



1 Study Conference
 2 Mennonite Brethren General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel
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 7

8 THE MENNONITE BRETHERN AS A CONFESSING CHURCH
 9

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 11

12 ENTERING A CONFSSIONAL SITUATION (What Is the Issue?)
 13

14 We as a Mennonite Brethren people of God are in a
 15 transitional period which calls for a rediscovery,
 16 reaffirmation and creative reassertion of our
 17 confessional tradition.
 18
 19

20 The starting point for this study is the 'pastoral letter' from the
 21 General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel to each congregation and
 22 to the conference this past May. The vision and challenge of this strategic
 23 document emerged from a profoundly valid concern that we are at a major
 24 transition point as a conference. It calls for the conference to "live as a
 25 covenant community" -- "to be a covenant people who reflect doctrinal and
 26 ethical unity, who engage in regular and careful study of our Confession of
 27 Faith on the local level . . . and carry out their commitments to the
 28 conference." In short it is a call to be a "confessing church."
 29

30 A confessing church is one which engages in a collective response to
 31 the Word of God at a particular time and in a particular place. Through
 32 confession, such a church finds new resolve to remain faithful and united in
 33 its identity as the people of God.
 34

35 The issues in this letter--historical identity, leadership authority,
 36 conference loyalty, covenant community, ethical integrity, faithful
 37 ministry, renewed spirituality and theological unity--find their source in
 38 the question of our identity and mission as a conference: "Who are we?
 39 What are we called to become as a people of God?" The purpose of this paper
 40 is to discuss the importance of our confession of faith for understanding our
 41 identity and mission as a Mennonite Brethren Church.
 42

43 During the past decade we, like many other church traditions, have
 44 become increasingly preoccupied with the questions of theological identity
 45 and direction. We too have had our studies, symposia, series and sessions
 46 that in one way or another have dealt with the concern of who we are, what
 47 we believe, and where we see ourselves going. The very need for this

1 strategic conference demonstrates that the powerful forces of modern culture
2 have had a substantial impact on us as a people. The basic spiritual convic-
3 tions around which we have organized our life as a conference, and the will
4 to live by these convictions, have increasingly ceased to be part of the
5 everyday tapestry of our individual and collective lives. Our traditional
6 values and practices as a people have sufficiently lost their grip on us so
7 that it becomes necessary once again to speak very explicitly about the
8 importance of those central theological convictions.

9
10 The impact of contemporary culture on our conference has brought us
11 into a 'confessional situation.' A confessional situation is one in which
12 the church finds it necessary to take stock of its own character and mission
13 in order to maintain its integrity as the people of God. It needs to
14 confess anew its understanding of biblical faith in the language of its day.
15 A confessing church will reevaluate its own inner life, as well as speak to
16 the doctrinal and ethical issues, a task which will certainly entail warnings
17 against accommodation to cultural values and ideologies.¹

18 19 FINDING A BIBLICAL ORIENTATION (What Is A Confession?)

20
21 Within the New Testament the church's confession of faith is
22 understood as an act of worship, as a statement of doctrine, and
23 as an ongoing process of translating faith into life. Confession
24 is worship, word and witness.

25
26 One of the first tasks of the church in a confessional situation is to
27 recognize the importance of theological confession and to ask about the
28 nature of the meaning of confession. Since a confessing church affirms
29 unequivocally the centrality and primacy of Scripture, the Bible must inform
30 our understanding of confession. Historically the church has tended to see
31 confession simply as doctrine. However, according to the NT the church's
32 confession of faith functions as the context in which faith-obedience to
33 Christ is expressed through worship, doctrine, and application in life.
34 This can be seen in a series of NT confessions which are used in connection
35 with the worship settings of the early church involving baptism and the
36 Lord's supper.²

37 38 1. Confession as Worship

39
40 Confession is first and foremost an act--a response of faith-obedience
41 in Jesus Christ. It is significant to note that in the NT the verb, 'to
42 confess,' appears more frequently than the noun. Therefore, in its original
43 form confession is an event, an act which is a response to what God has done
44 in and through Jesus Christ toward creating a confessing people.
45 Consequently in the NT all confession is thankful, praising, self-committing
46 acceptance of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ for the purpose of
47 creating a new people. It involves the joyous expression of gratitude to
48 God for his presence in our lives. That is why the early church as a
49 community does not have a confession; it exists in its confessing, in its
50 response of faith-obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Accordingly,
51 confession in the early church finds its basic expression and response in
52 the celebrative statement: "Jesus Christ is Lord." A confessing church is

1 grounded in the claim that Jesus is God and that there are no other gods
2 before him. Simultaneously, it confesses Jesus as truly human and that
3 there is ultimately no authentic humanness without him. In short, a
4 confessing church is Christ-centered.

*All good theology leads to
worship.*

6 2. Confession as Word

8 As a natural extension of the theological claims of the early church,
9 confession also takes place in the form of a statement: the church's
10 preaching and teaching about the gospel of God in Jesus Christ. The oldest
11 summaries of the early church's preaching revolve around the
12 cross/resurrection. Out of these earliest confessional formulas (which were
13 at the heart of the content and preaching/teaching of the gospel) there
14 developed a body of distinctive doctrine held as a sacred trust from God.
15 Confession as doctrine, then, is biblically rooted. It must reflect
16 biblical truth and not an alien ideology imposed onto biblical revelation.
17 In short, a confessing church is biblically grounded in true doctrine.

19 3. Confession as Witness

21 As act and statement, confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the
22 NT must also be seen in relationship to the church's witness to paganism.
23 The theme of the NT confession is always the present reconciling work of God
24 in Christ personally, historically, and universally. Thus the church's
25 confession becomes its defense against heresy. That is why the NT
26 confession always involves a central apologetic dimension in its missionary
27 task: this person Jesus and no other is Christ the Lord. Using the Bible
28 as our authoritative norm, our task is to make a translation of "Jesus is
29 Lord" for our day. In short, a confessing church is unabashedly
30 evangelistic in the scope of its claim that Jesus Christ is Lord.³

32 Worship, doctrine, and application in life make up the church's
33 confession of faith. A confessing church holds these elements together.
34 When the church limits its understanding of confession to only one or the
35 other of these, it loses its true identity as a confessing people. As a
36 people of biblicist tradition, we as Mennonite Brethren (MB) must affirm the
37 importance of a biblical view of theological confession. When we worship
38 together, think together, and live out our faith together, then we are a
39 confessing people--in our being, and thinking and acting. Confession is
40 first and foremost a corporate and communal act. Within this context the
41 affirmation of the importance of doctrine is no academic and theoretical
42 exercise. The very existence of the church depends on it.

