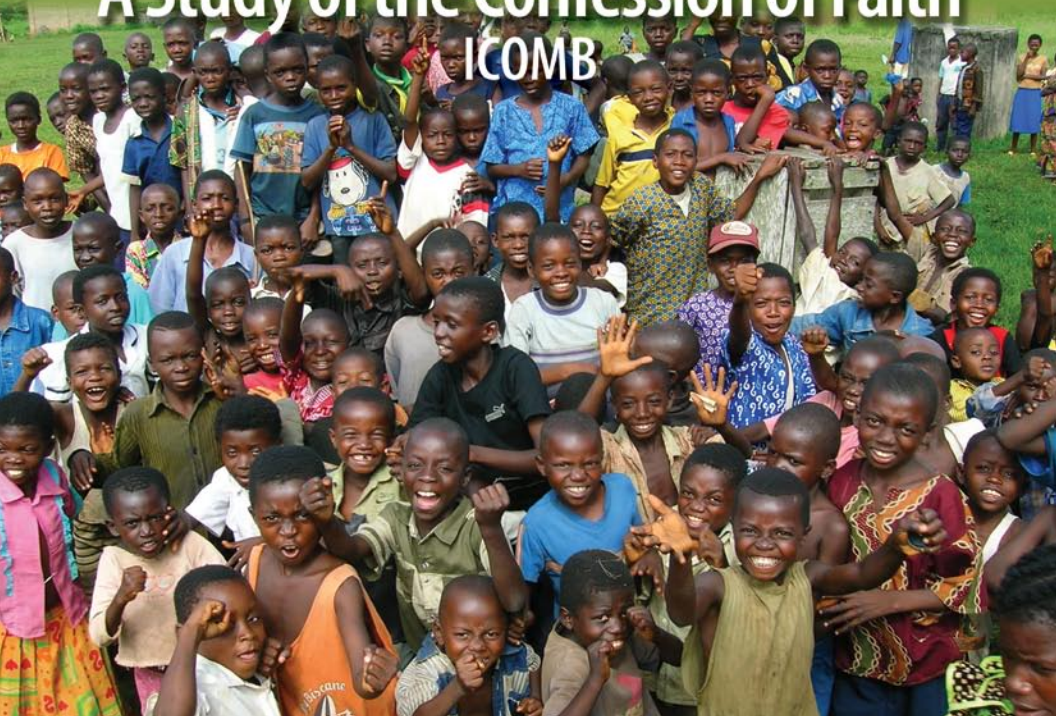




Knowing & Living Your Faith

A Study of the Confession of Faith

ICOMB



**KNOWING AND LIVING YOUR FAITH:
A STUDY OF THE CONFESSION OF FAITH
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF MENNONITE BRETHREN**

EDITED BY ELMER A. MARTENS AND PETER J. KLASSEN

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FOREWORD

Christians who go by the name Mennonite Brethren and who live in the Democratic Republic of Congo read the same Bible as Mennonite Brethren living in the USA. So do those living in Germany, India, Colombia, Japan, in the North, in the South, in the East, and in the West. We read the same Bible, but are we also one in our belief?

How important is it that Christians in one denomination who live in different parts of the world share the same belief? Do we know what our sisters and brothers across the ocean, or for that matter across the border, believe? Does it matter?

While we as Mennonite Brethren Christians live in different cultural and social contexts with different historical backgrounds, our common beliefs do matter. While we might look at certain issues with somewhat different cultural lenses, we could hardly claim to be one family of faith if we did not share basic biblical beliefs, could we?

So, to assist the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) to appreciate and strengthen its unity, a Confession of Faith was prepared in 2004. Part of its value lies in the international character of the commission that formulated it, and also in the fact that this Confession has been accepted unanimously by all 19 member Conferences of ICOMB.

Before we consider this as something revolutionary or new, let us recall some history. The first Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith dates from 1902 in Russia. It served the worldwide Mennonite Brethren Church well for decades. Then in 1975 the North American conference revised the Confession of Faith. It was this revision that came to have international importance as churches in other continents used it to define themselves. But in North America a rewritten and expanded Confession was adopted in 1999 (see chapter 6). So to share a common Confession of Faith is not new. That which is new in the current Confession is that it does not originate with a single national group, but instead is the outcome of all 19 Conferences sitting together at the same table.

Already in the Old Testament there are creedal-like statements (Exod. 34:6-7; Deut. 6:4; 26:1-11). In the New Testament there are several confessional statements, the shortest of which is also most radical: Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 8:6). Longer statements are found in 1 Cor. 15:3-8 and Phil. 2:5-11, both of which have a direct bearing on practice. Subsequent history provides evidence of the importance of Confessions of Faith: the early Apostolic Creed, the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325), the Schleitheim Confession of the early Anabaptists (A.D. 1527), or our own denominational Confes-

sion of Faith in 1902. Mennonite Brethren hold that a Confession of Faith is subordinate to Holy Scriptures. However, a Confession speaks to our common understanding of the central teachings of the Bible.

Jesus promised to build his church (Matt. 16:18) and prayed passionately for its unity (John 17). He reminds us that God is looking for authentic worship from Jesus' followers (John 4:24). My prayer is that our first globally-produced Confession of Faith, prepared by the International Community of Mennonite Brethren, would be useful in building up Christ's church to keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3), and to worship our Almighty God in Spirit and in truth. My hope is that it will be useful in mission frontier situations, and also to newer churches as they become part of the global community (1 Cor. 3:11).

This commentary and study guide to our Confession of Faith should help us in studying the Bible and in becoming firm in our faith as congregations and as individuals. The commentary has been translated into the major languages spoken by churches of our denomination and will include at least English, German, French, Spanish, Japanese, Telegu, Lingala, and possibly Russian and Kikongo.

Conference delegates of ICOMB are hopeful that all Mennonite Brethren churches will study the confession simultaneously during the years 2008-2009, as a preparation for the 150th anniversary in 2010.

A special word of thanks goes to our professional editors, Dr. Elmer A. Martens and Dr. Peter J. Klassen of Fresno, California. Also the writers of the various chapters and the many translators deserve our acknowledgement. May God grant us his blessing as we study together in order to become a more faithful "people of the Book."

Victor Wall,
Executive Secretary of ICOMB,
Asuncion, Paraguay.
Advent, 2007.

PREFACE

This booklet is decidedly an international project. The cooperation from the writers from around the globe has been commendable. The new technology of electronic mail made possible the rapid exchange of chapter drafts. Unevenness of style is unavoidable, but in a study guide of this nature, a certain unevenness enhances the international flavor. Great appreciation is extended to the writers of the study material and to the translators.

While written for a particular occasion, a global preparation for the denomination's 150th anniversary in 2010, this **study guide**, it is hoped, will benefit the global Mennonite Brethren Church for years to come. This **commentary/study guide** should be seen as offering a particular kind of Bible study. It is not the usual verse-by-verse study, but is more of a cross sectional kind.

Some 150 years ago, it was through small group Bible study that a spiritual revival came to a small group in Russia. From this group has grown a people known as the Mennonite Brethren now found on five continents. Might not a worldwide Bible study, by the grace of God, stimulate spiritual renewal again?

"I have heard all about you, Lord, and I am filled with awe by the amazing things you have done. In this time of our deep need, begin again to help us, as you did in years gone by. Show us your power to save us. And in your anger, remember your mercy" Hab. 3:2 (NLT).

Editor, Elmer A. Martens, President Emeritus
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Advent, 2007.

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The Sponsors. Three agencies have cooperated to produce these materials: The International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB); the North American-based Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services International (MBMSI); and the Fresno-based Council of Senior Professionals (CSP).

The vision for such a book came from Viktor Hamm, then with MBMSI. His successor, Ray Harms Wiebe, has been an active member of the steering committee. The CSP provided initial funds and impetus for the project.

Victor Wall, the executive secretary of ICOMB, has provided encouragement and counsel, and has chaired the Panel of Reference that reviewed each chapter. The panel members were Nzash Lumeya (Congo/California); Rolando Neyra Alemán (Peru), Takashi Manabe, (Japan), Alexander Neufeld, (Germany), and Ray Harms Wiebe, (Canada).

The Contributors. Heartfelt thanks are extended to the contributors who represent the various national conferences that make up the global Mennonite Brethren community. They are listed, with further identification, on the following page.

The Translators took on large challenges. Gratitude is due Rolando Neyra Alemán (Spanish); David Ewert (German); Kiesamukanu Kulungo (French); Erik Kumedisa (Kikongo); Mambakila (Lingala); Valdemar Kröker and Haroldo Janzen (Portuguese); P. Menno Joel, coordinator (Telegu), and Junichi Fujino, coordinator, (Japan). Needs finalization.

As of publication date, the following are acknowledged with gratitude for their services as North American translator assistants: Tim and Gertrud Geddert (German), and Leslie Mark with José and Esperanza Prada of Colombia and Peru (Spanish).

Resource Personnel. Ettie Janzen of MBMSI furnished the statistics (ch. 6). Lynn Jost and Hans Kasdorf assisted with the chapter sections, "For Further Study."

Publication. Large thanks go to the following who saw the manuscript through to publication and helped with promotion: Marilyn Hudson (freelance manager), and Mario Buscio, Manager of Kindred Productions, Winnipeg. Gratitude is also extended to Shelly Makus, Makus Design, for book design services.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THE STUDY GUIDE

This commentary and study guide is designed for use by groups. Smaller groups of 5-30, either in a Sunday school setting, a youth camp, a men's or women's Bible study, or a vacation Bible school would be ideal. Youth, who are often searching for identity, could benefit in a particular way.

Some will want to survey the confession of faith by devoting a session (1 hour) to one chapter. Such a plan would require a time frame of 3 months (12-13 sessions for the 11 chapters). But, judging from some field testing, since the material in each chapter is so dense, a six month period (or even longer) is highly recommended. A nine-month or a year-long study might even be preferable. One pastor suggested that the preaching schedule be coordinated with the group studies.

Use the Bible in your teaching. Individual verses are often cited, but the text's context should not be neglected. If possible have the ICOMB statement written out and posted on the wall.

Here are some hints for structuring the study.

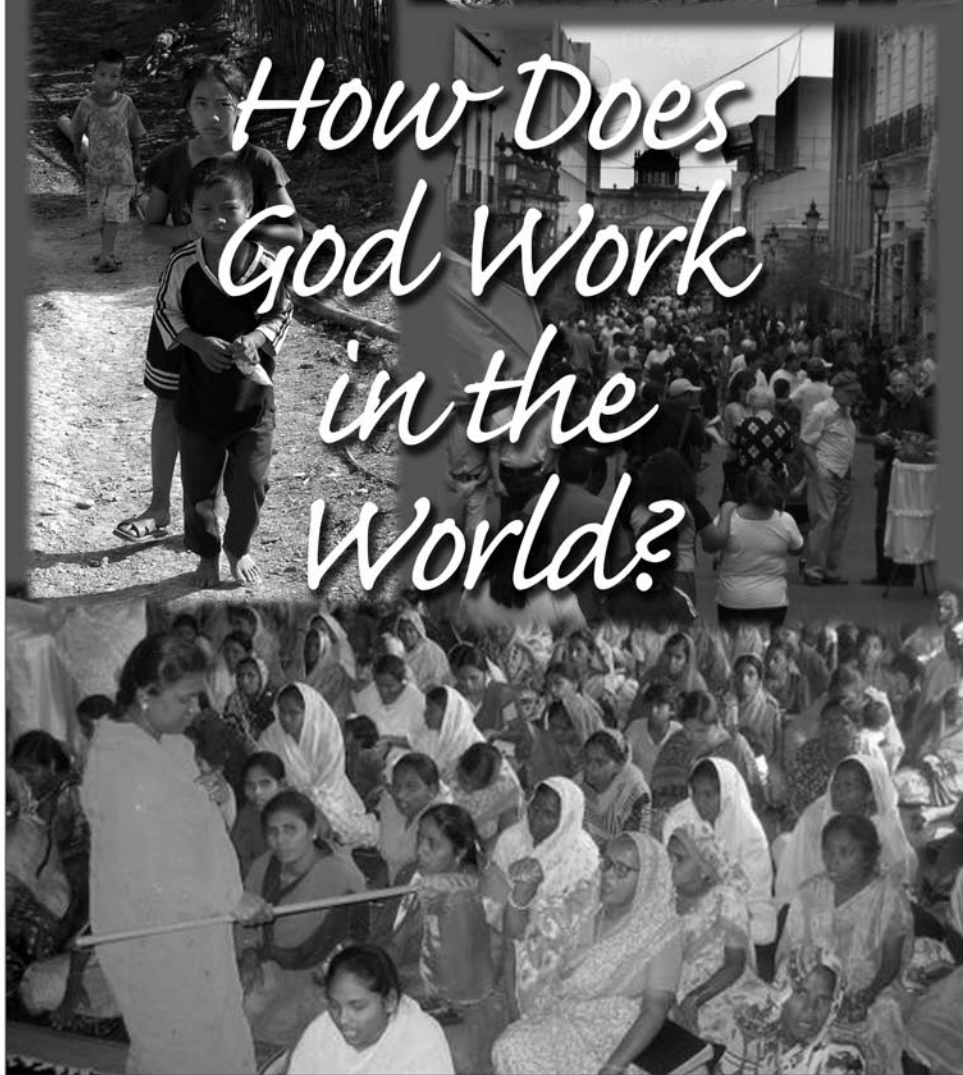
1. Begin the class with prayer. As an introduction invite discussion by asking, "What do you think important to say about topic X (e.g., Holy Spirit)? Consider recording the comments on a chalk board or a white board. Perhaps choose a few Scriptures from the commentary that fit the topic of the chapter. As an introduction or possibly during the session take 5-8 minutes to have class members discuss a question you as the teacher pose.
2. Several options for a teaching plan:
 - Choose a particular aspect of the topic from the chapter and follow it through.
 - Spend most of the time with the section, "What does the Bible say?"
 - Spend most of the time on the section, "Living with the Belief."
 - If the class has read the chapter (or even if not), work on answering the questions posed in the chapter.
3. The entire confession or the specific article of faith could be photocopied and distributed to the class. Keep the discussion in story form. It is not necessary to cover everything in the chapter.
4. Some questions the teacher might ask: "What part of the confessional article on this topic is most important to you?" "Why?" "How adequate is the Confession on this topic?" "Has a significant aspect of the topic been omitted?"

5. Rewrite an abbreviated version of the Confession and/or have the students write an abbreviated paragraph on the topic of the day.
6. Towards the end of the session have persons in groups of two or three, summarize in their own words what they believe about the topic, stressing particularly how this belief will become part of their practice.



Part 1

*How Does
God Work
in the
World?*



CHAPTER 1

God's Redemptive Story

Barkam Isaac Premaiah (India) and Lynn Jost (USA)

WRITING A CONFESSION OF FAITH

In July 2002 seven church leaders from Asia, Africa, Europe, and South and North America gathered to draft an international confession of faith for the Mennonite Brethren Church. One of the European leaders proposed that the North American Mennonite Brethren confession be used as a starting point. The response to this suggestion was swift and clear. The Japanese representative said, "Europeans and North Americans have a cultural tendency to work with doctrines and philosophies. We Asians and Africans have a cultural tendency to communicate with stories. We need to base the international confession on a narrative format. The Bible itself gives good examples in this regard." Later he supplied the examples: Joshua 24:2-15; Psalms 105, 106, 136; Nehemiah 9:5-37; and Acts 7:2-53. The working group produced a confession that has been adopted by the International Community of Mennonite Brethren. This Confession is composed of two sections. The first section retells the biblical story. The second section describes the church, God's community that lives according to God's reign. The church, we confess, is a people of the Bible, of the new way of life, of the covenant community, of reconciliation, and of new hope.

The Bible, like other stories, is told using characters, plot and purpose.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

In this chapter we explore the biblical story. The Bible, like other stories, is told using characters, plot, and purpose. Our interpretation of that story is influenced by our training, by the Anabaptist movement, the Pietist revival in Russia in 1860, and our context as a missionary people from nearly 20 different countries around the world.

The story has two lead characters: God and the People of God.

Characters. In this story, unlike most other stories, God is the leading character. God is the One who creates, delivers, forms covenants, judges, but also blesses with abundance. The other leading character is the people of God. This means Israel in the Old Testament, and Israel's renewed and fulfilled form, Jesus' disciple community and the Christian church, in the New. While the Bible tells of those who oppose God, most of the action involves God reaching out to God's people and beyond.

Plot. The plot begins with God's initiative in creating the world, including humans. The story relates how, after human rebellion, God calls a people through whom God will bless all humanity. God protects, liberates, covenants, instructs, gives the gift of land, reveals, judges, sends Jesus to teach, live, suffer, die and rise again, and forms the people of God to continue God's work in the world. In this story many individual men, women, and youth play a part. The Bible story anticipates a grand finale in which God will defeat evil and will restore heaven and earth to its pristine creation glory.

Purpose. This story of God and of God's people in the world is characterized by purpose. North American Mennonite Brethren Old Testament scholar Elmer A. Martens outlines God's design in four primary movements: God delivers, God forms a covenant community, God reveals God's own purpose in order to be known in relationship, and God gives abundant life in the promised land (Exod. 6:6-8). The European Mennonite teacher Bernhard Ott also emphasizes the narrative structure of the Bible by showing that God has a project; Ott speaks also of God's will, plan, and goal. When we pray for God's will to be done, Ott teaches, we pray for God's shalom project. Shalom, according to Ott, means that relationships

are right between humans and God and among humans. God's story can be described as God's Shalom Project. Ted Grimsrud, another Anabaptist scholar, introduces the biblical story as God's Healing Strategy. Biblical scholars N. T. Wright, J. Richard Middleton, Brian Walsh, and Sylvia Keesmaat speak of the Bible as a six-act drama written by God: creation, breaking relationship, Israel, Jesus, the church, and the consummation. With help from these Bible teachers, this chapter provides an overview of God's purpose as it unfolds in the biblical story.

1.

God Creates, then Responds to Human Brokenness (Genesis 1-11)

God's purpose was for humans to live in harmonious relationship with God, with each other, and with God's creation.

The Bible, the story of God's purpose, begins with creation. God created heaven and earth, a world that was good, had order and meaning. God created humans, male and female, in the image of God in order that humans might exercise dominion over and care for creation. God blessed humans with the mandate to be fruitful (Gen. 1:28). God's purpose was for humans to live in harmonious relationship with God, with each other, and with God's creation.

Humanity failed to obey God's commands, thwarted God's purpose, with the result of a string of broken relationships (Gen. 3:6-7). Creation was disturbed by evil, sin, corruption, and injustice. Estranged relationships between humans, and between humans and their world, and between humans and God, now needed mending.

God's redemptive purpose met every act of human sin, rebellion, and disobedience with grace. In spite of the devastating curse of the Fall, God promised the hope of redemption through the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). God protected the murderer Cain with a mark (Gen. 4:15). God delivered Noah and his family from the flood and resolved never again to destroy the earth in this way (Gen. 6-9). God scattered humans who were intent on building a name for themselves, but called one family to bless the world (Gen. 11:1-9).

In creation and beyond, God reveals himself to be a missionary God. God, whose purpose is right and who desires harmonious relationships, took the initiative to reverse human sin. Genesis 1-11 reveals the universal scope of the salvation which God provides for all peoples. God's plan reveals a universal covenant relationship between God, humanity, and creation.

2.
**God Promises, Calls,
and Delivers (Genesis 12
– Deuteronomy)**

The focus of the story narrows with the call of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and his family were called to be a blessing for all nations (Gen. 12:1-3). God confirmed the special relationship by making a covenant with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants (Gen. 15, 17). God guided and protected this family until they became a people, a nation, Israel. God heard the cries of his people when they came into Egyptian bondage (Exod. 2:23-25). Through Moses God delivered the people from slavery, defeating the power of Egypt, and opening a way of deliverance through the Red Sea (Exod. 14:1-30). At Mount Sinai, God renewed the covenant relationship with Israel (Exod. 20ff). God gave them the gift of the Law, instruction about living in right relationships, worshiping God, and practicing justice in human relationships. God's revealed purpose included deliverance from slavery and the forming of a covenant community. In this community persons are in right relationship with God and with each other. There is worship; there are promises of an abundant life.

3.
**God Gives the People
the Land and Anoints
Leaders for the People
(Joshua – Kings)**

Led by God's servant Joshua, the people of Israel occupied the land as God had promised (Josh. 1-24). Trying to find their place among the nations, the people insisted on having a king like the nations to lead them in war (1 Sam. 8:1-10:27). After Saul failed to serve God's purposes, Samuel anointed David as king (1 Sam. 16:1-3). Despite his failures, David experienced God's grace and was promised a royal dynasty (2 Sam. 7). David's son Solomon built a temple for worship but failed to keep the covenant (1 Kings 1-11). The story of Israel and Judah under the kings who followed is a story of division, rebellion, injustice, and bloodshed. The eventual collapse of the two nations is traced to their unfaithfulness to God's covenant (2 Kings 17:5-23). Israel and Judah and their kings were held responsible.

4.
**God Sends Prophets to
Warn the People: Hosea,
Amos, and Jeremiah**

God sent prophets to announce God's word regarding the people's covenant disloyalty. Hosea, for example, while warning that syncretistic religious practices would result in judgment, also insisted on God's loyal compassion and love (Hos. 11:8-9). Another prophet, Amos, condemned social injustice and exploitation of the poor and weak (Amos 5). Both prophets called the people to change their ways and repent of their sin (Hos. 14:1-3; Amos 5:4-7). The two prophets (Amos and Hosea) perceived clearly that Israel's moral and spiritual corruption must inevitably culminate in divine judgment

(Hos. 10:9-10; Amos 7:10-11). These prophets and, later, Jeremiah spoke words of judgment on the nation's failure to maintain the ancient covenant faith in matters both religious and moral (Jer. 11:1-13). The prophets' messages were also addressed to foreign nations, indicating the international scope of God's sovereign will (e.g. Jer. 46—51; Ezek 28:1-23).

5.
**God Sends More
Prophets to Provide
Hope: Isaiah, Ezekiel,
Joel**

God allowed the Assyrians to capture Samaria, Israel's capital, and to take its people into exile (722 B.C.). More than a century later Judah fell to the Babylonians and Jerusalem was burned (587 B.C.). God's spokespersons, the prophets, did not leave the people with a message of judgment and despair, but with one of hope and mission. Isaiah's perspective was dominated by faith in God, "the Holy One of Israel." Isaiah 40 opens with a message of comfort (40:1). Isaiah also addressed Israel's identity, anticipating a servant who would reconcile the nations (Isa. 42:1-4; 52:13-53:12). Ezekiel, too, preached hope and restoration after judgment (37:1-14). His prophecy concludes with a vision of a new temple, a restored land, and a splendid city in which God's presence would be experienced. Joel speaks of the Day of the Lord, a day of judgment, repentance, and God's new redemptive act through the outpouring of God's Spirit (Joel 2:28-32).

