

## Atonement in the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith Doug Heidebrecht

### A. Introduction

#### 1. Approaching the Confession of Faith

Mennonite Brethren are biblicists. At the heart of Mennonite Brethren identity is an acknowledgment of the Scriptures as the authority in all matters of faith and life. 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>1</sup> They assume that a careful study of the Scriptures will persuade all of the truth. It is critical to recognize how this conviction has permeated their approach to life when we engage with the Confession of the Faith.

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.

But 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>2</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 embrace of biblical theology is an attempt by Mennonite Brethren to address the presence of an implicit theology. During the 1960s, MBBS president J.B. Toews began to

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<sup>1</sup> A.J. Klassen, “The Bible in the Mennonite Brethren Church,” *Direction* 2, no.2 (April 1973): 45.

<sup>2</sup> J.B. Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren Church 1860-1990* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1993), 180.

refocus MBBS from being a fundamentalist institution to one with an Anabaptist orientation.<sup>3</sup> As part of this process, MBBS adopted biblical theology as its defining approach to the study of the Scriptures. In contrast to the philosophical categories employed by systematic theology to construct a logical doctrinal system, biblical theology seeks to synthesize the biblical material using biblical categories.<sup>4</sup> This sensitivity to the language, literary forms, and themes used by the biblical writers themselves reflects an attempt to hear the Bible in its own terms, without imposing foreign categories and assumptions onto the text. Rather than defending polarizing positions based on different perspectives or theological camps, biblical theology seeks to take into account the whole of biblical teaching on a subject, despite the tensions that may exist within the text.<sup>5</sup>

The Confession of Faith is also an attempt to articulate what Mennonite Brethren believe the Bible teaches. The Confession of Faith 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 our corporate 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 limited and new issues continue to emerge that need to be addressed. The Confession can be changed or modified only when the 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 our 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Toews, “Differing Historical Imaginations and the Changing Identity of the Mennonite Brethren,” in *Anabaptism Revisited*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1992), 165.

<sup>4</sup> Elmer A. Martens, “Through Biblical Theology,” in *The Seminary Story: Twenty Years of Education in Ministry, 1955-1975*, ed. A.J. Klassen (Fresno: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1975), 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>6</sup> “Resolution on Confession of Faith,” *1987 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Abbotsford, August 7-11, 1987), 68.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

The Confession of Faith is also understood as normative for Mennonite Brethren churches because it summarizes what we believe the Bible teaches. Thus the Confession is binding for all churches and 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 a norming statement 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>

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.<sup>15</sup>

## **2. Function of the Confession**

It is also helpful to recognize how the Confession is intended to function as a reflection of Mennonite Brethren convictions.

**- Functions as an Interpretive Guide -** The Confession of Faith essentially functions as an interpretive guide that spells out our corporate understanding of the intent and content of the Bible.<sup>16</sup> It is a hermeneutical document rather than a creedal statement. The Confession represents a consensual understanding of how Mennonite Brethren read the Bible together and so functions as a normative hermeneutical guide. The authority of the Bible is exercised in the life of the church through biblical interpretation. No matter what propositional view one has of biblical authority, the Bible does not function authoritatively in the church until it is interpreted and until there is consensus about how to interpret it.<sup>17</sup> Simply asserting the authority of the Bible does not resolve interpretive questions.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> John E. Toews, “The Meaning of the Confession,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, October 28, 1988, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *1987 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Abbotsford, August 7-11, 1987), 72.

<sup>16</sup> Toews, “The Meaning of the Confession,” 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

**- Functions as an Expression of Faithful Discipleship** - If a corporate consensus regarding how to read the Bible provides the basis for understanding what the Bible teaches within the church, then the Confession of Faith also functions as an expression of what it means to be faithful disciples who are unified around the Word of God. The Confession is not intended to become a creedal statement by defining our faith in terms that tend to become disconnected from the ongoing life of the church over time. Rather the Confession is intended to serve as an active manual of discipleship, expressing shared Mennonite Brethren convictions that have the power to shape our life together. The Confession, along with the commentary and pastoral application, acts as a teaching tool that conveys what faithful discipleship looks like when what we believe and how we live are drawn together. To relegate the Confession of Faith to something that we simply affirm, without it also actively shaping our life, is to separate faith and practice, the very connection which is at the heart of what it means to be Mennonite Brethren.