44 The pastoral letter refers to the problem of individualism in our
45 conference. A confessing church not only affirms the authority of
46 Scripture, but also the derivative authority of the church. Before I as an
47 individual (or we as a congregation, or we as a denomination) make a
48 confession I/we must hear the confession of the rest of the church,
49 even though the possibility of falsehood and error exist. Confession,
50 therefore, is this common speaking among the people of God toward the
51 binding purpose of unity and identity in relation to a true faith.
52 Confession of faith in the biblical sense is a profoundly communal act,

1 statement, and process. A confessing church takes seriously the authority
2 of the church and accountability to it in the life of the believer.

4 AFFIRMING A HISTORICAL TRADITION (What Is the Framework?)

6 The Mennonite Brethren Church is an integral member of a broader
7 Mennonite-Believers' Church tradition which has made many
8 confessional statements and represents a distinct doctrinal
9 heritage.

11 1. Historical Identity and Necessity

12 Within this context an active confession of faith is one of the evidences
13 of a confessing church. Invariably and necessarily the confessional
14 authority of the church also finds expression in specific historical
15 statements, such as confessions of faith. These statements are not the
16 source of the life of any church, but they can be powerful catalysts that
17 give the church its shape and momentum. A genuine confession of faith
18 arises out of and relates to moral or cultural problems or crises that are
19 clearly impacting the church, as the various NT documents reflect.
20 Confessions function best as crisis documents and when their basis is the
21 perception that the church is confronted by significant issues. As
22 Mennonite Brethren we are currently in such a situation and therefore it
23 is most necessary to give our own confessional tradition serious
24 consideration.

26 The biblical understanding of confession as worship, word and witness
27 helps us to locate the place and importance of confession for our own
28 denominational tradition. It provides a basis for seeing the biblical and
29 historical importance of confession as a statement for the believers' church
30 tradition, of which we are a part. Contrary to our common assumptions,
31 Mennonite Brethren are part of a larger tradition from which many
32 confessions have emerged. The authority of these confessions has not been
33 insignificant and they do reflect a distinct doctrinal heritage.

35 In a very real sense the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has not been
36 hesitant about affirming the content of even the classical confessions, even
37 though it has granted considerably less importance to the authority of these
38 confessions in the life of the church. In turn however it has written many
39 of its own confessions, from the 16th century to the present--demonstrative
40 that reflection on doctrinal matters within different historical moments and
41 cultural contexts is central to the existence and identity of any church as
42 a confessing people of God.

44 The real question is not whether confessions are necessary but whether
45 they are good or bad translations of biblical faith for the church here and
46 now. Instead of asking whether this or that confession is the immutable
47 form of theological truth for all time one must ask: How does it serve as
48 an adequate guard concerning what should be said? How does it function as a
49 faithful witness to life and doctrine? How is it serving as a necessary
50 corrective in internal discipline? How is it serving as a means of defense
51 against false accusations and heretical movements? How can it serve as an
52 instrument of education, clarifying and strengthening the convictions of

1 believers? How can it be used as a conversation piece in association with
2 other believers? How can it serve as a means of reorientation and church
3 renewal?
4

5 2. Doctrinal Continuity and Authority 6

7 It is important that we see the Mennonite Brethren theological heritage
8 within the context of the larger development of the Mennonite confessional
9 tradition (see Table I). Our two major confessions (1902 and 1975), as
10 well as other conference statements establish significant linkages to a
11 larger theological framework (See Appendix I). A doctrinal and
12 confessional way of thinking is not a foreign element that temporarily
13 distorts our Mennonite view of faith and history, but is a long-standing and
14 integral part of our heritage.
15

16 However, for confession as doctrine to have new significance for us,
17 confession as act and confession as ongoing process of translating faith
18 into life must be reappropriated--a collective vibrant Christian life and
19 warm spirit publicly portrayed together with an openness and willingness to
20 confront and struggle with the issues of faithfulness in the church.
21 Confessions as doctrine is an indispensable ingredient in the glue that
22 holds a confessing church together; but it is not the glue by itself. The
23 true bond of a confessing church is the spiritual and historical reality of
24 worshiping, thinking and processing together what it means to confess Jesus
25 as Lord in this culture at this time. Within this context a confession of
26 faith is not merely a descriptive statement of what a church happens to
27 believe at a certain point in history, but a profound commitment statement
28 of what a church, at a certain point in history, has decided to believe and
29 live by.
30

31 DISCOVERING A CONFSSIONAL CENTER (What Do the Confessions Say?) 32

33 The distinctive emphases of the broader Mennonite Brethren
34 confessional heritage include the nature and mission of the
35 church, conversion, free will, footwashing, church discipline,
36 Christian life and nonconformity, the Christian and the state.
37 Accordingly, the distinguishing doctrines of the Mennonite
38 Brethren Conference find their center in a believers' church view
39 of the church.
40

41 So far we have attempted to demonstrate that confession is central to
42 the existence of the church and that the importance of confession as
43 doctrine is not only biblically grounded but historically validated by the
44 larger church tradition in which the Mennonite Brethren Church is located.
45 Our task now is to delineate, in broad outline, the general context,
46 structure and context which may assist us in addressing our current
47 confessional situation. This is in keeping with the call of the pastoral
48 letter to engage in careful and regular study of our confession of faith.
49

50 1. History 51

52 The Mennonite Brethren confessional tradition is part of a much larger
53 historical family of Mennonite confessions whose offspring each reflects

1 its own distinctive features. This family of confessions has an almost
2 exclusively Dutch origin and is organically related through a complex,
3 sometimes very direct, borrowing and building involving a series of major
4 confessions such as the 1632 Dordrecht Confession, the 1660 Frisian-Flemish
5 Confession, the 1766 Ris Confession, the 1792 Prussian Confession, the 1836
6 Prussian Confession (Elbing edition), the 1853 Rudnerweide Confession, and
7 the 1902 Russian Mennonite Brethren Confession. The revision of the 1902
8 confession constitutes our current Mennonite Brethren Confession of faith
9 officially adopted by the conference in 1975. The Mennonite Brethren church
10 waited almost three quarters of a century to write a second confession of
11 faith. One might conclude that the Mennonite Brethren confessional
12 tradition has been characterized by doctrinal stability. Or, perhaps it
13 took 75 years to get back to the point where we could reaffirm our
14 confession. In any case, it is important to explore the substance of these
15 two important confessions.