According to these prophets, God is at work in the human world in both the present and the future (see Zech. 4:1-13). The Jewish people returned from Babylon after 538 B.C. (2 Chron. 36:22-23), thanks to a decree by Cyrus, the Persian, and rebuilt both the temple and Jerusalem's city walls.

6.
**Jesus Announces the
Reign of God: Matthew,
Mark, Luke, and John**

According to the Gospels, Jesus, God's Anointed One (or "Christ" or "Messiah"), affirmed God's promises and established a new covenant (Matt. 26:26-28). Jesus preached, "The kingdom of God is among you." In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus outlined the ethic of God's new society, a community of disciples (Matt. 5-7). Jesus called God's people to righteousness, the gift and demand of reconciled community life.

Jesus called people to repent from their sins and offered them eternal life (John 3:16) and spoke to them about a new way of

life. Jesus called disciples to follow him and to live a life of serving others, to help those in trouble, even as he did, and to love even enemies (Matt. 5:44; Mark 8:34-38). Jesus showed God's power over evil through mighty miracles, healing, and casting out of demons. Jesus taught with parables so that his hearers would know the mystery of the kingdom of God.

7.
**Jesus Demonstrates
God's Love through the
Cross: The Gospels**

More and more people opposed Jesus and rejected his call, and so rejected God. Religious and political leaders executed Jesus on the cross (Matt. 26-27; Mark 15; Luke 22-23; John 18-19). Jesus accepted death on the cross as the way to overcome evil and so set people free from sin and death. God raised Jesus from the dead, and in this way made it clear to everyone that Jesus had indeed fulfilled God's will. In the raising of Jesus from the dead, God defeated evil, sin, violence, injustice, and death. Jesus' death and resurrection opens the way to salvation for all who accept God's gift through faith. God exalted Jesus as Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36; Phil. 2:1-11).

8.
**God Sends the Holy Spirit
to Empower the Church's
Mission: Acts and the
Letters**

At Pentecost God sent the Holy Spirit to empower the church to witness to the whole world of Christ's triumph over sin and death (Acts 2). The church sent missionaries to witness to Jesus, to organize congregations, and to nurture disciples who would be faithful to Jesus' life and teaching. The letters of Paul and others give pastoral counsel, encourage believers to be faithful, and equip God's people to witness. These teachings encourage people to live holy lives to God, which often means living differently than surrounding peoples.

9.
**God in Christ is Coming
Again: Revelation**

God's purpose is fulfilled in various ways. God created all that exists. God called into being a people with a mission to be a blessing to all nations. God desires that the saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus be made known to the world's peoples through the church. Although Jesus delivered a fatal blow to the powers through the cross, evil continues to resist God's purposes. The Bible often refers to this evil power as "the world." In the book of Revelation Christians are given assurance that the evil empire of this world will be overcome by the power of the Lamb, Jesus, who defeated violence by love. Jesus will come again to take his

church to himself so that the redeemed will be forever with him (1 Thess. 4:13-18). God will create a new heaven and a new earth. Christians pray, "Even so come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

1.

Learning and Retelling the Story

The basic story of God's purposes and his ways with humans, and especially his plan to bring salvation through Jesus, is not complicated. Still, the story is so wonderful with so many characters and teachings, and in some ways so complex, that scholars can spend a life time studying what it means to really know God and to live as he intended. Churches should pray diligently that there will be teachers who in churches and schools study this story in depth. The Bible calls on parents in the home to tell and retell the story of God's ways to their children (Deut. 6:1-9; 20-25; Ps. 78:1-4). To emphasize the importance of such teaching, someone has said, "Christianity is but one generation from extinction."

2.

The Christian Story and Other Stories

The basic story of God's purposes and his ways with humans, and especially his plan to bring salvation through Jesus, is not complicated. Still, the story is so wonderful with so many characters and teachings, and in some ways so complex, that scholars can spend a life time studying what it means to really know God and to live as he intended.

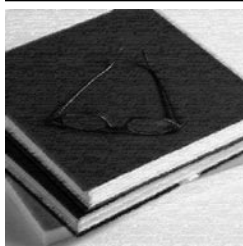
Christians are people who believe God's story as told in the Bible. They believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son. That is, they embrace him as their Savior and Lord. They become part of his family (John 1:12). Christians then devote themselves to follow Jesus, in both his teachings and in the life he modeled. So, in brief, Christians are marked by faith (in Jesus), family (becoming part of God's people) and following (walking in the way of Jesus). So much hinges on believing God's story and responding to it.

Persons in other places, such as Africa and South America, have very different stories about gods, spirits, and the world. Others, such as atheists, postmodern philosophers or Hindu religious leaders, hold that such a story should not be imposed on people as the only real story. They are suspicious of any who claim this is as the one true story. So they resist Christians who claim to know the truth of one God revealed in Jesus. It is important for Christians to know how others think and feel, and not to force their beliefs on others, but still to tell God's story faithfully and joyfully and to invite everyone to listen with care to the story, and to respond to a God who loves them.



THINKING IT OVER

1. Do you and others in your community find it easier to describe your faith with doctrinal arguments or with a story? What are the strengths or advantages of each approach?
2. What is God's purpose or mission statement? How would you describe God's will in a word, a phrase, or a brief sentence?
3. Have you embraced the story yourself, and are you living within that story?
4. How is the church telling the story and how is it helping parents in the retelling of God's story.



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Ted Grimsrud. *God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Bible's Main Themes*. Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000. 163 pp. An overview of the Bible's message and story from an Anabaptist perspective.

Elmer A. Martens. *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*. (Third Edition). N. Richland Hills, TX: Bibal, 1998. 418pp. From Exodus 5:22-6:8 summarizes the Old Testament under the themes of deliverance, covenant, knowing God, and land. College level.

Bernard Ott. *God's Shalom Project*. (Tr. Timothy J. Geddert). Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004. 141 pp. Uses the theme of shalom (peace, well-being) to trace the biblical story. Listed by Mennonite World Conference in its "Global Shelf of Literature."



We Confess:

God, the sovereign Lord of all, created the heavens and the earth through his powerful word.

God, the Deliverer, acted to establish a covenant people, beginning with Israel.

God the Father sent the Son, Jesus Christ, to inaugurate the reign of God, to proclaim good news, and to reconcile creation to God. God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead and exalting him to God's right hand where he intercedes for the saints and rules forever.

At Pentecost, God sent the Holy Spirit, and established the church to proclaim God's reign and to give witness to the new creation.

The church is God's new creation, agent of transformation, called to model God's design for humanity.

The new creation will be completed when Christ returns.

CHAPTER 2

Who is Like Our God?

Nzuzi Mukawa (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Elmer A. Martens (USA)

When Christians speak about God they have in mind a Trinity, by which they mean that God is one, but in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Moslems confess: "There is no god but Allah." Allah has 99 names, the most frequent are "the Merciful" and "the Compassionate."

STORIES ABOUT GOD'S NAME

Story 1. Isaac is a man who belongs to the Hema tribe in the Democratic Republic of Congo. His people's word for God is "Ruhanga." Ruhanga is not a human but dwells above the sky. Ruhanga is almighty and is the creator of everything. Christians in Isaac's tribe use this word Ruhanga when they pray, but they also use the word "Omukamaw ("king") with the sense of "our King." Non-Christians would not use this word for God.

Story 2. In Japan the general word for God is "Kami." Since almost everything, even a head of a sardine fish, can be considered "Kami," Christians, though they use the word, are careful to define it.

When Moses asks God for his name, God answers in a sentence, "I am that I am" (Exod. 3:14).

The Bible's word for the god is *Elohim*, which is translated into English as "God" and appears in forms such as *El-Shaddai* (God Almighty, Gen. 17:1) and *El-olam* (Everlasting God, Gen. 21:33). When Moses asks God for his name, God answers in a sentence, "I am that I am" (Exod. 3:14). From that sentence comes the four-letter name, Y-H-W-H, which is pronounced Yahweh (not Jehovah, as earlier thought), and is translated in the English as LORD (capital letters). The name means, "Present to act in salvation." This God is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

One Christian writer, A.W. Tozer, claims that what we believe about God is the most important thing about us. We begin by observing what God does.

God Creates. This is the very first activity attributed to God (Gen. 1–2). Some, such as Hindus in India or New Age folk in North America, teach that God is part of the world, or in some way part of individual persons. No, God is separate from his creation.

The Spirit of God, like a powerful force, had a part in the creation also (Gen. 1:2). All things, says the New Testament, were made by Christ (Col. 1:15-17). So there is more than a hint of one God in Three Persons active in creation.

The creation story points us to a God of order. The ancient Babylonians (modern Iraq) believed that the world came about through a large battle. Marduk, a god, defeated Tiamat, also a god, and then divided her body in half so that the top became the sky and the lower part the earth. Their world came about through an act of violence. God's world came about through a word.

The creation story points us to a God of order.

God Redeems. If we skip from Genesis to Exodus we find God acting in a different way. God's chosen people through Abraham had multiplied, and because of famine went to Egypt. When they were oppressed by a pharaoh (unnamed), they cried to God (Exod. 2:23-24).

God freed his people from oppression (Exod. 14). God also saved individuals, like David, from their troubles (Ps. 18:6-19). Jesus freed people from illness (Mark 1:40-43), from demon possession (Mark 5:1-20), and by means of the cross, triumphed over sorceries, spirit powers, and false healers.

But God frees persons in an even greater way, from sin and guilt. David can say: "Happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps. 32:1; cf. Mark 2:10). Paul explains that through faith in Jesus (Rom. 10:9-10) persons can know forgiveness and have peace with God (Rom. 5:1; cf. Eph. 1:7; Rev 1:5).

God is a Warrior. That sounds strange at first. But the Bible describes God as a warrior, one who does battle (Exod. 15:3). That description of God as warrior is tied to his title, "Lord of hosts," a military expression meaning commander-in-chief as of Israel's armies, (1 Sam. 17:45); stars and planets (Deut. 4:19), the angels (1 Kings 22:19).

There are many examples of God fighting for Israel, as at the Exodus (Exod. 14), and the battle of Jericho (Josh. 6). God helped David against Goliath (1 Sam. 17:19-51). In the New Testament God is pictured as riding on a white horse. He leads the charge against the enemy. It is God who is victorious over all evil (Rev. 19:11-21). His absolute sovereignty is the foundation for the Bible's vision of peace (Isa. 11:1-9), for God is at the same time a God of peace (Isa. 9:6-7; Rom. 15:33). The very fact that God is a warrior means his people need not, even must not, engage in violence and war.

God is a Teacher and Lawgiver. God instructed Adam about caring for the land (Gen. 2:15) and eating from the fruit trees (Gen. 2:16-17). Later, God gave his teaching to his people at Mt. Sinai (cf. ten commandments, Exod. 20).

God called priests to teach (Mal. 2:7). Prophets also told the people what pleased God and what did not (Isa. 1:10-17; Mic. 6:1-8). Jesus continued his teaching as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). The Holy Spirit was promised to help people understand the Bible (John 14:25-26). God in his grace did not leave people guessing as to what he wanted or what displeases him.

God Shepherds. God is compared to a shepherd to show how he provides for his own people, looks after them in every way (Ps. 23), and protects them (John 10:11-16; cf. Ezek 34:11-16). So we need not fear even when we are persecuted or in danger. God will take care of us.

God's activity of protection is highlighted in his gift of a pillar of cloud for the traveling Israelites (Exod. 14:19-20). The eyes of Elisha's servant were opened to see God's army in protecting Israel (2 Kings 6:15-23). Daniel was divinely protected (Dan. 3:19-30; 6:19-27). Jesus counted on God's protection (Matt. 4: 5-6; Ps. 91: 11-12). So did Paul (Acts 27:23-24).

God is compared to a shepherd to show how he provides for his own people, looks after them in every way (Ps. 23), and protects them.

God Guides. God guides his people (Exod. 15:13). King David rejoiced that God would guide him with his eye (Ps. 32:8). In one West Africa tribe, parents give signals to their children with their eyes. For example, if a family is a guest in another house and the hosts offer food to the children, the children look to their parents to see if they should take it, and the parents, without saying a word will signal with their eyes what the children should do. Sometimes God guided individuals through dreams (e.g., Matt. 2:13-15; cf. Acts 16:6-10). The church is guided by the Holy Spirit (e.g., Acts 13:1-3).

The good news is that although believers will be judged like everybody, because of Jesus Christ they will not be condemned.

God Judges. God is a judge (Isa. 33:22) who judges peoples justly (Gen. 18:25). He will separate between sheep and goats (Matt. 25: 31-46). The message about the day of the Lord (cf. Joel 1:15-18; Zeph. 1:2-7a) is about bringing punishment to evil-doer nations. As individuals all must die and face the supreme judge (Heb. 9:27). The good news is that although believers will be judged like everybody, because of Jesus Christ they will not be condemned (Rom. 5:9-10) but receive rewards (Col. 3:23-24).

Summary. From all these pictures of God—God as creator, father, warrior, shepherd, teacher, guide, judge—we can conclude at least the following. God is very powerful, in fact all-powerful, as shown in creation and in God raising Jesus from the dead (Eph. 1:19-20). He is also good and desires the best for his people (Ps. 73:1; Jer. 29:11; Rom. 8:28). God is caring about his creation and his people, and comes to help in trouble (Ps. 46:1). God is gracious and merciful. At the same time God will not ignore evil, but will punish it (Exod. 34:6-7).

God's plan is to establish his kingdom which is his overall rule on earth.

Best of all, God wants people to know him, and is prepared to offer forgiveness (Ps. 32:1). God has a plan, which is to form a community of people who have been forgiven of their sins and who acknowledge that God alone is God, and especially that he, through Jesus, is their God and Savior. Christians, the name by which this group is known, are to bring glory to God for he is worthy (Rev. 4:11). They are also to love God and their neighbor (Matt. 22:37-39). The Holy Spirit will bring about good fruit in their lives (Gal. 5:22-23).

God's plan is to establish his kingdom which is his overall rule on earth. God extends his kingdom through the church; his plan of forming a community is a means to a greater end.

What these pictures of God do not convey so clearly is stated elsewhere. God is holy (Lev. 19:1). God is fully pure and clean in a way that cannot be compared to anything in human experience. Because he is pure he is separated from all that is unholy. The Bible emphasizes the holiness of God in many ways, but perhaps most forcefully in the vision of God which Isaiah saw (Isa. 6:3).

LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

1. Is God One or Many?

The early church came up with the word Trinity. We might best think of a relational model and could speak of God as a loving community.

God, Jesus and Holy Spirit—all of them are God, yet God is not three separate gods but one (Deut. 6:4). Canaanites worshiped many gods, including Baal, about whom the Bible often speaks. Israel's other neighbors worshiped Chemosh and Molech. By contrast Israel was to worship only one God.

This God, although one, is at the same time three persons as we know from the New Testament. The early church came up with the word Trinity. We might best think of a relational model and could speak of God as a loving community.

Jesus is God; he is called the Son of God. By this is meant that Jesus belonged to God. It does not mean, as the Moslems think, that there was a God who had a child in the way human fathers and mothers have children. The Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4). God is at the same time three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cf. Paul's benediction, 2 Cor. 13:13).

2. Is God Father and/or Mother?

This question suggests that God has to be one sex or another. But that is thinking strictly along human lines. Jesus said that the angels did not marry for they were neither male nor female (Matt. 22:30). We must not think of God as having a physical body; God is beyond sex. Jesus explained that God is Spirit (John 4:24).

The Bible uses images to help us understand who God is. God is called Father both in the Old Testament (Jer. 31:9) and in the New (Matt. 6:9). Nowhere in the Bible is God called "Mother," but God is said to be like a mother. For example, as a mother has compassion, so God will have compassion (Isa. 49: 15). [The question of men and women in ministry is a very different question].

3.
**If God is all-powerful,
why is there evil in the
world?**

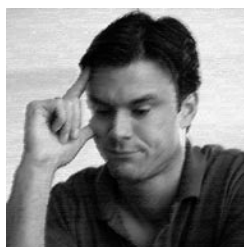
Bad things happen in the world. Forest fires destroy fine trees and wild animals. Tsunamis kill thousands of people. Thieves make life miserable and tragic for others. If God is good, would he not want to stop all that is bad? If God is powerful, why doesn't he do it?

Some have said that God is good but he must not be all-powerful. Or, it has been said, God is surely powerful and he could put an end to evil in the world, but perhaps he is not good. The Scriptures say both: God is powerful and God is good. We cannot fully give an answer to the problem of evil, but Christians have put forward some ideas.

- 1) That which seems bad may turn out to have some good in it. For example, in forest fires the dead wood on the ground is burned away. Some seeds will not sprout except for the heat of the fire. So also God brings good out of evil, as in the story of Joseph (Gen. 37–50; see 50:20), and especially in the story of Jesus.
- 2) Because God is all powerful, he is in control. But he has chosen to limit his power. Should God in every case step in and stop the conditions that produce large rainfalls and floods? Similarly, God is sufficiently powerful to stop every murderer, and in other ways to control human behavior totally. But that would make humans nothing but robots. Many evils come about simply as a consequence of the bad choices people make. However, choice also means that people can choose to love God.
- 3) James explains that trials make for strong character (James 1:2-4), and Elihu argues that suffering softens people for instruction (Job 36:5-11).
- 4) Suffering by some can benefit others. God allowed evil, even death to come on Jesus for the benefit that would come on the human race. In a smaller way the person who by the grace of God endures physical pain without complaining and fully trusts God becomes a model and an encouragement for others (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Even Jesus when on the cross asked, "Why have you forsaken me?" In the end we must allow for mystery. We are not God. We cannot fully figure it all out. So despite the problems that people raise about evil, suffering, God's power and his goodness, Christians affirm that God is both powerful and good.

*God is All-powerful, Why is
There Evil in the World?*



THINKING IT OVER

1. Think again about the meaning of the name for God, which is YHWH, LORD. What difference do you see between a title and a name (e.g., pastor and Hugo), and what meaning has this difference made in the way you connect with God?

2. God is the creator. What importance has this fact for
 - a. how you think of God and yourself (Ps. 8)?
 - b. how you worship (Ps. 29)?
 - c. how you pray (Acts 4:24-26)?

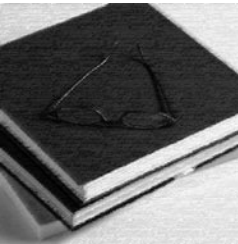
3. Our Confession of Faith begins with the story of how God has acted over time, and then follows with a listing of topics and what should be believed. Why is this ordering important?

4. God is a deliverer and so brings freedom. How is this true in one's personal life? From what does God save us? List more than one item. Some hold that people who are oppressed by governments should seek freedom, even by force. Do you agree?

5. God is Father. What is your answer to those whose experience with their human fathers is negative and who may think of God as Father in a negative way?

6. How would you interpret to a neighbor the meaning of "God is love"?

7. How important is it for the church to teach about God's holiness or God's anger? Against what is God's anger directed? Does this teaching frighten you or reassure and comfort you?
8. Relate incidents in your life where you have experienced God as
- guide
 - source of power
 - provider
9. Suppose a non-believer asks you, what do you believe about God? How would you start? What is it about God that you would emphasize?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Brian Edgar. *The Message of the Trinity*. (The Bible Speaks Today) Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007. 336 pp. Argues that the uniqueness of Christianity emerges entirely from the Trinity.

Alister E. McGrath. *Understanding the Trinity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988. 154 pp.

James I. Packer. *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993. 256 pp. Will deepen the understanding of God's greatness, grace, and goodness.

C. J. H. Wright. *Knowing God the Father Through the Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007. 232 pp.. First given as popular lectures. Fresh. Ties in the NT.



We Confess:

“God, the sovereign Lord of all, created the heavens and the earth through his powerful word. God made humans, male and female, in the image of God to live in fellowship and to be stewards of creation. Humans abused their freedom by rebelling against God in disobedience, which resulted in alienation and death. In the rebellion against God’s rule, the evil powers of Satan, sin and death claimed control of the world.

God, the Deliverer, acted to establish a covenant people, beginning with Israel. God purposed to form the covenant community to live in relationship with God, to experience God’s blessing, and to serve as a light to all nations. Through the prophets God communicated his law and purposes, expressing that God is forever faithful, just, righteous, with a father’s tender mercies, and a mother’s compassion. God promised the hope of a new creation.”

CHAPTER 3

Jesus Christ: A Savior Like No Other

Takashi Manabe (Japan)

First of all, the name “Jesus Christ” needs to be explained. “Jesus” was one of the names which was commonly used among the Jews in the first century. “Jesus” (Greek, “*Iesous*”) means “He will save” (Matt. 1:21). The Old Testament version of this name is “Joshua” which means, “Yahweh [the Lord] saves.”

It can be said that the central character of the revelation of the Bible is Jesus Christ, as he himself claims.

“Christ” is not a name, but a title. Christ is the transliteration of the Greek word “*Christos*,” which comes from the Hebrew word “*Meshiach*,” meaning “the anointed one.”

These two terms, a name and a title combined to name one person “Jesus Christ,” make the following important claim of faith: **“The Jew who was named Jesus is that person who was prophesied in the Old Testament as Messiah; it is He who does the expected great work of God in history.”** It can be said that the central character of the revelation of the Bible is Jesus Christ, as he himself claims (Luke 24:25-27; John 5:39).

STORIES

1) My own experience as a young Buddhist Japanese university student has to do with being introduced to Jesus Christ. I was in a very deep depression. I was led to attend a Bible study meeting one day for the first time in my life.

I felt a light shining into my heart. I began to study the Bible for the first time in order to understand who Jesus was. The Bible claims

that Jesus Christ is human but at the same time he is God. He is not a God among the eight million gods who most of the Japanese people believe to exist. One of the popular sayings here is, "The head of a sardine can be a god whom we can trust." So with this pluralistic cultural background I found the idea of an absolute God very difficult. It took years of continuous study of the Bible and the work of the Holy Spirit before I truly came to have a firm grip of the sole deity of the person of Jesus Christ.

Many Japanese people, sometimes even Japanese Christians, tend to think that Jesus Christ was a white man in a western culture.

2) There is a general notion among the Japanese people that Christianity is a western religion for the white people. Many Japanese people, sometimes even Japanese Christians, tend to think that Jesus Christ was a white man in a western culture. So it is hard in this context to establish truly indigenous churches where traditional Japanese culture is respected but where Jesus Christ is given his rightful place.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Our Lord's Incarnation

Jesus is God. He himself makes that claim (John 10:30). Paul echoes that claim when he says that Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) with God the Father, was the creator of all things (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16).

