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Mennonite Brethren Atonement Confessions and Mission

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*Mennonite Brethren Confessions use the biblical
images...trusting them to evoke and challenge
hearers with the truth of the gospel.*

Article subjects

- ◆ [Mennonite Brethren Church and History](#)
- ◆ [Theology: Biblical and Systematic](#)

¹ What have Mennonite Brethren confessed about atonement and how has it shaped our mission praxis? At “Deep Spirited Friends Study: The Cross of Christ,” sponsored by B.C. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (Nov 3, 2010), Doug Heidebrecht presented a comprehensive study of the atonement language in the four confessions used by Mennonite Brethren (1853, 1902, 1975, and 1999).² His paper shows how the Mennonite Brethren “family story” of a “mixed marriage” between evangelical traditions (Lutheran Pietist, Charismatic, and Baptist) and Anabaptist-Mennonite traditions is reflected in the evolution of confessional language on atonement. For example, he documents how the 1902 Confession incorporates Baptist atonement language to go hand in hand with the Anabaptist-Mennonite confessional language (7–8). In the end, Heidebrecht concludes:

I was surprised, although I shouldn't have been, at how MBs have used biblical atonement images without feeling the need to appeal to a particular atonement model as an explanation. Only rarely does the confession use more philosophical language (i.e. 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 the use of biblical atonement images is adequate in itself. (17)

Heidebrecht's paper serves as the starting point for our study conference workshop. We do not intend to repeat his work; we accept it as an accurate reflection of Mennonite Brethren confessional history and its development. Our interest in this workshop is to move forward the conversation that he initiated by taking up the two "shifts" in atonement language he noted in the 1999 Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith. Heidebrecht writes:

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 have occurred in how the atonement is depicted in this first article. Rather than referring to Jesus dying for our sin, it now declares that "Christ triumphed over sin." The shift is from a simple substitutionary statement to an allusion to a particular atonement theory—Christ-as-Victor. The atonement image of justification that was previously linked to the resurrection is no longer included. (14)

The two "shifts" highlighted are: (1) the shift to "triumph over sin" language in place of "died for sin" language, and (2) the omission of the link between justification and resurrection that appeared in the three previous confessions. Heidebrecht identifies these two observations as "surprises" and we do not dispute his analysis of the data. We do, however, think that "surprises" such as these invite follow-up exploration, and we suggest that such conversation will make a helpful contribution to our mission praxis.

The organizing questions for this workshop are as follows: (1) Does the revised language in Article 1 (1999), "triumphed over sin," represent a new direction in Mennonite Brethren atonement confession? Why was the "died for our sins" language, usually associated with evangelicalism, omitted? (2) What can be made of Heidebrecht's observation that all three previous Mennonite Brethren confessions have put the justification accent on the resurrection? Why might this be? Why was it omitted in 1999?

1. IS THERE A NEW DIRECTION IN MENNONITE BRETHREN ATONEMENT LANGUAGE?

Before leaving Fresno, California, in May 2011, Jon Isaak interviewed John E. Toews (senior churchman and seminary professor) and Lynn Jost (chair of the 1999 Confession revision task force) and put to both of them these questions. With regard to the first question, Toews thought the language of the 1999 Confession reflected conversations taking place in his New Testament Theology class. Many of the Confession task force members had been John's students at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS) in Fresno during the 80s and 90s. These conversations involved a more expansive view of God's reign, sin, and salvation. Together with a larger view of God's work in the world went a more expansive view of sin; in its singular form, sin was a magnetic force field that enslaved and resulted in destructive behaviors or sins, in its plural form. Thus, sin was recognized as personal transgression and as an enslaving power, able to captivate both individuals and institutions within a web of destruction, decay, and death. Consequently, God's salvation in Christ was framed in more expansive terms as well (deliverance, forgiveness, restoration, reconciliation, liberation, redemption, justification, triumph, sacrifice, etc.). Salvation *from* sin and *for* renewed living included two dimensions: vertical (with respect to God) and horizontal (with respect to self, community, world, and creation).

Jost responded to the first question by emphasizing that there was no intention to move the Confession in a new direction, no intention to move away from evangelicalism. Spiritual warfare was a hot topic at the time, he said. Many³ were talking about "principalities and powers"; it was even given its own section in Article 4 (Sin and Evil). Debate on atonement was not an issue at that time. In his view, the broader language of "sin as enslaving power" was not intended to minimize guilt or the consequences of human rebellion, but to expand the discussion of sin and salvation. The revision task force worked hard to keep in play the two sides of the Mennonite Brethren family story, the evangelical side and Anabaptist-Mennonite side.⁴

In addition, the use of "triumph over sin" language was not intended to signal a shift in direction, away from a substitutional model to a Christus Victor atonement model. Instead, the language shift represented an attempt to give expression to the larger view of

Christ's work of salvation that Mennonite Brethren, as a hybrid evangelical-Anabaptist family, were finding in Scripture. It included "died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pet. 3:18), saved "from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:9), "redeemed from the curse of the law" (Gal. 3:13), so that we are no longer "enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:6)—all this under the umbrella of the good news of God's "triumph" (Col. 2:15) over sin, evil, and death in the work of Christ on our behalf.