16
17 The Mennonite Brethren Confession (1902). This confession, originally
18 written in German, consists of 10 articles, about 8400 words, and was
19 authorized by the church, with 16 signatures on the confession. It has
20 references to other Mennonite confessions as well as to the Anabaptists.
21 Within the European context this Russian Mennonite Brethren confession draws
22 heavily from previous Mennonite confessions, as well as from previously used
23 Mennonite Brethren confessions. The tone, occasion and purpose of this
24 confession, as stated in the introduction, are noteworthy. There is a clear
25 note of "overagainstness" and statements regarding agreements and
26 differences with the other Mennonites. It strongly defends the faith. Its
27 emphasis on separation is unique in North American Mennonite confessions.
28 Clearly, the historical break of 1860 with the Mennonite church as a whole
29 contributed to such an emphasis. Its translation into English was
30 necessitated by the growing number of North American Mennonite Brethren and
31 the increased use of the English language among them. Primarily, its
32 function has been to encourage faithfulness in doctrine and life. The
33 extensive and narrative use of Scripture is distinctive; but even more so is
34 its theological content. Careful analysis reveals that although the 19th
35 century Russian Mennonite Brethren church experienced notable Baptist and
36 Pietist influences, the heart of its theological confession reflects a clear
37 evangelical-Anabaptistic orientation.

38
39 The Mennonite Brethren Confession (1975). This confession consists of
40 16 articles written in about 3400 words. It was also authorized by the
41 conference and contains the signature of four persons. The official occasion
42 for the writing of this confession began in 1966 when a series of directives
43 were given for the review and revision of the Mennonite Brethren Confession
44 of 1902. In 1969 a fourth draft of the confession was submitted to the
45 conference for review, with the hope of having it accepted officially at the
46 1972 General Conference session. In 1972 a sixth draft was presented to the
47 Conference for review and was subsequently referred to the area conferences
48 (USA and Canada) for further discussion. At the 1975 General Conference
49 session the seventh--and final--draft was adopted with several changes. The
50 1975 confession clearly intends to be in continuity not only with the 1902
51 Mennonite Brethren confession, (which the text itself clearly reflects), but
52 more also with the larger evangelical Mennonite-Anabaptist heritage, which

1 the preface clear states. It therefore reflects a broader self-conscious
2 identity than the 1902 Mennonite Brethren confession. This is also
3 reflected in the fact that it articulates more than one purpose. It is one
4 of the best examples among Mennonite confessions in relating to a number of
5 different purposes: church discipline and instruction, unity of believers,
6 defense of faith, authority of Scripture, evangelism.

7 8 2. Bible

9
10 In both confessions there is a predominance of NT references over OT,
11 but the NT/OT ratio is about the same in each. However, there are
12 considerably fewer Scripture references in Mennonite Brethren 1975.
13 Although it is half as long as the Mennonite Brethren 1902 Confessional, it
14 has only one-sixth of the biblical references. Moreover, it has shifted in
15 form from a strong narrative style which weaves Scripture passages and
16 paraphrases into the confessional text to a more prosaic one. Yet the
17 central theological emphasis remain virtually identical, with the book of
18 Matthew clearly representing the biblical center of each confession.

19
20

MB 1902	MB 1975
21	
22 Mt. -- 85	Mt. -- 20
23 John -- 80	Rom. -- 14
24 Acts -- 80	Acts -- 13
25 Rom. -- 67	Eph. -- 12
26 Rev. -- 54	John -- 10

27

28 The predominance of Matthew in the Mennonite Brethren confessions take
29 on increasing significance in view of the fact that this predominance is
30 virtually uniform throughout all Mennonite confessions of faith. Moreover,
31 in all the confessions, the primacy of Matthew is followed by that of John,
32 Romans, and Acts. This priority is also clearly reflected in the Mennonite
33 Brethren confessions. Within the references from Matthew are several
34 noticeable features: chapter 5 (Sermon on the Mount) by far is the most
35 extensively referred to; chapter 25 (on eschatology), chapter 28 (the great
36 commission) and chapter 18 (church discipline) follow Matthew 5 in that
37 order in frequency. Within Matthew 5 the section on love for one's enemies
38 (vv. 38-48) receives the strongest emphasis, followed by the section on
39 integrity and the oath (vv. 33-37). The scriptural evidence strongly
40 points toward a common biblical and theological center in the Mennonite
41 Brethren confessional tradition.

42 43 3. Doctrine

44
45 A content analysis of the Mennonite Brethren confessions reveals a
46 uniform progression of articles clearly consistent with the broader
47 Mennonite confessional: God, Word of God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, Human
48 Nature, Free Will, Conversion, Church and its Mission, Church Offices,
49 Baptism, Communion, Footwashing, Marriage, Church Discipline, Christian Life
50 and Nonconformity, Divine Law, Integrity and Oaths, Nonresistance and
51 Revenge, Christian and the State, Lord's Day and Work, Last Things.

1 Significantly, such a progression follows a classical model of
 2 theology. However, it includes a number of distinctive emphases not found
 3 in classical evangelical theology: free will, conversion, footwashing,
 4 church discipline, Christian life and nonconformity, integrity and oaths,
 5 nonresistance and revenge, the Christian and the state. These are
 6 distinctive elements of the broader confessional tradition in which the
 7 Mennonite Brethren confessions of faith are located and which they clearly
 8 reflect and which the Mennonite Brethren church has historically confirmed.