Christ is both God (has divinity) and human (has humanity). He is God as the Son (the second member of the Godhead) together with God the Father (the first member of the Godhead) and God the Holy Spirit (the third member of the Godhead). The Bible teaches that these three persons exist and act as only one God in perfect harmony. Jesus Christ speaks to God the Father as the Son, and makes the promise to his disciples that the "Counselor," the Holy Spirit, who will succeed him, will be sent by himself and the Father (John 14-16). In the church of Christ, this important truth has been confessed as "the doctrine of the trinity."

Jesus, who was God, did not grasp at that position, but became human, even taking on himself the form of a servant, and, as unlikely as it would seem, died on a cross. Jesus, a Jew, was born as Christ

*In the history of salvation
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(Messiah) to Joseph and his engaged wife, the virgin Mary (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38). As a man he became tired and needed rest (John 4:6) and, among other human things, enjoyed the company of disciples and friends like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-41; John 11).

In the history of salvation God chose a people called "Israel," whose ancestor was Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). The prophets who came from this people referred to one who would come in history as the Savior of the human race (Isa. 9:6-7; 49:6; Mic. 5:2). God's plan was to restore humans to himself based on the forgiveness of sins, and so to bring the hope of re-creation to the whole human person (Jer. 31:31-34; Hos. 2:19-23; Acts 3:18-21). Jesus is God's agent of redemption.

Our Lord's Ministry, Suffering and Crucifixion

Jesus Christ grew up as a man and went into his God-given public ministry which was given by God (Matt. 4:12-17; Luke 4:14-22; Isa. 61:1-3). That ministry was characterized by these powerful works of God among others (a selective list):

- (1) He preached that the kingdom of God was at hand. He called on listeners to repent of their sins and to believe God who has authority to forgive sins (Mark 1:15).
- (2) He wrought many miracles, such as healings, to demonstrate that he was truly the Messiah sent from God (Matt. 11:2-6). Most striking, he raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44).
- (3) He called and trained the disciples who would carry on the ministry of proclaiming the message of the repentance and forgiveness of sins (Matt. 10:1-8). His teaching touched on prayer (Matt. 6:5-15), marriage and divorce (Matt. 19:3-12), money (Luke 12:15-34), and the kingdom of God (Mark 13:1-52).
- (4) He, being sinless in his life, was improperly sentenced as guilty by the religious leaders of his time and was punished by death on the cross. This event, however, was based upon the plan of God, and his death was for the redemption of the sins of the whole human race (Acts 3:13-21; Isa. 53:5-6; 1 Pet. 2:21-25).
- (5) Three days after the crucifixion, Christ was raised from the dead and showed his resurrection body to many of his disciples (Luke 24:25-49; 1 Cor. 15:3-7).

*Jesus teaching touched
on prayer, marriage and
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kingdom of God.*

- (6) After appearing before the disciples for some while, he ascended to heaven, where he is now at the right hand of the seat of God, continuing to intercede for all the saints (Ps. 110:1; Heb. 10:10-14; Rom. 8:31-34).
- (7) In this way, having gained the overwhelming victory over sin, death, and Satan, Christ sat down at the right hand of God as ruler, and is active now to bring about the establishment of the perfect kingdom. Then after completing the kingdom, he will hand it over to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:20-28).

Our Lord's Resurrection, Ascension, and Exaltation

Great importance is given in the Scriptures to our Lord's resurrection. Each of the Gospels report it. The sermons in the book of Acts almost always mention it. Paul explains that by the resurrection Jesus was proved to be God (Rom. 1:4). We are forgiven of our sin by reason of his death, but we are justified before God by his resurrection (Rom. 5). He is the first born of all that will rise from the dead (Col. 1:18). It is the risen Lord who is "revealed" in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1:1-6).

Great importance is given in the Scriptures to our Lord's resurrection.

Jesus Christ ascended to heaven where he is highly exalted (Acts 1:9). Eventually all will bow their knee to him (Phil. 2:9-10). Seated at God's right hand, Christ dispatched God the Holy Spirit (the third Godhead) with God the Father (John 14:16-17; Acts 2:1-42). The Scripture announces his second coming (Acts 1:10; 1 Thess. 4:14-18) which will occur when all the elect people of God will be brought into the grace of salvation by the proclamation of the gospel (Eph. 1:4-14; Acts 13:46-48). When Christ returns to the earth, he will

- (1) give the new resurrection body to all people who are saved by believing in Christ while they were on this earth (Dan. 12:2-3; Matt. 24:30-31; 1 Cor. 15:50-53; 1 Thess. 4:13-18).
- (2) establish the scheme of ruling the world which was created by God, and will hand over the kingdom to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:20-28; Rev. 20-22).

Our Lord Builds His Church

Jesus said he would build his church (Matt. 16:18-19). This group is defined as those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, having received help from the Holy Spirit, and who follow Jesus (1 Pet. 2:21). The Holy Spirit incorporates them into the body of Christ as belonging to

Christ, and thus engages in the task of forming the church, which is the community of believers (John 16:8-15; Eph. 1:13-23; 1 Cor. 12:12-30).

The believers, who have been converted from the old way of life, have started a

The believers, who have been converted from the old way of life, have started a new life. They continue to seek for constant dedication and renewal by the help of the Holy Spirit. They meditate on the living Christ, and worship him (2 Tim. 2:8; Heb. 12:2). They follow Christ in sincere obedience to his commands (John 10:16). Some of these commands are given in Matthew 5–7. These chapters urge God's people to love the enemy; for this reason Christians (though not all) hold that participating in wars is not proper for them (Matt. 5:38-44). In order to bring about reconciliation and peace to human society, it is essential that there be reconciliation with God, as Paul explains (Rom. 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:17-21; Col. 1:22). Therefore, the most prominent and greatest mission of the church is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which can bring reconciliation between humans and God (Matt. 28:18-20).

LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

1. Christ's Deity/Humanity. The early church struggled with the belief that Jesus is both divine and human. Emperor Constantine called a council of the Christian Church which was held in Nicaea (now northwest Turkey) in A. D. 325. The Nicene Creed states: "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things both visible and invisible, and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Only begotten of the Father, that is to say, of the substance of Father, God of God and Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things on earth; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day, went up into the heavens, and is to come again to judge both the quick and the dead; and in the Holy Ghost."

How much of an issue is the deity/humanity of Jesus today? What issue about Jesus Christ should a present-day Council address? What might it say?

Different Christian groups are defined in part by the parts of the Bible they emphasize.

2. Denominational Emphases. Different Christian groups are defined in part by the parts of the Bible they emphasize. The Reformed (Presbyterian) church highlights those parts of the Bible, especially the Old Testament that speak of God's sovereignty. The Lutherans are known for taking Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians as central and to emphasize God's grace and justification by faith. The Pentecostals lift the Book of Acts to high importance. The Anabaptists have stressed the Gospels with their records of the life of Jesus, and give high importance to the Sermon on the Mount. ***Can one avoid giving some sections of the Bible greater priority than others? What has been the effect of giving such major importance to Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7)?***

3. "Christ died for our sins!" Discussion continues on how this statement is to be understood. One way of explaining how it is that Christ died for our sins is to understand something about sin and its effects. Sin is an attitude or behavior that breaks the human relationship of closeness with God.

The result of sin is sometimes fear, sometimes guilt, and sometimes shame. The story of the first sin illustrates all three consequences of the act of sin. When Adam sinned, he feared the consequences that God might inflict, and so he hid himself (Gen. 3:10). Moreover he experienced guilt; someone was at fault. Adam immediately declared innocence and instead blamed his wife Eve (Gen. 3:12). Shame was also part of the incident. It was because of shame that the two in the garden made coverings for themselves (Gen. 3:7, 10).

In Africa and other places people fear their gods. For many, salvation is the removal of their fear of gods.

In Africa and other places people fear their gods. The people are unsure why bad things happen to them. For many, salvation is the removal of their fear of gods. In Europe and America, sin has been explained as bringing guilt. The sacrifices which Israel offered were offered for their guilt. The Bible repeatedly says that in consideration of sacrifice (including right attitudes [cf. Cain, Gen. 4]), God would forgive (Lev. 4:26, 31, 35; 5:10). Paul explains that Christ's death as sacrifice has dealt with the people's guilt (Rom. 5:8-9). Christ's death means that sin is forgiven; guilt is gone (Gal. 3:13-14). Christ's sacrifice has also addressed the fear; believers no longer dread God as a judge, they speak to him as Abba, father (Rom. 8: 15).

In Asia, sin brings shame, more than guilt. Shame makes for a feeling of unworthiness. Christ has come to restore that sense of worth. Sinners who receive Christ's salvation are adopted as sons and daughters in God's family. They have dignity which was lost to them through sin. Various cultures may stress one or more of the effects of sin. The important point is that Christ's death eliminates fear, guilt, and shame brought on by sin.

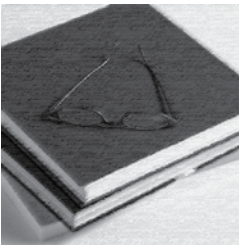


THINKING IT OVER

1. How should Christians deal with Muslims whose scriptures, the Qur'an, acknowledge Christ but speak of him as a prophet and not God? Since Muslims stress that only Allah is God, speaking of Jesus as God is to be guilty of blasphemy.
2. Does Jesus' three-fold ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing have any relevance for his followers today? If yes, what shape should this take given our times and our culture?
3. In Indonesia, Ascension Day is observed as a national holiday. What events, if any, in the life of Jesus are highlighted a) in your culture, b) in your nation, and c) in your church?
4. What emphasis is given Christ's Sermon on the Mount in your conference/church?

5. Discuss your understanding of the concepts of reconciliation and peace which Jesus Christ proclaimed. Consider how those can be applied to our Christian life.

6. What level of priority does or should Christ's second coming have in the preaching in your church and in your personal life style?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Alister McGrath. *Understanding Jesus: Who Jesus Christ Is and Why He Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 184 pp.

C. J. H. Wright. *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992. 256 pp. Christ's identity, his mission, his values, etc.



We Confess:

God the Father sent the Son, Jesus Christ, to the world born of the virgin Mary. Jesus inaugurated the reign of God, proclaiming repentance from sin, announcing the release of the oppressed and good news to the poor, and calling disciples to follow his way as a new community. Jesus responded to the violent evil powers by taking the cross in order to die for the sins of the world and reconcile creation to God. Jesus gained victory over sin, death, and Satan as God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead and exalting him to God's right hand, where he intercedes for the saints and rules forever.

CHAPTER 4

Learning About the Holy Spirit

Arthur Dueck (Brazil)

The Bible teaches that God, the Father is the creator. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior. The Holy Spirit, also God, was sent to be with believers. We can understand language about “father” or “son,” but what does it mean to be a Spirit? In most of the world’s cultures, a spirit is simply a force, some kind of power, something impersonal that acts upon people.

In most of the world’s cultures, a spirit is simply a force, some kind of power, something impersonal that acts upon people.

A STORY

In my early twenties, I was leading Bible study groups of elementary and high school students in a Christian school. One day one of the boys told the group that something special had happened to him. Someone had prayed with him and now he could talk to God in strange tongues. He was really taken by that experience. You could tell it by his enthusiasm. Then he told the group that they could also become special in God’s eyes if they received the Holy Spirit. In the absence of the leader, he taught several boys to speak these strange languages. There was an “aura” of spirituality in them. This made me think: Is this from God?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Spirit’s Role in the Old Testament

- The Spirit was present at creation and gave life to the created beings (Gen. 1:2; 2:7; Ps. 33:6; Job 33:4).

The “Spirit of God” was “God’s personal agent” which often meant that he was (and is) the change agent.

- The “Spirit of God” was “God’s personal agent” which often meant that he was (and is) the change agent. Usually the Spirit of God acts on behalf of the people of Israel (Ps. 104:29-30; Isa. 34:16). In some contexts the Spirit seems to be an impersonal force (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16; Ezek. 2:2; 3:12), but at other times a person (Isa. 63:10).
- God revealed his will to his prophets by means of the Spirit, sometimes through direct revelation or through other means (2 Sam. 23:2; Neh. 9:20; Ps. 143:10; Isa. 61:1-4; 63:10-14).
- The Spirit motivated people to actions, such as to repent from sin, obey God, and walk in justice, etc. (Ps. 51:10-12; Isa. 11:2; Ezek. 11:19);
- The Spirit enabled people to perform tasks for which they had no previous training (Gen. 41:38; Num. 11:17; Judg. 3:10). The empowerment sometimes had little connection with the person’s character (e.g., Balaam, Samson) and was not necessarily permanent (Judg. 14:6; 1 Sam. 16:14; cf. Ps. 51:11);
- The Old Testament awaited a new age of the Spirit (Isa. 32:14-15; Isa. 44:1-5; Ezek. 39:29; Joel 2:28-32; Zech. 12:10). “Then afterward I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28). The Spirit, now poured out on a collective group, would bring great changes to Israel’s life, creating in them the desire to obey God (Jer. 31:31-40; Ezek. 36:24-29).
- In summary, if limited to the Old Testament, we might best describe the Spirit as the “Energizing Spirit” and not as in the New Testament, the “Holy Spirit.” Note his activity in creation (Gen. 1:2), equipping his servants, for example Gideon (Judg. 6:34) and Micah (Mic. 3:8), and restoring the dead to life (Ezek. 37:1-14).

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament

- The Spirit is now clearly depicted as a person. He is not an inferior divinity or an angel. One cannot lie to a force, nor baptize someone in the name of a force. (Matt. 12:28-32; 28:18-20; Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor. 2:10-11; Eph. 4:30).
- Jesus’ life was lived in the presence of the Spirit from the outset. Jesus was begotten by the Spirit (Matt. 1:18). The Spirit came upon him in a visible manner at baptism (Matt. 3:16). Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit for ministry (Luke 4:14; cf. 4:18-21). Jesus expelled demons by the power of the Spirit (Matt. 12:28). Jesus’ victory over the devil during his life, culminating in

Jesus’ life was lived in the presence of the Spirit from the outset.

The Spirit glorifies Jesus (John 14:18-23), calls attention to the work of Christ in redemption, and reminds the people of Christ's words.

his death and resurrection, inaugurated the age of the Spirit.

- The Holy Spirit would be with his disciples forever, so Jesus promised (John 14:16-17). The Spirit glorifies Jesus (John 14:18-23), calls attention to the work of Christ in redemption, and reminds the people of Christ's words (John 14:26). The Spirit is like a spotlight that points toward Jesus, not to himself. The Spirit convicts people concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:7-11). The Spirit empowers his disciples for mission (Acts 1:8).
- The Holy Spirit in the life of the church was marked by his coming upon the congregation at Pentecost. The visible tongues of fire show how the Spirit emphasized Jesus' redemptive work on behalf of all peoples (mission). Peter showed that the Spirit's coming fulfills prophecy (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-21). What so far only could be imagined now became reality: the Spirit did not come only upon specific people, but indwells the life of all those who belong to the community of faith (Act 2:32-33; 1 Cor. 3:16; Gal. 5:25).
- The fruit of the Spirit consists of nine qualities: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). All are reflections of the character of Christ. These qualities appear especially in crisis situations. "Fruit" describes who we "are" as distinguished from what we "do" (gifts). This fruit cannot be self-produced. Rather, the Spirit creates the desire and the power to obey the Word (Phil. 2:13).

The Role of the Spirit in Gifting the Church

The Spirit, himself a gift, also gives gifts (enablements) for the church to accomplish God's work on earth. There are a great variety of gifts, ranging from supernatural enablements to gifts of service (1 Cor. 12:4-11). Some gifts require no development (e.g., tongues, healing), whereas others need to be developed (e.g., leadership, teaching).

Each believer receives at least one gift (1 Cor. 12:7) and is responsible for discovering it and utilizing it to serve Christ and the church.

- Each believer receives at least one gift (1 Cor. 12:7) and is responsible for discovering it and utilizing it to serve Christ and the church;
- The lists of the gifts differ and so are only representative (1 Cor. 12:4-11; 12:28; Rom. 12:6-8; Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Peter 4:10-11). We conclude that there are more gifts than those listed in the texts.
- Having a gift does not mean spiritual authority, or maturity. The gift is given for service, not as a symbol of spiritual status. There is no room for status fights.

- Some spiritual gifts parallel abilities in the secular world (e.g., leadership). This means we should not make too big a difference between spiritual gifts and natural talents.
- The use of the gifts needs to occur upon the foundation of love (the greatest gift), lest believers use them for show and so make for distrust and division (1 Cor. 13).

LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

Paul teaches that to belong to Christ is to have the Spirit of Christ.

1. Baptized/Filled by the Spirit. The receiving of the Spirit is called “baptism” in/by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). Some churches teach that Christians need a new experience with the Spirit after conversion, an experience which might include speaking in strange tongues. Although the Bible mentions some events where this occurred (Acts 8:9-17; 19:1-7), these possibly should be seen as a specific Pentecost experience of special groups of people to indicate that God accepts them in the same manner as he does the Jews. Paul teaches that to belong to Christ is to have the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9; Eph. 1:13-14).

To be filled with the Spirit does not mean “how much I have of the Spirit,” but “how much the Spirit has of me.”

Mennonite Brethren have questioned the rightness of seeking after an “experience” largely for the sake of the experience. Instead, the call to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) is understood as a call to yield increasing areas of one’s life on a daily basis to the control of the Spirit. So, for example, a new believer may struggle with anger or have a habit of using foul language. He or she may not be able to overcome this evil by means of sheer will power. However when this area of life is given over in a very deliberate way, sometimes in the presence of prayer partners and witnesses, the Holy Spirit strengthens the person to overcome the unchristian habit. If you want to have more of the Spirit, submit yourself more to him: read the Bible more, confess your sins, be willing to serve God and other people without recognition, etc. To be filled with the Spirit does not mean “how much I have of the Spirit,” but “how much the Spirit has of me.” Believers can give the Spirit more or less room in their lives.

However, some Mennonite Brethren testify to an experience in which, dissatisfied with their spiritual condition, they took steps to open themselves to God’s spirit by confessing their sin and

asking God's Spirit to control their lives. At least two results followed: First, such a person became more loving and in other ways demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit. Secondly, whereas previously witnessing was a dreaded obligation, there was now a freedom and a joy to share with others, whenever the Spirit prompted.

2. Discerning the Spirits. How can one distinguish between the promptings of the Holy Spirit from other voices? Christians experience urgings or promptings which are not always from God's Spirit but which originate in our human desires. How can God's voice be distinguished from our own voice or that of the tempter, the devil?

Some suggestions: When God's spirit prompts believers, it is in keeping with God's word. As the Christian is immersed in God's word, it will be clear whether or not the inner voice is of God or not. The story of the temptation of Jesus shows how knowledge of the Word of God can help sort out whether a certain "leading" is of God or not (Matt. 4:1-11).

We can and should create a sensitivity to hear what the Spirit tells us, always checking what we believe he is telling us with the Word.

Satan's promptings are often impulsive. The inner voice is impatient; the message is that something is to be done immediately. There is a hurry to it. By contrast, the inner nudgings of the Holy Spirit are deliberate. An impression that a certain action be taken, for example, to speak to someone about a delicate matter, becomes increasingly strong over time.

3. The Holy Spirit in Daily Life. A nine-year old girl in a Christian family asked her grandfather, "How does the Spirit work?" The work of the Spirit is a mystery. The Spirit's work is something like an inner voice (though different than conscience) prompting the believer how to think and act, convicting of sin (John 16:7-11). He guides us especially through the Bible, but also through other brothers and sisters and the inner voice. We can and should create a sensitivity to hear what the Spirit tells us, always checking what we believe he is telling us with the Word. We want to be open to the Spirit, but not toward the spirits. The discernment between them comes from the Word (1 Cor. 14:29).

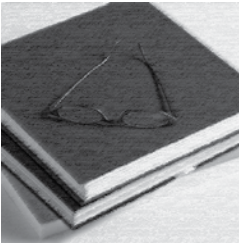
The Spirit may bring to mind individuals who need a visit or a word of comfort. The Spirit empowers, sometimes in a physical way to

endure a difficult situation. The Spirit enables persons for the ministry of teaching, preaching, counseling, or evangelizing. Certainly the Spirit guides in making decisions (cf. Acts 16:7). In the church the Holy Spirit works toward unity (Eph. 4:1-6). The Spirit brought revivals as in Korea (1903), Wales (1904), India (1904, 1907), and in the USA (Azusa Street, 1906). Read again the section "What the Bible Says" to continue the answer. Pay attention to the section on spiritual gifts.



THINKING IT OVER

1. How does your church respond to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit? Is there space for the Spirit (person) or only for what the Spirit does (force)?
2. The gifts of the Spirit should bless the church; however this does not always occur. How can the gifts be used to promote the kingdom of God and bring about unity, instead of divisions, in the church?
3. Would you agree that "being" (fruit of the Spirit) is the foundation for "doing" (gifts of the Spirit)?
4. Does the Spirit have enough room in your life? If the Spirit were given more room, what changes in your life could you expect?
5. Certain cultures, such as Brazil, Africa, and parts of Asia, are preoccupied with "spirits," good and bad. Where and how does the biblical teaching about the Holy Spirit connect with these cultures?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

David Ewert. *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983. 324 pp. By a noted Canadian Mennonite Brethren scholar.

C. J. H. Wright. *Knowing the Holy Spirit Through the Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006. 156 pp. A seasoned evangelical British scholar speaks about the Creating Spirit, the Empowering Spirit, the Prophetic Spirit, etc.



We Confess:

At Pentecost, God sent the Holy Spirit, who had acted in creation, in empowering the prophets, and in inspiring the Scriptures. Through the Spirit, God established the church, the body of Christ, to proclaim God's reign and to give witness to the new creation. The Spirit is poured out on all who receive Christ, baptizing them and sealing them for redemption as God's children. All who believe and confess Jesus as Lord are born anew into Christ. Believers are baptized by water into the new covenant community in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. By grace they are saved through faith to live out God's peace and love in the face of opposing circumstances.

CHAPTER 5

The Church: God's People

Elfriede Verón and Alfred Neufeld (Paraguay)

Martin Luther at the time of the European Reformation (16th century) described the church as the place where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are duly administered.

Jesus announced, "I will build my church (Matt. 16:18). At Pentecost the Holy Spirit birthed the church (Acts 2). The book of Acts tells the story of the church in action. Paul's letters are mostly addressed to individual churches, and even the book of Revelation has messages to the churches (Rev. 2:1-3:22).

Discussion continues on how to think of the church. Martin Luther at the time of the European Reformation (16th century) described the church as the place where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are duly administered. The Anabaptists differed. They held that the church was essentially a covenant community committed to following Jesus.