**- Functions as a Missional Witness** - Finally, the Confession of Faith functions as a witness to our understanding of who God is, our experience of salvation through Jesus Christ, and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit. The Confession is a missional statement, because it proclaims the gospel message before a watching world. It portrays a holistic gospel, which holds together the atoning work of Christ and the nature of the church; baptism and discipleship; God's creation and Christ's final triumph. The various articles of the Confession must be read together, for such an integrated reading points to the gospel's call for the transformation of all of life as a result of God's work in Christ. Just as the Confession attempts to faithfully describe the teaching of Scripture, so too it seeks to accurately present the triune God, who offers salvation to all through Jesus Christ and calls all to follow him. The Confession highlights the relationship between what we believe and our missional witness, because our witness to the world cannot be disconnected from our core theological convictions.

## **B. Overview of Early MB Confessions**

We will now survey what Mennonite Brethren Confessions have expressed regarding the atonement by examining the four confessions that have spanned the last 150 years. While I have included the ICOMB confession at the end for comparison, I will not be looking at it in this paper.

### **1. Rudnerweide Mennonite Confession of Faith (1660/1853)**

#### **II. Concerning Christ the Son of God**

We believe on Jesus Christ, that He is our Lord and Savior, Redeemer and Giver of Salvation...He was sent into the world by the Father, so that He might fulfill the plan laid before the foundation of the world, namely, to redeem us from the eternal curse. For this purpose God sent His eternal Son from heaven, Who in the body of a blessed, gracious, young woman named Mary, became flesh and man, through the miraculous power and action of the Holy Spirit. He suffered for us under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried for our sins, the four evangelists report. He descended into hell to save us from it. On the third day He rose for our justification. He

ascended to heaven, was seated at the right hand of God the almighty Father. From there He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

#### IV. Concerning the Church of God

Concerning the Church of God and the fellowship of the saints we believe and confess that there is a Church of God, which He through His own blood has redeemed and has washed her of her sins through His blood.

*Document of Secession (1860) – In all other articles of our confession, we are in full agreement with Menno Simons.*

*Brief Statement of the Rules and Regulations of our Church (Heinrich Hubert, 1868) – During the severe treatment by the (Mennonite) authorities, our written explanations and defences were based on the Confession of Faith published by the Rudnerweide Church, and passed by the Odessa censorship. Therefore it has become public knowledge that we propagate no new teaching, but our teaching is based on one already in existence for 1800 years, that of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and His apostles and prophets.*

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>18</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> edition of this confession was published in Odessa, South Russia, in 1853 and was the version looked upon by the early Mennonite Brethren as their own confession.<sup>19</sup> This Confession clearly stood in the Dutch Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and was the basis for clarifying Mennonite Brethren belief for the first 40 years of the movement.<sup>20</sup>

There are no separate statements in this first MB Confession on redemption, the fall, conversion, or 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 is 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.

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<sup>18</sup> 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-Bekentnis derer so man nennet die vereinigte Flämische-Friesische und Hochdeutsche Tauffsgesinnete oder Mennoniten in Preussen*. For an English translation see, Howard John Loewen, ed., *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 115-128.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

Finally, in another 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 us 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 effect salvation.

## **2. Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (1902)**

### **I. Concerning God**

5. This eternal Son of God, when the time was fulfilled, was sent by the Father from heaven into the world, that His purpose, which He had before the foundation of the world, might be accomplished; namely, to redeem us from the eternal curse...

