



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 1 [MB Confession of Faith]

God

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Mennonite Brethren believe that God is the source and goal of all things, the unifying center of our lives. All of our confession of faith, and indeed our whole journey of faith, consists of “applying” God’s claims to our lives. We find several specific items of pastoral application that arise from our understanding of God’s person and activity.

The Existence of God

Seekers coming to the church and believers within the church both ask at times, “Does God exist? How can I know God is real?” How one responds depends on the questioner. For some who are new to the idea of a personal Creator, pointing to the magnificent design of creation (the finely-tuned balance of physical matter, the complexity of life, the miracle of human birth and the human body) is a good place to start. Others need to be shown the historical reliability of the Bible. For these one could explain the wealth of biblical manuscripts, the care taken in copying these manuscripts, and the historical accuracy of what they record. (Books by Bruce and McDowell, listed in the bibliography, are helpful.)

For some seekers the presence of miracles could be an obstacle. A good starting point for conversation here is the resurrection of Jesus. If the plausibility and reality of the resurrection are accepted, the rest can fall into place (1 Cor. 15:17-20; Morrison’s *Who Moved the Stone?*). The problem of miracles, however, takes us to a larger issue, usually framed as “faith” versus “reason.” To address this issue, we’ll want to reflect on the importance of one’s world view. Our understanding is that “faith” is not opposed to “reason,” but is really one form of reason. It is reasoning based on the assumption that God exists (Heb. 11:6). Or, we might say that faith is “living in a way that would not make sense if God did not exist.” Faith in God is a reasonable world view, but with a different starting point than either rationalism (which shuts out the supernatural) or pantheism (which muddles the natural and supernatural). Faith in God is nurtured through the life of the church. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, learning from Scripture, and fellowship with other believers align us with God and reinforce a God-centered world view. (Books by C.S. Lewis, Zacharias, and Newbiggin could be helpful in answering questions of miracles, faith, and reason.)

In all these conversations we should remember that we are ultimately dealing not with issues of information, but issues of choice. We can’t prove that God exists in order to force seekers to concede and convert. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can persuade. We can show that belief in God is reasonable. Above all, we must show that it is fruitful: faith in God results in changed lives. In the end it is God alone who draws individuals to faith in Him (John 6:44).

Responding to God

Once we understand that God exists and choose to view the world from this perspective, we realize that we have to respond to God. We respond to God through Jesus (John 14:6). Our response begins when we turn from our sin and self-centered lives to the free gift of eternal, Christ-centered life (see Article 5: Salvation); and it develops as we follow Jesus through life (see Article 10: Discipleship).

Responding to God involves worship. This is a key biblical term and a current issue in the life of the church. We are living in a time when many churches are experiencing a renewal in their corporate worship. God’s blessing is present, and yet sometimes there is also confusion and division. As Mennonite Brethren we want to be clear about how we interpret and practice the Bible’s teaching on worship.



We begin by considering three valid levels of meaning to the biblical concept of worship. First, it means the physical act of prostrating oneself or bowing down in front of someone (Gen. 24:26, Job 1:20, Phil. 2:10). This posture has symbolic value and leads to the second level of meaning, namely ritual worship, involving personal and corporate acts and rituals which bring us in touch with God. This is the common, popular understanding of worship. The third level of meaning is that of “ethical worship”; worship as a lifestyle of sacrificial service. The interplay between ritual and ethical worship is a critical pastoral issue for Mennonite Brethren churches today, and we’ll come back to that concern.

We want to plan our worship services with care so that they reflect God’s intention for the church. The earliest believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). We notice that the first three of these activities are basically “horizontal” (person-to-person), while the fourth is directed Godward. The Bible teaches that we gather to encourage and build up one another (Col. 3:16, Heb. 10:24-25). In other words, the New Testament emphasis for church gatherings is for people to connect with each other, to speak to one another, and in this way encounter the God of salvation. The horizontal, person-to-person dimension should be evident in our gatherings to avoid an individualistic, disconnected, “Jesus and me” religion. We can enhance this by means of public sharing, by having times of “open worship” (song suggestions and prayers coming from the congregation, unplanned but prompted by the Spirit), by allowing for times of discussion and response after the sermon, or by concluding the service with opportunities for prayer or counseling in smaller groups. We yearn for the kind of positive impact that Paul held up: the seeker and unbeliever say, “God is really among you!” (1 Cor. 14:25).

