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# Atonement in the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith

**Doug Heidebrecht**



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<sup>1</sup> Recent debate about the atonement among Mennonite Brethren in Canada and the United States has prompted further conversation at both the national and provincial levels. The primary question a theology of atonement seeks to answer is, *how* does God actually save humanity through Jesus' death and resurrection? In other words, what is the means by which God saves? In the midst of this debate, Mennonite Brethren have looked to their Confession of Faith for clarity regarding their convictions about the atonement. In this paper, I will survey how the atonement has been portrayed in each of the confessions affirmed by Mennonite Brethren over the last 150 years. I will begin by reflecting on how Mennonite Brethren approach their Confession of Faith and then examine how the atonement is depicted, first in the three earlier confessions and finally in the two confessions currently affirmed by Mennonite Brethren.

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## APPROACHING THE CONFESSION OF FAITH

Mennonite Brethren are biblicists.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of Mennonite Brethren identity is an acknowledgment of the Scriptures as the authority in all matters of faith and life. It is critical to recognize how this conviction has permeated a Mennonite Brethren approach to their Confession of Faith. When faced with a question or issue in

the church, Mennonite Brethren insist it must be answered from the Bible—“What does the Word say?”<sup>3</sup> They assume that a careful study of the Scriptures will persuade all of the truth.

Consequently, Mennonite Brethren have not been concerned with creating a systematic doctrinal framework that could make sense of the content of faith. The Bible itself is their guide, not a set of doctrines derived from the Bible. The truthfulness of Scripture is supported by the evidence of new life and a walk of discipleship, not by a memorized faith. As a result of this profound biblicism, Mennonite Brethren have relied on an implicit theology that has not always been articulated in formal statements.

Nevertheless, J. B. Toews acknowledged, “an implicit faith can be sufficient for a church movement as long as it exists in the context of a homogeneous culture with a prescribed lifestyle that expresses the movement’s understanding of faith and practice.”<sup>4</sup> The cultural isolation of Mennonite Brethren in Russia did not force them to delineate their theological commitments. It took forty years before Mennonite Brethren felt compelled to write their first Confession of Faith, in part because their intention had not been to propagate a new teaching, but to live out what Mennonites already said they believed. Yet the experiences of migration, acculturation, and mission have challenged the capability of an implicit faith to provide adequate theological boundaries for Mennonite Brethren. Even though Mennonite Brethren have not developed a precise systematic theology, the ongoing need to articulate an understanding of their faith in changing contexts has pushed them to define more clearly how they read the Scriptures.

The Confession of Faith is one attempt to articulate what Mennonite Brethren believe the Bible teaches.<sup>5</sup> It is descriptive, not in the sense of what Mennonite Brethren typically believe, but descriptive of what they believe the Bible teaches. This is an important distinction to make. The Confession represents a corporate Mennonite Brethren understanding of the message and intent of the Scriptures. As a description of what the Bible teaches, the Confession points beyond itself to the Bible. While final authority always rests in the Scriptures, the Confession “is authoritative to the extent that it is biblical.”<sup>6</sup>

Since the Confession is descriptive of what the Bible says, it is not a closed statement of faith, but open to periodic review and revision.<sup>7</sup> Mennonite Brethren are open to new light from God’s

Spirit because they recognize that their understanding of Scripture is always limited and new issues continue to emerge that need to be addressed. But the Confession can be changed or modified only when the larger Conference comes to a new understanding of an article through the study of the Scriptures together. Mennonite Brethren “practice a corporate hermeneutic, which listens to the concerns of individuals and churches, but discerns together the meaning of the Scriptures.”<sup>8</sup> This process is intended to protect the denomination from the extremes of individualism and private interpretations, while at the same time allowing for free study and discussion.<sup>9</sup> The Confession is the end result of a consensual process involving all Mennonite Brethren congregations.

The Confession of Faith is also understood as normative for Mennonite Brethren churches because it summarizes what they believe the Bible teaches. Thus, the Confession is binding for all churches. Pastors, teachers, and conference leaders are expected to affirm and teach the Confession of Faith.<sup>10</sup> The idea of something being normative highlights concerns regarding what reflects a faithful reading of Scripture.<sup>11</sup> All confessional statements in any denomination are considered normative because each particular confession expresses a “community of faith’s understanding about what constitutes faithfulness to the gospel.”<sup>12</sup> Since it stands as a witness over against other understandings, the Confession of Faith functions as an interpretive guide regarding what it means to be Mennonite Brethren.<sup>13</sup> “To disagree with the Confession is to declare that one does not understand the Bible as Mennonite Brethren do.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the Confession is intended to serve as an active manual of discipleship, expressing shared Mennonite Brethren convictions that have the power to shape their life together.