A STORY

Mr. Rodríguez came to church with fears and prejudices after accepting his family's invitation. The family had recently started attending a Mennonite Brethren Church. He suspiciously observed what was going on. The kindness, smiles, and joy reflected on the people's faces caught his attention. According to the testimony of Mr. Rodríguez, who came from a different religious background, he had never seen or experienced such joy and kindness. This experience led him to return to church and finally to receive Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord. It was the church as a godly community that became a key factor in his conversion.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

A New Creation

When God created the world he pronounced it good. After creating human beings and contemplating once more all his creation, he saw that “indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). But the consequence of Adam and Eve’s disobedience was that sin, death, and condemnation extended to all humanity (Rom. 5:12, 18). Now we human beings live in this age where sin and weakness reigns, but the good news of the gospel consists in the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, has entered our time. And from that moment there exist just two kinds of time: the old time and the new time; the old age and the new age. According to Scripture the new time of the coming of the kingdom of God definitely began with the birth, the life, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. It became visible on the day of Pentecost when God’s Holy Spirit was poured out on his disciples. It was the day when the church was born. It was the day when the first massive baptism of 3000 people from all kinds of cultures, languages, and countries took place (Acts 2:41). Jesus was building his church as he had foretold: “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

In the New Testament we find many and different kinds of teachings about the nature and practices of the church.

God was creating a new humanity: the church. A new creation had started. To this creation belong all those who believe and follow Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). So that is the time in which we are living, the time of the church in which God is eager, because of his grace, to redeem the whole world. It is the last time. After this time, there will be no time anymore. When Christ returns, time will have gone and eternity will be there. When Christ returns, heaven and earth will be gone and there will be one new reality: heaven and earth united in the new creation.

Images of the church

In the New Testament we find many and different kinds of teachings about the nature and practices of the church. The life of this new community in Jerusalem is described (Acts 2: 43-47). Other descriptions of the church use metaphors or images. Here we list only three of these; each emphasizes a different aspect of the church.

God has a people

One of the strongest biblical images for the church is “the people of God.” In that sense the church will always feel linked to faithful Israel of old. The apostle Peter quoted from Hosea. “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:10 NIV). It is by grace and it is a privilege and a great joy to know that we as believers belong to God and to his people. We are part of God’s people throughout the world.

To be God’s people means at least two things.

To be God’s people means at least two things. On the one hand, the church belongs entirely to God as its owner, rule-giver, standard-setter, and identity-provider. On the other hand, the church is a human community, a new people who are learning how to live in this community. Through fellowship among Christians we overcome loneliness and experience strength and comfort in crisis. We also become signs of hope and healing for society. In this community sinners will experience change and acceptance and feel part of a family.

Christ has a body

What does “body” emphasize? According to Paul, the concept of body emphasizes unity in the midst of diversity (1 Cor. 12:12). Each member is different, with different gifts. Each one has his or her own place and function. However, every member is attached to the head, who is Christ. All the members in the body are necessary (vv. 21–22). All care for one another (v.25). All share suffering and joy (v.26).

As the body of Christ, we are called to make Christ visible in the world.

As Christians we are all members of the body of Christ; we belong to Christ, we abide in him and we find life in him. As the body of Christ, we are called to make Christ visible in the world. Everyone is called to be an active and useful member, cooperating with the whole body and the whole project God has assigned to his church. It means that the church always has to point toward Christ, the head.

The Holy Spirit has a temple

Church buildings are not sanctuaries in the literal sense. The Holy Spirit is present anywhere and not bound to special geographical regions or architectural buildings. Buildings are necessary for the gathering of God people, but it is the people of God that are called

“God’s house” (Heb. 3:6 NIV), a “holy temple” (Eph. 2:21 and a “dwelling place in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:22 NIV).

The best thing is that every individual as well as the whole church is inhabited by God’s Holy Spirit.

Church members are “living stones” (1 Pet. 2:5). With these stones God as the master architect builds a spiritual temple. The foundation of the building is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 3:11). This building is not finished yet, thus lacks the beauty and perfection we would like to see; but the Lord keeps on building his church. The best thing is that every individual as well as the whole church is inhabited by God’s Holy Spirit, and that makes all the difference (1 Cor. 3:16).

The Church’s Call to Repentance and Reconciliation

The people of God who have experienced the love and mercy of God encourage everyone towards repentance and conversion. When people asked the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost what they should do, Peter responded, “Repent, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Salvation is God’s gift in response to a sinner’s repentance. Salvation is a heavenly thing; angels in heaven rejoice, when one sinner repents (Luke 15:10). The name of every repentant sinner who has experienced new birth and new creation is written in heaven’s book of life (Rev. 21:27).

Salvation consists of reconciliation between God and humankind.

Salvation consists of reconciliation between God and humankind. That is, the reconciled person is integrated into God’s will and identity, as well as his people. Like Christ, so also the church becomes an agent of reconciliation. The Lord has given his own the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). Of course this reconciliation with God brings with it reconciliation with fellow believers as well as love for neighbors and even enemies. The reconciled person also has a special love for those who reject God’s offer of grace and new life.

Results of Reconciliation

Righteousness. Already in the Old Testament God revealed his will to his people: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). Righteousness is a

Righteousness is a basic demand in the Old Testament.

basic demand in the Old Testament (Ps. 15:1-5). Jesus, in turn, re-emphasizes it when he accuses the Pharisees and scribes of having neglected the weightier matters of the law, which are justice, mercy, and faith (Matt. 3:23). The demand of Jesus is for a righteous inner character and for right actions in all relationships. God is a righteous God (John 17:25); in grace he justifies the repentant sinner. Persons so justified should live righteously and promote righteousness.

Faithfulness. Why emphasize faithfulness? Jesus never promised a life without problems and suffering. Indeed he said, "In this world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world" (John 16:33). Yet Jesus calls the church to be faithful in the midst of suffering. His message to the church at Smyrna was, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). This church was already a faithful church; there are no negative things against her. Yet Jesus predicts that they will experience suffering, tribulation, and poverty. They will be tested, but he encourages them, "Be faithful." Suffering has been experienced by the church, including the Anabaptist and Mennonite Church. Christ suffered. He did it for us, but also modelled how to meet suffering. "When he was abused, he did not return abuse, when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23).

Suffering has been experienced by the church, including the Anabaptist and Mennonite Church.

The willingness to suffer, being faithful to God and to his church in spite of suffering, follows from genuine repentance and conversion. Suffering draws persons more immediately into the circle of Christ's fellowship (Phil. 3:10). There are rewards (Rom. 8:18). The Lord has prepared for his faithful people wonderful things to come, including eventually getting a new eternal perfect body. In the Lord's presence there will be singing, joy, and worship.

LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

1. Being a Show Case of God's New Age.

The church is God's new creation, God's alternative to the ways of this world. The church is the representative and showcase of God's new age, of God's new times, of God's new kingdom. Heavenly things happen in the church, because God's will is being done there. The first heavenly thing that happens in the church and through the

Heavenly things happen in the church, because God's will is being done there.

church is the fact that people get saved. People are transformed. They experience God's forgiveness. Broken marriages get to be restored. Violent people become meek and sociable. Former enemies become reconciled. Those addicted to vices and pleasures get free and become service oriented. Those dominated by materialism and the love for money and success become generous and share in an unselfish way what they are and what they possess.

Maybe you say: "This sounds too good to be true."

Maybe you say: this sounds too good to be true. Actually you are right. Sometimes there is not much heaven to see in our churches. Sometimes it is even tough to stay within the church because of so many things that sadden and discourage us. But that does not change the realities the way God sees them. The church is God's agent of transformation and reconciliation. The church is weak and imperfect. But the Holy Spirit is strong. When we are humble and submit to him, the fruit of the Spirit will be manifested: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). We will be a blessing to our families, church members, classmates, and all those around us.

2. Acknowledging Weakness

Menno Simons, after whose leadership and life witness our churches are named, usually felt himself to be a very weak man. The churches he was leading were quite weak and had many problems. Menno belonged to the renewal movement of the Anabaptist Reformation in the early 16th century of continental Europe. At that time the Christian church had almost completely identified with general society and worldly ways of superstition, of abuse of power, and folk religion. Bible knowledge was largely absent.

God's Holy Spirit breathed new life into the church through leaders such as Menno Simons and others.

God's Holy Spirit breathed new life into the church through leaders such as Menno Simons and others. In the following 500 years the Anabaptist church had to rediscover again and again, how weak and vulnerable it was, completely dependant on God's grace and the renewing work of his Spirit. When in 1860 the Mennonite Brethren Church began as a renewal movement within the larger Anabaptist tradition, again the law of strength in weakness was evident. The church is strong, in as far as it holds to God's vision for the church.

But the church always must keep humble, knowing that till the return of Christ it has not yet reached the goal and is not yet perfect.

A renewed and vital church is often at odds with the current culture.

3. Experiencing Renewal

The Anabaptists rediscovered in the Bible God's vision for the church, as well as God's way for personal renewal. In 1525 in Zurich they practiced the first adult believer's baptism. They held that every follower of Christ first has to experience personal repentance, new birth, and personal faith in the redeeming grace of God, before visibly being included into the believer's church community through baptism. In 1527 they wrote their first confession of faith. In it they called for a church that would renounce sin and power abuse and be committed to following Christ. These radical attitudes brought oppression and persecution to the Anabaptists. Devout leaders encouraged them to be faithful, and helped them to distance themselves from behaviors and people who would dishonor God. A renewed and vital church is often at odds with the current culture.

4. Loving and Sharing Generously with Those in Need.

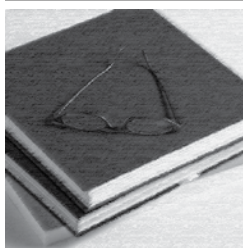
The result of having experienced the love of God is to return love. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Love is the sign of true Christianity (John 13:35). Our love to the Lord is expressed by loving the brethren and friends (John 15:12-13) and by loving our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:27). But our love extends to the poor and needy, and even to our enemies (Matt. 5:44). Not paying attention to the poor or dishonoring the poor by showing partiality to the rich is a sin and transgression of the law of love (James 2:1-9). Love is selfless service. The church, the beneficiary of God's love, is called to be a service community. Service is needed within the Christian community, because one already finds many needs there. But even more, the church is sent out to serve the needs of the world. The church is there to make a difference for good in society.

The church, the beneficiary of God's love, is called to be a service community.



THINKING IT OVER

1. In our daily life, what does it mean that Christ is the head and we are members of the body of Christ?
2. Currently, why is it necessary, in a world of plurality and relativism to emphasize the message of reconciliation between God and human beings?
3. How can we live and promote righteousness in an environment dominated by lies, corruption, and bribes?
4. "The purposes of the church are: worship, fellowship, nurture, service, and witness." Do you agree? Should anything else be added? Which of these characterizes your church?
5. In your country is the Mennonite Brethren Church weak or strong? Conforming to the culture or challenging the culture? Renewed or in need of renewal?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Rodney Clapp. *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996. 251 pp. Calls Christians to reclaim their heritage as unapologetic followers of The Way.

David Ewert. *The Church, The New People of God*. Abbotsford, BC: Heartbeat Productions, 2004. 144 pp. Discusses images of the church, its membership, worship, unity, and mission.

Walfred J. Fahrer. *Building on the Rock: A Biblical Vision of Being Church Together From an Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995. Designed for leadership and other small groups to study the church as primary alternative community.

David Watson. *I Believe in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979. 368 pp. Sturdy biblical study. Written for theologians and laity.



We Confess:

The church is God's new creation, agent of transformation, called to model God's design for humanity. The people of God call everyone to repentance and conversion, seek to promote righteousness, are faithful in suffering, share generously with those in need. They act as agents of reconciliation to reverse the alienation brought on by sin. In the Lord's Supper the church proclaims the Lord's death and celebrates the new covenant.

The new creation will be completed when Christ returns. All who belong to Christ will rise with a new body while Satan and those who have rejected Christ will face eternal condemnation. The new heaven and new earth will live under God's rule in everlasting peace and joy.



Part 2

*How Do
Mennonite
Brethren
Respond to
God's Purpose?*

CHAPTER 6

The Mennonite Brethren Story

I. P. Asheervadam (India) and Peter Klassen (USA)

The origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church goes back to the great awakening among the Mennonites in 19th century Russia. The Mennonite Brethren Church as an independent branch of the Mennonite community was founded in south Russia in that century. Historically it is connected to the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century. In the founding document adopted on January 6, 1860, the leaders of the new movement had a concluding and significant declaration: “. . . in all other points of our confession, we are in full agreement with Menno Simons.”¹ This historical connection and theological identification of the Mennonite Brethren Church with the 16th-century Anabaptist-Mennonite movement has remained a basic characteristic of Mennonite Brethren confessions ever since.

Anabaptists held that the Scriptures taught that baptism was for those who had made a conscious decision to follow Christ, and not for infants.

THE ANABAPTIST MOVEMENT AND THE BIRTH OF THE MENNONITE CHURCH

The Anabaptist movement arose in the first half of the sixteenth century in reaction to Lutheran and Zwinglian Reformations. The Anabaptists welcomed these reforms but understood them to be incomplete and partial. Anabaptists held that the Scriptures taught that baptism was for those who had made a conscious decision to follow Christ, and not for infants. Another of their beliefs was that church and state should be separate. They also

held that the believing community and not the state should deal with doctrinal beliefs.

Because of their view of baptism, these believers were called “Anabaptists,” from a Greek word meaning “rebaptizers.” The Anabaptists, of course, did not teach rebaptism, but rather that baptism was for the believer. They preferred simply to be called brothers and sisters. Later many of them came to be identified as “Mennonites” after their leader Menno Simons, who joined the movement in A.D. 1536.

Menno Simons was an ordained Roman Catholic priest living in the Netherlands. One day while he was celebrating Mass, he had serious doubts about the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. In search of an answer to the questions raised in his mind, he decided to turn to the scriptures. After careful study he became convinced that the church was wrong in its teaching that Christ was physically present in the Lord’s Supper. Menno Simons became a diligent student of the scriptures and a genuine biblicist in his theology.² He broke with the Roman Catholic Church in a public statement on January 30, 1536. For the next 25 years Menno provided outstanding and heroic leadership. Many of those who identified with this view of the scriptures, although known as Mennonites,³ were subjected to the harsh treatment that many states prescribed for Anabaptists, and so, as *The Martyrs Mirror* records, many Mennonites were killed because of their beliefs.

THE MENNONITE MIGRATIONS AND THE BIRTH OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

Mennonites Move to Russia

How had Mennonites come to live in Russia? The story of Mennonite migration to Russia goes back to a time when Catherine II, Empress of Russia, extended invitations to Mennonites and others to settle in her newly-conquered territories north of the Black Sea. Already by the middle of the 16th century a number of Mennonites had found a new home in the Vistula Delta, in the northern part of Poland. In the latter part of the 18th century, however, this part of Poland had become part of the expanding Prussia. This state reversed certain policies, such as exemption from military service and acquisition of more land, that had

The story of Mennonite migration to Russia goes back to a time when Catherine II, Empress of Russia, extended invitations to Mennonites and others to settle in her newly-conquered territories north of the Black Sea.

been granted to Mennonites by the earlier Polish rulers. So some Mennonites began to look for new settlement opportunities. Such an opportunity came when Catherine II, Empress of Russia, invited settlers to come to newly-acquired regions in Russia. Numerous Mennonites from Danzig, the Vistula Delta and other parts of what was now Prussia took advantage of this offer, and so in the late 18th century Mennonites began to settle in the Russian Empire. Soon Mennonite colonies and villages dotted the countryside. The new settlers were given land, religious freedom, and numerous economic incentives. In addition, they were promised exemption from military service.⁴

Under these favorable conditions the first large group of immigrants, more than 340 families, arrived in Russia and settled in the district of Khortiza in the province of Ekaterinoslav. The next large group comprising more than 360 families arrived in Molochna, which was located approximately 75 miles south-east of the Khortiza settlement. Further migrations to the two Mennonite colonies, as well as to new areas in Russia continued until the middle of the 19th century. Slowly and steadily these Mennonites settled in their new homes and flourished. At the same time, some of them began to feel a spiritual vacuum.

Revival in Russia

In this context, Edward Wüst, a Lutheran priest serving a nearby separatist Lutheran congregation, became friends with some of the Mennonite leaders. He was invited to conduct a series of meetings. His sermons stressed repentance, a conversion experience, and holy living. There were also Bible study groups and prayer cells, one of which began to meet regularly for Bible study and prayer on Saturday afternoons in order not to conflict with the regular Sunday worship services. This group later came to be known as “Brethren” since they addressed each other as “brother.” Even after Wüst’s death in 1859, this group continued to meet. Finally when Mennonite leaders expressed their disapproval of what they regarded as separatist tendencies, the members decided to part from the other Mennonites. In a written statement explaining why they were taking this action, the new group described the leaders of the Mennonite Church and its members as being insufficiently

When Mennonite leaders expressed their disapproval of what they regarded as separatist tendencies, the members decided to part from the other Mennonites.

“spiritual.”⁵ The formal separation was inspired by the pietistic teachings of Wüst, a desire for systematic Bible study, and a hope to recapture the spiritual emphases of the early Anabaptists.

Early leaders of the new movement made it clear that their actions were not motivated by doctrinal issues or by power struggles, but rather by a desire for spiritual renewal. Writings of early leaders that describe the rise of the new movement emphasize the quest for a deeper spirituality. This is also reflected in some later writings, such as those of Cornelius Unruh, one of the early missionaries to India. His article, “The Mennonite Brethren in Russia” published in 1921 in *Suvarthamani*, the India Mennonite Brethren monthly magazine, mention that (before 1860) these Mennonites lacked adequate pastoral care and nurture. Disputes and quarrels helped to create dissatisfaction, and some spoke of a deep vacuum in their spiritual life. Benjamin Bekker, one of the founding members of the Mennonite Brethren Church, saw a parallel between the Mennonites and Wüst’s church: “This separate [Lutheran] group had no pastor or clergyman to look after their spiritual welfare, although they were provided with church administrators and school teachers who read prepared sermons on Sundays and administered baptisms to the children. ... A few of them had a great longing for a shepherd of their souls.”⁶ John A. Toews comments, “The early Brethren regarded their withdrawal from the existing Mennonite Churches not as a retreat from true Mennonitism, but as a return to it.”⁷ Thus the Russian Mennonite context paved the way for the emergence of the Mennonite Brethren Church in such a manner that the new movement viewed itself as being in full harmony with the teachings of Menno Simons.⁸

Disputes and quarrels helped to create dissatisfaction, and some spoke of a deep vacuum in their spiritual life.

Pietistic influences are evident in the emphasis Mennonite Brethren placed on biblicism and spirituality.

A little more than a decade after their beginning in Russia, some of the Mennonite Brethren, as well as other Mennonites started to emigrate to North America, especially to the Midwest of the United States. After World War I, a significant number went to Canada. It is estimated that more than 50,000 Mennonites migrated to North America between 1873 and 1950.⁹

MENNONITE BROTHERS MISSION AND FELLOWSHIPS

Evangelization in Russia

Pietistic influences are evident in the emphasis Mennonite Brethren placed on biblicism and spirituality. Similarly, evangelistic impulses have been strong among the Mennonite Brethren from the beginning, even though Russian decrees warned Mennonites not to seek converts among the Russian Orthodox. In the early 1860s several leading brethren were called before Russian authorities to answer charges of having attempted to convert Russian laborers. Despite such warnings, some Mennonite Brethren continued evangelism among their Russian neighbors. Gerhard Wieler was imprisoned in 1865 for baptizing converts of Orthodox background in Russia.¹⁰ Soon missionary efforts were expanded, so that by 1889 the Russian Mennonite Brethren Church with a membership of only 1800 had sent a missionary couple to India.

Missionaries in India

In 1889, less than three decades after its founding, the new Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia sent Abraham Friesen and his wife as missionaries to Hyderabad, India. The success of John Everet Clough, an American Baptist missionary in Ongole, attracted the young Friesen to opt for India and the Telugu region.¹¹ A lack of resources, however, prevented the young Russian Mennonite Brethren Church from opening its own field, and so Friesen began his work in collaboration with the American Baptists. Soon the young Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia sent some half-dozen missionary couples to meet the growing needs of the mission. They established stations at Suryapet, Bohingir and Janagam and carried on their mission work until the outbreak of World War I. After the war, due to the difficulties in receiving funds from Russia, this missionary effort was joined with that of the Baptists. By then they had a membership of between seven and eight thousand people in the above three mission stations.

This first American Mennonite Brethren mission in India experienced remarkable success and eventually grew to be the largest conference among the Indian Mennonites and probably also the largest in the Global Mennonite Brethren family.

Although the Russian Mennonite Brethren mission begun by Abraham Friesen did not last a long time, this effort was an important contribution in encouraging and inviting the American

Mennonite Brethren Church to come to India and establish their own mission work.¹² This first American Mennonite Brethren mission in India experienced remarkable success and eventually grew to be the largest conference among the Indian Mennonites and probably also the largest in the Global Mennonite Brethren family. Today's Indian Mennonite Brethren leadership feels that this success is due to the strong teachings by the Mennonite Brethren, their emphasis on faith, and their commitment to mission and evangelism. In this development, the North American Mission Board and Indian national leadership have played key roles.

Global Missions

It has been said that the early Mennonite Brethren were uneasy in their soul if they were not engaged in mission and evangelism. Therefore they developed vibrant missionary programs and gave high priority to such work. As a result, today (2007) Mennonite Brethren churches are to be found in more than 20 countries of the world. Leadership has come from the North American mission agency founded in 1878 in Hillsboro, Kansas, currently known as Mennonite Brethren Missions/Service International (MBMSI). This agency, committed to carrying out Christ's command to "disciple all nations," provides services in more than 27 countries. Some of the countries where the Mennonite Brethren founded churches are India (1889 onwards), China (1901), Congo-Zaire (1912), Paraguay (1935), Brazil (1940), Colombia (1945), Japan (1950), Austria & Germany (1953), Panama (1958), Spain (1976), Peru (1996), and Nicaragua (1997). Remarkably the largest conferences are located in India and Congo.

In 2004, ICOMB prepared a Confession of Faith for the Global Mennonite Brethren, which has been adopted by most of the Mennonite Brethren conferences.

At the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1990, the International Committee of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) was officially launched. It was designed to encourage and strengthen the fellowship among the global Mennonite Brethren Conferences. In 2004 ICOMB prepared a Confession of Faith for the Global Mennonite Brethren, which has been adopted by the Mennonite Brethren conferences. In 1999, ICOMB organized an International Conference of Men-

nonite Brethren held in Kansas, USA, to celebrate 100 years of Mennonite Brethren Missions. In 2005, ICOMB appointed its first Executive Secretary, Victor Wall, president of the Paraguay German Mennonite Brethren Conference. In June 2007, in collaboration with MBMSI, Fresno Pacific University and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, ICOMB organized a historic global consultation on higher education in Fresno, California. Thus ICOMB, renamed as “International Community of Mennonite Brethren” is growing from strength to strength.

