

Mennonite Confessions of Faith

This We Believe

FOCUS

“In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”

Five hundred years ago Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas. Should his arrival be celebrated or lamented? Was he a hero or a villain? Should Columbus be honored or cursed?

History does not simply “report what happened.” History is always an interpretation of what happened. The story of Columbus is now being reconsidered and, in some cases, radically rewritten. The same re-framing is occurring within Mennonite churches.

The lessons in this unit have demonstrated that Anabaptist origins are neither simple nor uniform. We are the heirs of Anabaptist visions, not a definitive vision. We say we are the children of Menno, yet the question, “Who is a Mennonite?” has no easy answers.

We are, increasingly, a pluralistic people with a steadily shrinking openness to counsel. At a believers church conference in Goshen, Indiana (Spring 1992) Walter Klaassen observed:

If all opinions have equal authority and what I do is my concern and not someone else’s, there is no longer any place for church discipline.

At a time when the broader church is looking to Mennonites for leadership we are unsure of who we are and where we are going.

Statements of what Mennonites believe have been among us from earliest beginnings. A group of Anabaptists, forerunners of Mennonites wrote the Schleithem Articles in 1527 (see ARTICLE 11 page 120). Since then, Mennonite groups have produced numerous statements of faith. The Anabaptists never attached the weight to creeds given to them by the remainder of Christendom; they were biblicists who produced a large number of confessions for perhaps three main reasons: a) as instructional tools for the teaching of their young people, b) as witness to their faith to the larger society, or c) as a means of better understanding, (and often distinguishing) between differing groups.

Goal:

To understand the role which confessions of faith and doctrinal statements have played and continue to play in the life of the Mennonite Church.

Objectives:

1. To examine several historical and contemporary confessions of faith or doctrinal statements and discern their various emphases.
2. To be able to discern doctrinal distinctions and emphases in our worship, in the hymns we sing, etc.
3. To discern how our present convictions and practices are true to our doctrinal heritage.

The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, produced by two North American Mennonite groups in the 1990's takes its place in this rich confessional history. The historic creeds of the early Christian church, which were assumed as foundational for Mennonite confessions from the beginning, are basic to this confession as well. (see ARTICLE 35 page 187)

Though Anabaptism had its roots in Europe, we are increasingly a global community of congregations, linked through Mennonite World Conference. Sometimes geographical separation and cultural differences shape theological convictions and practices in different ways. How can we maintain a common faith and witness in the world?

Mennonites have sought, with James, to be “doers of the word and not merely hearers” (James 1:22). We have allowed our works to speak for us. It is now a day when we must find words to clarify and reaffirm our faith.

EXPLORE

Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus..., let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith..., let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful (Hebrews 10:19-23).

How does one “hold fast to the confession of our hope?” It depends, in part, on the winds that are blowing and the threats that are assailing true faith. At times the danger has been legalism; at other times liberalism. At times the danger was apostasy; at other times apathy.

Confessions of faith and statements of doctrine are both *conservative* and *contemporary*. They attempt to conserve the best of the faith tradition while, at the same time, applying that tradition to the changing needs and questions of the contemporary situation.

We have already seen how *The Schleitheim Confession* (1527) kept the Anabaptist movement on course. A less formal, but revealing doctrinal statement comes from Menno Simons (1554), in the midst of his debates with Gellius Faber:

The Signs by which [the true church] may be known:

1. The salutary and unadulterated doctrine of His Holy and divine Word... where the church of Christ is, there His Word is preached purely and rightly.
2. The right and Scriptural use of the sacraments of Christ, namely the baptism of those who, by faith, are born of God, who sincerely repent, who bury their sins in Christ's death, and arise with Him in newness of life; ...who put on Christ, and have a clear conscience.

[In the] Lord's Holy Supper [participants are penitent]...and expect grace, reconciliation, and the remission of their sins in the merits of the death and blood of the Lord, who walk with their brethren in love, peace and unity, who are led by the Spirit of the Lord into all truth and righteousness,

and who prove by their fruits that they are the church and people of Christ.

3. Obedience to the holy Word, or the pious, Christian life which is of God.

4. Sincere and unfeigned love of one's neighbor... Wherever sincere, brotherly love is found without hypocrisy, with its fruits, there we find the church of Christ.

5. The name, will, Word, and ordinance of Christ are confidently confessed in the face of all cruelty, tyranny, tumult, fire, sword, and violence of the world and sustained unto the end.