	1902	1975
	God	God
	Sin and Redemption	Revelation
	Church	Man and Sin
	Baptism	Salvation/Grace
	Lord's Supper	Christian Life
	Matrimony	Church of Christ
	Day of Rest	Mission of Church
	Divine Law	Christian Ministries
	Gov't/Oaths/ Nonresistance/ Kingdom of God	Christian Baptism Marriage and Christian Home Lord's Day and Work
	Second Coming, Resurrection and Last Judgment	Christian Integrity The State Love and Nonresistance Christ's Final Triumph

27
 28 The theological content of the Mennonite Brethren confessional
 29 tradition reflects a much broader theological heritage whose major accents
 30 can be present in the following general theological categories.

- 31
- 32 Triune God and Creation
- 33 Word of God and Revelation
- 34 Jesus Christ and Redemption
- 35 Holy Spirit and Transformation
- 36 Human Nature and Salvation
- 37 Church of Christ and its Mission
- 38 - Inner Nature of Church's Mission
- 39 - Outward Function of Christian Discipleship
- 40 Eternal Hope and Resurrection

41
 42 The Mennonite Brethren confessions, clearly reflecting the broader
 43 Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, revolve around theology, christology,
 44 ecclesiology and eschatology. They provide a theology of revelation and
 45 creation, of redemption, of church and of hope. The focus is on creation
 46 and the Word of God; on redemption and regeneration; on the inner life of
 47 the church's mission and the outward life of the Christian's discipleship;
 48 and on judgment and resurrection hope. The center of these confessions
 49 revolves most singularly around the nature of the church's mission and the
 50 life of Christian discipleship.⁴

51
 52 The burden of this section has been to demonstrate the content and
 53 center of our Mennonite Brethren confessional tradition within the broader

1 context of the Mennonite Believers' Church tradition. It remains our task
2 to deal with the theological implications that emerge from a recognition of
3 this confessional reality.

5 SEEING THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS (What Does the Confession Mean for Us?)

7 As a confessional church, the Mennonite Brethren must be
8 willing to reassert the importance of a teaching authority ✓
9 in the church; to deal with the growing lack of integrity ✓
10 between doctrine and practice; to reclaim the core of our
11 historically validated identity; to affirm a sound
12 evangelical ecumenicity; and to grow toward greater
13 confessional unity. ✓

15 1. Teaching Authority

17 Historically, the Christian church has understood its authority to be
18 grounded in the Holy Scriptures, the confessional tradition, and the
19 teaching office/function.⁵ Presently, the western church is experiencing a
20 crisis in teaching authority. A confessing church must be a teaching
21 church. A confessing church will see the urgency to forge a consensus about
22 the meaning of faith. This requires once again giving priority to
23 confession, especially confession as doctrine, and therefore to the teaching
24 function in the church. This will require a greater emphasis on a teaching
25 style of leadership that is committed to the confession. Here it should be
26 remembered that 'preaching/teaching' in the NT also has the force of an
27 established body of doctrine that is taught, mastered and preserved. The
28 fact that we do not have a strong tradition of systematic instruction (a
29 'catechetical' tradition, if you please) is indicative of the lack of
30 confessional teaching in our history and the need to reassert the teaching ✓
31 authority in the conference. In connection with this the Board of Reference
32 and Counsel is to be commended for its instructions to the conference
33 through a pastoral letter and for calling this study conference.

35 A confessing church takes seriously not only instruction but also
36 discipline. It will seek to provide a rule of faith that can be used to
37 encourage both the sheep and the shepherd of the flock; it will try to
38 ensure that its shepherds are not leading the sheep astray and that its
39 sheep are willing to obediently remain with the flock. Moreover, in a
40 confessing church discipline falls upon the leadership of the church,
41 especially its teaching authorities. However, in a believers' church
42 tradition, doctrine and discipline are also significantly shaped at the
43 grassroots level. Sound teaching and admonition is occurring when Christians
44 join minds and hands to help each other understand and remain faithful to
45 the content and core of their witness. The spirituality of the laity and
46 church doctrine and discipline are inextricably linked in a confessing
47 church. The difference in a believers' church tradition is how we teach
48 doctrine and discipline. There is a keen sense of corporateness and greater
49 emphasis on mutual accountability of Christians to each other.

51 2. Theological Integrity

52
53 The recent Mennonite Brethren Profile has revealed to us an important
54 picture on where we are as a conference. The central conclusion of this

1 study describes for us a significant and growing gap between what we believe ✓
2 and what we practice; between our faith and life; theology and ethics. The
3 issue is not doctrinal orthodoxy, but our increasing unwillingness to be
4 committed to our already-established confessional tradition. This raises a
5 serious question concerning our corporate ethical and theological integrity. U
6 When such a situation exists there is a twofold temptation: we become
7 increasingly embarrassed with our confessional stance and begin simply to
8 ignore it; or we begin to redefine our confessional stance to a general
9 minimal core of doctrinal beliefs at the expense of ethical commitment. U

10
11 In a confessing church doctrine and ethics are inseparable. Here the
12 teaching of doctrine is not separated from the church's attempt to be a
13 faithful witness to its culture. This involves a process of forming and
14 articulating doctrine that entails not only right thinking (orthodoxy) but
15 also right living (orthopraxy). This orientation toward doctrine is
16 inherent in the Mennonite Brethren confessional tradition, for here doctrine
17 and ethics are fused. This is not a peripheral matter; it lies at the heart
18 of its confessional theology, for it is grounded in its doctrine of the
19 church which provides the doctrinal center of the confession of faith. That
20 is why 11 out of the 16 articles (Articles V - XV) in the current Mennonite
21 Brethren confession relate to the church and how we live.

