

Confession of Faith

Commentary and
Pastoral Application

Winnipeg, Manitoba



Hillsboro, Kansas

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Introduction

Review of the Revision Process

The 1999 revision of the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith is the product of a healthy and delightful process begun earlier in the decade. At the 1990 convention in Hillsboro, Kansas, the Board of Reference and Counsel (predecessor of the Board of Faith and Life [BFL]) led the conference by calling for confessional integrity. The revision of Article 15, Love and Nonresistance, was an attempt to state the traditional peace position in a positive, proactive way. At the 1993 convention in Winnipeg, Manitoba, BFL recommended a complete revision of the confession. Leaders envisioned a decade-long process, working at the various articles on a progressive basis. The convention also approved the writing of the following parallel versions of the confession: “sidewalk” version for brief introductory summary of MB beliefs; “digest” version to summarize each of the 18 articles; “commentary” to present the biblical background for the article; “pastoral application” to discuss implementation of the article in the life of the church; and “liturgical” version for use in worship. The revision process was accelerated by the decision to divest the General Conference of its ministries. After extensive processing of preliminary drafts of the confession, the 1999 Wichita convention overwhelmingly approved the new confession. The Sidewalk, Digest, and Liturgical Versions were also approved by the convention and BFL was authorized to complete the Commentary and Pastoral Application.

Presenting the Confession Materials

The documents which accompany the Confession of Faith are intended for use by leaders, members, and inquirers of the Mennonite Brethren Church. The confession itself is reprinted here and is also available as a separate booklet.

The Sidewalk Version has been prepared as a brief introductory of Mennonite Brethren beliefs and distinctives. It is appropriate for use in brochures introducing the church, as part of weekly worship materials, and for distribution to those in the introductory inquiry stage of church affiliation. We encourage congregations to use this resource rather than writing individual statements of belief.

The Digest Version presents all 18 articles of the confession in abbreviated form. It is recommended for institutional catalogs as well as a further instrument for introducing beliefs to inquirers.

The Liturgical Version uses Scripture and contemporary language to make the confession available to the congregation for worship. Each article is presented in the liturgical piece. The conference owes a debt of gratitude to Randy Klassen for his original work on this version. The Liturgical Version is available as a separate document in booklet form or as overhead transparencies.

The Commentary and the Pastoral Application are the work of many writers from Canada and the United States whose work has been edited by BFL. The process involved soliciting original drafts from contributors to the confession (for the commentary) and pastoral leaders (for the pastoral application). The reader will note that each article has a distinct voice and style. Because of the extensive editing process, no author's name appears with the article. BFL extends gratitude to the many conference leaders, pastors, and scholars who contributed to this effort. Special thanks is owed to Philip Wiebe who served as general editor, David Ewert and Randy Klassen for their extensive work, and to the members of the Confession Task Force (Gerry Ediger, Valerie Rempel, and John Warkentin).

We encourage readers to use the articles as reference works. When additional insight is needed in teaching the confession or when help is desired in dealing with pastoral concerns, these pieces may be of assistance. The compositions are the work of BFL but have not been formally approved by conference action. They are meant to serve as a guide for interpretation, an additional voice in interpreting Mennonite Brethren distinctives.

The use of the upper case "He" in references to God is meant to remind the reader that the use of the masculine pronoun is a convention of human language. God is neither male nor female. Humans, male and female, are created in the image of God. References to Jesus Christ will use lower case pronouns.

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God

We believe in the one, true, living God, Creator of heaven and earth. God is almighty in power, perfect in wisdom, righteous in judgment, overflowing in steadfast love. God is the Sovereign who rules over all things visible and invisible, the Shepherd who rescues the lost and helpless. God is a refuge and fortress for those in need. God is a consuming fire, perfect in holiness, yet slow to anger and abounding in tender mercy. God comforts like a loving mother, trains and disciplines like a caring father, and persists in covenant love like a faithful husband. We confess God as eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God the Father

God the Father is the source of all life. In Him we live and move and have our being. The Father seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth, and hears the prayers of all who call on Him. In the fullness of time, the Father sent the Son for the salvation of the world. 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 gives the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, to all His children. God's creative and redemptive love sustains this world until the end of the age.

