



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 13 [MB Confession of Faith]

Love and Nonresistance

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Article 13 states clearly our commitment to alleviate suffering, reduce conflict, and promote justice as part of our witness in today's world.

We tend to respond to conflict and violence either by raising our voice and striking back, or by avoiding the conflict and walking away or remaining uninvolved. Christ chose a third option, peacemaking. He absorbed the evil and violence in himself, then released the perpetrators with grace and forgiveness, leaving vengeance and judgment to God. As followers of Jesus, our goal is a life of sacrificial love where even our enemies are treated with grace and forgiveness (Matt: 5:42-48). Christ calls us to be peacemakers—to stand between enemies to bring them together. To make peace is to stanch the flow of angry words, to cleanse the wound and bring healing to relationships. To make peace is to tear down barriers of misunderstanding and prejudice, anger, and hate, and to replace those barriers with bridges of acceptance, forgiveness, friendship, and love. This is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ; it is what we are called to be and to do as children of God. (Matt. 5:9)

A New Model

Jesus models a new way for the kingdom community to live, a way of love rather than violence. The paradox of the cross is that it is precisely through suffering and death that resurrection life comes. We are called not only to believe this paradox, but to live it. This new kingdom claims our highest allegiance. A critical issue for its citizens is how to be both loyal to God and loyal to civil governments (Rom. 13:1-7). Most Christians understand this to mean that Christians are called to obey the demands of the state whenever possible. This is not blind allegiance to civil authorities, however. The Bible emphasizes that members of the new kingdom community have a higher loyalty. Caesar is not lord; Jesus is Lord.

In the kingdom people are always more important than possessions. Persons who were created by God in His image, and for whom Christ died that they may be redeemed, are always more valuable than property. Citizens of the kingdom do not insist on legal rights. They surrender personal property. For followers of Jesus, defending personal property (which belongs to God anyway) with lethal force is wrong, and represents a misplaced value system.

Article 13 specifically addresses issues of war and international conflict. Most conflicts, however are closer to home.

Marriage and Family Issues

It is time for the church to break the silence concerning violence in marriage and in families. Discipline of children should never leave scars or bruises, whether physical or emotional. The biblical teaching of mutual submission in marriage may never be used as an excuse for physical or emotional abuse. Most churches recognize that violence is grounds for marriage separation, at least on a temporary basis, until the aggressor has found constructive ways of managing anger.

The church must listen to and be an advocate on behalf of victims. It must hold abusers accountable. More than that, the church must teach and model peaceful ways of living as marriage partners and as families.

A related issue is violence to unborn children. It is hardly possible to be pro-peace without being pro-life as well. If we consider the life of our enemy to be sacred, we must also consider the life of the



unborn to be sacred. In the same way, if we protect the life of the unborn, should we not also protect the lives of those who live in a country that our nation defines as its enemy?

Church

Surely the church is called to be a community of peace, providing an arena where the healthy exchange of differences is encouraged, supported, and resolved. Unfortunately, the church has too frequently been the place of bitter disputes and hurtful battles, harming its witness to the world.

Jesus taught that those coming to worship should first ensure that relationships with others are reconciled (Matt. 5:23,24). Before approaching the Lord's Table, we examine ourselves, seeking to determine whether our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters are open and clear (1 Cor. 11:27-34). In the past, some churches established peace committees designed to help fellow members resolve disputes—a decision which stands in contrast to our prevailing tendency to “mind our own business.” When we disagree within the Christian community, we should strive to do so as graciously as possible (Rom. 14).

Community, School, Work, and Play

Neighborhood disputes, racial tensions, and crime all provide further opportunities to promote justice, fight prejudice, extend love, work for peace. Community-based mediation services such as the Victim/Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) offer people an opportunity to practice peace-making by bringing people together, allowing for restitution, and moving toward reconciliation.

Schoolyard fights, labor/management tensions, violence among sports players and fans, are all variations on the same theme, and give Christians many opportunities to work for peace. For example, some schools have established playground reconciliation teams, where students are trained to negotiate (and, if necessary, arbitrate) settlements among their peers.

In the workplace we give employers and employees their due, and attempt to build bridges of trust and understanding. Truth, fairness, consideration, courtesy, and a love for others, even when we disagree with their positions, should mark the Christian's involvement in work-related disputes.

Christians should be encouraged to practice discernment in their entertainment choices. Television shows, movies, and computer games that glorify violence as a solution to problems stand in opposition to the way of the kingdom. In sports, vigorous yet friendly competition honors a worthy opponent. Insulting the referee or trash-talking the opposing team is not the way of Jesus. Our enthusiasm for the game is always tempered by our concern for the well-being of others.

National and International Disputes

For the Christian citizen, national and international disputes challenge a commitment to peace-making. The present-day dilemma of trying to keep the peace by the threat of force seems counter to Jesus' words of love for enemies.

We deplore our world's tendency to deal with violence by threatening or committing counter-violence. Such acts generally result in an uneasy truce or cease-fire, an escalation of the violence, or the displacement of the violence into underground forms of terrorism. Reconciliation, on the other hand, eliminates enmity and hate, and cuts the root that feeds the violence by building bridges of understanding, forgiveness, and friendship. It is a huge task, but far more productive in the long run.

We are grateful to God that governing authorities in North America have provided alternative service for Christians who, because of their faith convictions, choose not to enter military service. The church should continue to counsel youth to offer themselves in loving service to reduce strife and alleviate suffering rather than take up arms in military conflict. The church should also continue to provide service opportunities where believers may bear witness to the love we have for all humanity, even our enemies.

What about those who accuse us of benefiting from the sacrifice of others, while refusing to get involved? What about veterans who believe they did the right thing, yet return from war with nightmares and tremendous feelings of guilt? What about members of our congregations who serve in police forces, where lethal force is sometimes expected in the line of duty?



Here the church will probably continue to live in tension between what we believe and the realities of life. Not all countries accept alternate service. Not all believers accept this teaching. As graciously as possible, let us agree to disagree with those who hold different views. Let us be faithful in proclaiming the gospel in its fullness. This includes calling people to suffer for the sake of Christ and to extend love to those who seem unlovable.

At the same time, we extend grace and acceptance, love, and support to those among us who disagree with us, or who find themselves making difficult decisions in their line or work.

Remembrance Day, Veteran's Day

We do not take lightly the sacrifice paid by others in wars in which we were unwilling to participate. Surely we would be ungrateful if we did not recognize and honor their struggle for peace. To remember and to pay tribute to their courage and commitment is certainly appropriate. There is no shame, however, in insisting that our weapons for peace are of another nature. Were we to stand idly by, doing nothing while others are fighting, surely that would be shameful. We are not called to do nothing, however; we are called to active peacemaking. Christ calls us to lay down our lives daily for the sake of the gospel of peace. Our willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom should certainly be no less than those who have given their lives fighting for their country.

A High Calling

Though there may be disagreement surrounding certain aspects of Article 13, perhaps the greatest need in these issues is not more understanding but more obedience. At the heart, Article 13 calls for Christians to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Jesus said his followers must “take up their cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24 NRSV). He proclaimed, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (Matt. 5:9 NRSV).” There is no higher calling.

One of the most powerful ways to teach the principles of love and nonresistance, of peace and nonviolence, is by telling stories. Many from our congregations who have worked in missions, relief, inner city, reconciliation, and other such ministries can offer firsthand accounts and experiences in these areas. A variety of printed materials also exist that are suitable for varying ages and settings. Including such material in church libraries and discussing them in class and small group settings is highly recommended. The following bibliography lists several potential resources.

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