## THE ATONEMENT IN THE EARLY MENNONITE BRETHREN CONFESSIONS

### **1. Rudnerweide Mennonite Confession of Faith (1660/1853)<sup>15</sup>**

When Mennonite Brethren began in 1860, they insisted they were in complete agreement with the existing Mennonite Confession of Faith. Their concern as a revival movement was not with the Mennonite faith statement, but with how people lived out their faith in daily life. The Mennonite Confession in effect at this

time was first published by the West Prussian churches in 1660 in German and eventually went through seven printings over 250 years.<sup>15</sup> The sixth edition of this Confession was published in Odessa, South Russia, in 1853 and was the version the early Mennonite Brethren considered as their own Confession.<sup>17</sup> This Confession clearly stood in the Dutch Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and was the basis for clarifying Mennonite Brethren belief for the first forty years of the movement.<sup>18</sup>

There are no separate statements in this Mennonite Confession on redemption, the fall, conversion, or even Scripture for that matter. However, the article, “Concerning Christ the Son of God,” relates the narrative of Jesus, who is identified as “our Lord and Savior, Redeemer and Giver of Salvation.” The atonement is described in three ways, which provide an integrated portrayal of the significance of the incarnation, Jesus’ death, and his resurrection. First, Jesus was sent into the world in order to fulfill God’s plan to redeem humanity from “the eternal curse.” While there is no explanation regarding what this curse involved, the whole purpose of the incarnation was to free humanity from its effects. Second, Jesus “was crucified, died, and was buried for our sins.” Jesus’ death is clearly understood to be substitutionary, on behalf of humanity. Third, Jesus’ resurrection is “for our justification.” Justification is a result of Jesus being raised from the dead. Finally, in the article “Concerning the Church of God,” the church is confessed to be redeemed and washed of her sins through Jesus’ blood. Jesus’ death is able to cleanse humanity of sin.

While the atonement is linked to the entire narrative of Jesus’ life on earth, not just his death, the blood of Jesus is clearly seen as the means for redeeming and cleansing humanity from sin. The Confession makes no attempt to go beyond the repetition of biblical language in its explanation of salvation. Three atonement images are used—redemption, justification, and sacrifice—without any explanation as to how they actually bring about salvation.

## **2. Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (1902)<sup>19</sup>**

In 1898, the same year in which the larger Mennonite group in Russia published a new confession, Mennonite Brethren appointed a study commission to revise the earlier 1853 Mennonite Confession. However, all revision attempts were futile and so an entirely new confession was written in 1900, presented to churches for ratification, and eventually printed in 1902.<sup>20</sup> The large number

of biblical references used in this new Mennonite Brethren Confession—117 from the Old Testament and 696 from the New Testament—highlight the biblical orientation of the writers. The words and phrases of the earlier 1853 Confession were followed in fifteen of the twenty-five major topics discussed, while nine articles cover topics reflecting later Pietistic and Baptist influences.<sup>21</sup> The 1902 Confession represents an intentional doctrinal positioning consistent with the Anabaptist and Mennonite roots of the Mennonite Brethren.

The first article, “Concerning God,” closely follows the 1853 Confession, including the narrative description of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Again, the atonement is linked with all three aspects of the narrative: Jesus was sent into the world to redeem humanity from the curse; Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried for humanity’s sins; and he was raised from the dead for humanity’s justification.