Statistics

Membership statistics shown here were compiled by MBMSI / ICOMB (2007). The dates for the entry into these countries, where appropriate, is shown in parentheses.

Members Conferences of ICOMB

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------|
| Angola | 4,550 |
| Austria (1953)..... | 416 |
| Brazil (1940) | 6,000 |
| Canada..... | 36, 830 |
| Colombia (1945)..... | 1,700 |
| Congo (1912)..... | 91,174 |
| Germany (AMBD) | 1,480 |
| Germany (GTG) | 6,259 |
| Germany-Bavaria | 300 |
| India (1889)..... | 93,992 |
| Japan (1950)..... | 1,888 |
| Mexico | 175 |
| Panama (1958)..... | 600 |
| Paraguay-German (1935)..... | 1,769 |
| Paraguay-Spanish (1935) | 2,900 |
| Peru (1996) | 800 |
| Portugal..... | 40 |
| Uruguay..... | 209 |
| United State..... | 25,000 |

Mennonite Brethren Churches (Frontier Mission):

North Africa, Burkina Faso, Namibia, South Africa, Thailand, Eastern Asia

Countries Partnering with MBMSI (Mennonite-Related)

Argentina..... 75

Ethiopia

Former Soviet Union

(Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine)... 4,000

Indonesia..... 13,000

Lithuania 150

Philippines

Spain 75

Venezuela 75

Total membership (2007) 293, 457

Mennonite Brethren Confessions of Faith

The early Anabaptists of Switzerland expressed their faith in a document known as the Schleithem Confession. Michael Sattler was the primary author of the seven articles, ratified on February 24, 1527, during an assembly of Anabaptists in Schleithem, a village on the Swiss-German border. This created a “brotherly union” among the brethren. Soon these articles were copied and circulated extensively among the Swiss and south German Anabaptist communities. The Dutch Mennonites also wrote many confessions. Later these confessions were used by individuals, local churches, and church conferences for apologetic purposes, and for a witness to others. They also served to bring greater unity among diverse Anabaptist-Mennonite groups. Sometimes these confessions were used as written statements of Mennonite faith in new lands they entered.

The early Mennonite Brethren, with their claim to stand in the faith tradition of Menno, at first used the confessions of faith then used by Mennonites in Russia. Then, in an effort to show some distinctives, Abraham Unger, one of the Mennonite Brethren leaders, in 1876 wrote a new confession. In the view of other leaders, this document reflected a distinctly Baptist

The early Mennonite Brethren, with their claim to stand in the faith tradition of Menno, at first used the confessions of faith then used by Mennonites in Russia.

The writers expressly noted that this new formulation of belief stood squarely with the great historic doctrinal statements of the church.

understanding of belief and practice, and so it was not fully accepted. Instead, Mennonite Brethren in 1898 appointed a study commission, and in 1900 a new confessional statement was drafted. It was circulated to the various MB churches in Russia, received strong affirmation, and was published in 1902 (in German) as the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith. The compilers asserted that this confession was in harmony with earlier Mennonite confessions. Special mention was made of believer's baptism, a church free of state control, and the traditional Mennonite rejection of participation in war. The writers also expressly noted that this new formulation of belief stood squarely with the great historic doctrinal statements of the church, such as the Apostles' Creed (see appendix). The document was first printed in Halbstadt, Russia, in 1902, then later adopted by Mennonite Brethren in the United States and republished.¹³

A major revision of the confession was completed in 1975 and published in 1976. This confession was intended to stand in continuity with the 1902 Mennonite Brethren Confession and to express the doctrinal beliefs in contemporary language. In some instances, new interpretive statements were added and sections restructured for greater clarity. The statement on love and non-resistance specifically urged alternative instead of military service.

In 1999, after a decade of writing, consulting and revising, a substantially modified and completely rewritten Confession of Faith was adopted by the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches in North America. The confession is gender-sensitive, using "humans" instead of "man," and noting that God is neither male nor female. The various doctrinal articles are given clearer definition and biblical interpretation. In other instances, new articles, such as the one on "Christianity and Other Faiths," reflect a sensitivity to changing realities in our contemporary world. A commentary and a liturgical version of the confession add to its practical usefulness in a congregational setting. That confession was submitted to ICOMB for approval.

The confessional statements noted above stand in doctrinal harmony with each other. At the same time they reflect an awareness of changing societies and cultures. The Russian set-

ting of the 1902 confession was very different from that of 1999, when representatives from Canada and the United States created a confession that took note of the North American context. In recent years the Mennonite Brethren churches in Germany and Japan, for example, have produced their own confessions for their contexts. The new confession of faith drawn up by ICOMB in 2004 is deliberately designed to speak to a Mennonite Brethren community of faith from a global perspective.



THINKING IT OVER

1. How does the Mennonite Brethren story compare with “God’s story” (chapter 1)? In what way are such comparisons helpful?
2. What reasons for thanksgiving to God do you see in the story? What ideas have you for celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of the MB Church in 2010?
3. Emphasis on active mission and evangelism has characterized Mennonite Brethren in the past. Does it still in the country where you live?
4. What benefits do you see for having a Confession of Faith?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Abe J. Dueck. *Moving Beyond Secession. Defining Russian Mennonite Brethren Mission and Identity, 1872-1922*. Winnipeg, MB: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1997. 179 pp. By a Canadian historian.

Lynn Jost and Connie Faber. *Family Matters : Discovering the Mennonite Brethren*. Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2002. 131pp. Includes a succinct history section.

John A. Toews. *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Pilgrims and Pioneers*. Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, 1975. 513 pp. A thorough account by a recognized scholar.

Paul Toews and Kevin Enns-Rempel. (Eds.) *For Everything a Season. An Informal History*. Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2002. 188 pp. An attractive coffee-table book with excellent photos, a readable text, charts and documents.

ENDNOTES

1. Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Trans. D. E. Pauls and A. E. Janzen; Hillsboro, KS: The Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1973), p 46.
2. J.A.. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), p. 15.
3. P.M.Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia: 1789-1910* (Fresno, CA.: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), p.15.
4. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, p. 8.
5. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, p. 43.
6. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, pp. 23-24.

7. Toews, *Pilgrims and Pioneers*, p. 4.
8. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, p. 46. See also p. 43: "We, the undersigned, by the Grace of God see the corruption of the whole Mennonite Bruderschaft (brotherhood), and cannot, for the sake of the Lord and our conscience, participate in it any longer For these reasons we herewith are completely severing ourselves from the corrupt church ..."
9. Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), p. 206.
10. Wilbert R. Shenk, *By Faith They Went Out: Mennonite Mission 1850-1999*, (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1999), p. 69.
11. Peter Penner, *The Russians, North Americans and Telugus: The Mennonite Brethren Mission in India* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 1997), p. 4.
12. Abraham Friesen on his first furlough during 1897-99 went to Russia and then to America, where he played an important role in encouraging the American Mennonite Brethren Church to start the mission work. In fact there was considerable interest among the Mennonite Brethren churches in America for the foreign mission work as early as 1883.
13. See, H.F. Toews "Foreword," *Confession of Faith of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1917).

CHAPTER 7

People of the Bible

David Ewert (Canada)

The Mennonite Brethren Church emerged from within the wider Mennonite community in South Russia in 1860. From the beginning, the leaders encouraged all its members to obey the Word of God. In this way they imitated their 16th century forebears, the Anabaptists, who were known as “radical Bible readers.” Today, more than a century later, that commitment to the sacred Scriptures remains. Mennonite Brethren confess that the Scriptures are their supreme authority in both doctrine and practice.

STORIES

In India a Hindu from the Brahmin (the highest) caste taught the Telegu language to the American missionaries. The book used for this language training was the Bible. In reading the Bible while helping the missionaries learn the language, this Hindu began to think seriously about the Bible’s message. He became a believer and was converted. R.R.K. Murthy became a well-known evangelist, not only in the Mennonite Brethren community but beyond. The Word of God is God’s means to bring conversion.

Loyalty to the Word of God can be expressed in both word and deed in a variety of ways.

Loyalty to the Word of God can be expressed in both word and deed in a variety of ways. Let me illustrate! At the beginning of the 20th century, the German New Testament scholar, Adolf Schlatter, was invited to join the theological faculty in Berlin. The delegation that came to interview him asked whether it was true that he “stood on the Word of God” (a position not taken for granted at that time). Schlatter replied: “No, gentlemen, I stand under the Word of God.” To stand “under” God’s word is to confess that the scriptures are authoritative.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Authority of the Bible.

Jesus Christ underscored the authority of Scripture when he said, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 20:34). When tempted, Jesus used the authority of Scripture by saying “It is written” to rebuke Satan (Matt. 4:1-11). When the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, Jesus cited the authority of Genesis (2:24). Though this Genesis statement is not a report of God speaking, Jesus regarded that written word as authoritative (Matt 19:3-9).

Our conscience functions in keeping with our experiences, convictions, and upbringing.

There are those who say that every believer should be guided by his or her conscience. To have a good conscience is, of course, very important. The apostle Paul knew of people who had cast their good conscience overboard and suffered shipwreck in their faith (1 Tim. 1:19). Our conscience functions in keeping with our experiences, convictions, and upbringing. It varies from person to person. The apostle Paul claimed to have a good conscience (1 Cor. 4:4), but, he admits, “I am not thereby justified.”

God in his grace has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth (John 16:13). But when we ask how the Spirit guides God’s children, we are once again pushed back to the Scriptures. The Word of God and the Spirit of God are not at odds with each other. The Spirit guides believers by the written Word of God. If that were not so, individual believers might claim to be led by the Spirit to do things that are clearly contrary to God’s will.

The Bible is to be studied in the context of the community of faith.

But even when the scriptures are held to be the final authority for Christians, individual believers will understand some of the teachings of the Bible differently from other brothers and sisters. For this reason the Bible is to be studied in the context of the community of faith. Our understanding of the Word of God needs testing in dialogue with other Bible readers. Even the preaching of the word of God when God’s people are gathered must be tested by the Scriptures. “Do not despise the words of prophets,” writes Paul, “but test everything, hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess. 5:20, 21).

Mennonite Brethren believe that the books of the Bible are inspired by God, and that God continues to speak through this written word.

Mennonite Brethren believe that the books of the Bible are inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21), and that God continues to speak through this written word. The claims that the word of God is a light (Ps. 119:105) or even a sword (Heb. 4:12) have about them a ring of authority.

The Written Scriptures

God in his mercy made himself known to us sinful and lost human beings. God chose prophets and apostles to receive and record his revelations, and to spread the good news of salvation. Often they shared God's word orally. Later their messages were recorded. In the fullness of time God spoke to humanity through his Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2).

God chose prophets and apostles to receive and record his revelations, and to spread the good news of

The books of the Old Testament were written in Hebrew (some parts in Aramaic). The apostles wrote about Jesus' mighty deeds and marvelous teachings in the Greek language, since that was the language in the Mediterranean area where they lived. Despite the years and the climate, numerous copies of the originals have been preserved. Before the time of printing in the 15th century, the books of the Bible were copied and re-copied by hand, and so are called "manuscripts." The Hebrew books, of which we have fewer copies, were copied very carefully, as illustrated by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1947, at Qumran near the Dead Sea, many scripture fragments of Old Testament books were found, some as old as 200 B.C. Most striking of all is the entire scroll of Isaiah. By the end of the first century of the Christian era, all the books of the Bible had been written.

The Translated Scriptures

Early missionaries like Paul did not need to learn new languages as they proclaimed the good news throughout the Roman empire. The vast majority of people in the Greco-Roman world spoke Greek. The Old Testament had already been translated into Greek by Jews in Alexandria, prior to the time of Christ (it is called the Septuagint), and New Testament books were originally also written in Greek. However, on the borders of the Roman world lived people who spoke other languages, and Christian missionaries began to translate the Scriptures into old Latin and ancient Syriac (spoken in the land which

is modern Iraq). In the Nile delta in Egypt Greek was well known, but farther up the river Coptic dialects were spoken, and that called for Coptic Bible translations. Even farther to the south, Ethiopia also received the word of God in its language. North of the empire lived the Armenians, the Georgians, and the Goths, all of whom received the scriptures in their own languages by the 4th century.

It wasn't until the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century that the Bible was rendered into German, French, Dutch, English, Spanish, Italian, and other tongues.

Jerome's 4th century Latin Vulgate ruled the western Latin-speaking church in the Middle Ages. It wasn't until the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century that the Bible was rendered into German, French, Dutch, English, Spanish, Italian, and other tongues. Then another wave of Bible translation came as missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries carried the gospel to the ends of the earth.

At the beginning of the Mennonite Brethren Church the language was German, and the translation used was primarily the 16th century German translation of Martin Luther. Those who emigrated to North America eventually read the Scriptures in English translations. Those who emigrated to South America adopted Spanish and Portuguese translations. With missionary efforts widening, the Scriptures today are read by Mennonite Brethren in 46 countries in languages including Kituba (Africa), Telegu (India), and Japanese.

LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

People do not all interpret the Bible alike. Why is this?

1. Different Lenses. Bible readers come to the scriptures with different pre-understandings. They see God's word through the lens of their own experiences, attitudes, prejudices, convictions and expertise. In one sense this is unavoidable, but Bible students must be conscious of this reality. Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian, writes: "Because I am not an angel but a human being, my perspectives are limited. They are European and Protestant, western and middle class; they are out of the 20th century and, finally, they are determined by my personal experiences and limitations."

At a Bible conference the participants, African leaders and western missionaries, studied the story of Joseph. The question was asked:

Bible readers come to the scriptures with different pre-understandings.

what is the most significant lesson that can be derived from these accounts? The missionaries generally agreed that the basic message was that wherever Joseph went, he remained true to his God. The African leaders saw it differently. They suggested that regardless of where Joseph went, he never forgot his family.

We need not imitate the cultural forms in which God's word was originally given.

2. Cultural Wrappings. Bible readers do not always distinguish between the message of the Bible and its cultural wrappings. God's earlier revelation was given to people with a Semitic (Hebrew) culture. His final revelation in Jesus Christ was given in a Hellenistic (Greek) culture. The world of the Bible is not our world. We need not imitate the cultural forms in which God's word was originally given.

For example, Christians are exhorted to greet one another with the holy kiss (1 Pet. 5:14; 1 Thess. 5:26). But the form of greeting varies according to one's culture: a handshake, a hug, the rubbing of noses. The apostles did not introduce a new form of greeting; they stressed that the greeting be "holy." Similarly, when Paul asks the Corinthian women to wear a head covering he wasn't introducing a new custom (1 Cor. 11: 4-7). Rather he wanted Christian women to respect the proper customs of their society, lest the church come into disrepute.

When biblical picture language is used we must ask what biblical truth is conveyed by the imagery in question.

3. Literal or Figurative. Bible readers may disagree on what is literal and what is figurative. For example, when Paul exhorts the Corinthians to build with gold, silver, and precious stones, rather than with wood, hay, and straw (1 Cor. 3:12), he does not mean that in the literal sense. What he is saying is, that our work here on earth must be the kind that will pass God's fiery judgment. Wood, hay, and straw are the kind of materials that fire can destroy. When biblical picture language is used we must ask what biblical truth is conveyed by the imagery in question. The truth must be taken literally, but not the figure of speech.

4. Interpretation and Application. Bible readers do not always differentiate between interpretation and application. A biblical text has essentially one unchangeable meaning. The reader must capture the original meaning, and then apply that truth to his or

her life. The meaning remains constant, but the application may vary. When John the Baptist, for example, told his disciples, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30), that saying has a specific meaning in that historical context. However, when we read these lines today, we may say to ourselves: Christ must have greater prominence in our lives and we must grow in humility.

5. Literary Forms. Bible readers do not always distinguish between the literary genres of the Bible such as narrative, prophecy, poetry, gospel, letter or apocalyptic. We cannot treat these different forms of expression in the same way. Wisdom literature, such as we have in the book of Proverbs, cannot be treated in the same way as a letter of Paul, the apostle.

6. Wider Contexts. Bible readers sometimes fail to observe the wider context of a particular biblical passage. Words have meaning only in context. For example, the word “spirit” in 1 Corinthians 2, has several different meanings in that chapter. Paul’s proclamation of the gospel was a “demonstration of Spirit and power” (2:4). Here clearly the Holy Spirit is meant. But later he speaks of the spirit within a human being (2:11). In the same context Paul mentions “the spirit of the world” (2:12). In each of these passages the word “spirit” has a different meaning, depending on its context.

Sentences and paragraphs also have contexts. We cannot simply pluck a verse out of the Bible and say, “This is what the Bible teaches.” Surely, when the writer of Ecclesiastes says, “The fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same” (3:19), we cannot say that the Bible teaches that there is no life after death. Sometimes the overall purpose of a biblical book helps us to understand the individual chapters. For example, if it is recognized that Revelation is a book of comfort addressed to suffering churches, it will be easier to understand, than if it is looked upon as a kind of blueprint of world history. Another example: Paul stressed that we are saved by grace (Eph. 2:5), but James writes that Abraham was saved by works (James 2:24). When these two statements are seen in their wider context, the two apostles are obviously on the same page,

Sometimes the overall purpose of a biblical book helps us to understand the individual chapters.

for Paul also holds that good works are the evidence of salvation by grace through faith.

Because the Old Testament is also inspired by God's Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16), Christian readers can find a great deal

7. Old Testament and New Testament. Bible readers sometimes fail to see that the Old Testament must be understood in the light of the fuller revelation in Christ. Because the Old Testament is also inspired by God's Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16), Christian readers can find a great deal of spiritual nourishment in it. However, in the history of salvation, the Old Testament belongs to the period of preparation; God spoke his final word through his Son (Heb. 1:1,2). In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord, after referring to Old Testament texts, says, repeatedly, "But I say to you" (e.g. Matt. 5:21,22).

The great moral laws of God, as found, for example, in the Decalogue, are valid for all times, but there is also much that God commanded Israel to do that has passed away in the light of Christ's coming. Christians are not obligated to follow the practices of ancient Israel, such as temple worship, the priesthood, animal sacrifices, the dietary laws such as eating pork. And certainly one should not look for support in the Old Testament for such things as polygamy or warfare. This Christological method of interpreting the Old Testament should not be understood as undermining the unity of the Scriptures. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; he is not only the God of Israel, but also of the new people of God, the church.

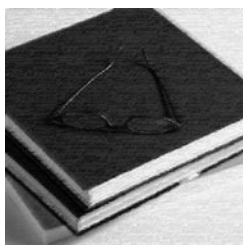
The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; he is not only the God of Israel, but also of the new people of God, the church.

8. Expectations. Bible readers sometimes ask more of the Bible than it was intended to give. The Bible is not an encyclopedia; it is a history of salvation. It does not answer all the questions a natural scientist might ask. It is a religious book and speaks to the deepest needs of our human existence—the problem of sin and suffering, of life and death, and of eternal destiny. And so we should not be embarrassed to admit that the Bible does not give us explicit answers to all the questions we might ask. Even the great apostle Paul admitted that we now know only part (1 Cor. 13:13). Some day the limitations of our earthly life will be done away, and we shall see our Lord face to face. Until that day comes, we want to continue to be "people of the book."



THINKING IT OVER

1. Is it possible to become a Christian and to live as Christ would have it, without a written Bible?
2. What pattern of Bible reading and meditation (see Ps. 1:2) is most useful in your present situation?
3. How does the Bible help you to find your way when you face critical questions of everyday life?
4. What role does the Bible play in the shaping of your Christian mind?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

David Ewert. *A General Introduction to the Bible: From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990. 284 pp. Careful treatment on the writing and translation of the Bible.

David Ewert. *How to Understand the Bible*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000. Important for interpreting the Bible.

Leon Morris. *I Believe in Revelation*. Grand Rapids, IL: Eerdmans, 1976. Helpful on the authority of the Bible.



We Confess:

We are People of the Bible. *The Bible is the authoritative Word of God and the infallible guide for faith and life.*

- *World view. The Bible provides the framework for our understanding of the world.*
- *Interpretation. Our interpretation is Christ centered. We read the Scriptures with a New Testament perspective. The person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments.*
- *Community of interpretation: Every believer is encouraged to seek to understand the Bible in order to discern God's will for obedience. Since the Holy Spirit is present and active in all believers, we read and interpret the Bible and its demands for today's life in community.*

Scripture references: Ps. 1; 19; 119; Matt. 5-7; Luke 24:27, 44-49; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Heb. 1:1-2; Acts 2:42; 15:1-29; 17:11; Col. 3:1-4; 1 Pet. 1:10-12.

CHAPTER 8

People of a New Way of Life

David Wiebe (Canada)

We as Anabaptists not only help people convert, but we work hard to develop disciples who will diligently follow after Christ.

Conversion, discipleship, and renewal are foundational to the new way of life in Christ. Mennonite Brethren have a strong track record in all three areas. These three aspects were emphasized in the Anabaptist reformation in the 1500s.

As Anabaptist Christians encounter the world, their impulse is to help people and convert them from their sinful ways to follow Christ. We as Anabaptists not only help people convert, but we work hard to develop disciples who will diligently follow after Christ. From their beginnings in 1860 till today, the Mennonite Brethren encourage both personal and congregational renewal.

A STORY

A young Malaysian woman came for studies at a Canadian university, during which time she lived with a Christian couple. Her international contact knew that the host family was Christian, and told the family, "She may live with you but you must not proselytize her." But during the course of the year, the Malaysian student began asking questions: "Why do you pray? Whom do you pray to? What do you believe? What is your approach to raising your children?" The discussions led to a strong, loving relationship between the host family and the young woman. Within the year she determined to follow Christ and start on a new way of life. She joined the church, learned more about the Christian way, discovered a spiritual gift of evangelism, and used her education to open doors of witness.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Conversion

Jesus clarified for Nicodemus that conversion was possible, based on believing in Jesus and deciding to follow him (John 3:1-9). Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about God's gift and the importance of believing. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). John, the apostle, explained what it means to believe: "But to all who received him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he [God] gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Another way of explaining conversion is with the word "turn."

Another way of explaining conversion is with the word "turn." A person turns away from the old way of sin to follow the new way of Jesus: "You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). The language of "turn" comes from the Old Testament. People are called to turn to God (Jer. 4:1). English translations use "return," though the Hebrew has only a word for turn, not return. Such turning, Jeremiah explained, involved repentance (Jer. 3:22b-24) with a clear acknowledgement of sin (Jer. 3:25b; see Acts 3:19), and abandonment of the old ways (Jer. 4:1). Repentance means turning away from evil (Jer. 4:1) and turning to embrace God (Jer. 4:2; Isa. 45:22). Isaiah says it very forcefully: "Let the wicked forsake their way. . . let them return (Hebrew, "turn") to the Lord . . . for he will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7). The story of the prodigal son illustrates these steps of conversion (Luke 15:18).