6. The pressing cross of Christ, which is borne for the sake of His testimony and Word. (*The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, pp. 739-741).

Menno wrote in the context of persecution; he could not write a comprehensive statement. His chief concerns were truth, obedience and love. Sometimes our greatest need is for the "bottom line." Crises have a way of removing life's clutter and highlighting the things that are essential. In other less harried times, the church can explore the full implications and applications of Christian faith.

The majority of Mennonites today are no longer of European descent. Mennonite World Conference, in its efforts to maintain fellowship among global Anabaptists, realized the need to formulate a common set of beliefs or shared convictions, drawing inspiration from our Anabaptist forebears of the 16th Century. In these seven shared convictions, as in Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, key Anabaptist distinctives such as discipleship, nonresistance, nonconformity, and the nature of the church emerge. These are the very themes that separated the 16th century Anabaptists from their Protestant and Catholic cousins.

1. Review Menno Simon's six signs of the true church. Would your congregation meet his requirements? On what point(s) does your congregation need to improve or become more effective?
2. Examine the seven articles of Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists (ARTICLE 34 page 185) and compare them to the seven articles of Schleithem (ARTICLE 11 page 120) Which aspects of Anabaptist convictions are shared then and now? Which are not emphasized in the current shared convictions? What has been added?
3. Examine the Hispanic Creed (ARTICLE 34 page 186) and compare it to the Apostles' Creed, in *Hymnal Worship Book, #712*. What aspects of the ancient creed are affirmed in the Hispanic creed? What is left out? What is added?



OUR SINGING FAITH

Mennonites have always had a “singing faith.” Our hymnbooks have been as much an expression of our beliefs as creeds or doctrinal Confessions. The first hymn in any hymnal is carefully chosen to reflect who we are as a people, and what we believe.



The first hymn in the *Mennonite Hymnal*, 1969, was “**Holy God, We Praise Thy Name.**” That hymn is #121 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 1992. Compare it with the new first hymn in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, “**What is this place**”, *Hymnal*, #1.

Holy God, We Praise Thy Name

Holy God, we praise thy name. Lord of all, we bow before thee.
All on earth thy scepter claim; All in heaven above adore thee.
Infinite thy vast domain, everlasting is thy reign.

Hark, the loud celestial hymn, angel choirs above are raising.
Cherubim and seraphim, in unceasing chorus praising,
fill the heavens with sweet accord: Holy, holy, holy Lord.

Lo! The apostolic train join thy sacred name to hallow.
Prophets swell the glad refrain, and the white-robed martyrs follow,
and, from morn till set of sun, through the church the song goes on.

Holy Father, holy Son, holy Spirit three we name thee,
though in essence only one, Undivided God we claim thee,
and adoring bend the knee, while we own the mystery.



4. What are some key doctrinal motifs in each hymn?
5. What is the difference in tone between the two hymns?
6. Which best fits the theology and worship style of your congregation?

CONNECT

In 1987 work began on a new confession of faith to serve Mennonite Church (U.S.A.) and Mennonite Church (Canada). The purposes for this new statement included:

- Christian *faithfulness* in our time and context
- genuine Christian *unity*
- *instruction* of new believers
- a useful basis for *conversation* with other Christians
- to clarify and strengthen Mennonite *identity*
- recognizing acceptable *diversity* as an alternative to rigid uniformity and to endless pluralism (from an article in *Gospel Herald*, October 1990).

Even when the articles were only in the draft stage, they brought out voices of

support and voices of suspicion. Consider these two viewpoints:

We as a denomination have come to a stage of great diversity or pluralism... The need for a current confession of faith is serious and urgent. Would any of the existing confessions be satisfactory? Perhaps, but just as recent Biblical versions help in biblical understandings, so a new confession of faith could help in our understanding of God's will for us today.

If [the new confession] is read from the viewpoint of *requirement*, then barriers or walls will immediately arise. Some will say, "let's *recommend* all the articles to be God's will for his people at this time." Will all of God's people agree? On the other hand, may God's Spirit direct the preparation and writing of the articles in the new confession of faith so that God's people will *recognize* these articles as valid expressions of faith for his people? May God grant it!

(adapted from an article by J. Mark Martin in *Gospel Herald*, 1990).

The editor of [*Sword and Trumpet*] believes that there is justification for a new Confession of Faith upon certain conditions and with certain limitations. One question to be raised here is this: Just what is the bottom line reason for this new Confession?