However, a separate article—“Concerning Sin and Redemption”—was now included. This particular statement regarding the atonement was borrowed from the German Baptist Confession of Faith. Already in 1873, the German Baptist Confession had been adopted by the Einlage Mennonite Brethren congregation in Russia, who had a long relationship with the Baptists, in an attempt to address ongoing concerns about Mennonite Brethren identity. This Baptist Confession had been written in 1837 by Johann Oncken, the Baptist leader in Hamburg, three years after he founded the German Baptist revival movement.<sup>22</sup> The Einlage congregation added a “peculiarly Anabaptist-Mennonite” perspective to the Baptist Confession by including sections on believer’s baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, foot washing, the role of government, and the use of the oath.<sup>23</sup> However, there was considerable dissatisfaction by Mennonite Brethren leaders regarding the adequacy of this revised Baptist Confession, and it was never formally adopted by any other Mennonite Brethren congregation.<sup>24</sup>

In the new article on redemption, taken directly from this Baptist Confession, the meaning of the earlier reference to being redeemed from the eternal curse is now spelled out in more detail. Humanity is redeemed or freed from the curse of eternal death, the wages of sin, and the wrath of God. This redemption takes place “only through the one eternal and sufficient redeeming and atoning

sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God” (par. 11).<sup>24</sup> The substitutionary nature of Jesus’ death is clearly described as a sacrifice, made even more explicit by the reference to Jesus as the Lamb of God. This sacrifice is characterized by two pairs of adjectives. The first two—“eternal” and “sufficient”—highlight the capacity of Jesus’ death for salvation; while the second two—“redeeming” and “atoning”—refer to the effect of his sacrifice. There is no further explanation regarding how the sacrifice of Jesus actually redeems or atones humanity. A third atonement image, justification, is also used (par. 16).

The 1902 Confession spends considerable space reflecting on conversion and sanctification, both key aspects in the Mennonite Brethren emphasis on discipleship. Here the result of redemption is evidenced through the new birth of conversion and renewal of life through sanctification. The redeeming blood of Christ is explicitly at work in both (par. 26). This new section now ties in with the article on the church (Article 3), which paralleled the earlier 1853 Confession’s emphasis on the blood of Jesus redeeming the church and washing her from sin.

The 1902 Confession took a significant step toward greater clarity about the atonement through the incorporation of this part of the German Baptist Confession. Yet the language continues to reflect biblical categories with no explicit reference to a theological explanation of atonement. Three atonement images are again used: redemption, justification, and sacrifice.

Mennonite Brethren would use the 1902 Confession for almost seventy-five years. A much-abbreviated summary was eventually published in 1963 as part of the Mennonite Brethren Constitution.<sup>25</sup> This summary highlighted how Jesus died for humanity’s sins (as a substitute), bringing about forgiveness through his blood for all who repent and believe. The double reference to Jesus’ blood emphasizes that this is the only means of “atonement for our sins.”<sup>27</sup>

### **3. Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (1975)<sup>28</sup>**

In 1966, the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches approved a recommendation to revise the 1902 Confession of Faith. The primary motivation underlying this revision was the desire to use contemporary language, which would be more readable and understandable for youth.<sup>29</sup> While the first

draft was initially completed in 1969, it was only in 1975 that the seventh draft was finally accepted by General Conference delegates. The 1975 Confession was shortened considerably—down to 2450 words from 6500—and biblical references were reduced to 19 from the Old Testament and to 118 from the New Testament and moved from the text itself into footnotes.

Like the first two Mennonite Brethren confessions, the atonement first appears in the article about God. Here the image of God the Father adopting as his children all who repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord is introduced (10). Jesus is sent by the Father to reconcile humanity to himself and to redeem people from sin and eternal death (10). The atonement image of reconciliation appears for the first time. Still following the 1853 narrative of Jesus' incarnation, the 1975 Confession highlights how God's redemptive purpose was accomplished in Jesus' crucifixion and death for sin. Justification is again linked with Jesus' resurrection, just as it had been in the previous two confessions (11). This is interesting given that while justification is the primary penal atonement image linked with Jesus' death, for Mennonite Brethren justification has consistently been connected to the resurrection. While Paul explicitly connects justification and the resurrection in Romans 4:25, I suspect the meaning of this connection remains largely untapped today.<sup>30</sup>

The article on Salvation (12–13) essentially repeats what had already been stated in the article about God—the purpose of Jesus' coming was to redeem humanity from the judgment and power of sin and to reconcile people to God (12–13). The judgment of sin parallels the consequence of eternal death, and sin is now characterized by power, which requires a redeemer. The sacrificial image of atonement is clearly central to the understanding of Jesus' death—“Through the shedding of his blood, Christ provided the one sufficient sacrifice for sin and established God's New Covenant” (13). This sacrifice is described as both singular and sufficient for addressing sin. The New Covenant, as a relational aspect of reconciliation, is also introduced as the result of Christ's sacrificial death (13).