22
23 Yet it must be noted that this strong orientation to the church's
24 mission and Christian discipleship is not a mere emphasis on life and
25 ethics. For the central section on the church and the Christian life in the
26 world is preceded and followed by--and therefore grounded in--the spiritual
27 reality of the triune God who is the Creator, the Christ and the Comforter,
28 and who redemptively rules over the church, culture and the cosmos from
29 creation through redemption to the consummation of all things in him. A
30 confessing church is one that lives faithfully by the power of the one whose
31 name is above every name. Herein lies its ethical and theological
32 integrity.

34 3. Historical Identity

35
36 A confessing church has not lost its memory. It listens to the past
37 and derives direction from it for the future. Our confessional tradition
38 links us clearly to an important and distinct line of the Believers' Church
39 tradition--an evangelical Mennonite heritage. This is no incidental point of
40 similarity but a profound mark of our identity. For we in fact are linked
41 to a broader theological tradition of faith. We have a distinct
42 evangelical-Mennonite-believers' church historical and theological identity.

43
44 It is noteworthy that the theological features that are ~~often~~ most
45 frequently questioned within our confession are in fact part of the
46 distinctive theological and ethical core--nonresistance, oath, baptism and
47 the Lord's Supper (membership and discipline)--in short, themes emerging from
48 that section of Scripture which is by far the most central to our
49 confessional tradition, Matthew. The centrality of these themes to our
50 theological heritage is a matter of clear historical record. A confessing
51 church does not take lightly a historically-validated identity.

1 4. Evangelical Ecumenicity
2

3 In facing the problem of pluralism in the modern context, a broader
4 understanding of our Mennonite Brethren confessional tradition prevents us
5 from reasserting our denominational boundaries and our theological identity
6 too narrowly. As a small movement of the people of God in history, we need
7 a broader confessional-doctrinal place on which to stand and carry out our
8 mission. Our confessional tradition will permit us to do that. It will
9 elevate our self-understanding as a people of God beyond merely
10 denominational horizons. Our confessional tradition, properly understood,
11 counters a narrow religious mentality, a rigid denominationalism and an
12 exclusive ethnic outlook. It takes seriously the developments of our
13 tradition beyond the 16th and 19th centuries and views its doctrinal
14 framework as the basis for inter-confessional dialogue with other
15 evangelical traditions.

16
17 We must not only relate our theological identity and practical activity
18 to our 16th and 19th century roots, but also to the ongoing influences of
19 biblical Christianity as expressed in other movements from whom we have
20 learned and who also carry on the work of God in the world. However, we
21 must not only be influenced by other traditions; we need to see ourselves
22 influencing them. A strong confessional identity will enable us to relate
23 to different Mennonites, Evangelicals, Charismatics, Catholics, and Third
24 World Christians where there is a common bond. This is the true nature of
25 an Anabaptist-oriented evangelical faith. It has a pro-global perspective.
26

27 Such a perspective contributes to the unity of the true church, one of
28 the central concerns of the NT and the distinguishing marks of the early
29 church. Such a view involves an understanding of confession that is
30 addressed to the whole church. For confession is the announcing of God's
31 good news. It is inherently public in nature. This we as Mennonite
32 Brethren must take to heart and address the embarrassment with our tradition
33 that sometimes surfaces in the Conference. In part the confessional crisis
34 relates to such embarrassment with our confessional distinctives, for in a
35 period of uncertainty the church is tempted to look for the most acceptable
36 (and often lowest) common religious denominator. Such a posture does not
37 lead toward a confident and expansive view of our identity and mission. It
38 leads, rather, to a diluted evangelical faith. A confessing church is one
39 which actively contributes to the unity of the church from the vantage
40 point of its particular identity and mission. We must do this precisely to
41 strengthen our particular contribution in the cooperation of churches.
42

43 5. Doctrinal Unity
44

45 How can a confessional tradition speak with force in light of the
46 growing diversity among us? Modernity, as a way of thinking and acting, is
47 pluralistic in nature. It inherently breeds many points of view. Thus, we
48 come at the question of biblical truth speaking different languages: the
49 languages of the newly urban vs. the traditional rural theology; of modern
50 individualism vs. cultural ethnicity; of the political radical vs. the
51 political right; of political liberationism vs. religious fundamentalism; of
52 social involvement vs. personal piety. The legion of issues that contemporary

1 pluralism generates among us leaves us wondering at times whether there is
2 any hope of sustaining any sense of unity.
3

4 In the context of a confessional situation a confessing church must
5 function again as it was originally intended to function--a creative way of
6 thinking about or handling new issues facing the church. It is important to
7 confront the centrality of doctrine head on. By this we are not implying an
8 appeal to a rigid and inflexible use of doctrine, nor suggesting a claim on
9 some narrow doctrinal understanding of faith and history.
10

11 Rather, doctrine here is viewed as a mediating principle. It provides
12 an overarching unity in addressing the diversity within the contemporary
13 church; between the contemporary church and the early church; and within the
14 biblical text itself. For doctrine can provide the overarching perspective
15 in dealing with specific issues which have no chapter-and-verse reference in
16 the Bible. We are now struggling with a wide range of pressing issues; a
17 doctrinal/confessional approach is foundational for addressing the issues of
18 authority, leadership, loyalty, membership, and ministry. It becomes a
19 method of interpretation in dealing with concrete issues we face.
20

21 For example, the question of leadership and authority in the life of
22 the church should be addressed by again working through our doctrine of
23 church in relation to other major doctrines of the Christian faith. Our
24 answers are not only determined by an appeal to specific texts but by a
25 perspective that would see a complete movement of the biblical text from
26 creation through redemption toward consummation. One of the main theses of
27 this study is that confession as doctrine should serve as a fundamental
28 perspective in dealing with the central theological issues we face today as
29 a conference.
30

31 GROWING A SPIRITUAL VISION (What Is the Challenge?) 32

33 The Mennonite Brethren Church is at a significant juncture in its
34 history. As a confessing church its challenge is to renew its
35 spiritual vision through gratitude, growth and a repentant
36 attitude of dependence on God's grace; to renew its historic
37 commitment to the importance of denominational leadership that
38 will nurture church members in the distinctives of our spiritual
39 heritage; to renew its theological conviction that our life is a
40 translation of doctrine and that that translation is a process in
41 which leadership and laity must be creatively engaged.
42

