

Response to "The Mennonite Brethren As a Confessing Church"

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PROCESSED
BY STENOGRAPHER

Howard Loewen has written a paper which I believe will be helpful in the process of attempting to understand our Confession of Faith and the broader questions of what it means to be a "confessing church." He has set the stage for our discussion by defining 'confession' as well as clarifying the nature and the place of confession as it relates to the authority of the church. I appreciated his setting our Confession of Faith in its context within the history of Anabaptist confessions as well as his analysis of the use of scripture and the doctrinal themes in our Confession of Faith. I am grateful that brother Loewen has proceeded to suggest some of the theological implications of what it means to be a confessing church and has given us some practical steps which can be taken if we are to be a confessing church.

As an attempt to stimulate some discussion, permit me to suggest several questions which came to my mind as I perused the paper. On page 17 Loewen says that the church "needs to confess anew its understanding of biblical faith in the language of its day." On page 25 he suggests that we need to have a pro-global perspective. We are here looking at our Confession of Faith in a North American context. What are the implications of our discussion for the world-wide Mennonite Brethren Church and is our Confession of Faith a document which expresses the understanding of the faith of our brothers and sisters in Africa and South America?

In the fourth section Loewen has indicated that certain parts of scripture receive greater emphasis. Is there a disproportionate emphasis in the topics discussed in our Confession of Faith and if so, what are the implications? Is the Confession in some sense an apology for the "Mennonite Brethren faith"--that is, is it largely a defense of our distinctives? Loewen writes, "within Matthew 5 the section on love for one's enemies receives the strongest emphasis, followed by the section on integrity and the oath." These two heavily stressed articles are probably the most controversial. We have ordained M. B. pastors who do not accept one or both of these articles. Some of our leaders suggest that they are of less importance than the rest. Why this apparent contradiction between the emphasis in the Confession and the neglect in the churches?

A closely related question comes out of an observation made by Loewen in reference to the recent M. B. Profile. He suggests that "there is a growing gap between what we believe and what we practise." The question which arises is whether we actually do believe what we say in our Confession. Perhaps the practise is consistent with belief even though it is not consistent with the statements of our Confession.

In the section on Historical Identity Loewen calls us to recover our "confession-theological tradition." He indicates that we have a "distinct evangelical-Mennonite-believer's church historical and theological identity." The question which comes to mind is whether we are always careful in critiquing our history or do we make the assumption that our forefathers were always right. Certainly we must learn from our history as we are called to do in the paper. I suspect, however, that sometimes Anabaptists have not always been critical enough in evaluating their heritage.

The last question which raised itself in my mind as I studied the paper was the old issue of whether our Confession of Faith is 'descriptive' or 'prescriptive.' I believe that we have traditionally always said that it is descriptive. But in the section on Doctrinal Leadership we are called to be teachers and to encourage "commitment to that confessional tradition." The "Pastoral Letter" also calls us to "engage in regular and careful study of our Confession of Faith." Is the implication of this that our Confession is, in fact, prescriptive?

Loewen concludes that we do not need a new confession (small 'c'). But as long as our Confession of Faith makes statements which are at variance with the practise of the Mennonite Brethren, we must recognize the need to do something. If church leaders can not teach--or perhaps do not even accept--the articles of the Confession, then we can not expect the document to serve a useful purpose in our brotherhood.

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