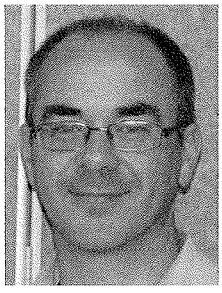
Mennonites, Doctrine and the Creeds
Canadian Council of Churches
Commission on Faith and Witness

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From a Mennonite-Anabaptist perspective Christian doctrine is that which a church must teach today if it is to *be* an authentic church in its context, that is, those shared convictions without which the church's mission and existence would be seriously impaired. Mennonites recognize that the church teaches in a variety of ways — by the instruction it offers, the hymns it sings and with the visible, vulnerably transparent witness of the lives of its members. Doctrine in this larger sense — truth taught and embodied, the formation of shared convictions and training in discipleship — constitutes the church's communal existence. Said another way, convictions are profoundly self-involving, and they show themselves not only in our confession of faith, but in our very attitudes and actions (McClendon 1994, 21ff.).

Many assume — Mennonites included — that Mennonites are non-creedal or even non-confessional. On the one hand, Mennonites are not a creedal or confessional church in the sense of adhering to a single authoritative confession which possesses some degree of ecclesiastical authority. On the other hand, Mennonites are confessional in the sense that they have formulated and adopted many contextually rooted comprehensive statements of faith — perhaps more than any of the three larger Reformation traditions (Dyck 1985, 17) — which have, in turn, played important roles at crucial moments in the church's life. This tension is perhaps best explained by an unwritten conviction that ethics and lifestyle are the most important fruit of Christian existence. Christian practice, especially as marked by the values of community, simplicity and peace, serve as the main criteria of a Mennonite understanding of apostolicity: "this behavioural emphasis would likely constitute their primary contribution to ecumenical Christianity," namely that confession, for Mennonites, "means, above all, the statement made by an overall way of life" (Finger 2002). Some have called this an "incarnational perspective" — that is, that the "doctrines of the church become most meaningful for Mennonites only as they are actually embodied, or lived out, in daily life" (Roth 2005, 13).

A Non-Creedal Church, but Christocentric and Trinitarian

Creeds are normally understood as universally accepted and authoritative statements of Christian belief. The ancient ecumenical creedal formulas were seen by the magisterial reformers of the sixteenth century to represent the consensus of the early church and to be an authoritative interpretation of scripture. Anabaptism in all its branches also taught regularly from and appealed to the Apostles' Creed. The other ecumenical creeds were largely affirmed in later Mennonite

confessions. Generally, where early Anabaptists were accused of heresy by their contemporaries, it was not because they had rejected common Christian affirmations, but had to do with Anabaptist practices such as believers' baptism, the ban, and an exclusive and memorial Lord's Supper (Snyder 1995, 84).

While valuing the careful formulation of shared convictions, Mennonites have never given the creeds *per se* a central place in their liturgy. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed of 381 were included in the North American *Mennonite Hymnal* of 1969, but the 1992 *Hymnal: A Worship Book* includes only the Apostles' Creed. Even the Apostles' Creed is, "to a Mennonite ear [...,] strangely silent about the life and teachings of Christ — the crucial part of the gospel story that unfolds between 'born of the Virgin Mary' and 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'" (Roth 2005, 25). Theologically, the Mennonite refusal to assume in advance that the creeds are binding rests on a larger claim regarding the primacy and authority of the canon of scripture. Historically, the experience of persecution in the sixteenth century by other Christians made Anabaptists sensitive to the temptation of allowing doctrinal statements to become substitutes for a lived, embodied faith that did not gloss over the "hard sayings" of scripture (for example, the rejection of violence). Rightly or wrongly, that suspicion has remained. "The truth of these claims becomes meaningful only as they are actually incarnated in the life of the believer or in the collective work of the church" (Roth 2005, 29), as one Mennonite historian summarizes the Mennonite view. In this regard, it is fair to say that "Mennonites are not creedal in the sense of revering, or even really knowing, the early tradition" (Finger 2002). Sometimes this suspicion has taken an anti-intellectual turn.