Finally, the article on the Church of Christ (14–16) again follows the previous two confessions by noting that the church itself was established through God's redemptive work. Now, alongside being cleansed by his blood, the church is regenerated by faith in



Christ, baptized by his Spirit into one body, and separated to God (14). For Mennonite Brethren the atonement clearly has both an individual and a corporate dimension.

It is fascinating to see how core dimensions of the atonement have remained consistent over these first three Mennonite Brethren confessions. Although the key atonement images have consisted of redemption, justification, and sacrifice, the 1975 Confession introduced adoption and reconciliation as additional complementary images. These images are employed without any theological explanation or reference to an atonement model, in part because they stand on their own as biblical categories.

What provides additional insight regarding the atonement in the 1975 Confession are a series of articles published in 1977 by the Board of Reference and Counsel in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* and *The Christian Leader*, which were presented as an amplification and explanation of the Confession. A.J. Klassen, who was behind the development of the 1975 Confession, wrote an explanation of the article “Salvation.”<sup>31</sup> Klassen highlights four traditional views of atonement: the ransom model, the penal model, the demonstration of God’s unconditional love, and the classic view of Jesus as a military conqueror. Klassen presents these views of the atonement without commentary or preference. Clearly, Mennonite Brethren were aware of the larger discussion of the atonement at this time, but chose to express their own confessional understanding in the language of the New Testament. Where Klassen does betray a preference is in regard to the image of reconciliation and God’s love for enemies, which he claims is “at the very heart of the atonement” and discipleship.<sup>32</sup> Reconciliation has ethical implications for how Mennonite Brethren live their lives as Christ’s disciples.

## THE ATONEMENT IN THE CURRENT MENNONITE BRETHREN CONFESSIONS

### 1. Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (1999)<sup>33</sup>

The impetus for a revised North American Confession of Faith emerged as a result of a renewed call for confessional integrity initiated in 1987 when the General Conference Board of Faith and Life (BFL) proposed revising several of the confessional articles in an attempt to develop greater consensus among Mennonite Brethren.<sup>34</sup> The Board began with perhaps the most contentious



issues, the articles on Peace and Nonresistance and the Lord's Supper. By 1990, the BFL recognized that this initial revision should be an ongoing process.<sup>35</sup> In 1993, it became apparent that the entire 1975 Confession needed to be rewritten, which would also entail the addition of several new articles to address pressing questions now facing the church.<sup>36</sup> The complete revision was projected to take ten to twelve years; however, in the face of growing questions about the continued existence of the General Conference, BFL presented a final draft for ratification in 1999. Despite the reduced timeline, BFL engaged in an extensive process of community discernment, through which both churches and individuals could propose revisions to the Confession. The Commentary and Pastoral Application sections of the Confession supplemented the confessional statements by discussing the biblical background to each article and reflecting on practical implications for the life of the church.

Not surprisingly, in this revised Confession the first encounter with the atonement appears in the article, "God." God the Father adopts all who respond in faith to the gospel, forgiving their sin, and entering into a new covenant with them (7). In the narrative concerning God the Son, "Jesus took on human nature" with the purpose of redeeming "this fallen world" (7). Through his death and resurrection, Christ "triumphed over sin" and was exalted as Lord of creation and the church. As the Savior of the world he invites all to be reconciled to God, calling them to follow him in the way of the cross (7).

The 1999 Confession remains consistent with the previous confessions by seeing the atonement as an integral aspect of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. However, several shifts occurred regarding how the atonement is depicted in this first article. Rather than referring to Jesus dying for humanity's sin, it now declares that "Christ triumphed over sin" (7). The shift is from a simple substitutionary statement to a mere mention of a particular atonement model—Christ-as-Victor (i.e., *Christus Victor*). The atonement image of justification that was previously linked to the resurrection is no longer included. In the commentary on this article (12–13), two primary metaphors are highlighted to describe Jesus as Savior: sacrificial atonement and liberation through his obedient fulfillment of the law of God. These two metaphors don't encapsulate the richness of the major New

Testament atonement images, and neither do they adequately explain what is meant by Christ triumphing over sin through his death and resurrection.

The third article, “Creation and Humanity” (35), points out how Christ’s work of redemption has cosmic implications because through the initiation of a new creation all things are being reconciled in Christ and created anew. The Commentary states that Christ’s death on the cross entails reconciliation with God, with humanity, and with creation (39). The results of God’s redemption are not just for a future time, but are already visible in the present era.