The Philippian jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" He was given the answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Paul explained that when one believes with one's heart and makes confession with the mouth, then God grants full acceptance (salvation) (Rom. 10:9,10). Individuals turn to God; God does the saving. Biblical stories of conversion include Naaman (2 Kings 5:15-18), Paul (Acts 9: 1-19) and Lydia (Acts 16:11-15).

Discipleship

Discipleship is about moving from a basic decision about Christ to incorporating the way of Christ into our lives.

Discipleship is about moving from a basic decision about Christ to incorporating the way of Christ into our lives. It is about following Jesus, about taking up Christ's yoke, learning from him and walking in partnership with him (Matt. 11: 29-30). In the words of Paul, it is about putting off the old ways and adopting new ways (Col. 3:5-11). Hans Denck, an Anabaptist believer of the 16th century, put it this way: "No one can truly know Christ except one who follows him in life." The New Testament instructions on how a disciple ought to live can be grouped into six major directional callings.

We are certain of salvation and understand that our emotional commitment must be accompanied by commitment to intellectual growth and obedient behavior.

Basic Commitment. We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as God with "all our heart, soul, mind and strength." We are certain of salvation and understand that our emotional commitment must be accompanied by commitment to intellectual growth and obedient behavior. From the original "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" (Deut. 6:5), we understand that our love for God through Jesus Christ must grow in these three dimensions: emotion (or passion), intellect, and behavior.

Spiritual nurture. This is the commitment to abide in Christ and cultivate a growing relationship with God (John 15:4-5, 10-11; Jer. 9:23-24). The believer practices spiritual disciplines. The believer works at knowing the Bible better. One cultivates an inner commitment that others cannot sway.

Community involvement. This commitment calls for participating in the faith community, learning to contribute through volunteering, giving and being supportive of others, developing and employing spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:4-13; 1 Cor. 12:4-11; 27-30; Eph. 4:11-13). Attention is given to learning how to think and discern together to forge direction towards God's mission in society.

Witnessing entails influencing others and inviting them to follow Christ.

Witness. Witnessing entails influencing others and inviting them to follow Christ (Acts 1:8). We must relate redemptively and compassionately to others, persuading and showing the way to follow Christ.

Discerning our place in the world. In general, the church is called to submit to the ruling authority of the day (Rom. 13:1-8; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). However, at times we must object to the structures

and forces of the larger institutions of our world. We may have to disobey authorities, withhold taxes, refuse to take up arms for war, challenge corporations, seek justice, and address oppression. In other words, a disciple seeks to extend the shalom (well-being) and peace of the kingdom, and learns to practice a Christian social ethic (Acts 4:18-20; Acts 5:29; Matt. 25:31-46).

Perseverance. Purposeful and persevering following of Christ (Phil. 3:7-14; 2 Tim. 4:7). As God gives length of days, our obedience must be lived out over time. The believer marks progress, keeps on learning and discovers how to finish well, refusing to go slack as time goes along.

Renewal

Renewal is needed because discipleship takes place over a lifetime and there are many things to learn. Also, temptations may lead Christians to stray from following Christ. Our spiritual life began with the renewal work of the Holy Spirit. "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:3-7).

Regular confession of our failings restores forgiveness, teaches humility, and re-establishes our relationship with God in Christ.

Our spiritual life requires renewal at a personal level. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God" (Rom. 12:2a). Christians become stained by sin, mistakes, and shortcomings. Regular confession of our failings restores forgiveness, teaches humility, and re-establishes our relationship with God in Christ (1 John 1:9; Ps. 51:12). The Holy Spirit will impart to us his gifts for service. A renewed believer "walks in the resurrection."

At a congregational level, we both pray and expect renewal. The prophet Habakkuk prayed about God's work in Israel, "In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known" (Hab. 3:2). A renewed church is a spiritually vibrant church, open to the Holy Spirit, and effective in the world.

LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

1. Conversion of Children. All our examples of conversion in the New Testament are of adults. Children are very welcome to become Christians, of course. However, in the process of growing up, they must establish their own spiritual identity apart from that of their parents. Sometimes youth forget or deliberately leave their childhood faith.

Hope and patience, the two great characteristics of the faithful church, must be extended to our youth. Hope fosters creativity and the expectation that youth will come back to God. Patience keeps us from being too judgmental and helps us find ways to keep them close even though we may disapprove of their actions. Likely more effort should be given in our churches to reaching and training the children.

Discipleship cannot be accomplished alone, or without an appropriate sense of progress.

2. Core Commands. Discipleship cannot be accomplished alone, or without an appropriate sense of progress. God's people have been called to two core commands: to remember and to walk. We are called to remember what God has done, and be able to teach it to the next generation (Ps. 78:1-4). A similar call is given to leaders of the early church (1 Tim. 2:1-7).

To remember is about knowing who God is, and who his people are. We remember the blessings (rewards of remembering and obedience) and curses—the consequences of not remembering, of disobeying. We are to remember everything that God has shown, taught, and commanded us.

To walk is to obey, to build a people, and to extend the kingdom of God to the world we live in. It is to build a Christian social ethic where the world sees how life functions in the kingdom.

3. Modes of Living. God ordained three key modes to convey the commands to remember and walk. These modes are: 1) teaching in all kinds of forms, 2) markers that help us know we are making progress, and 3) community—a body in which we learn and discern together.

The act of teaching is critical since each generation needs to learn the story of God's work in the world.

Teaching includes preaching, lessons, storytelling, apprenticing, and many other forms of conveying information and truth. The act of teaching is critical since each generation needs to learn the story of God's work in the world. This work is not only about the historical people of God, but also about the people of God today.

Markers can be rituals, events for individuals, events of the community of faith, and holy days. For Israel markers included circumcision, the Passover, and major gathering times, such as 1) feast of unleavened bread, 2) feast of weeks, and 3) feast of booths (Deut. 16:1-17). Specific locations where God brought victory were marked (note the pillar of stones after crossing the Jordan, Joshua 4). Markers for the modern church include baptism and the Lord's Supper, plus other events in the church calendar—Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Thanksgiving (North America), and various other special days which are designed to help us tell the story of God's work in the world, his people, and his purposes of redemption.

Markers for the modern church include baptism and the Lord's Supper, plus other events in the church calendar.

Community has been a major mode of conveying "how we are to live" in every culture and for all time. God called out Israel and identified the community as clans and families. Then the church came in the form of congregations all over the world. The community embodies the story of God, lives out the truth, and creates a new story of God's work in every generation. Community in its many forms (small and large gatherings, working teams, etc.) works to help people remember and walk in the ways of Christ.

These three modes—teaching, markers, and community—apply in all cultures. Some cultures tend to be more practiced in one or another mode. But all three are needed to cultivate the new way of life at both the individual and congregational level.

Initial commitments cannot generate the resolve and wisdom required to develop a Christian social ethic, either as an individual or within the living community in a given context.

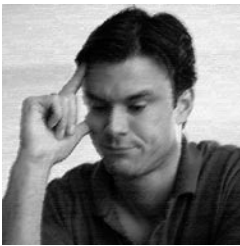
4. Call for Renewal. Within this framework stands the call for ongoing renewal. Our first-time commitment cannot carry us through to the end of life. Over time we face the danger of losing our first love (Rev. 2:4-5). Initial commitments cannot generate the resolve and wisdom required to develop a Christian social ethic, either as an individual or within the living community in a given context.

Special times of personal renewal may come in the context of private or community retreats, or especially powerful times of communication (sermons, speeches, etc.) or through times of focused service (a mission trip or service project). These times become markers for individuals as they determine to walk more closely in the way of Christ.

Special times of congregational renewal may come through especially focused preaching series, through corporate events such as prayer and fasting, or through times of service and mission done as a group. Is renewal dependent on humans or on God? Renewal is properly said to be God's business. But one can prepare for renewal, participate in activities that lead to renewal, and perhaps even trigger renewal by taking the initiative to respond radically to the leading of the Lord.

Renewal is about seeking to follow all the ways illustrated in the New Testament.

It is our calling to seek to return to the Lord in confession (Ps. 51), repentance, and practice the habits of following the way of Christ. Renewal is about seeking to follow all the ways illustrated in the New Testament. It is also about submitting to God in as deep and radical a way as possible, leaving the outcomes and results to him (Phil. 2:6-11).



THINKING IT OVER

1. Where have you been able to share your way of life with someone who doesn't follow Christ? Were you able to go beyond "what I believe" to "this is how I live"? How would you answer someone who, when asked, "How long have you been a Christian?" replied, "From my birth"?
2. Have you thought about what it will take for you, individually, to follow Christ through your lifetime? What have you tried to do in order to build up faith and obedience?

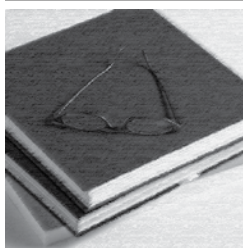
3. Have you thought about the challenge of following Christ as a congregation? What barriers to growth and obedience as a congregation are you experiencing that must be overcome?

4. Consider the challenge to remember the teaching and to walk the walk. What kinds of things, as you see it, are a part of each of these commands?

5. Reflect on the challenge of teaching. What kinds of methods does your congregation use to teach? How are you learning as an individual?

6. What faith markers are in your life? What kinds of markers does your congregation hold up for believers growing in faith? Are there other kinds of markers you should consider?

7. Consider the challenge of being community in order to promote faith. How have you as an individual experienced the benefit of community? What kinds of community activity are intentionally cultivated in your congregation?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Donald B. Kraybill. *The Upside Down Kingdom*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003. 301 pp. A virtual classic. Listed in the MWC Global Anabaptist Shelf of Literature.

John D. Martin. *Ventures in Discipleship: A Handbook for Groups or Individuals*. Scottsdale, PA : Herald Press, 1984. 304 pp. A wide-ranging book with discussion questions as well as action plans.

C. Arnold Snyder. *Following in the Footsteps of Christ. The Anabaptist Tradition*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004. Mostly biblical, but with historical anecdotes. Highlights spirituality and spiritual disciplines.

Howard A. Snyder. *Kingdom Manifesto: Calling the Church to Live Under God's Reign*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985. 132 pp. The church must seek to stabilize families, revitalize neighborhoods, work toward peace and justice, strengthen evangelistic outreach in a secular culture, etc.



We Confess:

We are People of a New Way of Life. *By God's grace the Holy Spirit calls people to a new way of life through conversion, discipleship, and ongoing renewal.*

- *Conversion. Christian conversion begins with new birth and always involves a deliberate personal commitment. As Christians we are called to turn*
 - *from a broken relationship with God, and to a personal relationship with the true God*
 - *from bondage of sin and past mistakes to freedom, forgiveness, and healing.*
- *Discipleship. In Christ salvation and ethics come together. As Christians we are called*
 - *to turn from individualism to interdependence with others in the church*

- *to prove ourselves faithful to the life and teachings of Jesus in everyday life.*
- *Renewal. The Holy Spirit indwells every believer, testifying that we are God's children, offering continual renewal and cleansing in order to empower for a life of witness and service.*

Scripture references: Isa. 43:1; Mark 8:34-38; John 1:12-13; 3:5-8; 14:15-16, 26; Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 4:2; Col 3:1-4; Tit. 3:3-7.

CHAPTER 9

People of the Covenant Community

Victor Wall (Paraguay)

On the Day of Pentecost, God created the new covenant community of the Spirit. In this community, baptism, the Lord's Supper, committed fellowship, and mutual service symbolized and made concrete what redemption and following Jesus truly meant.

A STORY

When Johanna became a Christian she was living with Helmut, with whom she had already had three children, though they were not married. Her spiritual growth was evident, especially in her love for Jesus. She was intentional about her preparation for baptism by consciously taking small steps of obedience designed to rectify aspects of her past life, when she had been distant from God. It was clear to her that she needed to separate from Helmut, since he still had a relationship with his wife. So she moved into her own rented apartment and as a single parent looked for work to support herself and her children. The church generously responded to her wish to be baptized and welcomed her into church membership. Naturally the church identified with Johanna's questions and her needs, and also helped with the financial costs of renting her apartment and paying tuition so her children could attend a Christian school. Johanna has not disappointed her Lord. She loves her church and has become a true follower of Jesus.

*On the Day of Pentecost,
God created the new
covenant community of
the Spirit.*

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Jesus as the mediator of the New Covenant gave his life for the covenant people that God was bringing into existence.

The Bible depicts the church as a covenant people. God, who initiated the covenant, seeks fellowship with the people of God. God acts for the benefit of humans—in creation, in the plan of redemption, and in God’s saving deeds. Jesus as the mediator of the New Covenant gave his life for the covenant people that God was bringing into existence. Jesus is therefore also at the center of the covenant relationship. That means that the church does not gather around a sacrament, nor around a pastor, nor for that matter around a worship band, but rather around Jesus. Though the blood of our Lord is the seal of the new covenant, it is the Holy Spirit who provides the seal of our belonging to the covenant. Those who respond to God’s invitation to salvation are born again through the Holy Spirit and are baptized into God’s covenant people. The seal which is given to believers is the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14) who takes up residence in them (1 Cor. 6:19; Rom. 8:11; 2 Cor. 6:16) and brings them into a direct relationship with God (Rom. 8:14-16,26). Thus redemption is a relational matter—both vertical and horizontal.

There are two closely related dimensions to the life of the church, brought into being through God’s Spirit and centering around Jesus. These include external visible acts performed by the church (Acts 2:37-41) and the fellowship relationships which constitute the life of the church (Acts 2:42-47).

Baptism

What does the church express with the highly symbolic act of baptizing a person in/with water?

Sign and Picture

Baptism is also a sign of forgiven sin and of breaking with sin.

Believers’ baptism is the occasion for the church and for the individual to confess publicly the personal faith in Jesus Christ of the person being baptized. The personal faith which is a prerequisite for baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 8:37) consists in a radical, exclusive trust in Jesus Christ and his redemptive death, a personal posture based on a conscious decision and informed conviction, and a willing faithfulness to God and to God’s plan (Heb. 10:39). Baptism is also a sign of forgiven sin and of breaking with sin. The condition of

this forgiveness is genuine repentance, which is shown by its fruits (Acts 2:38). God responds through Jesus Christ by forgiving our sin when we acknowledge and confess it. Through baptism the church and the individual indicate their conviction that the person being baptized has been forgiven of all sin.

The person baptized dies with respect to sin and is raised up into a new relationship with Christ.

Through the power of God, the repentant person is put into a new relationship with God. Just as a slave who has been purchased and set free no longer has any more obligations to the former owner (Rom. 6:16-23), so also God's power delivers a person from any more claims made by the power of sin. Baptism provides a visual image of precisely this through the act of burial in a watery grave. The person baptized dies with respect to sin and is raised up into a new relationship with Christ (Rom. 6:1-12). In this way baptism becomes a sign of the spiritual rebirth, which the New Testament also describes as a baptism of the Spirit. Baptism in and by the Spirit and baptism in water both point to the same reality, the reality of being born to a new, spiritual, eternal life. The external visible symbolic act follows after the inner spiritual experience.

Testimony, Commitment and Intention

Through baptism, the individual also bears witness to an intention and a commitment in relation to God and the church. When John hesitated to baptize Jesus, Jesus responded, "We must do everything that is right" (Matt. 3:15 NLT). The person who is baptized follows the example of Jesus in obedience to God, which leads to a good conscience (1 Pet. 3:21). Over and over again in the New Testament, we find people who were converted obeying the call to be baptized. In so doing they declared themselves ready to live their lives under the Lordship of Christ. Nowhere is the baptismal directive more clearly expressed than in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). For our spiritual ancestors this commission by Jesus was an expression and a strategy of the obedience of their faith.

Through baptism we also bear witness to our identification with Christ. This is depicted through being buried in water and being raised again. But it is also depicted through being brought into the body of Christ, the church. This incorporation (Acts 2:21) expresses tangibly what it means to be one with Christ, since the church is Christ's body.

Identification with Christ by its very nature includes saying Yes to covenant fellowship, to being on the way with others.

Identification with Christ by its very nature includes saying Yes to covenant fellowship, to being on the way with others. We follow through on discipleship in fellowship with brothers and sisters. Neither the first Christians nor their enemies imagined any kind of following Christ that was separate from the church.

The Lord's Supper

This impressive celebration of the church proclaims visually and symbolically a gripping message.

Sign and Picture

According to the words of institution, the bread and the wine represent the broken body and the spilled blood of Jesus (Matt. 26:26-28). The church remembers Jesus' great act of love, and does so deeply touched and full of gratitude. In an act of worship, the church experiences anew what happened at Golgotha, where the sinless Son of God experienced a shameful death by crucifixion in order to free people imprisoned in sin.

We join together in receiving the communion, knowing and believing that Christ's sacrificial death atoned for our sins.

We prepare ourselves inwardly for our participation in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:28). Because we are conscious of our sinfulness, we do not put any stock in our own religiosity, but rather in Jesus' death on the cross. We join together in receiving the communion, knowing and believing that Christ's sacrificial death atoned for our sins. That means that before God we are all sinners who have experienced God's grace.

Through the celebration of communion the church announces hope and bears witness for God in the grim situation of lost humanity (1 Cor. 11:26). At the same time the church is able to see light beyond the darkness of the present (Matt. 26:29).

Testimony, Commitment and Intention

With a repentant attitude we bear communal witness to our experience of being forgiven for our sins. Moreover, the church is the appropriate context to be a fellowship of true and genuine repentance and forgiveness, for we know each other, and thus there is less danger of insincerity.

Through the celebration of communion we as a church declare ourselves to be in solidarity with Christ. Just as Jesus rose from death, so

Through the celebration of communion we as a church declare ourselves to be in solidarity with Christ.

the new life is also a reality for us. We have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 13:14). The mind of Christ is also our mind (Phil. 2:5; John 13:1-17; Luke 9:46-48). His way is also our way (Matt. 16:24-25). His prayer is also our prayer (Matt. 6:9-13; John 17). His mission is also our mission (Luke 4:18-21). We do things the way Jesus does them (John 17:18; 20:21-22).

The celebration of communion is also a visible expression of the fact that we as a church belong to one another (Acts 2:42). Our fellowship is not based merely on the fact that we as humans have joined together, but is rather grounded in the Divine Trinity. It is a spiritual fellowship at the core of its being, which becomes “flesh” in a social context (1 Cor. 10:16).

The Committed Fellowship

Christian spirituality is something we experience together. Genuinely following Jesus means that we are on the way together as brothers and sisters.

Fruit of the Spirit

We can trust the Holy Spirit to form our life together. Paul was very impressed with the spiritual fellowship in the Philippian church (Phil. 2:1-2a). At the same time he challenged them to continue to nurture their common life (Phil. 2:2b-4). Still, authentic fellowship cannot be fabricated simply through human effort or rules of behavior. Only the Holy Spirit can work against all our selfishness and bring about the characteristics that contribute to a genuine Christian community. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). The Holy Spirit brings together people out of diverse life situations, languages, and places of origin. Indeed the Spirit baptizes them together, so to speak, into one body. God wants to gift each local church with this wonderful spiritual blessing, brought about by the power of God.

Discernment and Decision Making

Where the Holy Spirit shapes our common life, there are concrete results that follow, both in terms of ethical questions and in the process of discernment. It is to be clearly recognized that the Holy Scriptures are our starting point for all questions of faith and prac-

Only the Holy Spirit can work against all our selfishness and bring about the characteristics that contribute to a genuine Christian community.

tice. But how then do we respond to questions where the Bible does not give us direct answers?

We find a helpful example in the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15. It is important to answer questions that arise out of the actual practice of church life and mission. These answers must correspond to our understanding of salvation in Jesus Christ, and they must be the kind of answers that we can apply so as to hold the church together as we move into the future. Here various elements work together: the interpretation of Scripture offered by the apostles, the actual concrete situation in the church, and the seeking of answers together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is important to recognize that we are speaking here of basic principles, not of those issues which involve application to regional or cultural situations. The results of this experience of communal hermeneutics are freedom, unity, and great joy.

True spiritual fellowship means that we challenge each other in doing good (1 Thess. 5:15), mutually encourage one another (Rom. 1:12), admonish one another (Rom. 15:14), and confess our sins to one another.

Discipleship and Ethics

Insight brings with it responsibility. Actually we should say that only diligent obedience can lead to deep insight. True spiritual fellowship means that we challenge each other in doing good (1 Thess. 5:15), mutually encourage one another (Rom. 1:12), admonish one another (Rom. 15:14), and confess our sins to one another (James 5:16). Sin distresses the fellowship, whereas living transparently with one another strengthens the fellowship (1 John 1:6,7). It is on this basis that we also practice pastoral care and church discipline.

Serving Together

Crises on the leadership level have had the effect of making questions relating to church leadership the central concerns of church ministry, both for the local church and for our theological training centers. Have we perhaps defined the problem too narrowly? Isn't the question of church leadership, viewed from the perspective of the New Testament, much more a whole church issue? Of course leadership assignments are very important matters in each church. Still, serving one another finds its focus in a much more wholistic perspective, in the context of "the priesthood of all believers." The church of Jesus Christ is a royal priesthood, i.e., we are all "priests" and "kings" (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Exod. 19:6). Thanks to the redemption

of the church through Jesus Christ and through the power of the church's oneness with him, our High Priest, the church is called, and through the Holy Spirit, equipped with spiritual gifts to perform priestly service in the church and in the world. This teaching is the starting point for all ministry within the church.

Gifts of the Spirit – For the Building up of the Church

Our service in the church emerges out of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 show how the Spirit's gifts are to be practiced and how they can best function within our committed fellowship. In fact, gifts are designed specifically to build up the body. When we interpret Romans 12:1,2 in relation to the following verses (12:3-8), we can recognize how the mindset of the contemporary world endangers the practice of gifts in the style of Christ. Paul's teaching about leadership responsibilities is embedded within his understanding of the church (Rom. 12:4-8; Eph. 4:11-16). Gifts always imply responsibilities. They are truly spiritual gifts when they are put into operation in a way that corresponds to the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5-11).

We must always remember how revolutionary this concept is, when compared to what is assumed in the society around us. No matter which forms of service we perform, we are God's co-workers! And that is true even when our local church is going through a crisis. What an amazing privilege it is to be able to participate in carrying out God's sovereign plan of salvation.

Calling, Confirming, and Commissioning for Service

Though the New Testament refers to many different spiritual gifts, the "ministry of the Word" has priority for building up the church (1 Cor. 14:1,3,12; 1 Tim. 5:17). Apostles, teachers, preachers, shepherds, church-planters, missionaries—all these are "servants of the Word."

Deacons also play a significant role in the New Testament. It helps us to pay attention to the situation in which the deacon ministry first developed (Acts 6:1-6). First came the perception that there was injustice within the church, a situation that was immediately attended to. Secondly, responsibilities were divided to ensure that proclamation would not suffer. Thirdly, the whole church was involved in

Paul's teaching about leadership responsibilities is embedded within his understanding of the church.