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 Savior 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.

God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, the Counselor, is the creative power, presence and wisdom of God. The Spirit convicts people of sin, gives them new life, and guides them into all truth. By the Spirit believers are baptized into one body. The indwelling Spirit testifies that they are God's children, distributes gifts for ministry, empowers for witness, and produces the fruit of righteousness. As Comforter, the Holy Spirit helps God's children in their weakness, intercedes for them according to God's will and assures them of eternal life.

Gen. 1; Exod. 15:2-3; 34:6-7; Deut. 6:4-6; Ps. 8; 23; 139; Isa. 55:8-9; 66:12-13; Jer. 31:31-34; Hos. 11:1-4; Matt. 1:18-25; 5-7; 28:18-20; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 4:18-19; John 1:1-18; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-15; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4; Rom. 8:1-17; 1 Cor. 12:4-7, 13; 15:3-8; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:16-21; 13:14; Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 1:15-2:22; 3:14-21; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 6:15-16; 2 Tim. 2:11-13; Heb. 12:7-11; 1 Pet. 2:21-25; 1 John 2:2; Rev. 5:5-6, 9-10.

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God

COMMENTARY

The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith begins with a statement of our belief in God. The opening paragraphs use images—biblical metaphors, similes, and adjectives—to describe God. God is our powerful Sovereign and loving Protector, as these images suggest. The three captioned paragraphs follow New Testament Trinitarian forms. These paragraphs discuss the unique ministry of each person of the one being. While the Mennonite Brethren confession is orthodox, it strategically aims to use biblical and narrative language, rather than systematic or philosophical structures, to describe God.

One True, Living God

Christians confess that God is one being in three persons. The opening paragraphs begin with an emphasis on monotheism and conclude with the Christian confession of Trinitarianism, a concept found in the New Testament and defined by later church councils. The Trinitarian doctrine is the basis for an emphasis on the relational nature of God. God is relational. God is community. God is the community of Father, Son, and Spirit and enjoys fellowship.

Scripture tends to speak of God using images and metaphors rather than philosophical categories. The confession attempts to reflect this preference by avoiding terms such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence in favor of such phrases as “consuming fire” and “perfect in holiness.” Although parts of Scripture use doxological phrases to express awe at God’s person (especially the Psalms, parts of Isaiah and Ezekiel, and Revelation), one can also discover the person of God through the narrative of the salvation story with God as the leading character.

God the Creator

The Bible begins by confessing that God is Creator of heaven and earth. (See Article 3 for more on creation). Mennonite Brethren have not developed a dogmatic stance on the mechanics of God’s act of creation. With Scripture we confess that God created all things visible and invisible (Gen. 1:1; Col. 1:15-16). The Genesis text appears to be written from the standpoint of an ancient world view. The emphasis of the creation stories in Genesis 1-3 is that God is transcendent from

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the created order (Genesis 1 says God spoke the cosmos into existence) and yet relates immanently with creation, especially with humankind (Genesis 2-3 shows God walking in the garden with Adam and Eve).

The doctrine of God as Creator is fundamental for our understanding of God's role in time and space. As Creator, God is also Sovereign (Gen. 1:28-31). God rules over every principality and power and holds dominion over humans as well (Eph. 1:20-23). God also is the Gardener who preserves and cares for creation (Gen. 2; Col. 1:17). As Sovereign, God judges all affronts to His rule, especially acts of human rebellion (Gen. 3:11-19). As Redeemer, God persists in seeking to reconcile humans and creation to a restored relationship with Himself.

God of Human History

The story of God's reconciling activity begins with the stories of Genesis 1-11. When Eve and Adam eat of the forbidden fruit, God provides clothing and promise of the Seed (Gen. 3:15, 21). When Cain murders Abel, God provides a preserving mark (Gen. 4:15). When human wickedness caused God to be sorry for the creation of humankind (Gen. 6:5-7), Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD, was saved in the ark, and was offered a covenant relationship (Gen. 9:1-17). When society seeks a name for itself at the tower of Babel, God not only judges (Gen. 11:6-8) but chooses a family through whom to bless the world (Gen. 12:1-3).