6. He has, after a perfect, holy and sinless life, suffered for us under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried for our sins, descended into hell (into the lower regions of the earth, into prison or Hades) and upon the third day, for our justification, was raised from the dead, ascended into heaven, sitteth at the right hand of God, the almighty Father and intercedes for us...

### **II. Concerning Sin and Redemption**

11. Concerning redemption we believe, that man can be 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, the lamb of God; and by His grace only are we justified without works, and He only is the ground of our choosing, renewing, and sanctification.

17. This great change in the heart of man is the work of the Holy Spirit who according to the gracious will of God, accompanies the Word with His powerful working and thus by means of the redemption through Christ worketh the new birth and renewal of the sinner unto a new life of sanctification and a joyous hope of eternal life.

26. The perceptible means of grace, which God has ordained in his Word and through which the Holy Spirit worketh in virtue of the redeeming blood of Christ in the work of conversion and sanctification are: the Word (the preaching) in conversion; the Word, holy baptism, and the Lord's Supper for the converted in the congregation of the believers, the Church of Christ.

29. This congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ had redeemed through His own blood and washed them from their sins, and gave Himself for the church; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word...

*1963 Summary Statement – That the Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that all who repent and believe on Him have the forgiveness of sins through His blood. His shed blood is the only atonement for our sins.*

In 1898, the same year 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>21</sup> The large number of biblical references used in the 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 15 of the 25 major topics discussed, while nine articles cover topics reflecting later Pietistic and Baptist influences.<sup>22</sup> The 1902 Confession represents an intentional doctrinal positioning consistent with Mennonite Brethren’s Anabaptist and Mennonite roots.

The 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: Jesus is sent to the world to redeem us from the curse, Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried for our sins, and he was raised from the dead for our justification.

However, a separate article Concerning Sin and Redemption was now included. The particular statement regarding the atonement was adapted from the German Baptist Confession of Faith. Already in 1873 the German Baptist confession was adopted by one Mennonite Brethren congregation in Russia, which 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>23</sup> The Einlage Mennonite Brethren congregation added a “peculiarly Anabaptist-Mennonite” position to the Baptist confession by including sections on believer’s baptism, the Lord’s supper, church discipline, footwashing, the role of government, and the use of the oath.<sup>24</sup> This revised Confession was printed in 1876 and sent to the Russian government in response to questions regarding the fledging Mennonite Brethren movement. 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>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the new article on redemption was 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. We are 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...” Now the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* For an English translation see, Howard John Loewen, ed., *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 163-173. 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: Kindred Productions, 1997), 108-111.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

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. But we are left with no further explanation regarding how the sacrifice of Jesus actually redeems or atones us. A third atonement image, justification, is also used.

The 1902 Confession also spends considerable space reflecting on conversion and sanctification, both key aspects in the Mennonite Brethren emphasis on discipleship. Here the result of redemption is seen as the new birth of conversion and renewal of life through sanctification. The redeeming blood of Christ is explicitly at work in both. This new section now ties in with the article on the church, 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 used: redemption, justification and sacrifice.

Mennonite Brethren would use the 1902 Confession for almost 75 years. However, a much abbreviated summary was published in 1963 as part of the Mennonite Brethren constitution. This summary highlights how Jesus died for our sins (as our 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."

### **3. Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (1975)**

#### **1. God**

**The Father** - In mercy and grace He adopts as His children all who repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

**The Son** - We believe in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, whom the Father sent to reconcile us to Himself and to redeem us from sin and eternal death. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin, Mary. Thus He is true God and true man according to the Scriptures. He lived a perfect, holy and sinless life. In the redemptive purpose of God, He suffered crucifixion and death for our sin. He rose from the dead for our justification and ascended into heaven where He now intercedes for all who believe. He will come again to judge the living and the dead and to establish His eternal Kingdom.

