

# Deconstructing the Draft Revision of the MB Confession of Faith

*Delbert Wiens*

Although I had been aware for a long time that the Board of Faith and Life was sponsoring a new Confession of Faith, it hardly occurred to me that I ought to wonder about the making of such Confessions. Nor did I pay attention to the five revised articles that were accepted by General Conferences over a period of several years. But the decision to “fast-track” the completion of the project and the request to the churches to respond quickly to the draft of the proposed Confession that was presented at Waterloo, Ontario, on July 10-13, 1997, stimulated me to wonder about projects like this. The result was a long critique which I submitted to the Board of Faith and Life. This article is a reduced version of that essay.

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It is in the nature of brief critiques that they are one-sided. There is much in the draft that I applaud, and will therefore ignore. I do have problems with a number of the articles. But I am even more troubled that I am unsure what the function of such statements ought to be at this point of our history and whether it is possible for them to fulfill that function. I will first argue that it is presently impossible to write a Confession that expresses a consensus on what all of us believe or ought to believe. Secondly, I will use specific articles to illustrate that claim. I also appeal for revisions to some articles.

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## **WHY CONFESSIONS CANNOT SPEAK A SINGLE MEANING**

A first reading led me to wonder what the "felt need" for this revision might have been. Usually, Christian creeds have been responses to crises which brought the Church's central teachings into question. Arianism was such a crisis, and it led to the Nicene Creed. The Reformation was the crisis which evoked a series of classic Protestant creeds. But what is the crisis to which this effort is a response? Or is it merely an attempt to tidy up loose ends and to make the statement speak in current idioms? The fact that my interest in this project was so tardily aroused and that few congregations wished to become involved in debating the draft before us could be used to argue that our members do not sense that there is a crisis. But, in fact, there are many fierce arguments among us, and I think that there is much fear and anxiety about what is happening within the constituency. It must be the case, therefore, that the document before us does not appear to us to be relevant to the crises we recognize.

In other words, what we claim to believe about the basics of our Christianity do not appear to connect with the actual problems we debate with each other. For example, when I was growing up, plaques in churches used to read, "Be Still and Know That I Am God," and "The Lord Is in His Holy Temple; Let All the Earth Keep Silence before Him," and "Worship the Lord in the Spirit of Holiness." If we had plaques now, I suppose they would read "Praise Him with Timbrel and Dance." Very different modes of piety are in conflict, and people care a lot about this issue. Surely the nature of God should have a great deal to say about how we worship God. But nothing in the Confession strikes people as important to this discussion.

Again, Jesus came to inaugurate God's rule in a very tangible "Kingdom" that would be a counterculture over against any natural society. Early Christians took this so seriously that they came to be known as the "third ethnicity." The question of our ethnicities can always stir up a barrage of letters to the editor of our church periodicals. What in the Confession's discussions of the Kingdom and of our congregational life has been thought to be relevant to this issue?

The article on creation is biblical in its primary emphasis. But what troubles many of us is the controversy between "evolutionists" and "creationists." The article skillfully evades that controversy. The items on eschatology make "the last days" indefinitely long. But what troubles many, and is not at all addressed, is whether the "signs of the times" have been completed.

## A CRISIS OF MODERNITIES

There are several general ethical principles listed in relevant articles. But the really troubling issues we confront are the result of profound disagreements on the *application* of principles. Are they true statements to be literally applied given “all other things being equal?” Or are they absolute recipes in and of themselves? When Jesus affirmed marital fidelity, was he stating a truth that ought always to be taken seriously in a debate among conflicting truths in complex situations, or was he stating an absolute prohibition of divorce? What are readers to do with Article 11 which affirms both that the Scriptures tell divorced people to remain single and that we can bless their next marriage?

I can defend the Board of Faith and Life for skirting the “real” questions. After all, if we were to include all of our live concerns the statement would be very long indeed and might never be approved. But what I find truly troubling is a general lack of expectation that creeds are even potentially relevant to such issues. The laity are generally content, I think, to let the theologians work out their theologies among themselves. Apparently we need to have theologians, and it makes sense that they should have something to do. What appears not to make sense is how what they do has anything to do with the real life of the church.

And that, I would insist, is a sign of the very large crisis which must be faced head-on, if any possible statement is to be taken seriously. That crisis is the shift in consciousness that is implied by terms like “pre-modernity,” “modernity,” and “postmodernity.” One could even argue that this is a crisis that is more serious than those of the late classical or Reformation eras. Indeed, this crisis demands something that can guide Christians into the next millennium. But this guide cannot just list dogmas. It must also clarify the nature and use of each of them and of any set of them. In other words, the meaning and function of such statements are determined by the “worldview” of the persons contemplating them. It is entirely possible for four people to agree to a given set of words and yet to have four entirely different understandings of what they assert. One response to the recognition that such words do not yield agreement is to lose interest in debating them.