God of Israel

The Old Testament salvation story is the narrative of the God who "persists in covenant love like a faithful husband." The ancestral narrative (Gen. 12-50) traces God's dealings with Abraham and Sarah and their offspring. Repeatedly, God preserves the promise despite human faithlessness and invites the ancestors to renewed covenant relationships.

The Exodus is the Old Testament salvation story *par excellence*. God hears the cry of the oppressed Israelites (Exod. 2:23-25), judges Egyptian injustice (Exod. 7-15), and fights as the divine Warrior to deliver Israel (Exod. 15:2-3). God's plan for Israel is summarized in God's speech to Moses in Exodus 6:6-8. God will deliver Israel, take them as His people, make Himself known to them, and give them abundance in the land. This fourfold design becomes the rubric for God's relationship with Israel in the Old Testament.

God of Covenant

God's relationship with Israel is commonly described as a cove-

nant. Scholars have demonstrated that the covenant form of Exodus 20-24 and the book of Deuteronomy parallel the structure of ancient treaties. Mutual loyalty essentially marks the covenant relationship. God, the stronger party, offers human partners, the weaker party, intimacy in relationship. The legal stipulations of the covenant are offered as the appropriate response to the prior salvation which God has worked. Three distinct covenants are formed in the Old Testament. First, God's covenant with all creation is offered after the flood (Gen. 9:1-17). Second, God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants moves from a simple promise with a patriarch of the family (Gen. 15, 17) to a formal document with the nation (Exod. 20-24, Deuteronomy). Third, God offers David a covenant promise of the kingdom (2 Sam. 7).

Later Jeremiah 31:31-34 promises a new covenant written on the heart.

God is Yahweh

The Old Testament uses many names and metaphors to refer to God. The most common name for God (and most frequently used word in the Bible) is the LORD (Exod. 3:11-15; 6:1-8). Traditionally pronounced Jehovah but better rendered Yahweh, the interpretation of the name is mysterious, perhaps alluding to the transcendence and elusiveness of God. God simply refuses to be restricted to any human agenda. The name may also allude to God's creativity, the one who causes to be, or to God's sufficiency, the one who will be "what I will be." Yahweh is above all Deliverer; that is, the mighty Warrior who rescues, the righteous Judge who offers justice, the powerful King who rules, and the loving Parent who comforts and disciplines.

Although some have found allusions to the Trinity in the Old Testament, it is best to avoid reading into the text a notion that would have been foreign to its human authors. In light of the New Testament we read of the Spirit's activity and recognize the person who was sent at Pentecost. Though the Messiah is predicted in the Old Testament, writers nowhere suggest that theophanies of Yahweh (e.g., Gen. 18:16-33) are appearances of Jesus.

Several confessional texts are particularly rich with expressions of the person of God. In Exodus 34:6-7 Yahweh pronounces the divine name and claims both steadfast love and visiting iniquity. In Deuteronomy 6:4-8 Israel's confession of faith (the *Shema*) confesses that Yahweh alone is our God, one God. In Isaiah we read that God is holy and glorious (6:3), tender and comforting (40:1-2), and the untiring Creator (40:30-31).

God is also revealed in the Law and the Wisdom literature. God's

holiness leads God's people to be holy (Lev. 19:1-3). God's wisdom has been active since creation (Prov. 8). We hold the blessings and curses of the deuteronomic law in tension with such books as Job and Ecclesiastes, which wrestle with the mystery of God's ways.

God the Father

Jesus calls God "*Abba*" (Mark 14:36), reflecting the Son's intimacy with the Father. God as Father is the source of all life. God the Father is Creator of all life, but especially of the family of the redeemed. The New Testament refers to God's work as adoption, accepting as daughters and sons those who respond to God's offer of family relationship.

The Father designed the redemptive plan and sent His beloved Son to reconcile the world to God. God also takes the initiative to nurture the family of faith. As a Father who loves the entire world, God hears and answers prayer (John 16:23-24, 26-28). God the Father is characterized by love and mercy (John 3:16). The emphasis on God as Father calls humans to respond confidently as children and to live in ways that reflect the family resemblance (1 John 3:1-2).