#### **4. Salvation by Grace**

We believe that there is one Mediator between God and men, the Man Jesus Christ. The purpose of His coming was to redeem man from the judgment and power of sin and to reconcile him to God. Through the shedding of His blood, Christ provided the one sufficient sacrifice for sin and established God's New Covenant.

## 6. The Church of Christ

We believe that the church is one body, the bride of Christ, established through God's redemptive work in history. Believers from all nations, races and social classes, regenerated by faith in Christ and cleansed by His blood, are baptized by His Spirit into one body and separated to God and are members of this body, whose head is Christ.

***Explanation (A.J. Klassen)** – Salvation is an inclusive word that embraces justification, reconciliation and adoption, not only in the past, but also in the present and in the future.*

*Several traditional views of the atonement have been held by the church in history. In the second century the church father Origen developed the ransom theory of the atonement in which God bought man from the devil for the price of Jesus' death on the cross. In the twelfth century Anselm suggested that the death of Christ should be understood as the debt man owes God but cannot pay. According to this penal theory, man can be forgiven because the death of Christ satisfies the legal justice of God. Peter Abelard held that God was in Christ revealing his unconditional love for man. The substitutionary death of Christ on the cross satisfied the justice of God and provided the basis for man's reconciliation. The classic view of the atonement describes the person and work of Jesus as a military conquest. His entire life, death and resurrection culminated in the defeat of sin and the reconciliation of man and God.*

*Paul has carefully reminded us that a proper response to God's grace must always be directed toward peace and reconciliation in the world; otherwise our acceptance of God's grace would be cheap and vain. God's love for enemies is at the very heart of the atonement and the New Testament call on all true disciples to practice the way of reconciliation through suffering love in daily life. (MB Herald, August 19, 1977, 28-29.)*

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>26</sup> While the first draft was completed in 1969, it wasn't until 1975 that the 7<sup>th</sup> draft was finally accepted by General Conference delegates. The 1975 Confession was shortened considerably—down to 2450 words from 6500—and biblical references were both reduced (19 Old Testament and 118 New Testament) and moved from the text itself to footnotes.

Like the first two MB Confessions, the atonement first arises in the article about God. Here the idea of God the Father adopting as his children all who repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord is introduced. Jesus is sent by the Father to reconcile us to himself and to redeem us from sin and eternal death. The atonement image of reconciliation appears for the first time. Still following the 1853 narrative of Jesus' incarnation, it highlights how God's redemptive purpose was accomplished in Jesus' crucifixion and death for our sin. Justification is again linked with Jesus' resurrection, just as it had been in the previous two confessions. This is interesting, given that while justification is the primary penal atonement image, for Mennonite Brethren it has been consistently related to the resurrection.

The specific article on Salvation essentially repeats what had already been stated in the article about God – the purpose of Jesus' coming was to redeem humanity from the judgment

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<sup>26</sup> Marvin Hein, "Introducing: A New Series on Our Confession of Faith," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, June 10, 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*, August 8, 1969, 16.

and power of sin and to reconcile people to God. 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." 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.

Finally, the article on the Church of Christ again follows the previous two confessions by noting how 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. For Mennonite Brethren the atonement clearly has both an individual and 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 theory, 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 by the Board of Reference and Counsel in the *MB Herald* and *The Christian Leader*, which were to be used as an amplification and explanation of the Confession. A.J. Klassen, who was behind the development of the 1975 Confession, wrote the explanation of the article on Salvation.<sup>27</sup> Klassen highlights four traditional views of atonement: the ransom theory, the penal theory, 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 lean is in regards to reconciliation and God's love for enemies, which he claims is "at the very heart of the atonement" and discipleship.<sup>28</sup> The atonement has ethical implications for how we live our lives as Christ's disciples.

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<sup>27</sup> A.J. Klassen, "Salvation by Grace," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, August 19, 1977, 28-29.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

## C. Reflections on our Present Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (1999)

### 1. God

**God the Father** - Through Jesus Christ the Father adopts all who respond in faith to the gospel, forgiving those who repent of their sin and entering into a new covenant with them.