This approach to the creeds has not, however, led Mennonites to deny their validity. The introduction to the latest North American *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) states that "[t]he historic creeds of the early Christian church, which were assumed as foundational for Mennonite confessions from the beginning, are basic to this confession as well" (Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective 1995, 7). Specifically, where Mennonites have entered into Trinitarian discussions the approach has been decidedly christocentric: the starting point for Mennonite theological formulation has normally been the narrative history of Jesus Christ. Thus Mennonites teach that Jesus' renunciation of violence and his willingness to accept the cross in order to conquer evil through love reveals who the triune God really is, who God is in the depths of God's self. The 1995 *Confession* highlights the consequences of this christocentric trinitarian approach, rejecting the assumption that one can play off an ethic of the created orders derived from the Father against the more radical ethics of the Son (Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective 1995, 11). This account based on the unity of divine persons (*perichoresis*) seeks to be nothing less than radically Nicene and Chalcedonian. In ecumenical conver-sation, Mennonite theologian John H. Yoder urged that the implications of what the church has always confessed about Jesus as the Word of the Father, as true God and true humanity, "be taken more seriously as relevant to our social problems, than ever before" (Yoder 1994, 102). The point is not pacifism as a principle, but Jesus Christ and classical trinitarian and Christological creedal orthodoxy. For Yoder, the creeds can function successfully to reject those statements about God that are not compatible with the biblical narrative focused on Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God. In this account, the peace witness is wholly related to protecting, proclaiming, and unpacking the claims of classical Christology. In ecumenical conversation, Mennonites ask the larger church to test the claim that peace is at the heart of the gospel as it is enshrined in the creeds of orthodox Christianity.

Mennonites acknowledge Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life and for devotion to God. Mennonites recognize the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament as belonging to inspired scripture, which we accept as the Word of God written. While Mennonites share the broader Protestant emphasis on the authority of Scripture for doctrine and for testing truth and error, they have also emphasized the following:

- that Scripture should be authoritative for ethics, for the relation of the church to society and for church polity;
- that Scripture should be interpreted in harmony with Jesus Christ, in the sense that Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection are essential to our understanding the Bible as a whole (this gives a certain priority of the New Testament over the Old Testament);
- that the congregation of believers is the place where individual understandings and interpretations of Scripture, truth and error are to be tested (the "hermeneutical community").

Church authority in discerning "truth and error" is ultimately congregational for Mennonites. To undergird the integrity of the church's witness in word and deed, persons received into church membership commit themselves "to give and receive counsel within the faith community on important matters of doctrine and conduct" (Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective 1995, 55). Though pastors and other church leaders have a special responsibility for guidance and discipline, in the Mennonite tradition this is related primarily to the mutual care of members for one another. Ordained ministers are also accountable to the broader church because of their representative role. Mennonites recognize that the New Testament gives several reasons for suspending fellowship or for excommunication, including: denying that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (1 Jn 4:1-6), persisting in sinful conduct without repentance (1 Cor 5:1-13), and causing divisions in the church by opposing apostolic teaching (Rm 16:17f.).

A Confessional Church

Confessions generally include unique beliefs and emphases pertaining to a specific denomination. In the aftermath of the Reformation, all Christian churches were under considerable pressure to identify themselves and to explain their differences. The definition of doctrine and the concern for doctrinal correctness proved to be particularly characteristic of Protestant orthodoxy. The many confessions formulated by Dutch and north German Mennonites of the seventeenth century adhered to this pattern; they were both comprehensive and systematic, normally following the thematic order of the Apostles' Creed and they staked out distinctive denominational ground. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Mennonites in Europe and North America were variously influenced by the anti-confessional attitudes of early Pietism ("no reformation of doctrine without reformation of life"), Enlightenment rationalism, and (later) nineteenth century Protestant Liberalism.