George Lindbeck, in his book, *The Nature of Doctrine*, takes one approach to clarifying these issues. Are doctrinal statements evocations of Christian attitudes, a set of propositions describing divine reality, or a regulative “grammar” for Christian action and thought? The “Yale School,” of which he is a member, tends to argue for the latter. Although the Yale School’s insistence that we must return to indwelling the biblical narrative as the context for our faith and life should strike a respon-

sive Mennonite Brethren chord, I will use the categories explored by Nancey Murphy in *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda*. My attempt will be to show that the proposed Confession can be profoundly ambiguous, evoking sometimes radically different meanings depending on whether the reader is premodern (pre-mod), modern (mod), or postmodern (post-mod). I will not pay much attention to pre-mods. It is important to know that Liberals and Fundamentalists/Evangelicals (lib-mods and ev-mods) are both mods.

## THE MANY MEANINGS OF THE TEXT

### Article 1. God

The language used in the first article could appeal greatly to pre-mods. What is claimed about God uses scriptural phrases which evoke the grand biblical narrative of God's activity to create the world and to redeem the world and its peoples. On the other hand, theologically informed pre-mods would be struck by the absence of God's ontological attributes. Left out is any direct way of expressing God's aseity (apart from the first sentence which notes that God is "one" and "eternal spirit") and the traditional "omni-" attributes. What is also striking is that God has become quite tame. God as Mystery, Wrathful, or Awesome is not evoked by the text, except for the bare assertion that God is "holy." Even a lib-mod like Tillich would wonder whether such a God is truly worthy of our worship.

Except for a few quibbles (as on the way of expressing Jesus' virgin birth?), lib-mods can accept the statement as an expression of the meaning of our deepest spiritual experiences. Perhaps ev-mods should have the most difficulty accepting the statement. They could not deny its biblical ring, but they would likely insist that the treatment of Jesus avoids commitment to a specific theory of salvation (like "substitutionary atonement").

Moreover, much in the statement seems to reflect post-mod sensibilities. The rich pluralism of biblical metaphors that are used calls attention to the fact that our human descriptors should not be taken to be univocal assertions. I do not know enough about process theologies to judge. However, I suspect that they, who emphasize the dynamic nature of God's character, could accept most of it even though it does not explicitly champion their approach.

I wonder, in fact, whether the rejection of ontological categories is meant to be a subtle opening to such younger conservative post-mod theologians who stress God's relational and process aspects so strongly that

they move beyond the older acknowledgement that God cannot be expected to do the logically contradictory (like make a rock too big to move) to assert that God is ultimately time bound. By that perspective, God cannot know what any of us will decide (nor even what God will in the future decide) until the decision is made.

Except for the statement's general avoidance of the awesome holiness of God and a corresponding affinity with the contemporary tendency to domesticate God to a doting father and obediently on-call servant, my point is *not* that this is a "bad" statement. I applaud a careful appropriation of post-mod themes. But what is to be made of a statement that can be read to support strikingly different worldviews? How can it help us to achieve other than a purely verbal consensus on our deepest convictions? If contradictory conclusions can be deduced from it, how can it guide us to the reconciliations we require in the "practical" controversies that divide us?

### **Article 2. Revelation of God**

Much of the statement on Scripture will be very acceptable to pre-mods and to lib-mods. The first paragraph is compatible with their assumption that religious truths are primarily grounded in human religious experience. But "infallible" grants a curt nod toward the ev-mods. Never mind that ninety-nine percent of the readers will not understand how present Evangelical scholars define this word. Those whose theory of the Scriptures holds that they are literally inerrant propositions which can serve as foundations for the construction of science and history and theology will presumably not notice that those other key shibboleths are not used. So is the statement intended to allow an Evangelical reading without being Fundamentalist? The last sentence—"Christ is the key to understanding the Bible"—is what we do accept, and should. But does it not really function to deny the authoritative status and perhaps even the infallibility of the Old Testament? It is, of course, an authentic Mennonite assertion.

There are post-mod moves on the authority of Scripture that are very exciting (as in the discussions of the Yale School, canon critics, and by Ms. Murphy), but I see nothing in the statement that encourages us to think of them. Would it not be more honest to say something like, "Although there is no consensus among Mennonite Brethren on a theory which fully accounts for our rightful dependence on the Scriptures, we are united on the need to reimmerge ourselves in the Bible until our thinking is so transformed that we are able to understand everything in accordance with the themes and patterns of Scripture." This would also help to keep the post-mod options open.