God the Son

The gospels tell the story of Jesus. The gospels are not straight biographies but are theologically motivated proclamations of God's communication through Jesus. Some scholars have recently become active in communicating at a popular level about their skepticism regarding the historicity of the gospels. As Mennonite Brethren we accept the historical reliability of the gospels. Jesus came proclaiming the "kingdom of God." Although the idea of the kingdom was common to first-century Judaism, Jesus' interpretation of the kingdom was so radical that it led to his execution. Jesus announced that God was intervening in the person of Jesus to confront the evil powers. Jesus acted to thwart Satan by rejecting the common messianic notions of economic success or elitism, nationalistic violence, and ethnic exclusivism. Jesus rejected the Jewish notions of the centrality of the Jerusalem temple in favor of a call for liberty for the poor, the blind, and the sinner.

As we read the epistles with the gospels, we discover that the mission of Jesus involves at least four emphases. First, God is revealed in the person of Christ; Jesus shows us what God is like through his life and ministry (John 1:1-18; 14:9-11). Christ's teaching tells us about God; his person shows God's character; his death reveals God's suffering; and his resurrection declares God's creative power.

Second, 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 (Rom. 3:21-26 and Heb. 9:15-28). 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 (Rom. 5:18-21 and Heb. 4:14-16). Hebrews 2:14-18 seems to pull together the aspects of atonement and obedience.

Third, Jesus is the model for faithful discipleship. When Jesus called the first disciples, he said, "Come, follow me" (Mark 1:16-20). Anabaptists have consistently interpreted this call as more than an invitation to first-century students of a rabbi. The call to follow Christ is the essence of Anabaptism. Following Christ means that Christians learn of Jesus, they take on Christ's character, and they assume Christ's counter-cultural stance—*vis-à-vis* the larger world. Christ's followers are people of the Way, people who take the cross in voluntary, serving, self-giving suffering (Mark 8:24-38). Among the acts and attitudes of disciples of Jesus are the following: disciples love indiscriminately, forgive, give themselves, serve, suffer, give their lives.

Fourth, Jesus is Lord of the church and the cosmos (Acts 2:32-36; Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:15-20). There is an eschatological dimension to the ministry of Jesus (Phil. 2:6-11). Jesus inaugurated a new age, the age of God's reign. We confess that the end of the age has begun with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We also recognize that we are in an interim period in which evil powers oppose Christ's lordship.

Three great implications of Christ's lordship occupy contemporary minds. First, Christ is Judge of creation (Matt. 25:31-46; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15). Second, Christ is Lord of the created order (Gen. 1:28; Rom. 8:18-25). Third, Jesus is Lord of all powers. As Christians, we are in a spiritual battle with the principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12). Demonic powers are at work in every culture. Sometimes they manifest themselves in corporate power structures, but they are also active in the everyday lives of people. It is clear that Christ the cosmic Lord is in fierce conflict against them.

God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit leads people to faith. The Bible speaks of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11). The Spirit is the seal, the firstfruits, the mark of conversion (Eph. 1:13-14). All believers have the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit also assures children of God of their new relationship (Rom. 8:15).

By the Spirit believers are baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit is the great unifier of the church (1 Cor. 12; John 17). The Spirit equips believers with gifts to build up the body and to minister

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in the world (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12, 14; Eph. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). It appears most likely that the gifts listed in the New Testament are not meant to be exhaustive. No single list contains all of the gifts mentioned.

Gender and God

Humans struggle to express in human language the inexpressible nature of God. The Hebrew language lacks a personal neuter pronoun to describe God and by convention refers to God as "He." Although male metaphors for God are predominant in the Bible, occasional metaphors depict God as a mother (Isa. 66:12-13), as one who gives birth (Deut. 32:18), and as a woman (Luke 15:8-10). Contemporary theologians have attempted to "re-image" God with feminine sexual metaphors. How should Mennonite Brethren understand this issue?

First, God is Spirit. God is neither male nor female. Although male pronouns are used for God in the Bible, this most likely reflects limits in language rather than the notion that God has gender. Familiar metaphors that refer to God as King or Father or Husband no more make God a male sexual being than references to feathers make God a bird (Ps. 91:4).

