



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 1 [MB Confession of Faith]

God

COMMENTARY

The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith begins with a statement of our belief in God. The opening paragraphs use images—biblical metaphors, similes, and adjectives—to describe God. God is our powerful Sovereign and loving Protector, as these images suggest. The three captioned paragraphs follow New Testament Trinitarian forms. These paragraphs discuss the unique ministry of each person of the one being. While the Mennonite Brethren confession is orthodox, it strategically aims to use biblical and narrative language, rather than systematic or philosophical structures, to describe God.

One True, Living God

Christians confess that God is one being in three persons. The opening paragraphs begin with an emphasis on monotheism and conclude with the Christian confession of Trinitarianism, a concept found in the New Testament and defined by later church councils. The Trinitarian doctrine is the basis for an emphasis on the relational nature of God. God is relational. God is community. God is the community of Father, Son, and Spirit and enjoys fellowship.

Scripture tends to speak of God using images and metaphors rather than philosophical categories. The confession attempts to reflect this preference by avoiding terms such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence in favor of such phrases as “consuming fire” and “perfect in holiness.” Although parts of Scripture use doxological phrases to express awe at God’s person (especially the Psalms, parts of Isaiah and Ezekiel, and Revelation), one can also discover the person of God through the narrative of the salvation story with God as the leading character.

God the Creator

The Bible begins by confessing that God is Creator of heaven and earth. (See Article 3 for more on creation). Mennonite Brethren have not developed a dogmatic stance on the mechanics of God’s act of creation. With Scripture we confess that God created all things visible and invisible (Gen. 1:1; Col. 1:15-16). The Genesis text appears to be written from the standpoint of an ancient world view. The emphasis of the creation stories in Genesis 1–3 is that God is transcendent from the created order (Genesis 1 says God spoke the cosmos into existence) and yet relates immanently with creation, especially with humankind (Genesis 2–3 shows God walking in the garden with Adam and Eve).

The doctrine of God as Creator is fundamental for our understanding of God’s role in time and space. As Creator, God is also Sovereign (Gen. 1:28-31). God rules over every principality and power and holds dominion over humans as well (Eph. 1:20-23). God also is the Gardener who preserves and cares for creation (Gen. 2; Col. 1:17). As Sovereign, God judges all affronts to His rule, especially acts of human rebellion (Gen. 3:11-19). As Redeemer, God persists in seeking to reconcile humans and creation to a restored relationship with Himself.

God of Human History

The story of God’s reconciling activity begins with the stories of Genesis 1–11. When Eve and Adam eat of the forbidden fruit, God provides clothing and promise of the Seed (Gen. 3:15, 21). When Cain murders Abel, God provides a preserving mark (Gen. 4:15). When human wickedness caused God to be sorry for the creation of humankind (Gen. 6:5-7), Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD, was saved in



the ark, and was offered a covenant relationship (Gen. 9:1-17). When society seeks a name for itself at the tower of Babel, God not only judges (Gen. 11:6-8) but chooses a family through whom to bless the world (Gen. 12:1-3).

God of Israel

The Old Testament salvation story is the narrative of the God who “persists in covenant love like a faithful husband.” The ancestral narrative (Gen. 12–50) traces God’s dealings with Abraham and Sarah and their offspring. Repeatedly, God preserves the promise despite human faithlessness and invites the ancestors to renewed covenant relationships.

The Exodus is the Old Testament salvation story *par excellence*. God hears the cry of the oppressed Israelites (Exod. 2:23-25), judges Egyptian injustice (Exod. 7–15), and fights as the divine Warrior to deliver Israel (Exod. 15:2-3). God’s plan for Israel is summarized in God’s speech to Moses in Exodus 6:6-8. God will deliver Israel, take them as His people, make Himself known to them, and give them abundance in the land. This fourfold design becomes the rubric for God’s relationship with Israel in the Old Testament.

