



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 17 [MB Confession of Faith]

Christianity and Other Faiths

PASTORAL APPLICATION

With increasing frequency, pastors and church leaders in North America face questions about the relationship of Christianity to other faiths, as the communities surrounding our churches become more religiously diverse. A useful way to describe the growing diversity of faith commitments in North America is “religious plurality.” This is somewhat different than “religious pluralism,” a term often used to state a philosophical position which considers all faiths to be equal paths to God (see Article 17 Commentary).

Motivation for Mission

While we do not agree with religious pluralism, Article 17 approaches the reality of religious plurality in a positive way: it states that “salvation is available to all.” In other words, the good news of Jesus Christ which we know from the New Testament is also good news for people who are committed to other faiths. The way of salvation which God opened for us through the death of Jesus is open to people of other faiths as well. This approach encourages believers to strongly affirm Jesus as the Only Way.

The phrase “the assurance of eternal life” indicates one of the dimensions of salvation which Christians have the privilege of sharing with people of other faiths. Scripture speaks clearly to this hope, which comes through the gospel alone. But this is just one of many aspects of salvation in the New Testament which could be highlighted. One could also speak of the defeat of the powers of evil, sin, and death, liberation from the oppressive power of the enemy, and the abundant life that Jesus promises to those who follow him.

Pastors and church leaders can help congregations strengthen their motivation for mission by providing preaching and teaching on the truths which propelled the first Christians to evangelize their world. Mission is motivated by our desire to proclaim God’s sovereign authority in the world, God’s love for the world, and God’s desire that no one would perish but all come to repentance. The Scripture passages listed in support of Article 17 suggest good starting points for such encouragement.

The article sounds a definite call to action, stating at the end of the second section that the Christian way is to “lovingly and urgently proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation for all peoples.” Similarly, the end of the third section describes proclamation of the gospel among all peoples as “our task.”

Living Among People of Other Faiths

Article 17 was drafted partly in response to demographic developments in North America, where people of many religions are moving into the communities surrounding our churches. It is useful to note, however, that Mennonite Brethren churches in other parts of the world, such as India and Congo, emerged in the midst of competing faiths. They continue to function as minorities in their societies. Many in these churches have already thought through important questions about other faiths, and may be in a position to help their MB sisters and brothers in North America.

The Bible offers many helpful resources for questions surrounding people of other faiths. The New Testament was written at a time when the Christian population was a tiny minority in the midst of competing faiths. The witness to Jesus recorded in the gospels, the Christological confessions in the letters of Paul, the bold evangelism of the first Christians recorded in Acts, all took place in a multi-faith atmosphere. All of these biblical stories thus become very relevant for the situation which is emerging in North America.



For example, Philippians 2:5-11 provides a solid foundation for preaching the divinity, incarnation, and exaltation of Jesus. Similarly, Colossians 1:15-20 is a great launching pad for preaching Jesus' preexistence, supremacy, and role in creation. Hebrews 1:1-4 proclaims the centrality of Jesus in the way God has spoken to the world, and Romans 10:9-13 makes unmistakably clear that Jesus is Lord of all people. The Gospel of John announces the truth of God's one way of salvation through his son Jesus Christ.

Non-Biblical Approaches

Another reason that the question of other faiths has become more urgent is that some Christians are attracted to non-biblical approaches to religious plurality. One popular solution is an idea of "tolerance" which says that to be kind to people of other faiths, Christians need to say that all religions are equal. This secular notion copes with religious diversity by stating that all religions are true and none false. In this non-Christian view, Jesus becomes only one savior among many.

But this runs counter to the witness of Scripture. The central teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus is Lord of all, and that there is no other Lord (see article by John E. Toews listed in the bibliography). The danger in accepting secular solutions to religious plurality is that they can lead to denial of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Christians begin to choose non-biblical views over the New Testament witness to Jesus, there is cause for alarm. The challenge for church leaders is to help our congregations think of their non-Christian friends with love and generosity, while still holding firmly to the truth about Jesus.

Attitudes Toward Other Faiths

Article 17 takes a cautious approach to the question of truth in non-Christian faiths. But it affirms that "God has not left anyone without a witness to the Creator's goodness and power" (see Rom. 1:20), and lists Acts 10 (Peter and Cornelius) and Acts 17 (Paul in Athens) as helpful passages for this question.

A good idea for shining further light on this question is to consult Mennonite Brethren who have experienced world religions firsthand. Invite speakers from African and Asian MB churches, or missionaries who have studied other faiths and lived among people of other faiths, to interact with your congregations.

Respecting People of Other Faiths

Article 17 is straightforward, however, on the Christian attitude toward people of other faiths. It says that we are to treat them with respect. This opens the way for many practical expressions of respect and friendliness.

First, we can express cross-cultural neighborliness. Cultural differences with people of other faiths can provide contact points for building good relationships. Mennonite Brethren are a culturally diverse, global fellowship. This cultural diversity is not something which poses a problem for us. Rather, it is something we can affirm and celebrate. As we show appreciation for the cultures of others, we build a strong foundation for discussing spiritual issues where there may be disagreement.

Second, we can engage in interfaith conversation at the local level. In the context of friendly relationships, Christians should confess their faith to others and listen carefully to how others describe their faith. Both of these actions show respect to people of other faiths. Avoid stereotyping or caricaturing other faiths. Rather, learn to know other faiths as their practitioners themselves experience them. Many people of other faiths are grateful when Christians show a strong faith of their own and do not hesitate to speak openly of it.

Third, we can take opportunities to cooperate on social issues. Christians and people of other faiths frequently find themselves on the same side in public issues of morality. Many people of other faiths share the very important perception that human life is lived in response to a Creator God who gives humans laws for their behavior. This can lead to similar views on such issues as abortion, sexual morality, and the education of children. Standing together with people of other faiths on these social issues is another way that Christians can treat others with respect.



Trusting in God

Some worshipers in our congregations struggle with questions about the eternal destiny of those who have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. Article 17 does not give an answer to that question, but leaves it “in God’s hands.” It counsels trust that God will do what is right.

As the article suggests, it is good to maintain a measure of modesty concerning how much we humans know about God’s ways in these matters. However, Christians should act upon what can be clearly known from Scripture. Strong motivation for mission is based on the deep conviction that the good news about Jesus is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Its foundation is the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe. It is a response of gratitude to God for saving us through the death of His Son, and a desire that the blessings we enjoy should reach people of other faiths as well.

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