Second, ancient pagan religions routinely referred to the gods as sexual beings. In the Babylonian and Canaanite mythology contemporary with the Hebrew Bible, the sexuality of the gods was the basis for creation. Sexuality in these fertility religions was directly related to sexual eroticism in the cultic practices. Humans engaged in sexual intercourse with the deity by means of temple prostitutes. The Genesis creation account counters such hedonistic notions of the deity. God is neither male nor female but the image of God includes both male and female (Gen. 1:27). Insistence on the maleness of God threatens to return the worshiper to pagan notions.

Third, contemporary thinking warns us that hierarchical notions of gender impact human relationships. As sisters and brothers we want to speak charitably as we wrestle with these questions. God is sovereign; humans are not.

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God

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Mennonite Brethren believe that God is the source and goal of all things, the unifying center of our lives. All of our confession of faith, and indeed our whole journey of faith, consists of “applying” God’s claims to our lives. We find several specific items of pastoral application that arise from our understanding of God’s person and activity.

The Existence of God

Seekers coming to the church and believers within the church both ask at times, “Does God exist? How can I know God is real?” How one responds depends on the questioner. For some who are new to the idea of a personal Creator, pointing to the magnificent design of creation (the finely-tuned balance of physical matter, the complexity of life, the miracle of human birth and the human body) is a good place to start. Others need to be shown the historical reliability of the Bible. For these one could explain the wealth of biblical manuscripts, the care taken in copying these manuscripts, and the historical accuracy of what they record. (Books by Bruce and McDowell, listed in the bibliography, are helpful.)

For some seekers the presence of miracles could be an obstacle. A good starting point for conversation here is the resurrection of Jesus. If the plausibility and reality of the resurrection are accepted, the rest can fall into place (1 Cor. 15:17-20; Morrison’s *Who Moved the Stone?*). The problem of miracles, however, takes us to a larger issue, usually framed as “faith” versus “reason.” To address this issue, we’ll want to reflect on the importance of one’s world view. Our understanding is that “faith” is not opposed to “reason,” but is really one form of reason. It is reasoning based on the assumption that God exists (Heb. 11:6). Or, we might say that faith is “living in a way that would not make sense if God did not exist.” Faith in God is a reasonable world view, but with a different starting point than either rationalism (which shuts out the supernatural) or pantheism (which muddles the natural and supernatural). Faith in God is nurtured through the life of the church. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, learning from Scripture, and fellowship with other believers align us with God and reinforce a God-centered world view. (Books by C.S.

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Lewis, Zacharias, and Newbiggin could be helpful in answering questions of miracles, faith, and reason.)

In all these conversations we should remember that we are ultimately dealing not with issues of information, but issues of choice. We can't prove that God exists in order to force seekers to concede and convert. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can persuade. We can show that belief in God is reasonable. Above all, we must show that it is fruitful: faith in God results in changed lives. In the end it is God alone who draws individuals to faith in Him (John 6:44).

Responding to God

Once we understand that God exists and choose to view the world from this perspective, we realize that we have to respond to God. We respond to God through Jesus (John 14:6). Our response begins when we turn from our sin and self-centered lives to the free gift of eternal, Christ-centered life (see Article 5: Salvation); and it develops as we follow Jesus through life (see Article 10: Discipleship).

Responding to God involves worship. This is a key biblical term and a current issue in the life of the church. We are living in a time when many churches are experiencing a renewal in their corporate worship. God's blessing is present, and yet sometimes there is also confusion and division. As Mennonite Brethren we want to be clear about how we interpret and practice the Bible's teaching on worship.

We begin by considering three valid levels of meaning to the biblical concept of worship. First, it means the physical act of prostrating oneself or bowing down in front of someone (Gen. 24:26, Job 1:20, Phil. 2:10). This posture has symbolic value and leads to the second level of meaning, namely ritual worship, involving personal and corporate acts and rituals which bring us in touch with God. This is the common, popular understanding of worship. The third level of meaning is that of "ethical worship"; worship as a lifestyle of sacrificial service. The interplay between ritual and ethical worship is a critical pastoral issue for Mennonite Brethren churches today, and we'll come back to that concern.