43 This study has attempted to keep a biblical perspective on our
44 understanding of confession as an act of worship, a statement of doctrine,
45 and a process of translating faith into life. However, the explicit purpose
46 of this paper has been to demonstrate the importance and significance of
47 confession as doctrine for the Mennonite Brethren church as a confessing
48 church. We, therefore, want to conclude by refocusing the specific
49 challenge of understanding confession as worship, word and witness.
50

51 1. Confession as a Spiritual Vision 52

53 We begin our study with the concerns expressed in the pastoral letter.
54 That letter, however, moves beyond concern and challenges us with hope and

1 vision. A confessing church is characterized by a vision filled with
2 gratitude and a desire for growth. In this regard the tone of the pastoral
3 letter is significant--it affirms the renewal that is taking place among us.
4 This tone is similar to Paul's letters to the early Christian congregations
5 which too were characterized by numerous doctrinal and ethical problems.
6 Invariably he begins his letters with a word of thanksgiving for the grace
7 of God among them. We as a Mennonite Brethren church also have many reasons
8 to be grateful for God's faithfulness.

9
10 But confession as worship is more than an expression of gratitude for
11 God's faithfulness. It is an expression of a desire for growth and
12 transformation. The challenge of a confessing church is to confess the
13 faith once delivered to the saints in the language of our day--not in
14 conformity to the spirit of the times, but to the Spirit of the one Lord.
15 The confessing church is one which realizes that the Spirit and the Word of
16 the one God is actively bringing change within the church and standing in
17 judgment over all idolatries and ideologies. The Mennonite Brethren church
18 is at an important juncture in its spiritual history and must confess a
19 willingness to grow in a spiritual and Spirit-empowered vision.

20
21 A confessing church exists when the dangers to the faith are clearly
22 discerned and when it then repents and realizes its dependence on the grace
23 of God for its growth in a God-denying culture. Within the context of an
24 idolatrous, polytheistic and pluralistic culture, a confessing church must
25 rediscover and reassert in word and deed its confessional claims regarding
26 the nature and activity of God. We as Mennonite Brethren Christians must
27 pray for discernment of the times and repent for our accommodation to the
28 spirit of the times. We must rediscover the deep spiritual intention of our
29 confessional theology which makes powerful doctrinal and ethical claims in
30 connection with the nature of Christian existence in the world.

31 32 2. Confession through a Teaching Leadership

33
34 Confession as doctrine is faithfully embodied in and extended through
35 the teaching leadership of the church. The role of those who have been
36 called out as preacher/teachers within the church is to find positive and
37 constructive ways of encouraging commitment to that confessional tradition.
38 We, as Mennonite Brethren, have a confessional tradition and we must
39 dynamically teach it, disseminating it and encouraging commitment to it. It
40 is the responsibility of current General Conference and local congregational
41 leadership to nurture and enable member churches and church members within
42 the framework of this theological heritage. The importance of a confession
43 of faith exists not simply, or even primarily, in its being the final
44 product of a significant conference process in 1975, but in the ability of
45 current church leadership to openly affirm its importance and validity, and
46 to see it as a consensus statement that continues to be a catalyst for
47 commitment and conversation in the Conference. To ensure this, there must
48 be ongoing instruction in the confessional heritage, for leadership and laity
49 alike.

50
51 This generation must also experience ownership of past processes and
52 statements. The Mennonite Brethren Church today must reaffirm its doctrinal

Our "Confession" - prescriptive (normative) or descriptive?

1 identity and direction through the initiative of strong spiritual and
2 theological leadership committed to our confessional heritage.

3
4 3. Confession through a Churchly Process
5

6 The conclusion of this study is that we do not need a new
7 confession--although the possibility and necessity of one should never be
8 ruled out in principle--but we need to appropriate the meaning of our
9 present confession. This study has used the Mennonite Brethren confessional
10 tradition to demonstrate the need to rediscover and appreciate the
11 significance of confession as doctrine in our conference, and to emphasize
12 the fact that we need to articulate our theology as doctrine. However, this
13 is not to imply that the confessions represent the only and final
14 articulation as doctrine. There are many formal and informal ways in which
15 the theology of a church tradition continues to be expressed--through
16 sermons, teaching materials, music, devotional literature, poetry,
17 biography, etc. But these confessions represent important historical
18 benchmarks that must not be taken lightly. They are not a final product but
19 they must always be a starting point for the ongoing process of shaping
20 doctrine in our tradition.
21

22 We must never forget that confession is a process of translating faith
23 into life. It is the hallmark of a believers' church theology to insist
24 that a godly walk, as much as godly talk, helps shape Christian doctrine.
25 Spirituality informs Christian doctrine when Christians help each other
26 understand the meaning of their walk and witness in the world. In other
27 words, the issues we face need to continue to give shape to the nature of
28 our confession in an ongoing way. Practice needs fundamentally to inform
29 our theology. Here confession means working together to apply and translate
30 our common doctrinal convictions to develop the spiritual character of the
31 community. We must be led to find creative ways of working together as a
32 conference so that the spiritual vision will grow and the doctrinal center
33 will hold. We must preach sermons, write songs, plan symposia, organize
34 sessions, publish series, instruct our students, and above all cultivate a
35 Spirit-empowered spirituality that fosters our identity, mission, and unity
36 in Jesus Christ.
37

38 The call of the pastoral letter is 'a call to be the church and to live
39 together as a covenant people who reflect doctrinal and ethical unity, who
40 engage in regular and careful study of our Confession of Faith on the local
41 level and who practice their commitments to the Conference.' This important
42 call--to be a covenant community--is what a proper understanding of
43 confession will engender. The mark of a covenant community is to confess
44 common commitments and to encourage growth toward those commitments. The
45 covenant community is a confessing community. The purpose of this paper has
46 been to encourage the growth of a spiritual vision for the Mennonite
47 Brethren to be a confessing people of God who are ministers of a new
48 covenant, not in a written code which kills, but in the life-giving Spirit
49 of Christ whom we confess as Lord--in worship, word and witness.