In the early twentieth century, Mennonites who had found a new home in North America sought to steer a unique path between the fundamentalist and liberal options that dominated the North American Protestant landscape. The new vision did not emphasize doctrinal belief or subjective experience, but identified and built on three defining features of sixteenth century Anabaptism: first, "a new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship; second, a new conception of the church as a brotherhood; and third, a new ethic of love and non-resistance" (Bender 1957, 37). Post-World War II North American Mennonites came to identify themselves as that Christian tradition committed to the communal embodiment of right praxis (ortho-praxis)

above orthodoxy understood as "mere" assent to doctrine. This communal model of discipleship was also understood as an alternative to Christianity defined primarily in terms of individualistic, inner spiritual experience.

In the later part of the twentieth century, there was a marked interest among Mennonites in the classical Christian creeds as well as in their own confessional tradition. In the early 1980s, two North American Mennonite conferences tested the question of whether to develop a common confessional statement. In 1986, the General Boards of the two conferences struck a 12 member Inter-Mennonite Confession of Faith Committee, including older and younger persons, women and men, pastors and lay persons, ethnic minorities, historians and theologians, and a range of theological perspectives. The committee's goal was to develop consensus on core Christian beliefs and practices as seen from a specifically Mennonite perspective. Drafts were tested in congregations; each article not only had a summary statement, but also a commentary with background information designed to help build consensus within as well as between the two groups — theologically and also with respect to praxis. A final version was recommended to the General Boards and, at the 1995 annual meetings of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church, the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* was adopted by congregational delegates (98% majority vote) as their statement of faith for teaching and nurture in the life of the church.

The distinctive Anabaptist and Mennonite emphases in this confession are understood not only as peculiarly Mennonite and as a self-definition, but as claims of the gospel worthy of commendation to the wider community of faith. For example, the article on baptism emphasizes, among other things, that the meaning of baptism should include a readiness to suffer for Christ's sake and to be a pledge to follow Christ. In this regard, the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* was written to encourage conversation and further testing with the broader ecumenical church. As such the confession serves as a witness and resource of what Mennonites consider to be significant to a faithful interpretation of scripture for faith and life at this time.

While the confession is non-binding, it does spell out those beliefs which Mennonites consider normative, such as salvation through Jesus Christ, believers baptism and the rejection of violence. Ministerial candidates are asked to identify areas "of strong affirmation, areas of uncertainty or areas of disagreement." It is expected that candidates for ordination will understand and embody core Anabaptist values and witness as these are formulated in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective.*

The impact of the *Confession* on Mennonite congregations in Canada has been mixed, largely depending on the context and how it has been employed. It has served as an instrument to promote commitment, identity and unity, and to enhance worship, mission, teaching, ethical behaviour and theological reflection. But as the General Secretary for Mennonite Church Canada writes after visiting all 230 congregations in 2006, it has also distanced some congregations from corporate, joyful, patient discernment of the Bible and from the presence and leading of the Spirit of God within the body of Christ. In some cases, it has been used to increase polarization rather than to build common ground, or as a screen to test biblical faithfulness rather than as a mirror that shows that we all fall short of the glory of God (Suderman 2007, 65-75).

Today, there are about 1.5 million people globally who are baptized members of Mennonite-related churches. Most of these individuals are members of one of 97 national churches across 53 different countries; approximately 60 per cent are African, Asian or Latin American. In 1990, 104 of the 126

Mennonite conferences worldwide who relate to Mennonite World Conference reported that they had written a confession. As opportunities for exchange and fellowship have increased in recent decades, national churches have shown greater interest in inviting counsel and being accountable to one another. Though Mennonites worldwide do not have a common confessional statement, in the last five years member churches received, discussed, and then approved in 2006 by consensus a 325 word document entitled "Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists" (Mennonite World Conference 2007).

Conclusion

While Mennonites are not a creedal church *per se*, the theological foundations of the Mennonite Church are rooted in a longer tradition shared by millions of other Christians. Doctrine is teaching; it is not arbitrary, but a response to God's own authority in Jesus Christ. Mennonites recognize that doctrine is important for the church's witness to Christ in word and deed, and we remain committed to ongoing ecumenical conversation for the unity of the body of Christ.

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