Finally, I vigorously protest the statement's failure to present the authentically Mennonite teaching that is called the "Anabaptist hermeneutic." The claim that Scripture interpretation is authoritatively guided by the Holy Spirit in the context of churchly deliberation on the texts is becoming recognized even by non-Mennonite scholars as a very helpful way to move beyond the modernist assumptions that have helped to create the Liberal/Fundamentalist impasse.

#### **Articles 5 and 17. Salvation and Other Faiths**

With these articles, the writers are obviously struggling. On the one hand, "only those who put their faith in Christ have the promise of eternal life" (Article 17, lines 8-9). This would rule the Old Testament saints out of heaven, unless they mean to imply that hearing and accepting will be possible after death. But then hope is inconsistently inserted. We do not know what happens to those who never heard (or those who heard with their ears but could not understand with their hearts and minds).

Even more confusing, Article 5, line 11 states that salvation is "a gift of grace apart from any human achievement," which seems also to deny the efficacy of the "achievement" which happens when persons "put their faith in Christ." Several years ago I got a lot of flack—and many expressions of agreement—when I argued in a letter to the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* that our people have never held, really, that only those who explicitly put their faith in Christ are saved.

The phrase "remnants of truth" in Article 17 is far too weak to express what I have found to be Luke's attitude to Gentile paganism. I appreciate that these articles are allowing us some wiggle room away from the doctrine that almost everyone is damned. But I do not think the result is either biblical or consistent. These statements strike me as essentially an ev-mod statement watered down by lib-mod allusion to a universal experience of God and a post-mod sensibility to pluralism. The writers do not take advantage of the careful post-mod thinking and writing that has been going on, even in conservative circles.

#### **Articles 7 and 10. Mission of the Church and Discipleship**

I am glad for the emphasis that the way of life in the redeemed community is itself a witness to the world. Here, and elsewhere, I would like a stronger emphasis that our purpose as Christians and as churches is to glorify God and "to make everyone mature in Christ." I would like this Confession to strengthen the call to "being" to balance that of "works." We do not immediately know how to serve prior to "the renewal of our minds" that Romans 12:1-2 calls for. When the lawyer asked Jesus who was his neighbor, he got the story of the Good Samaritan. But Luke immediately pairs that with the story of Mary and Martha. Would-be

Good Samaritans will be overwhelmed with the cares of serving unless they learn to sit with Mary to have their minds reshaped by Jesus' teaching and presence. Even where maturity is addressed in this Confession, what we *do* seems to me to come across most strongly.

Article 10, lines 16-19 is a good start in the matter of Christian growth. But where are all those texts that stress that maturity is the result of suffering? The recurring pattern in Scripture is that an initial call is followed by a disastrous attempt to fulfill that call, as if it can be done with the old "programming" that is still with us. Then after a stint in the desert (or jail, or a pit) for "reprogramming," a second call finds the saint able to move with power. St. Paul's category is old self/new self and death/resurrection. And that takes time and suffering, usually after failing utterly at an initial doing.

#### **Article 12. Society and State**

Here I will only protest the text's failure to deal with our classic Mennonite Brethren positions. Objections to lodges were not just to their secrecy, but to their original (and continuing) anti-Christian teachings, as an aging friend of mine was shocked to discover when he had worked far enough up the hierarchy.

And what has happened to our two-kingdom theology? I'm willing to agree that our elders went too far in automatically consigning the state to the devil. Every generation must "discern the times." But, just like my friend who got up the lodge hierarchy far enough, friends of mine who have moved into significant governing levels (or have seriously studied current history and government) are beginning to suspect that our elders were right who argued that Christians should not be "magistrates." I think that our statement should articulate that position and give some guidance as to what sort of "times" we are in. Those early Christians who created a counter-Kingdom turned out to be more relevant to society than those who set out to ameliorate the Roman one.

#### **Article 14. The Sanctity of Human Life**

I am glad for the consistency of including capital punishment with abortion, etc. However, I am unclear whether we mean that the state has been given the power to do that by God but should not, or that in fact God reserves that right to himself. Further, the statement as a whole deeply troubles me.