Article 4 on “Sin and Evil” (45) has implications for the description of salvation in the following article on “Salvation.” Two important observations should be noted. First, the consequences of sin are immense, resulting in both physical and spiritual death—defined as eternal separation from God. God will judge sin. Second, sin is defined primarily as a power that enslaves humanity. Sin is not just what people do but also describes what controls human behavior. Humans are unable to overcome its power on their own. This recognition will clearly inform how the solution to the problem of sin will be perceived and likely lies behind the portrayal of Christ triumphing over sin in Article 1.

The “Salvation” article (55) is divided into three sections: God’s initiative, God’s plan, and humanity’s response. Salvation is only possible because of God’s love and grace expressed in his initiative to accomplish deliverance, healing, redemption, and restoration. Salvation is holistic. The emphasis on God’s love for humanity is significant, particularly in light of some evangelicals promoting the bewildering idea that God hates sinners. “God’s love is fully demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (55). Here is also the recognition that God’s saving action through Jesus involves his life, death, and resurrection.

The Commentary declares that while God saves from both physical dangers and spiritual dangers, such as God’s wrath, Satan, and demonic oppression, the most common use of salvation in the New Testament has to do with sin (56). God saves his people from the penalty, power, and practice of sin. The Commentary’s language clearly reflects affirmation for the penal model of atonement without being explicit regarding how people are saved.

In the second section of the article, “God’s Plan” (55), God’s work of salvation through Jesus is recognized as an outworking of his earlier deliverance of his people from bondage and the establishment of a covenant relationship. The key atonement statement is quite brief: “God reconciled the world to himself by the atoning blood of Jesus.” Two atonement images are primary—reconciliation and sacrifice—reflecting again the preference to use biblical language when describing the atonement. The “blood of Jesus” is shorthand for both the death and sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. This gift of salvation involves God forgiving people, delivering them from sin’s bondage, and sealing them for eternal life when death and sin will finally be abolished. The Pastoral Application defines atonement as “the term which represents God’s accomplishment of salvation through Christ” (60).

In the final section of the Salvation article (55), Jesus broke the domination of sin, and through his obedient life, his death on the cross, and his resurrection he triumphed over Satan and the powers of sin and death. Here is a fuller explanation of the cryptic “triumphed over sin,” that appeared earlier. God’s salvation involves freeing (synonymous with redeeming) people from sin in order that they may live in newness of life.

Four models of atonement used by the church through the centuries are briefly described in the Pastoral Application discussion: the legal or penal substitution model, the moral influence model, the example model, and the Christ-as-Victor model (60–61). Cautions are raised about the example model because it has historically been associated with those who have denied the deity of Christ and may fail to appreciate the depth of human sinfulness.

As the Pastoral Application correctly observes, “the model of atonement one adopts tends to shape one’s understanding of salvation and approach to Christian living” (61). As has been clear throughout Mennonite Brethren history and also within the present Confession, the tendency is to appeal to biblical language to describe the atonement rather than to line up behind a particular atonement model. The advice given is that “it is important to balance such models with the whole counsel of Scripture” (61). No one atonement model incorporates the rich diversity of atonement images used in the New Testament. Rather, following the biblical writers’ lead, Mennonite Brethren have sought to embrace multiple

images in their description of the atonement.

This concern for balance is also behind the caution expressed in the Pastoral Application of this article regarding how the penal substitution model has sometimes been disconnected from the call to discipleship. This caution recognizes that concerns about the discrepancy between what one believes and how one lives is at the very heart of Mennonite Brethren identity and, in fact, was the impulse for the start of the movement. Just because one may have a correct view of the atonement does not mean that he or she is necessarily living as a faithful disciple of Jesus. The example of the early Anabaptists' use of a variety of models to describe their understanding of the atonement is highlighted in the pastoral application (61).

Finally, Article 17 ("Christianity and other Faiths") clearly affirms that "the saving grace of God in Jesus is the only means of reconciling humanity with God....Our task is to proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation to all people in all cultures" (187). Sometimes the discussion about the atonement, *how* God saves through Jesus' death and resurrection, becomes defined as though it was about *whether* God saves through Jesus' death and resurrection. These are two very different issues. Mennonite Brethren clearly confess that Jesus is the only way of salvation.