We appreciate the need for more expansive confessional language; however, we think the case for "expansion" would have been stronger if the phrase "died for our sins" had not been omitted from the list in Article 1 of the 1999 Confession. We would like to see it reinstated in the next revision.

QUESTIONS

Do you think the more expansive confessional language for atonement (i.e., "died for our sins" *and* "triumphed over sin") distracts from and/or promotes the "mystery of the cross"? Why or why not?

What missional and church-planting consequences do you see related to the kinds of language you use to talk about sin and what Christ's work on the cross saves from and for? Explain.

2. WHY HAVE MENNONITE BRETHERN PUT AN ACCENT ON THE RESURRECTION?

Jon Isaak also tested with John E. Toews and Lynn Jost the observation made by Heidebrecht that Mennonite Brethren Confessions typically link justification with the resurrection.

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. (17)

Heidebrecht noted that in the three confessions prior to 1999, the language of justification is qualified with a reference to resurrection. Then he noted that the 1999 Confession omits the link between justification and resurrection in Article 1, but does use "triumph over sin" as the umbrella terminology for all that Jesus' work on the cross accomplishes.

Toews agreed immediately with the accent Mennonite Brethren Confessions put on the resurrection and noted that the text of Romans 4:25, “raised for our justification,” was key for Anabaptist-Mennonites generally, when they talked about the cross. In other words, the “triumph over sin” language used in the 1999 Mennonite Brethren Confession reflects the implicit Anabaptist-Mennonite atonement emphasis on the resurrection, without diminishing the crucifixion. And Jost was quick to point out that the Confession does not minimize the salvific nature of the resurrection. It appears not only in Article 1 (God), but also in Articles 5 (Salvation) and 18 (Christ’s Final Triumph). The resurrection signals God’s approval of Christ’s sacrificial self-offering for others at the crucifixion (Acts 2); it marks the launch of the new humanity (Rom. 5); it indicates deliverance from sin’s bondage (Rom. 8); incorporation into the body of Christ (Col. 3); and empowerment for a life of discipleship (Rom. 6, 12; 2 Cor. 5; Eph. 2).

Part of the reason why the Bible’s justification imagery (e.g., of a courtroom or judicial proceeding) is linked to the resurrection has to do with the Anabaptist emphasis of obedience, discipleship, and taking the words of Jesus literally (especially those that speak of simplicity, integrity, compassion, peace, and justice, as in Matthew 5–7). While other Reformation traditions tended to put the judicial emphasis of justification on the crucifixion as the moment when salvation from damnation was won, Anabaptists tended to emphasize the resurrection as the judicial outcome with its call and provision to walk in newness of life.⁵

Anabaptists generally understood that, because they were part of the new creation in the resurrected Christ, Jesus’ teaching was applicable to their daily lives in all their interactions, even in the judicial arena, refusing (though not unanimously) to take up the sword or swear oaths. They chose not to bracket out the challenging words of Christ, either by pushing them to a future time (heavenly kingdom) or by applying them only to the community of faith. Either or both of these ways of softening the difficult sayings of Jesus were promoted in some applications of Augustine’s political theology, Luther’s two-kingdom theology, and Calvin’s two-government theology.⁶

Of course, there are examples of unhealthy developments emerging from the emphasis on discipleship and the zeal to

separate from the world, to be pure, to live like Jesus, etc. Through the centuries some Anabaptist-Mennonites have fallen into legalistic perfectionism (e.g., use of the “ban” to construct a church “without spot or wrinkle” [Eph. 5:27]) and abusive treatment of others both within the church and in the world (e.g., isolationism [separation from the world and even other Christian groups], ethnocentrism, racism, and, ironically, even violence).⁷

But what does a discussion of discipleship have to do with atonement? It shows that the Mennonite Brethren atonement language ties it to how most Anabaptist-Mennonite groups articulate the core of the gospel message. The good news is that God refused to let sin carry on its reign of terror and intervened in Christ Jesus at the cross to upend sin’s rule. This is what was confirmed when God raised Jesus from the dead, making possible new life and discipleship by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁸

It also explains why Mennonite Brethren confessions have not sided with any of the speculative atonement *models* developed through church history (Christus Victor, penal satisfaction, or moral influence; see Heidebrecht, 15, 17). Instead, Mennonite Brethren confessions use the biblical *images* (sacrifice, redemption, triumph, reconciliation, and justification), trusting them to evoke and challenge hearers with the truth of the gospel. When speaking about justification, however, Mennonite Brethren confessions carry forward the Anabaptist-Mennonite emphasis on the resurrection. The resurrection was God’s approval of Jesus’ ministry of love for others, even enemies, which righted humanity’s broken relationship with God and made possible a new life of obedient discipleship.

