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Reflections on Confession of Faith Revision

Lynn Jost

The present revision of the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith marks a transitional period among Mennonite Brethren. For this reason, it is perhaps fitting that *Direction* is devoting an issue to faith confessions while the process of revising is still under way.

In an era when less and less seems certain, it is too early to know that the revision itself will be accepted by the conference. Board of Faith and Life (BFL) deliberations have focused on the following modern problems: paradigm shifts; postmodernism; denominational erosion; theological drift; the slippery slope of deteriorating values; passing the torch to a new generation; and confessional integrity. The greatest value of the revision process is not the outcome—a definitive statement of MB belief—but the conversation itself: a communication experience which allows us to reexamine ourselves and our reading of Scripture in a time of intellectual flux.

A complete consensus about theological questions is no more among us. However, the outcome of this Confession will show that MBs can agree theologically about a great deal.

BEGINNING THE REVISION PROCESS

The revision began with the adoption of a new Article 13, "Love and Nonresistance," in 1990 under the leadership of the Board of Reference and Counsel (BORAC). BORAC sought to exercise its authority as the elders of the conference by bringing a proactive statement which could unify the conference. The revision of Article 13 was motivated by a

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desire to express Christian peacemaking positively without compromising the traditional denominational posture against participation in military violence.

By 1993 when the new BFL brought two additional articles for convention approval, "Christian Baptism" and "Lord's Supper," the revision was reactive: an attempt to bring confession in line with practice. The revised article on the Lord's Supper was a reluctant move by BFL leaders to allow nonbaptized participants at the table despite biblical arguments to the contrary.

The 1993 proposal for a complete revision of the Confession was a BFL attempt to retake the initiative. Generational change in leadership from 1990 to 1993 was significant, perhaps even dramatic. BFL was wrestling with the paradigm shift from modern to postmodern presuppositions. A revised Confession appeared to be one way both to confess unity on essentials and to embrace the diversity characteristic of these times.

MOTIVATIONS FOR REVISION

There were two primary motivations for a rewrite in 1993. First, the gender-exclusive language of 1975 was outdated. Second, issues paramount for communicating in the postmodern intellectual climate were not addressed in the 1975 Confession. The convention overwhelmingly endorsed the BFL proposal for a complete confessional revision. The conference mandated not only a new confession but also accompanying pieces that would provide commentary for those who might teach the confession, and pastoral application to deal with practical issues related to the various articles.

The newly appointed task force approached the revision process with energetic enthusiasm. Chair Herb Kopp, the skilled wordsmith, provided global vision for the process. John E. Toews, the most experienced theological scholar on BFL, was the center of industry, writing the first drafts of the four articles approved in 1993 and 1995: "Nature of the Church," "Mission of the Church," "Christian Baptism," and "Lord's Supper." Ed Boschman, the trusted churchman who eventually gave up his assignment to become moderator of the General Conference, demanded that the group write with a content and style that would engage the church.

ADJUSTMENTS

Transitions have characterized the project. Most significant in terms of process, the promised realignment of the General Conference structure accelerated the time line from a ten-year process to an attempt to gain approval of the entire revised Confession before General Confer-

ence structures would be eliminated in 1999. Task force composition changed radically as well. Toews moved from MB circles to become president of Conrad Grebel College. His replacement, Pierre Gilbert, moved from Montreal to Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS) in Fresno. Gilbert eventually resigned from the task force because of scheduling complications involving his new role as academic dean of the seminary. Both Boschman and Kopp removed themselves from the task force when they became conference executives. As the only member of the original task force, I have become its chair and enjoy working with task force members Valerie Rempel, a theologian from MBBS; John Warkentin, a church leader from Wichita; and Gerry Ediger, historian from Concord College who was BFL chair when the revision process began.

The definition of the assignment has emerged over time. The articles to be included were mandated by the convention. Repeated discussions about the intended audience of the Confession have raised the need for accessibility (so that obtuse language does not confuse the uninitiated or unsophisticated) yet theological articulation (the Confession does speak about profound questions of faith). The intent of the Confession is to say what Mennonite Brethren believe the Bible teaches for the contemporary world. The Confession is not simply a biblical paraphrase. It is a bridge that connects biblical principles with contemporary concerns. This draft seeks to articulate the old truths in fresh ways that best communicate in our world.

A DIVERSE CHURCH

Implicitly, the task force faced the question, "How does one write a unifying confession for a diversifying church?" The process devised for revision significantly reflected the church context. Church leaders and scholars were commissioned to draft articles to provide a starting point for the task force. Initially, twelve different writers were commissioned for the thirteen new articles. The task force chair instructed authors to write comprehensively with the theory that the editors would find deleting surplus material easier than supplementing too sparse a draft.

Task force members as well as the entire BFL read and reread the successive versions of each article, seeking biblical faithfulness and stylistic consistency that would address the emerging social context of the church. Since July 1997, individuals and congregations have been invited to respond to BFL's draft revision of the Confession. A complete rewrite of the proposed Confession was approved by BFL in April 1998 for further comment by the church [See in this issue—Ed.].