God of Covenant

God’s relationship with Israel is commonly described as a covenant. Scholars have demonstrated that the covenant form of Exodus 20–24 and the book of Deuteronomy parallel the structure of ancient treaties. Mutual loyalty essentially marks the covenant relationship. God, the stronger party, offers human partners, the weaker party, intimacy in relationship. The legal stipulations of the covenant are offered as the appropriate response to the prior salvation which God has worked. Three distinct covenants are formed in the Old Testament. First, God’s covenant with all creation is offered after the flood (Gen. 9:1-17). Second, God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants moves from a simple promise with a patriarch of the family (Gen. 15, 17) to a formal document with the nation (Exod. 20–24, Deuteronomy). Third, God offers David a covenant promise of the kingdom (2 Sam. 7).

Later Jeremiah 31:31-34 promises a new covenant written on the heart.

God is Yahweh

The Old Testament uses many names and metaphors to refer to God. The most common name for God (and most frequently used word in the Bible) is the LORD (Exod. 3:11-15; 6:1-8). Traditionally pronounced Jehovah but better rendered Yahweh, the interpretation of the name is mysterious, perhaps alluding to the transcendence and elusiveness of God. God simply refuses to be restricted to any human agenda. The name may also allude to God’s creativity, the one who causes to be, or to God’s sufficiency, the one who will be “what I will be.” Yahweh is above all Deliverer; that is, the mighty Warrior who rescues, the righteous Judge who offers justice, the powerful King who rules, and the loving Parent who comforts and disciplines.

Although some have found allusions to the Trinity in the Old Testament, it is best to avoid reading into the text a notion that would have been foreign to its human authors. In light of the New Testament we read of the Spirit’s activity and recognize the person who was sent at Pentecost. Though the Messiah is predicted in the Old Testament, writers nowhere suggest that theophanies of Yahweh (e.g., Gen. 18:16-33) are appearances of Jesus.

Several confessional texts are particularly rich with expressions of the person of God. In Exodus 34:6-7 Yahweh pronounces the divine name and claims both steadfast love and visiting iniquity. In Deuteronomy 6:4-8 Israel’s confession of faith (the *Shema*) confesses that Yahweh alone is our God, one God. In Isaiah we read that God is holy and glorious (6:3), tender and comforting (40:1-2), and the untiring Creator (40:30-31).

God is also revealed in the Law and the Wisdom literature. God’s holiness leads God’s people to be holy (Lev. 19:1-3). God’s wisdom has been active since creation (Prov. 8). We hold the blessings and curses of the deuteronomic law in tension with such books as Job and Ecclesiastes, which wrestle with the mystery of God’s ways.



God the Father

Jesus calls God “*Abba*” (Mark 14:36), reflecting the Son’s intimacy with the Father. God as Father is the source of all life. God the Father is Creator of all life, but especially of the family of the redeemed. The New Testament refers to God’s work as adoption, accepting as daughters and sons those who respond to God’s offer of family relationship.

The Father designed the redemptive plan and sent His beloved Son to reconcile the world to God. God also takes the initiative to nurture the family of faith. As a Father who loves the entire world, God hears and answers prayer (John 16:23-24, 26-28). God the Father is characterized by love and mercy (John 3:16). The emphasis on God as Father calls humans to respond confidently as children and to live in ways that reflect the family resemblance (1 John 3:1-2).

God the Son

The gospels tell the story of Jesus. The gospels are not straight biographies but are theologically motivated proclamations of God’s communication through Jesus. Some scholars have recently become active in communicating at a popular level about their skepticism regarding the historicity of the gospels. As Mennonite Brethren we accept the historical reliability of the gospels. Jesus came proclaiming the “kingdom of God.” Although the idea of the kingdom was common to first-century Judaism, Jesus’ interpretation of the kingdom was so radical that it led to his execution. Jesus announced that God was intervening in the person of Jesus to confront the evil powers. Jesus acted to thwart Satan by rejecting the common messianic notions of economic success or elitism, nationalistic violence, and ethnic exclusivism. Jesus rejected the Jewish notions of the centrality of the Jerusalem temple in favor of a call for liberty for the poor, the blind, and the sinner.

As we read the epistles with the gospels, we discover that the mission of Jesus involves at least four emphases. First, God is revealed in the person of Christ; Jesus shows us what God is like through his life and ministry (John 1:1-18; 14:9-11). Christ’s teaching tells us about God; his person shows God’s character; his death reveals God’s suffering; and his resurrection declares God’s creative power.