We also spend time in prayer and song. We sing and pray not because God somehow needs to be told repeatedly how great He is (Jesus said the Father seeks worshipers more than worship—John 4:23), but because prayer and praise shape us as obedient children of God. We believe that worship services ought to be centered on the Word, that is, on Jesus Christ and the biblical story of salvation. Worship services ought to include the public reading (1 Tim. 4:13) and explanation (Neh. 8:8) of Scripture. But the proclamation of the Word isn’t limited to the sermon. It can include public prayers, songs, and testimonies. It’s helpful to think of the whole worship service, and not just the sermon, as “the message.”

Worship and Music

Congregational worship is almost unthinkable apart from music. Sadly, cultural and generational differences have resulted in some tensions in this area. We find at least three different groups in our churches: the “traditionalists,” the “reformers” (who want some continuity with the past), and the “revolutionaries” (who want to form their own tradition). In a uniform church, where one view predominates, there is little cause for tension. But in a church with more than one group represented (as the New Testament church exemplified with its broad cultural and generational mix), the tension can be severe. Leaders must take great care in how they lead the congregation in worship to ensure that the whole congregation, not just one part, is given a voice. The “blended worship” approach can be helpful for congregations dealing with this. In divisive situations it is imperative that worship leaders place the spiritual needs of the congregation above their own musical or devotional preferences. An effective leader will respect the various “dialects” spoken in the congregation, and will help the differing groups in the church to find their own voice before God.

Several specific issues have arisen out of the “worship renewal” movement in recent years. The first is that “worship” implies a certain style of music. We find no biblical basis for this. Paul encourages diversity in music (Eph. 5:19). Heaven will welcome a multitude of cultural expressions (Rev. 5:9). The healthy worshipping church will prepare for this in the present!

A second issue is the feeling of some that only songs addressing God as You/Thou (that is, second person) should be considered as worship. We want to encourage the desire for intimacy this approach brings. But we shouldn’t try to be more biblical than the Bible. The Psalms move seamlessly back and forth between second and third person in their “God-talk” (Psalm 23, for example). We understand that talking to God and talking about God are equally valid and necessary for corporate worship. The one is prayer, the



other is testimony. If we view believers as the Temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16), then our conversations with each other are also communication with God.

In the planning of worship services, whether traditional or contemporary, a useful tool is the Christian calendar. Worship leaders ought to be familiar with the seasons of the Christian year (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and so on). How the themes are used depends on the creative preferences of the congregation. The Christian calendar helps the church to walk the journey of Jesus each year. A further aid, used by some churches, is the Common Lectionary, a cycle of weekly Scripture readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, and Epistles that ensures that the church hears from the whole Bible every three years.

In the New Testament sense the worship service is not an end in itself. It exists for the purpose of enhancing lifestyle worship. We gather in order to be strengthened for ministry. Our day-by-day worship of God is shown in a life of sacrificial service (Rom. 12:1-2), in which we endeavor “to look after widows and orphans” (James 1:27) and “to do good and to share with others” (Heb. 13:16). The worship that God invites and enjoys is a lifestyle of placing other’s needs before our own, living generously with what God has entrusted us, and reflecting the life of Jesus in all our relationships and commitments.

Prayer and “God-talk”

The biblical teaching on the Trinity has its most immediate application in the life of prayer. The act of prayer places us within the heart of the mystery of the Trinity. We pray to God the Father (Matt. 6:9). We pray in the name (that is, with the authority) of Jesus the Son (John 14:13-14). And we are empowered by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:15, 26). We don’t think that it is wrong to offer prayers addressed to Jesus or the Holy Spirit, of course, since it is the One God to whom we pray. But New Testament prayers are consistently directed to the Father. The practice of saying “in Jesus’ name, Amen” to conclude our prayers is likewise not wrong, even though it does not necessarily reflect Jesus’ intent. Rather than reciting a set formula, Jesus wants us to remember and act on the authority he has given through the Spirit every time we pray.

Many models for prayer have been developed over the years. Some follow the ACTS model, which encourages well-rounded prayers of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (requests). We suggest that to be biblically-shaped people, the Psalms should be an important guide. Privately and publicly, the Psalms work wonderfully to guide our prayers and give expression to our deepest needs and highest praises. Jesus also left us with a model prayer, which we know as The Lord’s Prayer. This is a unifying prayer, used by countless past and present believers, which still works well in personal and corporate prayer. Along with reciting the words of The Lord’s Prayer, we can use its outline to shape our prayer life according to the Master’s plan (see bibliography for Dodd’s great guide for this). Jesus teaches us to begin by focusing on God’s holiness, God’s authority, God’s purposefulness. After we place ourselves humbly before our Father in heaven, we then confidently bring to Him our present needs: physical (daily bread), social (restored relationships), and spiritual (safety from temptation and the evil one). We conclude by turning our gaze from our present needs, to once again face God’s awesome glory and power.