By observing the way deacons function, we can see very clearly how the practice of spiritual gifts works concretely to build up the church.

the process of calling out deacons. Proceeding in this way directly contributed to the growth of the church (Acts 6:7). By observing the way deacons function, we can see very clearly how the practice of spiritual gifts works concretely to build up the church.

LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

As Mennonite Brethren who have been gifted with a rich spiritual and theological heritage, we want to commit ourselves anew to the challenges of New Testament *koinonia* (fellowship).

1. Baptism. Our understanding of redemption determines the extent to which we view baptism as an act which connects us with the church. A yes to Jesus always includes a Yes to his church. There is no other alternative. Followers of Christ will suffer the consequences if they reject or devalue the Bride of Christ. Full participation in the church is the condition for living continually in the fullness of the Holy Spirit and growing in love. Baptism (i.e., our identification with Christ) and the church (i.e., the body of Christ) belong together.

2. The Lord's Supper. To celebrate the Lord's Supper is to give witness to the real possibility of being part of human community and to practice community. Those who participate in communion say yes without reservations to their brothers and sisters. Those who identify with Christ in their celebration of communion can do so only if they are prepared to declare their solidarity with their spiritual family, the church (1 John 4:19-21). To say yes to sister and brother in the celebration of communion is to say: your community is my community. But it also means: your joys are my joys, your tears are my tears, your sickness is my sickness, your poverty is my poverty, your victory is my victory, your burdens are my burdens, and your love is my strength.

3. The Committed Fellowship. Authentic Christian spirituality, consistent with the way of Christ, is nourished by the fellowship of the Spirit within the church. Biblical holiness is a communal reality. Where we understand love and mutual submission as a way of mutually fulfilling one another, relationships can grow.

Authentic Christian spirituality, consistent with the way of Christ, is nourished by the fellowship of the Spirit within the church.

3.1 Decision Making. What makes the experience of a communal hermeneutics possible is, of course, the fact that the same Spirit that inspired Scripture is at work in each believer, giving insight on how the Scriptures are to be understood and practiced in life. The central test for every insight, as to whether or not it is valid, is Jesus Christ himself, the final standard of all insight. Menno Simons said, "Everything must be judged through the spirit, the word, the deeds, and the example of Christ."

With a unified Confession of Faith, it is possible for the church to check and to correct its teaching and its life, especially in times when theological fads and powerful personalities endanger the church.

3.2 The Significance of a Confession of Faith. The Confession of Faith, that is the unified body of teaching that has been adopted by ICOMB, serves the church, so that it may grow biblically. In the New Testament the confessing of faith is a matter of worship, of witness, and of teaching: it is a continuing effort to build the bridge between faith and life. With a unified Confession of Faith, it is possible for the church to check and to correct its teaching and its life, especially in times when theological fads and powerful personalities endanger the church. The Confession of Faith functions as the theological framework for our biblical understanding. If the church commits itself to this expression of our faith and teaching, it will be able to preserve the unity of the Spirit and the bonds of peace.

3.3 Real Life Application. A Christ-centered faith statement helps the church to translate into practical living the church's confession that Jesus is Lord. In ethical matters our confrontation with new situations makes it necessary always to be in the process of discerning God's will. The church is commissioned to "bind and loose." In terms of ethics, this means to examine, to discern, and to decide (Matt. 18:15-20; John 20:23). In accordance with the principles of God's kingdom we continually seek new ways, we offer alternatives, and we remove burdens. When previous church rules are out of date, the church frees its members from such restrictions.

It is in the context of the local church that calling and commissioning take place.

4. Serving Together. Two basic New Testament concepts contribute to an appropriate practice of mutual service: the concept of gifts and the concept of leadership. Biblical teaching about spiritual gifts always has the whole church in view. Leadership in the New Testament is always viewed as plural. In the Bible we find no trace of the idea that a church has only one "servant of the Word." It is in

the context of the local church that calling and commissioning take place. The church must see to it that all members are encouraged to practice their gifts, and that proclamation and leadership assignments are not carried out autocratically or by only one person.

In the Mennonite Brethren Church we often practice the ordination of those church workers who serve in proclamation. Here the local church carries a significant responsibility. The local church must recognize, call, commission, and ordain those whom God calls to be “servants of the Word.” On the other side, those who sense that God is calling them to such service should seek the confirmation of the church. When Jesus taught that the least among us are the greatest, then this most certainly means that leaders and preachers must practice mutual submission in a way that provides a model for the church.



THINKING IT OVER

1. How do baptism and the Lord's Supper express covenantal relationships in your congregation?
2. Should Christians who have not yet been baptized be invited to participate in the Lord's Supper? Why? Why not? What is implied by our answer?
3. How have covenantal relationships helped you in your discipleship? How have they hindered you in your discipleship?
4. How does your church understand and practice the calling out of church workers?

5. Is the so-called “one pastor system” a biblical model? Is it consistent with the communal character of the church? What alternatives would be helpful in our day?
6. What experiences has your church had with corporate discernment and decision-making processes?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Arnold Bittlinger, *Gifts and Graces*. (Transl. from German by Herbert Klassen). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969. 123 pp. Also his *Gifts and Ministries*. 1973, 109 pp. Both books by the Marburg professor are lucid for the average reader. Soundly biblical.

John D. Roth. *Beliefs. Mennonite Faith and Practice*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005, 168 pp. Popular in style. Chapters 5 & 6 (pp. 59-85) deal with baptism.

C. Arnold Snyder. *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999. 54 pp. Widely translated. A MWC Global Anabaptist Shelf of Literature book.



We Confess:

***We are People of the Covenant Community.** In the church, the covenant community, believers commit themselves to worship together, pray as Christ taught us, to fellowship, and to care for one another.*

- *Believer's Baptism. People from all cultures, nations and languages who are willing to follow Jesus as obedient disciples confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and are baptized by water into the fellowship of the church. The Mennonite Brethren church baptizes by immersion.*
- *Lord's Supper. In the Supper the church identifies with the life of Christ given for the redemption of humanity and proclaims the Lord's death and resurrection until he comes. This Supper of remembrance expresses reconciliation, fellowship, peace and unity of all believers with Christ.*
- *Accountability. The church interprets God's will, discerning what is right and what is wrong. All believers hold each other accountable for a Christ-like walk of faith. The purpose of accountability is to heal and restore through repentance and not punish or condemn. The church excludes those who consistently disregard discipline.*
- *Priesthood of all believers. The Spirit of God gives all believers gifts for service to build up the body of Christ. The church discerns the call of God and confirms servant leaders who equip people for ministry.*

Scripture references: Matt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20; 28:18-20; Acts 2:37-47; Rom 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 11:23-32; 12-14; Eph. 4:11-16; Col. 2:12-13; Heb. 10:24-25; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; 4:10-11.

Reconciliation and Peacemaking

César García (Colombia)

Religions and ideologies have found ways to justify the use of physical force as a legitimate means of defense or for attack.

All of us face conflicts as human beings. The diversity of cultures, ways of thinking, and human motivations make disagreements and divisions easy. In many circumstances, the placing of our own ego above the good of others has led families, churches, societies, and communities to opt for violence as a way of resolving their conflicts. Religions and ideologies have found ways to justify the use of physical force as a legitimate means of defense or for attack. What does Jesus teach us in this respect? Is violence an option for the People of God?

STORIES

1) In the early part of this century (2005) the Congo Mennonite Brethren Conference had leadership problems. Factions had developed that had to do with elections of persons to leadership. There were accusations; people's feelings had been hurt. At one point it seemed that the conference of 100,000 members would be split into two. Pakisa Tshmika and Nzash Lumeya, from out of country got the two parties together for discussion and prayer but the settlement did not hold. There was more prayer including prayer by the global community. Pascal Kulungu, trained in mediation, arranged for several meetings. At last there was a breakthrough. People forgave one another. There was a reconciliation service at the Kimpwanza Mennonite Brethren Church in Kikwit with 400 persons (men, women and children present). Confidence in the elected leadership returned, and the church remained united. By God's grace, this reconciliation was a decided victory.

2) Javier was a soldier for thirty years. He reached a high rank within the Colombian Air Force. As a soldier, he was trained to defend the State against terrorist attacks, but as a Christian he saw in Jesus a call to love his enemies. After a long process of reflection on the teachings of Jesus, Javier became a convinced pacifist. He now found his lifestyle incompatible with his faith in Jesus. He decided to place his trust in God's protection ahead of his capacity to defend himself or attack his enemies. Javier chose the path of peace, becoming a part of the People of Reconciliation.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

According to our Confession of Faith, being a People of Reconciliation is one of the ways in which Christians respond to the purposes of God. As a church, we have been reconciled with God and now have the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20). That ministry is realized when we act as ambassadors of Christ, having the same attitude that Christ had (Phil.2:5). As a reconciled community in which hostility doesn't exist between cultures, social levels, or genders (Gal. 3:26-29), we give evidence of the kingdom that we proclaim, the kingdom of the Prince of Peace.

Reconciliation: A Divine Work

Reconciliation is a work of God: Jesus took the initiative to reconcile us with himself, forming a new humanity in which separation and animosities have been destroyed (Eph. 2:14-18). Building peace using the methodology of Jesus is not a work which we can accomplish in our own strength. It requires the Spirit of God (Luke 4:16-19). We have to reject death (self, contempt of others, greed, idolatry) and choose life (love, peace, justice) having in mind that the encounter with the Lord is the starting point for a life according to the Spirit.

Building peace using the methodology of Jesus is not a work which we can accomplish in our own strength. It requires the Spirit of God.

Today there are many organizations that work for peace. Some of them do it quite apart from the church and separate from any belief in Jesus. Although we value the efforts for peace which are done outside the church, lasting peace can come only when people depend on God and his Spirit. It's possible to be "peacemakers" who

look down on their enemies. But if we want to look like Jesus in our peacemaking, we must distinguish ourselves from the rest by our motivation, which implies genuine repentance and conversion.

The search for reconciliation in dependence on God includes the following distinctives which are found only in the church:

- Praying for those who persecute us is not easy. Nevertheless, Jesus encouraged his disciples to do it (Matt. 5:44). The search for reconciliation with our neighbors is likely to succeed when we pray for them. It is difficult to be annoyed with someone for whom we are praying.
- Serving our enemies is the invitation to attempt in a proper manner acts which give evidence that we are seeking the wellbeing of our enemies, not revenge (Rom. 12:20).
- Returning good for evil is one kind of response to aggression. Being a pacifist is not a passive option. The Scripture invites us to respond to one who attacks us with specific acts that demonstrate our love for our enemy (Rom. 12:17).
- Seeking to be at peace with all carries with it the idea of always taking the initiative when it's time to seek reconciliation. Whether we are the attacked or the attacker, we must always seek reconciliation with the one from whom we have been distanced (Rom. 12:18).

The Scripture invites us to respond to one who attacks us with specific acts that demonstrate our love for our enemy.

Reconciliation: Some Implications

Loving the Enemy. The Sermon on the Mount invites us to seek the well being of our enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). According to Jesus, it is the decision to love our enemy that makes a child of God different from a Gentile or a publican. The love to which we are called (*agape*) implies being ready to give our lives for another, which when speaking of enemies is really a miracle. Only God can do something like that in us. We depend on the Spirit, the same Spirit who sustained Christ to the end.

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Forgiving the Offender. Giving ourselves for the well being of the enemy includes a willingness to accept the hurt caused by the enemy (Matt. 18:23-35). To express resentment or bad wishes toward the one who has hurt us does not give evidence of the work of God in our lives. Menno Simons says: "True Christians don't cry out: Revenge!

Revenge! as the world does; rather like Christ they ask in prayer: Father, forgive them; for they don't know what they are doing."

Openness to Suffering. The term generally used by the Anabaptists for "peace" was "nonresistance," taken from the mandate, "Don't resist one who is evil" (Matt. 5:39). Nonresistance was a part of discipleship and inevitably included suffering as in the way of the cross. To renounce our own interests, well being, or rights in order to act for the good of our enemies can result in our own loss (1 Pet. 2:19-23), just as it did in the life of Dirk Willems (1569), one of many Anabaptist martyrs of the 16th century. Willems was escaping from prison when his pursuer fell into an icy river. Willems gave up freedom to save his pursuer. Jesus said to his disciples; "Take up your cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

All followers of Jesus are called to be peacemakers in the conflicts they face day by day.

All followers of Jesus are called to be peacemakers in the conflicts they face day by day. This means that in our relationships with our spouse, in the education of our children, in family problems, in legal matters, in the life of the church, in diverse ideologies and political views, and in the threats that are inherent in a world such as ours, Jesus calls us to follow his example and methods. Only in that way can we build a peace that comes from God. Only then will we be blessed (Matt. 5:9). A believer's response to any conflict must not be violent.

A reconciling attitude implies on our part a decision to love our enemies and forgive them. Seeking the good of others, as Jesus did, may lead us to suffering. Being ready to pay such a price is a part of our decision to follow the Master.

LIVING WITH OUR BELIEF

Being a people of reconciliation, peacemakers in the manner of Jesus, raises some questions. Without pretending to have easy answers, we bring some for consideration here.

1. Does the Old Testament validate the use of force?

In the first place it is necessary to clarify that the model we follow is Jesus, not the Old Testament. We interpret the Old Testament by taking into account the way Christ interpreted it. His words and life

leave no doubt whatsoever that peacemaking is our Lord's will. While we may encounter Old Testament passages that we consider difficult to interpret because they appear to support the use of violence, we also find texts that express that in the kingdom of God the way of peace is God's will (Ps. 37:14-15; 46:9; Isa. 2:4; 60:18). In the words of Augustine of Hippo, the obscure texts must be interpreted in light of those which are clear.

2. How do we relate with governments that promote an armed response to conflicts?

Jesus said with complete clarity that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). We need to avoid the temptation to identify human governments with the kingdom of God. Keeping in mind that we are pilgrims and strangers (Heb. 11:8-16; 1 Pet. 2:9, 11; Phil. 3:20), we must be careful about lending our support to governments that react to conflicts in ways that are different from the way of Jesus. Because we cannot hope that human governments would react as followers of Christ should react, it is inconsistent with our faith to support governments doing what we ourselves refuse to do because of biblical conviction.

In those countries where the laws permit social service as an alternative to military conscription in wartime, the churches are called to provide service opportunities to assist believers who choose the way of peace. Supporting nationalistic causes and identities is not the best way to love our enemies. On the other hand, neither is doing nothing in times of conflict the Christian way. Jesus called us to be *peacemakers*, and this implies active involvement in the search for peace.

Jesus called us to be peacemakers, and this implies active involvement in the search for peace.

3. What happens with the soldiers who come to follow Christ?

As Jesus received and loved the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13), we too must show love to soldiers. We must show them mercy, keeping in mind that it is not easy to come to know the Prince of Peace after following a way defined by military discipline/order. Some will choose to remain in the armed forces as a testimony to the God of peace and refuse to attack their enemies. Others will prefer to abandon their military careers. In the first 400 years of

church history it is uncommon to find believers who chose military service after committing themselves to become Christ's disciples.

Here is an update on Javier, the Colombian military officer who became a follower of Jesus and his way of peace. Javier resigned his high commission in his nation's air force to become a senior pastor in a congregation in Bogota. Today he is part of a pastoral team in another congregation. He owns a large farm that is designed to provide social justice to the poorest people of Colombia through education and social development projects. Javier uses the farming operation to proclaim the good news of God's peace to his farm workers and other farmers. Javier continues to teach peacemaking in Colombian evangelical churches.

4. What about taxes that are collected for war efforts?

Money is the way one is paid or reimbursed for the time that is invested in a particular job. Money comes to represent our very lives given to a project. This is one of the reasons that we give part of our earnings to God's work. We are giving part of our lives to something for which we are prepared to give our whole lives.

Since that is true, giving support with our finances to any military endeavor is something which should disturb us. In countries where "fiscal [war tax] objection" is permitted, some Mennonite Brethren decide to see to it that their taxes are directed only to non-military purposes. In other places such legal options are still unavailable.

Throughout history peacemakers have demonstrated that this way of life has good results even though many have given their lives to follow the way of Christ.

5. Is it realistic to be a peacemaker?

Nonresistance implies renouncing the use of arms and the capacity to defend ourselves, placing our security in the hands of God. This is not always easy. Nevertheless, throughout history peacemakers have demonstrated that this way of life has good results even though many have given their lives to follow the way of Christ. We are peacemakers not because this has good results in human terms, but because Jesus was a peacemaker.



THINKING IT OVER

1. Because peacemaking is closely related to justice (Isa. 32:17), what can we do as a people of reconciliation to promote justice in our context? What can we do as a worldwide family of faith?

2. What concrete attitudes do we need to be peacemakers in the midst of conflicts present in
 - a. The family (as couples and as parents raising children)?
 - b. The church (among leaders and members)?

3. What are the implications of the fact that the themes of mission, the peace witness, the family, and the State appear together in our Confession of Faith under the title "People of Reconciliation"?

4. Relate incidents in your life when you acted as a peacemaker, following Jesus' example.

5. Relate an inspirational story about other Christians who by their actions encourage us in the way of peace. If you do not know such stories, you can find them in the book, *Martyrs Mirror*.

6. What importance does the witness of peace have in cross-cultural mission? Think of some implications of presenting the gospel of peace by way of nonresistance and loving enemies in the context of Islam.

7. The 6th article of the Schleithem Confession (1527) declares:
The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ.
The temporal authorities have been established to bear the sword.
But the perfection of Christ (the church) may not use the sword for
personal defense, nor to defend its faith, nor to resolve differences
nor to exercise authority over others [Text adapted by the writer].

How does this compare to the Mennonite Brethren Confession of
Faith? Are there differences? Which aspects does the Mennonite
Brethren Confession share with this article of the Schleithem
Confession? Why?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider and Paulus Widjaja. *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005. 203pp. Discusses "peace thinking" from the New Testament as it works itself out in the marketplace, church, and international affairs. For the table of contents see <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0518/2005024596.html>

John Paul Lederach. *Journey Toward Reconciliation*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999. 206 pp. Mostly stories. Helpful.

John D. Roth. *Choosing Against War: A Christian View: "A Love Stronger Than Our Fears."* Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002. 206pp. Invites consideration of Christian pacifism while humbly admitting difficulties.

Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler. *Making Peace with Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999. 199 pp

John E. Toews and Gordon Nickel (eds). *The Power of the Lamb*. Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1986. 183 pp. A collection of essays on war and peace from an Anabaptist perspective. A Leader's Study Guide (1988) by Edith Ratzlaff is available from the publishers.



We Confess:

We are a People of Reconciliation. *Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God. The mission of Jesus was to reconcile humans with God, each other and the world. The church is called to participate in God's mission.*

- *Mission.* Christ has commissioned the church to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all his commandments. Jesus teaches that disciples are to love God and neighbor by telling the good news and by doing acts of love and compassion. Since Jesus is the only way of salvation, the evangelistic imperative is given to all believers.
- *Peace witness.* Peace and reconciliation are at the heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus calls the community of faith to be peacemakers in all situations. We believe that peace with God includes a commitment to the way reconciliation was modeled by the Prince of Peace. As Christians we are called to turn
 - from lifestyle choices that harm us, to choices that nurture wholeness, healing, joy and peace
 - from hating enemies and ignoring neighbors to showing love and justice to all
- *Family.* God blesses singleness, marriage and family. God calls all people to live a sexually pure life. Marriage is a life-long covenant commitment of one man and one woman. Godly parents instruct their children in the faith. The church nurtures family life and makes every effort to bring reconciliation to troubled relationships.
- *State.* God has given the state the responsibility to promote the well-being of all people. Followers of Christ respect and pray for government authorities but resist the temptation to give the state the devotion that is owed to God. The primary allegiance of all Christians is to Christ's kingdom and his global church. In each state and society Christians cooperate with others to defend the weak, reduce strife, care for the poor, and promote justice, peace and truth.

Scripture references: Matt. 5-7; 22:34-40; 28:18-20; Luke 4:18-19; 10:25-37; Rom. 12:17-13, 10; 2 Cor. 5:17-6,2; Eph. 2; 5:21-6:4; 1 Tim 2:1-6; Jam. 2; 1 Pet. 2:21-25

CHAPTER 11

People of Mission and Hope

Nzash Lumeya (Democratic Republic of Congo) and P. Menno Joel (India)

The Confession of Faith affirms the commitment of our global family to everyday witnessing of God's love. As the Confession states: "Confident in this hope the church engages in mission until the Lord returns." The Anabaptists in the 16th century were the most missionary of the Reformation. From its beginnings in 1860, the Mennonite Brethren Church has had a strong emphasis on outreach, already to the neighboring Russians and soon (1890) by sending a missionary couple, Abraham and Maria Friesen, to go overland to India to work in the Nalgonda field.

TWO STORIES

Deevanamma was poor, lived in a small house with her son, and had no status in society.

From India: J. H. Pankratz, a missionary, went to a remote Indian village to preach the gospel. After hearing this message, the widow Deevanamma accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord. She was poor, lived in a small house with her son, and had no status in society. In subsequent visits, the evangelist noticed the plight of this boy who could not go to school; he saw a future in the boy and took him to a mission school. Later, this young man, Joshua, became a pastor.

In his visit to many villages, Pastor Joshua saw numerous boys and girls working for rich landholders but deprived of basic education. This young pastor, having experienced a similar childhood but now educated and transformed by the gospel, had hope for these kids. With the promise "the truth will make you free" (John 8:32) in mind, the pastor took these boys and girls to a Christian hostel where

they might be educated and hear the gospel. The pastor faced much opposition, threatenings, and accusations of child traffic from the children's former employers and even from the children's own families. Some cursed this pastor, wishing him death. But the pastor retained hope and was zealous to participate in the mission of the church to uplift the poor.

After their studies were over their lives were changed spiritually, socially, and economically.

Over the years these young women and men accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior and found real freedom. After their studies were over their lives were changed spiritually, socially, and economically. Some became nurses, teachers, pastors, or entered other professions. Shantamma became a Mennonite Brethren school teacher and lady evangelist in the villages of Manchala, Khanapur and Agapally of the Hughestown field. P. Simon and B. John became pastors; now their sons P. Dayanandam and B. Joseph have also become pastors, serving the Lord.

From the Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R.C.). The 1990s were years of testing for the Democratic Republic of Congo and its growing Mennonite Brethren Church. The Congolese socio-political and spiritual landscape had changed greatly. Politically, thirty-two years of dictatorship had ended. In 1997 the name of the country was changed from Zaire to the Democratic Republic of Congo. A year later an invasion by foreign military destroyed the national economy. Thus the times were uncertain. The Mennonite Brethren were challenged to rethink their missionary identity. The sense of Christian mission was renewed. A newly-realized theology of mission mobilized the church to use its spiritual and human resources to spread the good news of Jesus Christ at home and also abroad.