If this is an attempt to justify unscriptural practices which have crept into the church, then we reject such a rationale. If this is an attempt to spell out more clearly than ever before the application of scriptural principles to modern life...then we support it wholeheartedly.

We are willing to give the joint committee a chance by waiting to see what will be the form of their final draft. However...we have solid ground and good reason to suspect that this is going to be a masterpiece of compromise and accommodation to prevailing practices.

(adapted from an article by George R. Brunk II in *Sword and Trumpet*, 1991).

The questions and controversy over the new confession of faith were signs of spiritual health. People don't argue about things that are not important to them. The goal is not to settle for a superficial calm, but to continue debating, challenging and discerning together in mutual commitment to Jesus Christ and to each other.

7. Read "Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective," (ARTICLE 35 page 187).

- a. Take time to review the confession of faith. If wording is confusing or if you disagree, try rewriting the section in question.
- b. Sometimes a statement is uncomfortable not because of what it says but because of what it leaves unsaid. Are there ideas or implications in any of the articles that you believe should be "up front" in the summary paragraph?

8. Read "What's in a Name?" (ARTICLE 36 page 190). In your community, is the term "Mennonite" an asset, a liability, or simply a source of bewilderment (e.g., "What's a Mennonite?")?

This is a time of great transition for Mennonite churches. Our character and identity are being examined, challenged, and often reshaped. In all of this change, can the words of "**Renew Your Church**" (*Hymnal*, #363) be our prayer?





9. Each verse speaks a different petition: for spiritual renewal, a fuller understanding of God's Word, a more authentic prayer life, and a reconciling love. Which of these four needs is greatest in your own life? in your congregation?

10. As an exercise in spiritual discipline, make up a note card that you can carry with you for two weeks. Read and pray it often.

Help me, God, be renewed.
Help me, God, know your word.
Teach me, Christ, how to pray.
Teach me, Christ, how to love.

After two weeks, write a brief paragraph describing what differences these prayers made in your life and in your ministry.

APPLY



11. Confessions of faith and doctrinal statements can clarify where we've been and who we are. It requires vision to shape our direction and goals as the people of God and the children of Menno. On the surface a common vision seems elusive. Perhaps our dis-ease with one another is more a matter of form than substance. Read "Vision For the 1990's (ARTICLE 37 page 191) containing two dreams for Mennonites in the 1990's

- a. On what points do the two authors agree?
- b. On what points do they differ?
- c. You have been commissioned to write an "open letter" to the churches of Mennonite World Conference, which includes Mennonite Churches, Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ. Your theme is "A Call to Unity," to be written in 250 to 500 words. What would you say to promote a common vision for Mennonites around the world?

12. Read, "Where Have All Our Convictions Gone?" (ARTICLE 38 page 192)

- a. No one doubts that Mennonite churches are changing. The key question is: Are we growing or drifting? How do you answer this question?
- b. Detweiler identifies four primary threats to Mennonite churches: conformity, compromise, contentment, and conscience (lack of). Which of these four is most dangerous to your congregation? How are you, as leader, responding to this threat?
- c. Toward the end of his article Detweiler links personal faithfulness with participation in the faith community:

We must begin to live with the transforming conviction that the church is not a collection of random individuals but the center of our life as Christ's body...We will never reach a depth of vitality and spiritual power until we become accountable to Christ and with each other in covenant relationship.

If Detweiler is right, what does this mean for your ministry?



Readings

ARTICLE ELEVEN

The Schleithem Confession of Faith

ARTICLE THIRTY-FOUR

Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists – Mennonite World Conference
Hispanic Creed - #135 in *Sing the Journey*, a Faith & Life Resource publication of
Mennonite Publication Network, 2005

ARTICLE THIRTY-FIVE

“Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective” (Excerpts), adopted 1995 by
General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church.

ARTICLE THIRTY-SIX

“What’s in a Name?” J. Lorne Peachey, *Gospel Herald*, Sept. 1, 1992, p. 16.

ARTICLE THIRTY-SEVEN

“Vision for the 1990’s,” Adapted from John R. Mumaw, *Sword and Trumpet*, Oct.,
1991, pp. 2-4 and Freeman J. Miller, *Gospel Herald*, Dec. 26, 1989, pp. 906-908.

ARTICLE THIRTY-EIGHT

“Where Have All Our Convictions Gone?” Richard Detweiler, *Gospel Herald*, Aug.
25, 1992, pp. 1-3, 7.