The Commentary on the "Salvation" article refers to four objective atonement images: redemption, justification, adoption, and reconciliation (58). These atonement images are recognized as reflecting both individual and corporate implications of salvation. Five atonement images actually appear in the 1999 Confession itself. Redemption, adoption, and reconciliation are used in a similar way to the 1975 Confession. The image of sacrifice, while now including the adjective "atoning," is not as explicit as it was in earlier confessions regarding the substitutionary nature of Jesus' sacrificial death. The new image introduced in the present Confession is of Jesus' triumphant victory over sin, death, and Satan. In part, this image emerges in response to the understanding of sin as a power, particularly as found in Paul's letter to the Romans. As already noted, the language of justification is absent from this Confession.

## **2. ICOMB Confession of Faith (2004)**<sup>37</sup>

In 1997, the newly formed International Community of

Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) asked the question, “What do MBs around the world believe?”<sup>38</sup> A task force of ICOMB members from Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, and North America surveyed existing confessional materials and considered the primary questions Mennonite Brethren encounter around the world.<sup>39</sup> This task force completed a two-part confessional document in 2004 with the hope that it would assist national conferences formulating confessions specific to their own cultures as well as define Mennonite Brethren convictions for churches inquiring about joining the Mennonite Brethren.<sup>40</sup>

The format of the first section of the ICOMB Confession represents an Asian and African narrative approach to theology, which seeks to address the question, “How does God work in the world?” through the story of God’s creation, the fall, and God’s re-creation. The second section answers the question, “How do MBs respond to God’s purpose?” by describing five core Mennonite Brethren values regarding the church.<sup>41</sup> This international Confession complements the current North American Confession of Faith as a parallel statement representing a global Mennonite Brethren perspective.

The atonement figures prominently in the first section of the ICOMB Confession where it is again set within the narrative of Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection as well as his inauguration of the reign of God (124). On the cross, Jesus gained victory over the “evil powers of Satan, sin and death” by dying for the sins of the world (123). The substitutionary nature of Jesus’ death is clearly recognized in the image of triumphant victory. Those who reject Christ “as the only way of salvation” will “face eternal condemnation” (124, 127).

Reconciliation, a major theme integrated throughout this Confession, is the second image used to describe the atonement. “The mission of Jesus was to reconcile humans with God, each other and the world” (127). Since “peace and reconciliation are at the heart of the Christian gospel,” the church is also called to be agents of reconciliation and participate in the mission of God by making disciples and being peacemakers (127). Through the cross Jesus will also reconcile creation to God (124).

The image of redemption is highlighted briefly in the description of the Lord’s Supper where the church proclaims the Lord’s death and “identifies with the life of Christ given for the

redemption of humanity” (126). These three atonement images—triumphant victory, reconciliation, and redemption—reflect some of the similar concerns expressed in the 1999 North American Confession, such as the need for the cross to address the effect of the power of sin. However, the emphasis on reconciliation throughout the ICOMB Confession highlights both a depth and integration of an atonement image that is not evident in any of the other Mennonite Brethren confessions. Reconciliation, as an atonement image, clearly carries both ethical and missional implications.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on some of the challenges that emerge from this survey of the atonement within the various Mennonite Brethren confessions. I applaud the recognition that the atonement must be grounded in the narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is a consistent Mennonite Brethren conviction that has spanned every confession over the last 150 years. I have also appreciated the growing breadth in the use of multiple New Testament atonement images within the confessions. This usage affirms the multifaceted view of the atonement that is expressed through the complementary images found in Scripture. I am encouraged by the introduction of both reconciliation and triumphant victory, both strong biblical images, in the two current confessions. The relational dynamics of the atonement and the recognition of the spiritual battle won at the cross are critical dimensions of the gospel for this time.

However, I've also been surprised by some of what I have discovered in my study of the various Mennonite Brethren confessions. I have been troubled that the 1999 North American Confession has dropped some of the atonement themes prominent in earlier confessions. I recognize that during the revision process, Mennonite Brethren were attempting to find “new language to better communicate what we believe to a changing world,” preferring words that communicated directly to the contemporary context rather than “simply parroting scriptural phrases.”<sup>42</sup> But in doing so, the rich traditional language of justification disappeared. I am particularly intrigued that Mennonite Brethren consistently connected justification—typically used to support a penal model of atonement—with the resurrection of Jesus in the first three Confessions (see Rom. 4:25). The meaning of this connection, I

suspect, remains largely untapped.