PATTERNS IN THE MB CHURCH

As I have led the process, I have observed several patterns which characterize the Mennonite Brethren Church. First, Mennonite Brethren care deeply, even passionately, about the Confession of Faith. Since BFL solicited response from the church, significant numbers of individuals, small groups, committees, leadership boards and large groups in congregations, agencies and conferences have studied the draft and provided thoughtful feedback. The energy of the response indicates that people really do care deeply about how the denomination articulates our faith.

I believe that the second draft of the Confession will also indicate the importance of community in our hermeneutical process. The task force made every effort to listen closely to the many comments. Not every suggestion for change was heeded, but each was weighed carefully. Many changes were incorporated. I believe that the resulting work has been important not only because it reinforces our community hermeneutic but also because we are closer to the best reading of scripture for having listened to the community.

Second, many Mennonite Brethren prefer to use traditional language when expressing their faith. Several linguistic issues emerged in the writing of the Confession. Foremost in significance was the language we use to reference God. Some readers understood the paucity of pronouns referring to God as a move to neuter God. The second draft is less squeamish about using pronouns, though it continues to represent the conviction that God is neither male nor female, and that God's image is reflected in humankind, both male and female. A second issue had to do with the use of "blood" in referring to Jesus' life and passion. Although the task force had no objection to the use of the term, other words were chosen to refer to Christ's sacrifice in the first draft but replaced with the word "blood" in the latest revision. Readers repeatedly preferred wording of the 1975 revision to that of the 1997 draft. I believe this reflects a strong preference to use familiar language in matters of faith.

Third, and conversely, a growing number of Mennonite Brethren are seeking new language to better communicate what we believe to a changing world. Readers resisted simply parroting scriptural phrases, preferring words that communicate directly to our context. They also demanded lyrical phrasing, especially to point to the glory of God. Terms that would not be clear or accessible were eschewed. There was strong agreement that inclusive language should be used to refer to people.

IMPLICATIONS OF OUR DIVERSITY

This leads to a fourth observation. Although it might be an overstatement to assert that MBs are deeply divided theologically, our diversity in belief carries at least three implications.

(1) Individualism threatens community. 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.

(2) Living in a world of change is uncomfortable. As mentioned above, we often prefer the old wording because it is more familiar. Though the changing world presses us to express our faith afresh, we also have the sense that in a world of change it would be reassuring if our faith core could be expressed in the former ways.

(3) A complete consensus about theological questions is no more. Some suggest that a confession should address only those questions about which we have total agreement. We have aimed at addressing many important theological issues, leaving open some details in which we do not find unanimity. There is, of course, precedence for this deliberate ambiguity. The 1975 Confession does not articulate a particular eschatological interpretation. Christ's final return, however, is an important theological issue. In that article, we confessed what we agreed to and left the details out. One contentious issue which we aim to address without confessing unity on details is the question of state-supported violence. We hope that the conference will agree with wording that states that we regret the loss of life, though we do not have a unified position on capital punishment.

NEW QUESTIONS

As a fifth observation, I believe it has been good for us to confront new questions. Some doubted the merits of addressing such questions as the beginning-of-life and end-of-life issues. BFL was advised to use another format to refer to such problems. We believe, however, that changing contexts demand that we address new issues. Today, concerns about environment, economic lifestyle, sexuality, other faiths, and the influence of demons have replaced older debates (e.g., Trinitarian formulas) and demand our attention. Though we do not speak as definitively on these questions as some would prefer, the task force believes that simply including the articles will assist the church's witness in the world.

Sixth, I believe the outcome will show that we as MBs can agree theologically about a great deal. In a world of very diverse value systems, MBs continue to confess an evangelical Anabaptist biblical hermeneutic. We agree on the orthodox doctrines about God, humanity, creation, sin, salvation, and the church. We continue to confess that discipleship is central to our faith, that it involves evangelism, stewardship, holy living, and respect for life. To be MB carries both a commitment to common evangelical doctrine and to distinctive Anabaptist expressions of those doctrines.

Seventh, this revision will most likely reflect an increasingly narrative biblical theology rather than a theology based primarily on systematic philosophical categories. When we confess what we believe about God, we prefer not to use such philosophical categories as “omniscience” and “omnipotence” but use biblical language which is narrative (telling the story of creation, fall, and redemption), metaphorical (God is rock, refuge, shepherd, etc.), and covenantal (God relates to a people called to live in obedient relationship with one another and with God).

In summary, the revision process is far from complete. I am both encouraged and sobered by the preface to the 1975 Confession which mentions seven drafts before acceptance was granted. I am certain that many new lessons will be learned before our work is finished. I am also confident that the grace of God, with the graciousness of God’s people, will sustain us as we find consensus about what we confess. ✨