**God the Son** - The Son, through whom all things were created and who holds all things together, is the image of the invisible God. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, Jesus took on human nature to redeem this fallen world. He revealed the fullness of God through his obedient and sinless life. Through word and deed Jesus proclaimed the reign of God, bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. Christ triumphed over sin through his death and resurrection and was exalted as Lord of creation and the church. The Saviour of the world invites all to be reconciled to God, offering peace to those far and near, and calling them to follow him in the way of the cross. Until the Lord Jesus returns in glory, he intercedes for believers, acts as their advocate, and calls them to be his witnesses.

*Commentary – Jesus is the unique Savior of the world. Two primary metaphors describe Jesus' act. The first, sacrificial atonement, grows out of the New Testament understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. The second involves liberation by means of Christ's obedient fulfillment of the law of God. Christ broke the reigning power of sin by subscribing to God's will in every way. Hebrews 2:14-18 seems to pull together aspects of atonement and obedience (12-13).*

### 3. Creation and Humanity

**The New Creation** - Sin, guilt, or death will not prevail. God will create a new heaven and a new earth in which there will be no evil, suffering, and death. The first signs of this new creation are already present in those who accept God's forgiveness through Christ. In Christ all things are being reconciled and created anew.

*Commentary – We do not fully understand why, but it was necessary for God to do something of cosmic proportion to provide redemption for humanity. God sent His own Son to die on a cross so that we may, in the most profound sense of the word, be reconciled with Him, with ourselves, and with creation. The Bible states that the outworkings of this reconciliation are not exclusively reserved for some future time. Scriptures repeatedly state that the results of God's redemptive work are already visible and effectual in the present time (39).*

### 4. Sin and Evil

**Sin and Its Consequences** – Human sinfulness results in physical and spiritual death. Because all have sinned, all face eternal separation from God.

**Principalities and Powers** – Sin is a power that enslaves humanity.

### 5. Salvation

**God's Initiative** - We believe that God is at work to accomplish deliverance, healing, redemption, and restoration in a world dominated by sin. From the beginning, God's purpose has been to create for himself a people, to dwell among them and to bless them. Creation and all of humanity are without hope of salvation except through God's love and grace. God's love is fully demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**God's Plan** - Throughout history, God has acted mightily to deliver people from bondage and draw them into a covenant relationship. Through the prophets God prepared the way of salvation until finally God reconciled the world to himself by the atoning blood of Jesus. As people place their trust in Christ, they are saved by grace through faith, not of their own doing, but as a gift of God. God forgives them, delivers them from sin's bondage,

makes them new creatures in Christ, empowers them by the Holy Spirit and seals them for eternal life. When sin and death are finally abolished and the redeemed are gathered in the new heaven and the new earth, God will have completed the plan of salvation.

**Humanity's Response** - Though Jesus entered a world ruled by sin, he chose not to submit to its allure and broke its domination. Through his obedient life, his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection, Christ triumphed over Satan and the powers of sin and death, opening the way for all people to follow. Convicted by the Holy Spirit, people turn from sin, entrust their lives to God, confess Jesus Christ as Lord, and join the family of God. All who receive Christ are born again, have peace with God, and are called to love one another and live at peace with their neighbour. Those whom God is saving no longer live for themselves, for they have been set free from sin and called to newness of life.