I am also disappointed that the simple phrase, “Jesus died for our sins,” is no longer included in the 1999 Confession. This profound proclamation of the gospel clearly communicates the substitutionary nature of Jesus’ death found across the various atonement images in the New Testament. I believe Mennonite Brethren should work at expressing with greater clarity the substitutionary nature of Jesus’ sacrifice on behalf of humanity’s sins.

I am intrigued at how Mennonite Brethren have consistently used biblical atonement images without feeling the need to appeal to a particular atonement model as an explanation. Only rarely does a Mennonite Brethren confession use more philosophical language (e.g., “sufficient”) to describe the meaning of the atonement. It’s not that Mennonite Brethren have been unaware of different atonement models, rather, as is consistent with their tendency to rely on an implicit theology, Mennonite Brethren assume that using biblical atonement images is adequate in itself.

Mennonite Brethren are left with the ongoing challenge of how to assess their current Confessions of Faith in a world of increasing theological diversity. As Lynn Jost reflected in the midst of the 1999 confessional revision process,

A complete consensus about theological questions is no more...All of us want this Confession to say exactly what we as individuals believe. There is a sense, that if there are concepts we would prefer to see stated differently, perhaps we cannot endorse the Confession as a whole. The revision process, however, is an implicit call to trust the community of faith and to submit to the hermeneutical community.<sup>43</sup>

The 1999 North American Confession may not be above critique, but it must be treated with respect since it represents the careful and prayerful reflection of Mennonite Brethren churches across the U.S. and Canada.

The basis for ongoing assessment, of course, is the Word of God, the authoritative guide for faith and practice. Yet the difficulty Mennonite Brethren face is whether they are actually willing to engage in significant Bible study together in a way that would



enable them to understand the whole counsel of Scripture. In any assessment of the Confession, their appeal must always go back to the Bible—“What does the Word say?” However, by asking this question they are also asking the Spirit to enlighten the eyes of their hearts and to forge a unity amongst themselves based on a common confession. This process always takes both time and relationship. Mennonite Brethren must walk toward each other in an attempt to understand the Scriptures—no matter what issue they are facing. I am committed to walking together in love.

Finally, I recognize that at the heart of the atonement is mission. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Mennonite Brethren confessions are very clear about this. Mennonite Brethren proclaim the love of God revealed in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. They proclaim Jesus as the only way to God, which is good news for all people.

Mennonite Brethren in North America also now face the challenge of listening to their brothers and sisters from around the world as they reflect on their Confession of Faith. The 1999 Confession represents the convictions of American and Canadian Mennonite Brethren, but it does not take into consideration Asian, African, South American, or European perspectives. How is the atonement understood and proclaimed within these different cultural contexts? How do Mennonite Brethren interpret God’s Word together, enriched by their various perspectives? Mennonite Brethren in North America can no longer confess their faith in isolation from the larger international Mennonite Brethren community.

## NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a presentation delivered at “Deep Spirited Friends Study: The Cross of Christ,” a study day sponsored by the B.C. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches and held at Gracepoint Community Church in Surrey, B.C., November 3, 2010.
2. For further reflections on Mennonite Brethren hermeneutics, see Doug Heidebrecht, “People of the Book: The Significance of Mennonite Brethren Biblicism and Hermeneutics,” *Direction* 40 (2011): 219–31.
3. A.J. Klassen, “The Bible in the Mennonite Brethren Church,” *Direction* 2 (April 1973): 45.
4. J. B. Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren*

*Church 1860–1990* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1993), 180.