ENDNOTES

1
2
3 ¹The most vivid example in our century of this kind of church is
4 provided for us by the Confessing Church in Germany during the rise and fall
5 of The Third Reich. Those evangelical Christians who found it necessary to
6 oppose the idolatrous nationalism of the Third Reich also found it important
7 to declare their convictions in a clear confession of faith, the well-known
8 Barmen Declaration.

9
10 ²The following texts are examples of NT references to confession: Mk.
11 10:15-22, 12:29; Jn. 1:1-14; Rom. 1:3-4, 6:17, 10:9f; I Cor. 8:6, 11:23-26,
12 12:3, 15:3-5, 15:22; Phil. 2:5-11; Eph. 2:14-16; 4:6; 5:19; Col. 1:15-20,
13 2:6, 3:16; I Thess. 1:9f, 2:6; 2 Thess. 2:15; 1 Tim. 3:16, 2:5, 4:6,
14 6:12-16; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; Heb. 1:3, 3:1, 4:14, 6:1f, 10:23; I Pet. 3:18-22; 1
15 Jn. 1:9, 2:23, 4:2, 15. Moreover, there are the numerous references in Acts
16 to some form of the confession which states that 'Jesus was killed but God
17 raised him from the dead.'

18
19 ³It is instructive to see how the different practical and theological
20 issues in the NT find a common answer in the central confessional claim of
21 Christ's Lordship: the coming messianic Kingdom (Synoptic Gospels), mission
22 and the Spirit (Acts), the righteousness of God and mission (Rom.), unity and
23 diversity (1 Cor.), apostolic authority (2 Cor.), legalism (Gal.), boldness
24 and unity (Phil.); reconciling all peoples, and head of the one church
25 (Eph.), victory over the cosmic powers and head of creation (Col.),
26 destroying a gnostic hierarchy (John), superseding a sacrificial hierarchy
27 (Heb.), the ultimate decisive event in history (Rev.). From many different
28 perspectives and problems the line is drawn back to that central confession
29 by the NT community of faith, that Jesus Christ is ultimate Servant-Lord
30 through his death and resurrection.

31
32 ⁴On the basis of an "influence approach" to the Mennonite Brethren
33 confessional tradition, one observes that classical orthodox Christian
34 theology is reflected most clearly in the first doctrinal emphasis, theology
35 and revelation; that Pietism has made the greatest impact on the second,
36 christology and salvation; that Fundamentalism has made its greatest impact
37 on the fourth, eschatology and consummation; and that Anabaptism is
38 reflected in the third and the most distinctive theological area,
39 ecclesiology and mission. It is significant to note that the greatest
40 unanimity among Mennonite confessions of faith exists in relation to the
41 church and its mission. Recognizing the broader sphere of influence of
42 these different theological axes will have practical implications for how
43 MBs, as a distinctive confessional tradition, relate to other theological
44 traditions. It is our judgment that our confessional theology in its
45 entirety provides a framework for how we can think about our relationship to
46 other theological and spiritual traditions. More will be said on that in
47 the final section on theological implications.

48
49 ⁵Although different traditions have attached varying significance to
50 these 'authorities', the confessional framework has generally been viewed as
51 a derivative authority that stands between Scripture and the teaching
52 function in the church, and provides the framework within which the teachers

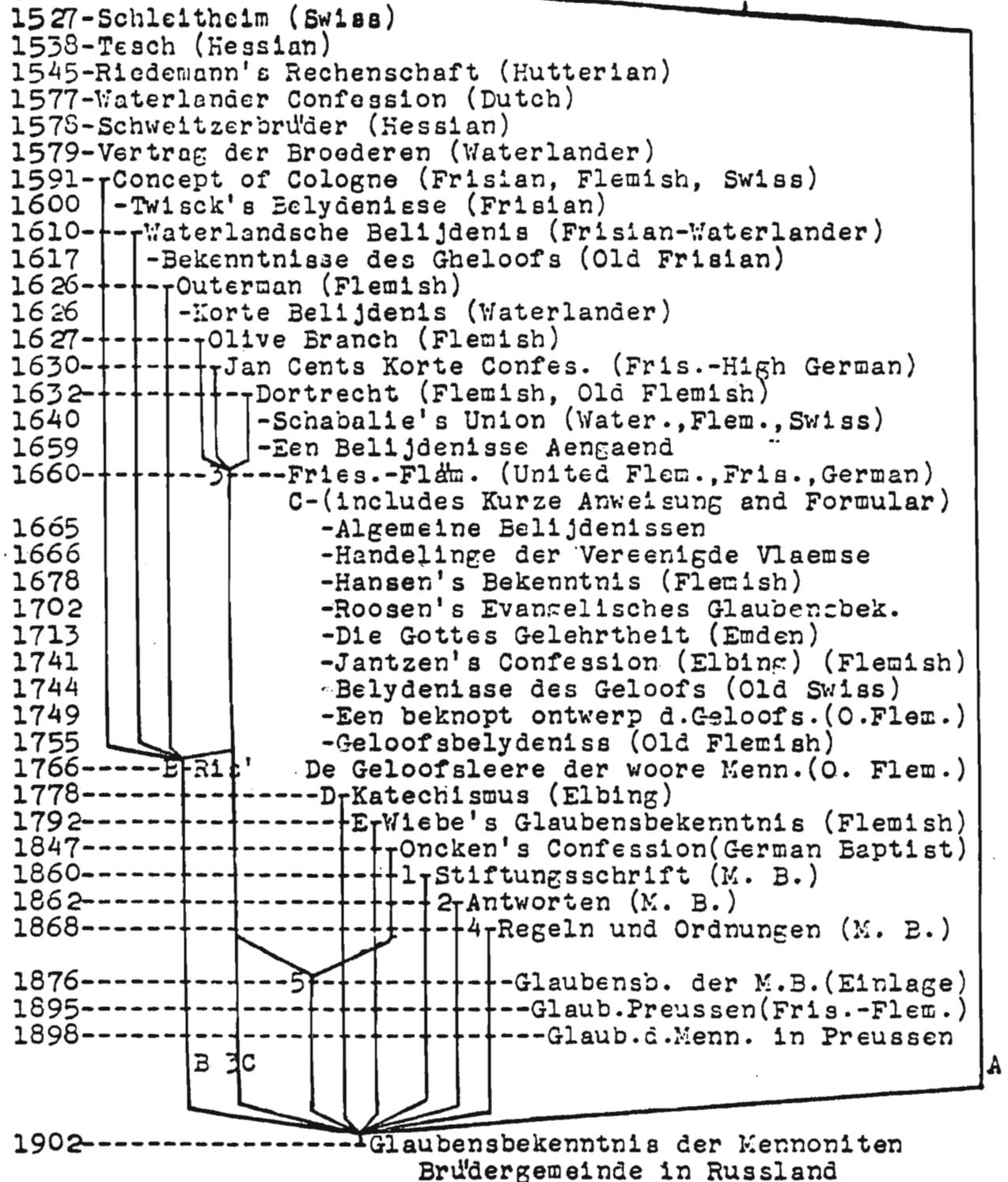
1 of the church carry out their task. Therefore one of the most important
2 implications of understanding the role of confession within a church is its
3 relationship to the church's understanding of teaching authority.
4 Confession as doctrine centrally involves sound teaching by those who have
5 been authorized to be the teachers in the church. Teaching authority is
6 empowerment by the Lord of the church which, under Scripture, recognizes,
7 affirms and endorses those whose gift it is to lead and guide the church
8 through faithful teaching.