**Commentary** – *God saves from physical threats, from disease and physical maladies, from spiritual dangers such as God's wrath, Satan, and demonic oppression. The most common New Testament use of salvation, though, has to do with sin; indeed, Jesus' name was given because he would "save his people from their sins." God's people are saved from the penalty, power, and practice of sin (56).*

*Christ is the true Savior sent from God, and salvation in the New Testament is described in terms of union with him...God's salvation is holistic, embracing all that God originally intended for the entire creation, including that which was subsequently lost or damaged. Salvation encompasses both material (caring for the sick, hungry, naked) and spiritual matters (56-57).*

*God's initiative in salvation is motivated by His unfathomable love. The term grace is used to describe the marvellous reality that God freely saves, through no work or merit of their own, those who will repent, which means a radical turning from sin and turning to God...Whether a person is gradually nurtured through the believing community or experiences a crisis conversion, genuine faith indispensably involves each of the following: embracing a set of basic beliefs, a commitment of trust in Christ and Christ's work, and actions which reflect such belief and commitment (57).*

*The Bible describes salvation in terms of past, present, and future. The past, objective dimension is presented with the imagery of redemption, justification, adoption, and reconciliation. These images are used of each believer's relationship with God, but they also (particularly adoption and reconciliation) reflect the corporate and communal implications of salvation for God's people...At a future time God will bring this age to a close and complete the defeat of Satan and death. God's complete salvation is therefore a future hope (58).*

**Pastoral Application** – *Atonement is a term which represents God's accomplishment of salvation through Christ. Christians through the centuries have embraced several models of the atonement. The legal substitution model, probably the most common view among Protestants, focuses on the death of Christ as a substitute for the punishment which all humanity deserved. It emphasizes the truth that we could not accomplish our own salvation.*

*The moral influence model describes the change which occurs in human attitudes toward God when they recognize in the death of Christ how much God loves them. God takes the initiative in Christ to show us this love which results in breaking the barrier of mistrust between God and humans.*

*The example model puts the focus on the life and teachings of Christ. While this model rightly emphasizes that Jesus teaches and exemplifies what we are called to do in order to please God, historically it has often been associated with a position that denies Christ's deity. In that sense it fails to appreciate the depth of human sinfulness and the necessity of relying on the Spirit for the life of faith.*

*Finally the dramatic or Christ-as-Victor model, historically the earliest, depicts a drama in which Jesus defeats Satan, setting human captives free. A variation of this emphasizes the role of human beings enlisted by Christ to be part to be part of the ongoing divine struggle with the evil powers that enslave people. God's people participate in this ongoing struggle and thus their lives are also subject to death which brings victory over the powers of evil.*

*The model of atonement one adopts tends to shape one's understanding of salvation and approach to Christian living. It is important to balance such models with the whole counsel of Scripture. For example, the substitutionary model offers little in connection with Christ's call to discipleship, perhaps even implying that it is optional. But Jesus tells us only those who obey his Father will enter the Kingdom. Although early Anabaptists employed forms of the substitutionary atonement model, they also used models*

*such as Christ-as-Victor. Whatever the model, they emphasized that Christ's life and teachings demonstrate how Christians must participate in God's grace (60-61).*

*The nature of salvation was one of the key issues leading to the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860. It was the concern of the Brethren that salvation be a meaningful choice that resulted in a life of discipleship (62).*

*Mennonite Brethren believe that there is sufficient biblical evidence to affirm the salvation of children who die before they are able to make a conscious choice for Christ. We believe that the atoning death of Jesus Christ is sufficient to provide for their salvation (65).*

## **17. Christianity and Other Faiths**

**Jesus Is the Only Way** - We believe that the saving grace of God in Jesus is the only means of reconciling humanity with God. Although salvation is available to all, only those who put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ have the assurance of eternal life.

The Bible teaches that those who reject the gospel are under divine judgment; the eternal destiny of those who have never heard the gospel is in God's hands. Our task is to proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation to all people in all cultures.