Second, Jesus is the unique Savior of the world. Two primary metaphors describe Jesus’ act. The first, sacrificial atonement, grows out of the New Testament understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system (Rom. 3:21-26 and Heb. 9:15-28). The second involves liberation by means of Christ’s obedient fulfillment of the law of God. Christ broke the reigning power of sin by subscribing to God’s will in every way (Rom. 5:18-21 and Heb. 4:14-16). Hebrews 2:14-18 seems to pull together the aspects of atonement and obedience.

Third, Jesus is the model for faithful discipleship. When Jesus called the first disciples, he said, “Come, follow me” (Mark 1:16-20). Anabaptists have consistently interpreted this call as more than an invitation to first-century students of a rabbi. The call to follow Christ is the essence of Anabaptism. Following Christ means that Christians learn of Jesus, they take on Christ’s character, and they assume Christ’s counter-cultural stance—vis-à-vis the larger world. Christ’s followers are people of the Way, people who take the cross in voluntary, serving, self-giving suffering (Mark 8:24-38). Among the acts and attitudes of disciples of Jesus are the following: disciples love indiscriminately, forgive, give themselves, serve, suffer, give their lives.

Fourth, Jesus is Lord of the church and the cosmos (Acts 2:32-36; Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:15-20). There is an eschatological dimension to the ministry of Jesus (Phil. 2:6-11). Jesus inaugurated a new age, the age of God’s reign. We confess that the end of the age has begun with Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. We also recognize that we are in an interim period in which evil powers oppose Christ’s lordship.

Three great implications of Christ’s lordship occupy contemporary minds. First, Christ is Judge of creation (Matt. 25:31-46; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15). Second, Christ is Lord of the created order (Gen. 1:28; Rom. 8:18-25). Third, Jesus is Lord of all powers. As Christians, we are in a spiritual battle with the principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12). Demonic powers are at work in every culture. Sometimes they manifest themselves in corporate power structures, but they are also active in the everyday lives of people. It is clear that Christ the cosmic Lord is in fierce conflict against them.



God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit leads people to faith. The Bible speaks of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11). The Spirit is the seal, the firstfruits, the mark of conversion (Eph. 1:13-14). All believers have the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit also assures children of God of their new relationship (Rom. 8:15).

By the Spirit believers are baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit is the great unifier of the church (1 Cor. 12; John 17). The Spirit equips believers with gifts to build up the body and to minister in the world (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12, 14; Eph. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). It appears most likely that the gifts listed in the New Testament are not meant to be exhaustive. No single list contains all of the gifts mentioned.

Gender and God

Humans struggle to express in human language the inexpressible nature of God. The Hebrew language lacks a personal neuter pronoun to describe God and by convention refers to God as “He.” Although male metaphors for God are predominant in the Bible, occasional metaphors depict God as a mother (Isa. 66:12-13), as one who gives birth (Deut. 32:18), and as a woman (Luke 15:8-10). Contemporary theologians have attempted to “re-image” God with feminine sexual metaphors. How should Mennonite Brethren understand this issue?

First, God is Spirit. God is neither male nor female. Although male pronouns are used for God in the Bible, this most likely reflects limits in language rather than the notion that God has gender. Familiar metaphors that refer to God as King or Father or Husband no more make God a male sexual being than references to feathers make God a bird (Ps. 91:4).

Second, ancient pagan religions routinely referred to the gods as sexual beings. In the Babylonian and Canaanite mythology contemporary with the Hebrew Bible, the sexuality of the gods was the basis for creation. Sexuality in these fertility religions was directly related to sexual eroticism in the cultic practices. Humans engaged in sexual intercourse with the deity by means of temple prostitutes. The Genesis creation account counters such hedonistic notions of the deity. God is neither male nor female but the image of God includes both male and female (Gen. 1:27). Insistence on the maleness of God threatens to return the worshiper to pagan notions.

Third, contemporary thinking warns us that hierarchical notions of gender impact human relationships. As sisters and brothers we want to speak charitably as we wrestle with these questions. God is sovereign; humans are not.

Bibliography

Grenz, Stanley J. *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.