We appreciate that the judicial aspect of the resurrection is implicit in the new 1999 confessional language of “triumphed over sin”; however, we think that the Mennonite Brethren discipleship emphasis would have been stronger if the phrase “justified by the resurrection” had not been omitted from the list in Article 1. We would like to see it reinstated in the next revision.

So, what about the evangelical parentage of the Mennonite Brethren? Where does it shine through? The “for us” or substitutionary language typically associated with atonement in evangelicalism enters explicitly in 1902. In that year, Mennonite Brethren incorporated the Baptist confessional language of being “redeemed from the curse of eternal death, the wages of sin, and the wrath of God, only through the one eternal and sufficient

redeeming and atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ” (Heidebrecht, 7–8). However, the evangelical values of personal conversion were present from the beginning in the revivalistic preaching of the Lutheran Pietists that was a significant factor in the birth the Mennonite Brethren church.⁹

While the dual parentage of Mennonite Brethren creates a lot of room for diverse views, it also works best when charity is shown to those in the family with whom there are differences *and* when the extreme positions of either family tradition are resisted (see questions below). The forebears of the Mennonite Brethren church believed it was possible to hold both sides of the family together, as Heidebrecht’s analysis shows. We believe it remains possible to do so today as well, but like marriages in general, and mixed marriages in particular, it takes lots of hard work, a supportive faith community, and the grace of God.

QUESTIONS

Assuming that the Mennonite Brethren hybrid family story is worth continuing, what nuances of language do you think are needed to avoid the extreme language of our family traditions when talking about atonement with children, loved ones, co-workers, acquaintances, strangers, etc.? For example, how could “punishment” and “wrath of God” language be kept in the conversation, without sounding as if God needs to hurt one child in order to love another? Is God really like an impulsive and abusive parent? And, how could “reconciliation” and “restorative” language be kept in the conversation, without sounding as though God doesn’t take sin seriously or hold people to account? Is God really like an impotent and indulgent parent?

What do *you* think Mennonite Brethren can bring to the larger evangelical discussion on atonement? Since our study conference is not about trying to hammer out the “right” atonement language for each and every Christian church, where do you think Mennonite Brethren can make a contribution from the vantage point of our particular story? What makes you hopeful? What cautions are worth noting? What are you left wondering about?

NOTES

1. A workshop presented at the “Mystery of the Cross” study conference held October 27–29, 2011, at the Kitchener MB Church in Kitchener, Ontario.

2. "Atonement in the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith." A digital copy can be found at <http://www.mbconf.ca/resource/File/PDFs/Atonement%20in%20the%20MB%20Confession%20of%20Faith%21> References in this article to the Heidebrecht essay will be to this version. A further revised version of that paper is included in this issue of *Direction* (vol. 41, no. 1). See above, pp. 18–33. — Ed.
3. See, for example, the writings of John Wimber and others associated with the Vineyard Movement, a movement of significant influence among Mennonite Brethren and other evangelical churches.
4. See Lynn Jost and Connie Faber, *Family Matters: Discovering the Mennonite Brethren* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 2002), 25–33.
5. See Robert Friedmann, "Soteriology: Salvation, Justification, Grace," in his *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1973), 78–101; and Arnold C. Snyder, "The Theological and Ecclesiological Core of Anabaptism," in his *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1995), 83–99.
6. See Richard B. Hays, "Violence in Defence of Justice" in his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 317–46.
7. These themes are treated in Rudy Wiebe's controversial novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962). Mennonite Brethren continue to debate two particular challenges with regard to the church's interface with the world: (1) how to understand the human role in combating evil and (2) whether God's actions serve as an exemplary model for believers committed to peacemaking. For some, the biblical peace witness is accented with "resistance" (i.e., fight against evil) and for others it is accented with "nonresistance" (i.e., leave wrath and vengeance to God). See Willard Swartley, "God's Moral Character as the Basis for Human Ethics," in *Covenant of Peace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 377–98, for a good treatment of the contributions of both views, "resistant" and "nonresistant," along with his proposal of a mediating position.
8. See Snyder, 88.
9. See John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, 1975), 29–32.

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