*Commentary* – *The Bible is clear that those who reject the gospel of Jesus are condemned by God. Condemnation by God is eternal separation from God and is a "second death" (190).*

*Pastoral Application* – *Strong motivation for mission is based on the deep conviction that the good news about Jesus is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes. Its foundation is the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe. It is a response of gratitude to God for saving us through the death of His Son, and a desire that the blessings we enjoy should reach people of other faiths as well (196).*

Our present Confession emerged as a result of a renewed call for confessional integrity initiated in 1987 when the General Conference Board of Faith and Life proposed revising several of the confessional articles in an attempt to develop greater consensus about the Confession of Faith.<sup>29</sup> They began with perhaps the most contentious issues, the articles on Peace and Nonresistance and the Lord's Supper. By 1990 the Board recognized that this initial revision should be an ongoing process.<sup>30</sup> In 1993 it became apparent that the entire confession needed to be rewritten, which would also entail the addition of several new articles to address pressing questions facing the church.<sup>31</sup> The complete revision was projected to take 10-12 years; however, in the face of growing questions about the continued existence of the General Conference, the Board of Faith and Life 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 suggest revisions to the Confession. Supplementing the Confession itself is a commentary discussing the biblical background to each article and a pastoral application reflecting on implementation in the life of the church.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See "Vision Statement for General Conference," *1987 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Abbotsford, August 7-11, 1987), 59-64.

<sup>30</sup> *1990 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Hillsboro, September 28-October 2, 1990), 12.

<sup>31</sup> *1993 Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Winnipeg, July 7-11, 1993), 14.

<sup>32</sup> See *Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2000).

Not surprisingly, we again encounter the atonement in the first article on God. God the Father adopts all who respond in faith to the gospel, forgiving their sin, and entering into a new covenant with them. In the narrative concerning God the Son, “Jesus took on human nature” with the purpose of redeeming “this fallen world.” Through his death and resurrection Christ “triumphed over sin” and was exalted as Lord of creation and the church. As the Saviour of the world he invites all to be reconciled to God, calling them to follow him in the way of the cross. 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. In the commentary explanation, two primary metaphors are highlighted to describe Jesus as Saviour: sacrificial atonement and liberation through his obedient fulfillment of the law of God. I’m left somewhat confused with this explanation, because these two metaphors don’t encapsulate the richness of the major New Testament atonement images. Neither do these metaphors adequately provide an explanation of what is meant by Christ triumphing over sin through his death and resurrection.

The third article on Creation and Humanity points out how Christ’s work of redemption has cosmic implications because by initiating 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 ourselves and with creation. The results of God’s redemption are not just for a future time, but are already visible in the present.

Article 4 on Sin and Evil has implications for the description of Salvation in the following article. Two observations are important to note. First, the consequences of sin are immense, resulting in both physical and spiritual death – defined as eternal separation from God. God will judge sin. The second is that sin is defined primarily as a power that enslaves humanity. Sin is not just what we do but what controls us as humans. We are unable to overcome its power on our 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.

Article 5 on Salvation 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 who have been promoting the bewildering idea that God hates sinners (Mark Driscoll). “God’s love is fully demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Here we also find 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. God saves his people from the penalty, power, and practice of sin. The commentary's language reflects affirmation for the penal theory of atonement without being explicit regarding how we are saved.

In the second section, 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."

In the final section of article 5, 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 we see a fuller explanation of the cryptic "triumphed over sin," we had discussed earlier. God's salvation involves freeing (synonymous with redeeming) people from sin in order to live in newness of life.

Various models of atonement used by the church through the centuries are briefly described in the pastoral application following the Salvation article. Four models are reviewed: the legal or penal substitution model, the moral influence model, the example model, and the Christ-as-Victor model. 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.

The pastoral application correctly observes that "the model of atonement one adopts tends to shape one's understanding of salvation and approach to Christian living." As has been clear throughout Mennonite Brethren history and also within our 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." 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.

This concern for balance is behind the caution expressed in the pastoral application regarding how the penal substitution model has sometimes been disconnected from the call to discipleship. We need to recognize that concerns about the discrepancy between what one believes and how one lives is at the very heart of Mennonite Brethren identity and was the impetus 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 faithful disciple of Jesus. The example of the early Anabaptist's use of a variety of models to describe their understanding of the atonement is highlighted in the pastoral application.