When I apply the "mod," "lib," "ev," "post" paradigm tags to it, I am powerfully impressed how lib (even "new age") this whole thing sounds. When did we start talking about the "sanctity" of human life, "human dignity," and the notion that God "values human life highly"—as if it is an independently constituted good, or even that the motivation for pre-

servicing life is “loving our neighbors as ourselves.” Humanists should be proud. Of course, there are ways to affirm human life. But this rhetoric comes neither from the Scriptures nor from, I think, pre-mod orthodoxy. And it has come so suddenly for us. I suspect it is due to the willingness of antiabortionists to adopt a politics that makes for strange bedfellows. Psalm 8 certainly affirms the greatness of human beings, but note also that this hymn is given as praise to God, not to people!

Since when has Christianity justified humaneness on the basis that we humans are worthy of it? I agree that “such-a-worm-as-I” theology overdid the theme of original human depravity. Nor did original sin ever imply that we all consistently did the most rotten things we could imagine. But I do not have much trouble being quite sure that there are “sub-human” types around us who do not have the right to live. (Do any of us?) Yet I am even more sure that I do not have the right to make the judgment that they should be killed, or to pull the switch. The biblical language is that Yahweh is jealous, refusing to give us the right to come between God and even the least worthy of God’s children. God reserves the right to make the final judgment. And everyone belongs to God.

I was powerfully impressed with the following argument H. Richard Niebuhr made in class one day. I paraphrase:

During the long centuries when the state was officially Christian, every magistrate knew that his judgments were only provisional. Only God could “take” a life. The most that any human could do was to interrupt a life. For there would be a final judgment when false earthly judgments would be rectified, and justice would finally be done. Then the accused could be vindicated and a judge who did wrong could be condemned. But now that the state is officially secular, there can be no appeal. Now, for the first time, a capital judgment becomes a final judgment. The state and the judge now claim the authority that used to belong only to God.

Whether capital punishment was right even then would call for a different kind of discussion. But now for us, for sure, “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord” (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19), whatever be the viciousness of the person. This is not to say that every question has been answered. So far as this argument against judicial killing goes, it need not be applied to every killing, as when a policeman fires at a psychopath who is swinging his Uzi into action against a crowd. With our elders, however, we may have to question who should be a policeman.

And none of this has yet clarified when a *human* life begins. Chris-

tians in the past have placed that at different stages of development. For some, it was placed at the drawing of the first breath. For many, it was held to occur at "quickenig," that is, when the "soul" entered, as revealed by the beginnings of motion by the fetus. Some were sure that the soul came at forty days for males and somewhat later for females. American churches permitted abortion prior to "quickenig" until about the 1850s. And there is nothing in Scripture to justify that it begins when the sperm enters the egg.

The penalty for causing a miscarriage was much less severe than the penalty for killing someone already born. Certainly a kind of life begins then. And it is certainly a *potentially* human life, a very powerful potential to be protected so that it can emerge into those personal and social relations with others that make us human. There was a prior stage when a set of physical relationships was begun that constitutes physical things. And, I would hold, there is a relation to God that is present in and upholds *all* the sets of relations that progressively bring us to the possibility of becoming sons and daughters of God. And so it is ultimately for God's sake that we cherish life and protect it, in ways appropriate to every level of created things and beings.

In any case, our ethical and theological reflections will have to become a great deal more serious than this statement hints if we are to give adequate guidance on questions of life and death that arise in all these situations. Especially this is so for end-of-life decisions. On the one hand, we have to grant to God what is God's. On the other hand, Christians have not historically absolutized life. "This world is not my home; I'm just a'passin' through." But we do not sing those sorts of songs anymore.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

When worldviews are in flux, and even more so when there are many of them, it is impossible to have a finished Confession that is both coherent and expresses a consensus. And that is why it would be completely wrong to rush the process. I realize that the Faith and Life board acted to shorten the time for churchly deliberation because of last year's proposal to dissolve the North American Conference. But it is far better to have no Confession at all than to have one that has not received the care needed to get it right.

More importantly, I believe that the *process* of working out the statement is more important than the product. Since our churches have no continuing context for liturgical and educative use of creedal statements, we have generally ignored them after they have been written and accept-

ed. But the writing of a creed could be a powerful tool for helping members of the conference to think together on the meaning of our faith. It could also stimulate congregational forums where we help each other to understand the various worldviews out of which our members speak. Perhaps we could even move toward a substantial consensus among those who dedicate themselves to work at this task. Ideally, it should never be finished.

Confessions are our attempt "to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). They are called for by the crises and opportunities of our own time and place. Even if none of us are entirely in agreement with what we produce, it will remain possible for us to affirm that we stand in the long line of those who expressed and protected the faith through history in the classic, and our contemporary, Christian creeds. ❄

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