APPENDIX I

MENNONITE BRETHREN CONFSSIONAL
FAMILY TREE

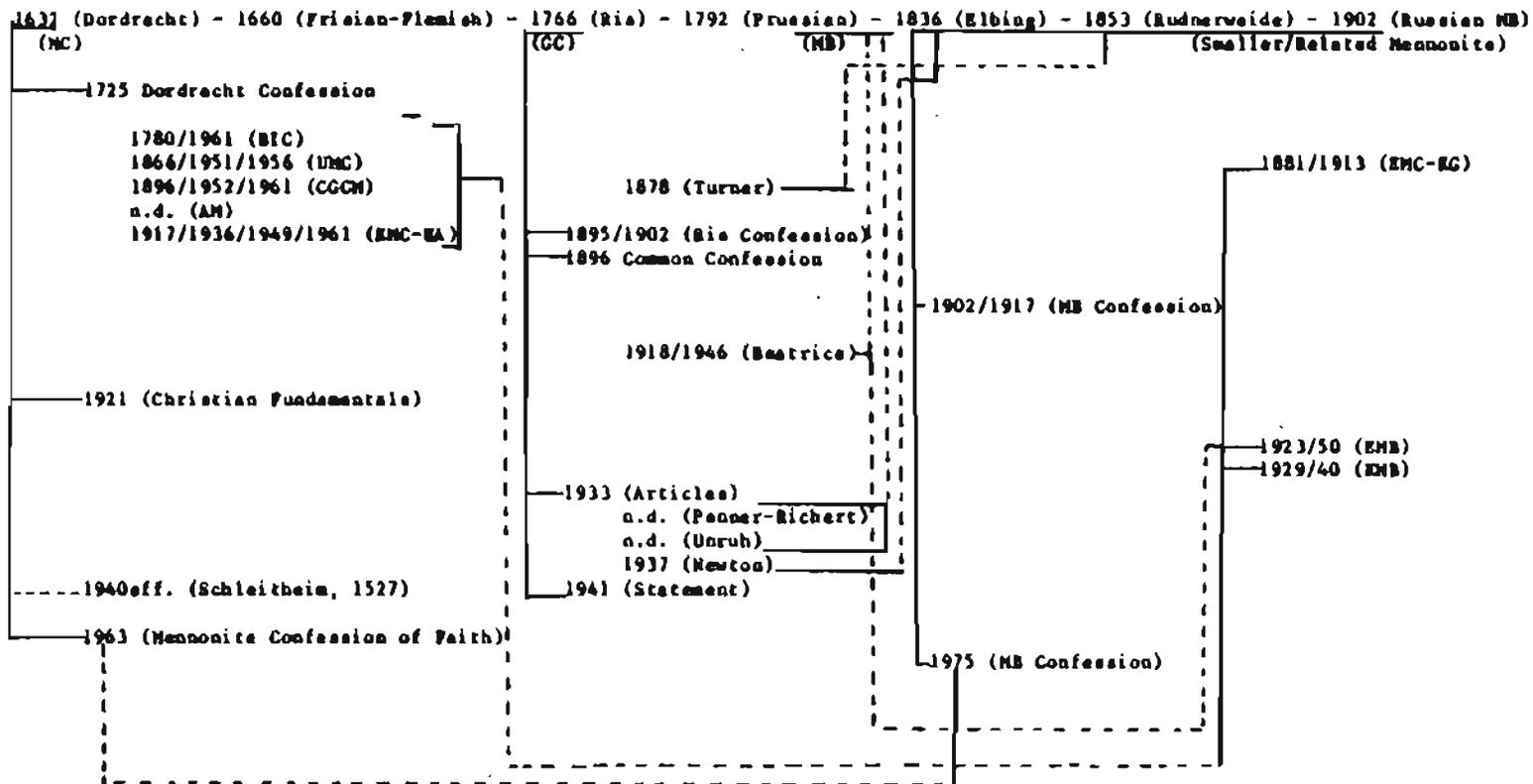
WRITINGS OF THE EVANGELICAL ANABAPTISTS	EARLY CHURCH CREEDS
1525-1561. (Grebel, Sattler, Menno Simons, Dirk Philips, Marpeck.)	Apostolic c215 A.D. Nicene 325 A.D. Athanasian c450 A.D.

CONFSSIONS



[Taken from A. J. Klassen, The Roots and Development of Mennonite Brethren Theology to 1914. A.M. Thesis, Wheaton College, 1966.]

Table 1 THE CHRONOLOGY OF CONFESSIONS



TABLES

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[The Chronology of I. ...] ... [The Chronology of I. ...] ... [The Chronology of I. ...]