Finally, the article on 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." 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 confess that Jesus is the only way of salvation.

The commentary refers to four objective atonement images: redemption, justification, adoption, reconciliation. These atonement images are recognized as reflecting both individual and corporate implications of salvation. Five atonement images actually appear in the 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 regarding the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death as sacrifice as it was earlier. 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 power, particularly as found in Paul's letter to the Romans. As I already noted, the language of justification is absent from the Confession.

## **E. Concluding Challenges**

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on some of the challenges that emerge from my survey of the atonement in the Confession of Faith.

**First**, in my exploration of what our Confession says about the atonement I have been challenged at a personal level in my understanding of the atonement.

I have gained a deeper appreciation for our Confession's clear proclamation of Jesus as the only way of salvation. This conviction is unwavering and can be found articulated in numerous articles.

I applaud the recognition that the atonement is grounded in 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 New Testament atonement images within our confessions. This usage affirms the multifaceted view of the atonement that is expressed through the complementary images we find in Scripture.

I am encouraged by the introduction of reconciliation and triumphant victory, both strong biblical images, in the last two versions of the confession. The relational dynamics of the atonement and the recognition of the spiritual battle won at the cross are critical dimensions of the gospel for our time.

However, I've also been surprised with some of the things I have discovered in my study of our Confession. I have been troubled that our present Confession has dropped some of the atonement themes prominent in earlier confessions. I recognize that during the revision of the 1999 Confession, Mennonite Brethren were attempting to find "new language to better communicate what we believe to a changing world," preferring words that communicated directly to our context rather than "simply parroting scriptural phrases."<sup>33</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 Romans 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 our 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 we should work at expressing with greater clarity the substitutionary nature of Jesus' sacrifice on behalf of our sins.

Finally, 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.

**Second**, we together are left with the ongoing challenge of how we assess our Confession of Faith. We live in a world of increasing diversity as Mennonite Brethren. 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

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<sup>33</sup> Lynn Jost, "Reflections on Confession of Faith Revision," *Direction* 27, no.1 (1998): 60.

community.”<sup>34</sup> The Confession is not above critique, but it must be treated with respect since it represents the careful and prayerful reflection of our Mennonite Brethren churches across the U.S. and Canada.

The basis for our ongoing assessment, of course, is in light of the Word of God, our authoritative guide for faith and practice. Yet the difficulty we face is whether we are actually willing to engage in significant Bible study together in a way that would enable us to understand the whole counsel of Scripture. In our assessment of our Confession, our appeal must always go back to the Bible, “What does the Word say?”

But by asking this question we are also asking the Spirit to enlighten the eyes of our heart and to forge a unity amongst us based on our common confession. This process always takes both time and relationship. We must walk toward each other in our attempt to understand the Scriptures, no matter what issue we are facing. I am committed to walking together in love.

**Finally**, we recognize that the heart of the atonement is about 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). The Mennonite Brethren Confession is very clear about this. We proclaim the love of God revealed in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. We proclaim Jesus as the only way to God and this is good news for all people.

But we also now face the challenge of listening to our brothers and sisters from around the world as we reflect on our Confession of Faith. The 1999 Confession represents the convictions of U.S. and Canadian Mennonite Brethren, however, 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 we interpret God’s Word together, enriched by our various perspectives? We can no longer confess our faith in isolation from the larger international Mennonite Brethren community.

#### **ICOMB Confession of Faith (2004)**

God the Father sent the Son, Jesus Christ, to the world born of the virgin Mary. Jesus inaugurated the reign of God, proclaiming repentance from sin, announcing the release of the oppressed and good news to the poor, and calling disciples to follow his way as a new community. Jesus responded to the violent evil powers by taking the cross in order to die for the sins of the world and reconcile creation to God. Jesus gained victory over sin, death, and Satan as God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead and exalting him to God’s right hand where he intercedes for the saints and rules forever.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.