The practice of compassion and the proclamation of Christ across the world derives from their reading of the Old and New Testa-

The Mennonite Brethren created a school of mission, a national mission office, and a sending mission agency. Their missionaries are now serving in seven countries in Africa, Europe, and North America. Their ministry is holistic—both spiritual and social. In the DRC and in South Africa their assignment is to plant churches, whereas in Quebec and the USA, they are involved in social and spiritual ministries. In France, they emphasize discipleship. The practice of compassion and the proclamation of Christ across the world derives from their reading of the Old and New Testaments.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

God Is a Missionary God

The idea of mission, reaching out to others, is not a human invention. God himself reaches to people for the sake of their own welfare. God's mission to the world is like a dove: it has two wings, spiritual and socio-cultural. The spiritual wing deals with the inner life, intimacy between God and our souls, interpersonal bonds between God and his people.

The relationship between the creation and the Creator needs to stand strong and well.

The socio-cultural wing relates to social, cultural, and environmental transformations. The Bible also emphasizes the development of the physical world/milieu/life. The relationship between the creation and the Creator needs to stand strong and well. For example, in the beginning God commissioned Adam to work in the garden and to maintain it (Gen. 2:15).

But when the relationship between God, Adam, and Eve broke down and death affected the whole creation, the missionary task of God moved to a spiritual plane to seek for their restoration. He rescued them by inviting them back into communion with himself. The evil one was denounced and disobedience was judged severely (Gen. 3:1-24). Transformation and hope in God are core to God's mission (Gen. 3:15). The prophets explained that mission had a spiritual focus (Isa. 1:18) and that it included attention to the homeless, the hungry, and those treated unjustly (Isa. 58:6-7). The socio-cultural situation cannot be ignored. God's mission is one but it embraces two activities: spiritual restoration and activities on the socio-cultural plane.

The socio-cultural situation cannot be ignored.

Hearing the Missionary Overtones in Israel's Story

God chose Abraham to be a blessing to all people. In God's covenant with Abraham may be found the root of the missionary calling to God's people (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:7-15).

Stories such as Isaac's interaction with Abimelech, the Philistine, show how in everyday life an individual can have a positive impact through his peaceful behavior with others (Gen. 26:12-33). A servant girl gave testimony to her God, and before long Naaman,

a Syrian military general, became a God-worshiper (2 Kings 5:1-14). Jonah is an example of God reaching out to the Assyrians (Jonah 1-4).

God is not a national god, but one who calls out: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!"

Prophets portrayed Yahweh as controlling and governing all the nations. The whole universe belongs to God, the Maker and Provider (Isa. 6:3b; 13–23; 45:23-24; 66:19; Jer. 1: 5). It is God's intention that his "way be known upon earth, [his] saving power among all nations" (Ps. 67:2). God is not a national god, but one who calls out: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!" (Isa. 45:22). The prophets announced the coming of Yahweh, who was anointed to build the new community of peace (Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-9; 35:1-10; 42:1-6; 61:1-4). Jesus was the fulfillment of that announcement (Luke 4:18-21).

Hearing Jesus and the Apostles on Mission

In the New Testament, mission is based on the person, life, work, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He came to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. The kingdom of God is deserving of cost (Matt. 13:44-46). It starts in the heart and leads to the transforming of behaviors (Mark 2:5). It requires obedience to Christ as Savior and Lord.

Jesus accepted total humiliation. On the cross, he took upon himself our sins, suffered and defeated Satan and all evil powers and authorities in order to give new life and hope to those who believe in him (Heb. 2:14-16). His resurrection from death gives hope to the nations (1 Cor. 15:20-24). The last Adam (Christ) sends his people to proclaim the good news with words and deeds, with passion and compassion, with power and humility.

Our Lord, in keeping with his mission, reached out to others. His was first and foremost a spiritual mission.

Our Lord, in keeping with his mission, reached out to others (Luke 4:18-21). The gospel was central. His was first and foremost a spiritual mission: He preached repentance and urged his audiences to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15; John 3:3-16). His outreach was also social in nature. He healed the sick and extended help to the poor and disadvantaged (Mark 1:40-44; 2:1-12). He sent his disciples to do the same: to preach (spiritual ministry) and to heal (social work) (Luke 10:1-9). Jesus Christ sent those who believed to make disciples locally and globally (Matt. 18:18-20).

The early apostles witnessed to Jesus even when forbidden by the authorities (Acts 4:18-20). The deacon Philip shared about Christ in the city of Samaria (Acts 8:5). Peter went to the Roman centurion in Caesarea (Acts 10:1-48) where he was “preaching peace by Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). His testimony about going to a non-Jew (even within the same city) opened the Jerusalem church to missionary activity (Acts 11:18).

Paul’s conversion experience included a call to missionary activity: “He is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15; see 26:16-18). When on his missionary journeys the Jews failed to respond, he cited Isaiah 42:6; 49:6 and announced, “We are now turning to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46).

To be a follower of Jesus goes hand in hand with giving oneself away for the salvation of our neighbors in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

The Book of Acts describes the missionary expansion to places as distant from Jerusalem as Rome. Telling the world about God’s love and letting it transform our milieu through our personal and family story characterizes God’s people. To be a follower of Jesus goes hand in hand with giving oneself away for the salvation of our neighbors in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand—everywhere. Because we, the Mennonite Brethren global family, confess that Jesus Christ is coming back soon, we profess this spoken word of care and hope to our global village.

LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

1. Mission Motivation. In Mennonite Brethren history, obedience to Christ’s farewell words has been a primary motivation for mission (Matt. 28:18-20). Christ’s pattern of ministry as recorded in Luke 4:18-19 was the model which N.N. Hiebert (ca 1900), the first American Mennonite Brethren missionary to India, cited as his motivation. In North America in a 1975 convention, the theme of preaching the gospel of the kingdom (Matt 24:14) stirred the delegates. After the Lausanne Conference (1974) the theology of the kingdom of God was something of a driving force. A frequent mission text was Acts 1:8. The Spirit of Christ, it was understood, comes to energize, encourage, and enable the people of God as they share the good news with their neighbors at the market place, public

arena, and private places so that men and women can be saved. More recently, the urgency of missionary activity has been understood as arising out of the very nature of God, who is a missionary God. Christians derive their motivation for mission from the Old and New Testaments. To become a follower of Jesus Christ is a choice, but once we belong to his family everyday witnessing for Christ is our way of life.

More and more, in a global society where tolerance and respect of differences are major values, voices are claiming that each religion is sufficient in its own way and that there is no need for a conversion experience to Christ.

2. Christian Mission and other Religions. Some consider that bringing the gospel to peoples of the world is an affront to people who already have a religion. In Christian mission history there have been those who claimed that there was “good” in certain religions, but that the message of Christ was still necessary for these persons to be saved. More and more, in a global society where tolerance and respect of differences are major values, voices are claiming that each religion is sufficient in its own way and that there is no need for a conversion experience to Christ. The discussion has been framed around two key words. “Exclusivism” means that only through Christ and in hearing about Christ is salvation possible (Acts 4:12). “Inclusivism,” as used by some, means that there could be instances where devout seekers in other religions are saved without hearing about Christ. An even broader meaning of “inclusivism” is that sincere devotees of any religion are acceptable before God. In this debate, Mennonite Brethren, while acknowledging that God is not limited in his methods, have historically sided with the “exclusivists.”

3. The Meaning of Mission. The term “mission” has a wide range of uses. To be missionary, as in “missionary conferences,” used to mean for the church to be involved in overseas evangelism. Another interpretation of “mission” was wholistic mission, which referred to the need for repentance (spiritual) but also the help given to the poor. “Mission” meant “evangelism” and “service” as incorporated in the name “Mennonite Brethren Mission and Service International.” A witness to peace is also key (Acts 10:36). At its core “mission” is sentness.

The recent use of the word “missional” means, in short, that the local church sees itself as “sent” into the (immediate) community by being engaged in the life of the community. This may mean tutoring

adults in literacy, assisting single mothers in apartment blocks with car repairs, and/or supporting certain candidates for local government. This understanding of mission does not exclude “sending” missionaries to places elsewhere.

Is yours a “mission-minded” church? Explain and illustrate your answer.

4. Mission and Injustice. Because of the suffering of the Servant, several Mennonite Brethren local churches in Congo accepted imitating Christ as their model (Isa. 42:1-6; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). The theology preached in the pulpit motivated listeners to take risks in daily life. In the presence of organized socio-economical national injustices at home, prophetic voices spoke up. Tangible social actions were taken. Teams were formed to collect looted goods and give them back to different owners that lost their businesses in 1991 and 1993. The degradation of the national system of education had left many classrooms without benches; some pupils sat on floors under a roof which leaked during a rain. A corporate Mennonite effort was made against this waste of mind and encouraged local churches to participate in prayer for reconstruction and for a triangular collaboration between parents, church, and teachers in order to help pupils gain knowledge in a healthy environment.

A public health care campaign led by Mennonite Brethren in Bandundu province reached out to the capital city and south Kivu through the National Mennonite Brethren Medical Department activities. Poor urban and rural neighborhoods in Kinshasa—Kitambo, Kanzombi, and Kiri—received medical assistance in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Missional local churches such as Kitambo released their health-related members to offer free medical consultation to needy people. Compassion was practiced towards both refugees and local population. Dispensary bills of some patients were paid by social church funds in the name of Jesus Christ.

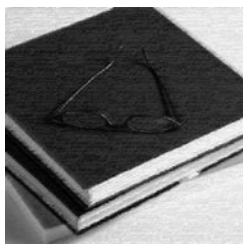
A careful reading of the Scriptures in a context of hardship encouraged some Mennonite Brethren intellectual leaders to serve the Lord in the public arena of provincial and national government.

Financial and food cooperatives were initiated in order to give hope to local people. Those in need had access to financial and nutritional help. A careful reading of the scriptures in a context of hardship encouraged some Mennonite Brethren intellectual leaders to serve the Lord in the public arena of provincial and national government. ***How would these kinds of ministries translate in your situation?***



THINKING IT OVER

1. What is God's mission in the Old and New Testaments?
2. Is the mission mandate given by God relevant to us? Why?
3. Who are the missionaries today, and where is their mission field located?
4. How is your church, or how is your family, or how are you personally, involved in God's mission?
5. How might the emphasis on "mission" be improved in your church?
6. Is the ICOMB Confession of Faith sufficiently clear on "mission"?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000. 101 pp. Reviews the pertinent texts in Genesis, Isaiah, etc.

George W. Peters. *A Biblical Theology of Mission*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972. 368 pp. A basic discussion on mission from the Old and New Testaments (e.g., instruments and dynamics of mission) by a veteran Mennonite Brethren.

Wilbert R. Shenk, (ed). *By Faith They Went Out: Mennonite Missions 1850-1999*. Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000. 133 pp. A Mennonite missionary statesman deals with Anabaptist Roots, Mennonites and the Emerging Evangelical Network, Mennonite globalization, etc.

Max Warren. *I Believe in the Great Commission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976. 190 pp. A mission classic matching writings such as those by Roland Allen, Henry Venn, and Gustav Warneck.

David W. Shenk. *Global Gods : Exploring the Role of Religions in Modern Societies*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995. 401 pp. Includes discussion of African religions, Islam, Buddhism and Marxism. College level.

MWC Global Anabaptist Shelf of Literature books are available in English, Spanish, Indonesian, French, German.



We Confess:

We are a People of Hope. *The Church belongs to the in-breaking kingdom of God. The citizens of the kingdom model an alternative community, challenging godless values of this world's cultures. The people of God join in the struggle for justice, yet are prepared to suffer persecution knowing that sin, guilt and death will not prevail. Confident in this hope the church engages in mission until the Lord returns, empowered by the certainty that God will create a new heaven and a new earth.*

Scripture references: Matt. 5:10-12; 10:7; 13: 24-25; Mark 1:15; 13; Luke 17:20-37; 21:5-36; Tit. 2:11-14; Rev. 21-22.

APPENDIX

THE APOSTOLIC CREED (from the fourth century)

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body;
and life everlasting.

CONFESSION OF FAITH OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

Part 1.
**HOW DOES GOD
WORK IN THE
WORLD?**

God, the sovereign Lord of all, created the heavens and the earth through his powerful word. God made humans, male and female, in the image of God to live in fellowship and to be stewards of creation. Humans abused their freedom by rebelling against God in disobedience, which resulted in alienation and death. In the rebellion against God's rule, the evil powers of Satan, sin and death claimed control of the world.

God, the Deliverer, acted to establish a covenant people, beginning with Israel. God purposed to form the covenant community to live in relationship with God, to experience God's blessing, and to serve as a light to all nations. Through the prophets God communicated his law and purposes, expressing that God is forever faithful, just,

righteous, with a father's tender mercies, and a mother's compassion. God promised the hope of a new creation.

God the Father sent the Son, Jesus Christ, to the world born of the virgin Mary. Jesus inaugurated the reign of God, proclaiming repentance from sin, announcing the release of the oppressed and good news to the poor, and calling disciples to follow his way as a new community. Jesus responded to the violent evil powers by taking the cross in order to die for the sins of the world and reconcile creation to God. Jesus gained victory over sin, death, and Satan as God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead and exalting him to God's right hand where he intercedes for the saints and rules forever.

At Pentecost, God sent the Holy Spirit, who had acted in creation, in empowering the prophets, and in inspiring the Scriptures. Through the Spirit, God established the church, the body of Christ, to proclaim God's reign and to give witness to the new creation. The Spirit is poured out on all who receive Christ, baptizing them and sealing them for redemption as God's children. All who believe and confess Jesus as Lord are born anew into Christ. Believers are baptized by water into the new covenant community in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. By grace they are saved through faith to live out God's peace and love in the face of opposing circumstances.

The church is God's new creation, agent of transformation, called to model God's design for humanity. The people of God call everyone to repentance and conversion, seek to promote righteousness, are faithful in suffering, share generously with those in need. They act as agents of reconciliation to reverse the alienation brought on by sin. In the Lord's Supper the church proclaims the Lord's death and celebrates the new covenant.

The new creation will be completed when Christ returns. All who belong to Christ will rise with a new body while Satan and those who have rejected Christ will face eternal condemnation. The new heaven and new earth will live under God's rule in everlasting peace and joy.

Scripture references: Gen. 1-3; 12:1-3; Exod. 6:6-8; Ps. 8; Isa. 49:6; Jer. 9:23-24; 31:31-34; Hos. 2:19-20; Matt. 4:17; 25,46; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 4:18-19; John 3:16; Acts 2; Rom 8; 1 Cor. 11:23-32; 12:13; 15; 2 Cor. 5:17-6,2; Eph. 1:13-14; 2:8-10; 6:10-12; Col. 2:12-15; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Hebr. 7:25; Rev. 21-22.

Part 2.
**HOW DO MENNONITE
BRETHREN RESPOND
TO GOD'S PURPOSE?**

The Mennonite Brethren Church is rooted in the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century Reformation, a movement that sought to recapture the faith and life of the New Testament church. The Mennonite Brethren Church was born within the Mennonite renewal in Russia in 1860. World mission and migration have produced a Church that circles the globe. As a world wide MB fellowship we commit ourselves to be a people of God.

PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is the authoritative Word of God and the infallible guide for faith and life.

- World view. The Bible provides the framework for our understanding of the world.
- Interpretation. Our interpretation is Christ centered. We read the Scriptures with a New Testament perspective. The person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments.
- Community of interpretation: Every believer is encouraged to seek to understand the Bible in order to discern God's will for obedience. Since the Holy Spirit is present and active in all believers, we read and interpret the Bible and its demands for today's life in community.

Scripture references: Ps. 1; 19; 119; Matt. 5-7; Luke 24:27; 44-49; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Heb. 1:1-2; Acts 2:42; 15:1-29; 17:11; Col. 3:1-4; 1 Pet. 1:10-12.

PEOPLE OF A NEW WAY OF LIFE

By God's grace the Holy Spirit calls people to a new way of life through conversion, discipleship and ongoing renewal.

- Conversion. Christian conversion begins with new birth and always involves a deliberate personal commitment. As Christians we are called to turn
 - from a broken relationship with God, and to a personal relationship with the true God
 - from bondage of sin and past mistakes to freedom, forgiveness, and healing.
- Discipleship. In Christ salvation and ethics come together. As Christians we are called
 - to turn from individualism to interdependence with others in the church, and
 - to prove ourselves faithful to the life and teachings of Jesus in everyday life.
- Renewal. The Holy Spirit indwells every believer, testifying that we are God's children, offering continual renewal and cleansing in order to empower for a life of witness and service.

Scripture references: Is. 43:1; Mark 8:34-38; John 1:12-13; 3:5-8; 14:15-16,26; Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 4:2; Col. 3:1-4; Tit. 3:3-7.

PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT COMMUNITY

In the church, the covenant community, believers commit themselves to worship together, pray as Christ taught us, to fellowship, and to care for one another.

- Believer's Baptism. People from all cultures, nations and languages who are willing to follow Jesus as obedient disciples confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and are baptized by water into the fellowship of the church. The Mennonite Brethren church baptizes by immersion.
- Lord's Supper. In the Supper the church identifies with the life of Christ given for the redemption of humanity and proclaims the Lord's death and resurrection until he comes. This Supper of remembrance expresses reconciliation, fellowship, peace and unity of all believers with Christ.
- Accountability. The church interprets God's will, discerning what is right and what is wrong. All believers hold each other accountable

- for a Christ-like walk of faith. The purpose of accountability is to heal and restore through repentance and not punish or condemn. The church excludes those who consistently disregard discipline.
- Priesthood of all believers. The Spirit of God gives all believers gifts for service to build up the body of Christ. The church discerns the call of God and confirms servant leaders who equip people for ministry.

Scripture references: Matt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20; 28:18-20; Acts 2:37-47; Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 11:23-32; 12-14; Eph. 4:11-16; Col. 2:12-13; Heb. 10:24-25; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; 4:10-11.

PEOPLE OF RECONCILIATION

Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God. The mission of Jesus was to reconcile humans with God, each other and the world. The church is called to participate in God's mission.

- Mission. Christ has commissioned the church to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all his commandments. Jesus teaches that disciples are to love God and neighbor by telling the good news and by doing acts of love and compassion. Since Jesus is the only way of salvation, the evangelistic imperative is given to all believers.
- Peace witness. Peace and reconciliation are at the heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus calls the community of faith to be peace-makers in all situations. We believe that peace with God includes a commitment to the way reconciliation was modeled by the Prince of Peace. As Christians we are called to turn
 - from lifestyle choices that harm us, to choices that nurture wholeness, healing, joy and peace
 - from hating enemies and ignoring neighbors to showing love and justice to all
- Family. God blesses singleness, marriage and family. God calls all people to live a sexually pure life. Marriage is a life-long covenant commitment of one man and one woman. Godly parents instruct their children in the faith. The church nurtures family life and makes every effort to bring reconciliation to troubled relationships.
- State. God has given the state the responsibility to promote the well-being of all people. Followers of Christ respect and pray for government authorities but resist the temptation to give the state

the devotion that is owed to God. The primary allegiance of all Christians is to Christ's kingdom and his global church. In each state and society Christians cooperate with others to defend the weak, reduce strife, care for the poor, and promote justice, peace and truth.

Scripture references: Matt. 5-7; 22:34-40; 28:18-20; Luke 4:18-19; 10:25-37; Rom. 12:17-13,10; 2 Cor. 5:17-6,2; Eph. 2; 5:21-6:4; 1 Tim 2:1-6; Jam. 2; 1 Pet. 2:21-25.

PEOPLE OF HOPE

The Church belongs to the in-breaking Kingdom of God. The citizens of the Kingdom model an alternative community, challenging godless values of this world's cultures. The people of God join in the struggle for justice, yet are prepared to suffer persecution knowing that sin, guilt and death will not prevail. Confident in this hope the church engages in mission until the Lord returns, empowered by the certainty that God will create a new heaven and a new earth.

Scripture references: Matt. 5:10-12; 10:7; 13: 24-25; Mark 1:15; 13; Luke 17:20-37; 21:5-36; Tit. 2:11-14; Rev. 21-22.

A Historical Note: ICOMB (International Community of Mennonite Brethren) addressed the question "What do Mennonite Brethren around the world believe?" in January 1997 in Calcutta, India. In October 2001 in Curitiba, Brazil, ICMOB commissioned a seven-member Confession of Faith Task Force to write a summary of Mennonite Brethren convictions. Later, the members of the Task Force from Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, and North America met in Abbotsford, BC, during the July United States-Canada Mennonite Brethren conventions (2002). The Task Force surveyed existing confessional materials and considered the primary questions which Mennonite Brethren face worldwide.

The international team produced a two-part document. Part One addresses the question "How does God work in the world?" with a narrative of God's creation, the fall, and God's re-creation. The story of God's actions represents an Asian and African approach to theology. Part Two answers "How do Mennonite Brethren respond to God's purpose?" by describing five core values regarding the church.

The Task Force presented the first draft of its work to ICOMB on July 19, 2001. ICOMB directed the Task Force to circulate the revised draft to all 17 national boards of faith and life and to the conference periodicals. The Task Force met in Bielefeld, Germany in 2003 to prepare a report to the ICOMB delegates meeting later that year in Zimbabwe. Translations were completed and circulated to member conferences. Delegates meeting in Paraguay in June, 2004, heard from each of the national conferences, all of them endorsing the Confession of Faith proposed by the Task Force. So in 2004 the document became the official Confession of Faith of ICOMB and for that matter of all 17 member conferences

The purpose of the common confession is to guide national conferences in formulating confessions specific to their own cultures and to define Mennonite Brethren positions for national churches that have inquired about joining the denomination.

Task force members:

Menno Joel (India),
Lynn Jost (USA),
Takashi Manabe (Japan),
Alfred Neufeld (Paraguay),
Arthur Dueck (Brasil),
Pascal T. Kulungu (Congo),
Heinrich Klassen (Germany).

Knowing & Living Your Faith

From its beginnings as a renewal movement in Russia in 1860, the Mennonite Brethren Church has grown into a communion of churches that spans the globe. This growth has brought into the church a richness of peoples and cultures that reflects the diversity of God's family.

Menno Simons, the 16th century Dutch leader of the Anabaptists, was known for repeating: "No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). This conviction is reflected in the Confession of faith of the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) expressed in this study guide.

Sixteen writers from eight countries reflect on the meaning of different parts of the confession. Readers will note that a strong unity of faith pervades all chapters.

The leadership of ICOMB, the authors and editors fervently hope that this volume will be studied in all our global churches, and will strengthen our united witness in building the Kingdom of our Lord

Countries of the 19 Member Conferences of ICOMB

Angola
Austria
Brazil
Canada

Colombia
Congo
Germany
India

Japan
Mexico
Panama
Paraguay

Peru
Portugal
Uruguay
United States




Kindred
Productions