game... and perhaps most poignantly... they’re right... they truly don’t know... they really **CAN’T** tell. They’re unable to identify what is divine and what is human. Their eyes can’t see it... they’re disqualified. Mark does this a few times in his story – he has characters tell the TRUTH by lying. They THINK they’re lying, but they end up telling the truth. Simon Peter, when “on trial” in the court yard, being questioned about his relationship to Jesus, “lies” and says, “Truly I tell you, ‘I don’t know this man.’” He’s right. “We don’t know,” is the truth, they’re right... they don’t, even if they think they’re lying.

So then Jesus says, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

So there’s your story of mutual conversion... two parties enter a confrontation... questions are asked... no questions answered... and they all leave... so where’s the conversion?

It’s in the crowd! The people in the crowd are the ones who have been mutually converting one another... and this story is merely the final scene in that conversion process. Jesus opponents are overheard acknowledging that the crowd already regarded John as a prophet. The public verdict on John is that he was divinely authorized. The crowd has

already, correctly, discerned John's divine role. ALL that's happening is whether the crowd's correct determination of John is affirmed by the religious authorities, or whether the religious authorities will disqualify and de-authorize themselves by giving an answer the crowd knows is false.

The crowd has already been conducting a grass-roots movement of mutual conversion. They've already left behind the ideas that forgiveness and connection to God can only occur through a Priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. They know that God can do it through a hermit prophet, at the Jordan river, in the wilderness. Through off-stage, out-of-view dialogue, witnessing, and co-journeying the crowd has been converting one another towards God's truth in Mark. This scene in Mark simply depicts the final shoe falling. To EVERYONE'S surprise, the Religious Elite reveal that, "**They DON'T know.**" They're even LESS capable of determining God's actions than the people. Yes, this is a scene where Jesus outsmarts his opponents, with a brilliant trap question of his own, but this is also a massive elevation of the people to the SAME kind of discerning status as the Jewish religious elite. They don't know something about God that WE do! We're capable of knowing what God is up to. It's HUGE! And it's the precursor to the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, to the experience of the Apostles at Pentecost, and to a central and pivotal conviction of we Anabaptist/Mennonites – the priesthood of ALL believers.

The priesthood of ALL believers is built on the idea that God can and does talk to and through anyone connected to God's spirit. There is NO longer any other mediator between God and humanity other than Jesus. That's why Menno Simons isn't our Pope or our standard... Menno is different to us than Luther is to the Lutherans or Calvin is to the Calvinists. Menno is merely a fellow believer on the journey. Menno had some good perspectives and some bad perspectives. That he was right at times doesn't give him more authority and that he was wrong doesn't take it away. We're all equally equipped to connect to God. All voices matter.

Since God can speak through ALL, then God could speak through ANY, and that means the ones who we should listen to is EVERY, so we are extra careful not to elevate and enforce our view ONLY. That doesn't mean every voice is RIGHT... it means every voice is VALID... that God's truth could come from anyone with the spirit, leader or not, namesake or not, credentialed or not... everyone connected to God's spirit has the ability to discern God's way – and then we as a community, together, are tasked with discerning, TOGETHER, God's way.

That's why MUTUAL Conversion becomes such an important topic for us, and why I am so put-off by those who claim to have been converted – as if it's completed. Conversion – receiving and integrating new theologies, expressions, behaviors, and incarnations – is, and must be, an ongoing process. We are human becomings, more than human beings... therefore we Christians are constantly converting to be more like Jesus than claiming to have already arrived... uncomfortably often in the Church, especially in North America, we've confused the starting line for the finish line... and invited people to understand conversion as a completed task rather than the beginning of a lifelong journey. Moreover, we are CONVERTING as a community—we're constantly in the process of CONVERTING together, mutually, and must remind the Christian world that individual conversions are likely incomplete and dangerously isolated. Instead, conversion is experienced with one another, helping point out the way to go, and what's hiding in each other's blind spots along the way, because we all trust that the other may be hearing something more clearly from God than we are. We are attracted to mutual conversion because we recognize, with uncomfortable clarity, how easy it is for us to fall into the trap the religious elite find themselves in – that we are the experts and everyone else the mindless masses. This story reminds us that the community is more likely to find God's heart than the individual – that converting is an ongoing process, experienced in community.

And so it was, the mutual conversion of the crowds, in the background of Mark 11's confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish religious elite helped pave the way for our talking circles, our speaking stones, our invitations for youth to speak their truths, and our commitment to walk and learn beside each other -- mutually accountable as fellow priests and ministers - as our community helps recognize together the truths in lies; the inspiration of the uncredentialed, and the mutual dependency of our conversion journeys.