5. See Doug Heidebrecht, “Confessing Our Faith: The Significance of the Confession of Faith in the Life of the Mennonite Brethren Church,” in *Renewing Identity and Mission: Mennonite Brethren Reflections after 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck, Bruce L. Guenther, and Doug Heidebrecht (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2011), 141–53.
6. “Resolution on Confession of Faith,” *1987 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Abbotsford, August 7–11, 1987), 68.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 69.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. John E. Toews, “The Meaning of the Confession,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 28 October 1988, 7.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. Yet there is also a level of flexibility in relation to the Confession of Faith, which has not always been clearly articulated. Mennonite Brethren recognize that struggles with particular statements in the Confession may not be incompatible with affirming the Confession in principle, so “a principled confessional integrity, not a legalistic confessional rigidity” is lived out in practice. See *1987 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Abbotsford, August 7–11, 1987), 72.
15. References to the Rudnerweide Confession will be to Peter J. Klassen’s English translation, which can be found at the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. “Confession, or Short and Simple Statement of Faith (Rudnerweide, Russia, 1853).” [http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/Confession or short and simple statement of faith rudnerweide](http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/Confession%20or%20Short%20and%20Simple%20Statement%20of%20Faith%20Rudnerweide) and in Howard John Loewen, ed., *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America* (Ekhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 115–28. For a more recent translation, see Karl Koop, ed. and tr., *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition, 1527–1660* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2006), 314–30.
16. Abram John Klassen, “Mennonite Brethren Confessions of Faith: Historical Roots and Comparative Analysis” (S.T.M. Thesis, Union College of British Columbia, 1965), 105. The full title of this Mennonite confession reads: *Confession oder Kurtze und einfältige Glaubens-Bekennniss derer so man nenne, Die vereinigte Flämische/Friesische und Hochdeutsche Tauffs=gesinnete, oder Mennonisten in Preussen*.
17. Klassen, “Mennonite Brethren Confessions,” 106.

18. Ibid., 109.
19. The English version of the 1902 Confession was published as *Confession of Faith of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Pub. House, 1917). In Howard John Loewen's *One Lord*, it can be found on pp. 163–73. For an online version, see the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Confession of Faith (Mennonite Brethren Church, 1902)," <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C6654.html>.
20. Ibid. For an English translation of the Introduction to the 1902 Confession see, Abe J. Dueck, *Moving Beyond Secession: Defining Russian Mennonite Brethren Mission and Identity, 1872–1922* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 1997), 108–11.
21. Klassen, "Mennonite Brethren Confessions," 132.
22. Ibid., 106.
23. Ibid., 109.
24. Ibid., 107.
25. Paragraphs are numbered continuously throughout the Confession.
26. *Constitution of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Church Conference, 1963), 16–19.
27. Ibid., 17(f).
28. *Confession of Faith of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Winnipeg, MB; Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 1976). Numbers in parentheses in this section refer to pages in this publication. The 1975 Confession is also available online at the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Confession of Faith (Mennonite Brethren, 1975)," <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C6655.html>.
29. Marvin Hein, "Introducing: A New Series on Our Confession of Faith," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 10 June 1977, 27. See also A.J. Klassen, "Revising the Confession of Faith," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, July 25, 1969, 2–3; and A.J. Klassen, "The Process of Revision," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 8 August 1969, 16.
30. For a helpful explanation of the connection between justification and the resurrection, see the chapter, "Raised for Our Justification," in I. Howard Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement* (London: Paternoster, 2007), 68–97.
31. A.J. Klassen, "Salvation by Grace," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 19 August 1977, 28–29.
32. Ibid., 29.
33. *Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application* (Winnipeg, MB; Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 2000) includes the confessional articles, a Commentary and Pastoral Application, as

well as the liturgical, digest, and sidewalk versions of the Confession. Page numbers in parentheses in the following discussion refer to this publication. See also,

[http://www.mbconf.ca/home/products\\_and\\_services/resources/theology/confession\\_of\\_faith/](http://www.mbconf.ca/home/products_and_services/resources/theology/confession_of_faith/)

34. See "Vision Statement for General Conference," *1987 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Abbotsford, August 7–11, 1987), 59–64.
35. *1990 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Hillsboro, September 28–October 2, 1990), 12.
36. *1993 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Winnipeg, July 7–11, 1993), 14.
37. See Elmer A. Martens and Peter J. Klassen, eds., *Knowing and Living Your Faith: A Study of the Confession of Faith, International Community of Mennonite Brethren* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2008). Numbers in parentheses in this section refer to pages in this publication. See also, <http://www.lcomb.org/confession>.
38. *Ibid.*, 128.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. These include: People of the Bible, People of a New Way of Life, People of Covenant Community, People of Reconciliation, and People of Hope.
42. Lynn Jost, "Reflections on Confession of Faith Revision," *Direction* 27 (Spring 1998): 60.
43. *Ibid.*, 61.

**Doug Heidebrecht is currently working in an international setting. Previously, he served as director of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (Winnipeg, Manitoba) and for sixteen years as instructor in biblical and theological studies at Bethany College in Hepburn, Saskatchewan.**

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