A final issue of “God-talk” has to do with gender and God. We realize that this is a potentially explosive and political issue. As Mennonite Brethren, we acknowledge that God is revealed in the Bible through predominantly (though not exclusively) masculine language. We use masculine pronouns regularly to refer to God. But, being fallen people, we often forget that the masculinity of language is only grammar, a habit of limited human speech. We confuse masculinity (having to do with grammar and words) with maleness (having to do with sexuality and identity). We affirm that God is not male, but includes and transcends both male and female. We do not want to burden our God-talk with the power imbalance that afflicted male-female relationships after the fall (Gen. 3:16). This imbalance has been healed through Jesus (Gal. 3:28). Thus we should take care to avoid giving the impression that God speaks only through male voices. We can do much to enrich our congregations by encouraging women to express their voices in public readings, prayers, preaching, worship leading, and so on. It is men and women together who reflect the image of God.



Idolatry

The Lord forbids all idolatry, as expressed from the First Commandment (Exod. 20:3) to the closing line of one of the last letters of the New Testament (1 John 5:21). Idolatry in the form of offering worship to an image or statue is not a huge threat for most North Americans, though we realize it can be an issue in other cultural contexts and in popular New Age practices. But in a larger sense idolatry is a grave temptation for us. We always live with the temptation to make anything but God a priority in our lives. Our jobs, our recreation, our wealth, our desire for material things, our families, our political party, our nation—all these and more can become rival gods. Whatever competes with God for our allegiance and trust is as much a rival god for us as Baal was for the Hebrews in the Old Testament. The church's ongoing task is to call believers away from idolatry of every kind, and into the freedom of serving God alone.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit brings unity to the Christian church (1 Cor. 12:13). Unfortunately, the work of the Spirit has sometimes become the subject of division and distrust. The New Testament records several occasions in which the Spirit performed a mighty work, but afterward the devil moved in quickly to tempt, deceive, and try to destroy the work of God (Matt. 3:13–4:11; Acts 2, 5:1-11, 8:14-24).

The Bible tells us to earnestly desire the spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14:1), but only as they are used for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7) and tested by wise discernment (1 Thess. 5:19-21). Current questions about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, being filled with the Spirit, and the function of charismatic gifts have created confusion for some believers. Following is a brief overview of Mennonite Brethren interpretation in these matters.

The language of the New Testament in regard to the Spirit involves both “baptism” and “filling.” Baptism by the Spirit is the experience of every believer at conversion and is symbolized by water baptism. It is a one-time experience. Romans 8:9-11 teaches that if one does not have the Spirit of Christ one does not belong to Christ. According to Mennonite Brethren interpretation, the Scriptures do not instruct that a dramatic, emotional, post-conversion experience is needed to live a full Christian life. In Acts 2 Peter declares conversion, water baptism, and Spirit baptism as concurring events (v. 38). Scripture does teach, however, that Christians need to grow in surrender to the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26). We are commanded to be continuously filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). It is not a one-time event, but an ongoing surrender to the will of the Lord. Filling is obedience to the Spirit of God. Filling produces the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

Spiritual gifts are listed in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4. None of the lists is complete and it appears that the New Testament is not exhaustive in listing the gifts. The gifts themselves include gifts that involve human talents that can be developed through study and practice, and supernatural phenomena often called sign gifts that defy categorization and explanation. The teaching makes clear that differences in giftedness should never become a source of division or result in feelings of superiority or inferiority.

Many believers have discovered great freedom in the sign gifts. Paul in Corinthians, for instance, commends speaking in tongues, both as a private prayer language and as an element in worship when accompanied by interpretations. Healing is encouraged via prayer by the elders (James 5:14-15) but also may be experienced as a special gift. Other phenomena such as spiritual laughter and being slain in the Spirit do not have scriptural basis or authority.

Paul encourages believers to grow in the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1-5). Although prophecy may have an element of prediction, predictive prophecy should be carefully tested. False prophets are detected not only by predicting things that do not come to pass but also by failure to submit to the body and by making contradictory statements. Prophecy may address concerns of the church, but differs from teaching in that it tends to be a special word for a congregation or individual for a strategic moment. The congregation should test all prophecies. Prophets should submit to the congregational leadership (1 John 4:1-6; 1 Cor. 12:29-32).

Gifts are given by the Spirit to the body and for the body. Individualistic use of the gifts is not in keeping with the Spirit's intent. Gifts are given to equip and build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:7-16).



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