We want to plan our worship services with care so that they reflect God's intention for the church. The earliest believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). We notice that the first three of these activities are basically "horizontal" (person-to-person), while the fourth is directed Godward. The Bible teaches that we gather to encourage and build up one another (Col. 3:16, Heb. 10:24-25). In other words, the New Testament emphasis for church gatherings is for people to connect with each other, to speak to one

another, and in this way encounter the God of salvation. The horizontal, person-to-person dimension should be evident in our gatherings to avoid an individualistic, disconnected, “Jesus and me” religion. We can enhance this by means of public sharing, by having times of “open worship” (song suggestions and prayers coming from the congregation, unplanned but prompted by the Spirit), by allowing for times of discussion and response after the sermon, or by concluding the service with opportunities for prayer or counseling in smaller groups. We yearn for the kind of positive impact that Paul held up: the seeker and unbeliever say, “God is really among you!” (1 Cor. 14:25).

We also spend time in prayer and song. We sing and pray not because God somehow needs to be told repeatedly how great He is (Jesus said the Father seeks worshipers more than worship—John 4:23), but because prayer and praise shape us as obedient children of God. We believe that worship services ought to be centered on the Word, that is, on Jesus Christ and the biblical story of salvation. Worship services ought to include the public reading (1 Tim. 4:13) and explanation (Neh. 8:8) of Scripture. But the proclamation of the Word isn’t limited to the sermon. It can include public prayers, songs, and testimonies. It’s helpful to think of the whole worship service, and not just the sermon, as “the message.”

Worship and Music

Congregational worship is almost unthinkable apart from music. Sadly, cultural and generational differences have resulted in some tensions in this area. We find at least three different groups in our churches: the “traditionalists,” the “reformers” (who want some continuity with the past), and the “revolutionaries” (who want to form their own tradition). In a uniform church, where one view predominates, there is little cause for tension. But in a church with more than one group represented (as the New Testament church exemplified with its broad cultural and generational mix), the tension can be severe. Leaders must take great care in how they lead the congregation in worship to ensure that the whole congregation, not just one part, is given a voice. The “blended worship” approach can be helpful for congregations dealing with this. In divisive situations it is imperative that worship leaders place the spiritual needs of the congregation above their own musical or devotional preferences. An effective leader will respect the various “dialects” spoken in the congregation, and will help the differing groups in the church to find their own voice before God.

Several specific issues have arisen out of the “worship renewal”

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movement in recent years. The first is that “worship” implies a certain style of music. We find no biblical basis for this. Paul encourages diversity in music (Eph. 5:19). Heaven will welcome a multitude of cultural expressions (Rev. 5:9). The healthy worshipping church will prepare for this in the present!

A second issue is the feeling of some that only songs addressing God as You/Thou (that is, second person) should be considered as worship. We want to encourage the desire for intimacy this approach brings. But we shouldn't try to be more biblical than the Bible. The Psalms move seamlessly back and forth between second and third person in their “God-talk” (Psalm 23, for example). We understand that talking to God and talking about God are equally valid and necessary for corporate worship. The one is prayer, the other is testimony. If we view believers as the Temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16), then our conversations with each other are also communication with God.

In the planning of worship services, whether traditional or contemporary, a useful tool is the Christian calendar. Worship leaders ought to be familiar with the seasons of the Christian year (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and so on). How the themes are used depends on the creative preferences of the congregation. The Christian calendar helps the church to walk the journey of Jesus each year. A further aid, used by some churches, is the Common Lectionary, a cycle of weekly Scripture readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, and Epistles that ensures that the church hears from the whole Bible every three years.

In the New Testament sense the worship service is not an end in itself. It exists for the purpose of enhancing lifestyle worship. We gather in order to be strengthened for ministry. Our day-by-day worship of God is shown in a life of sacrificial service (Rom. 12:1-2), in which we endeavor “to look after widows and orphans” (James 1:27) and “to do good and to share with others” (Heb. 13:16). The worship that God invites and enjoys is a lifestyle of placing other's needs before our own, living generously with what God has entrusted us, and reflecting the life of Jesus in all our relationships and commitments.

Prayer and “God-talk”

The biblical teaching on the Trinity has its most immediate application in the life of prayer. The act of prayer places us within the heart of the mystery of the Trinity. We pray to God the Father (Matt. 6:9). We pray in the name (that is, with the authority) of Jesus the Son (John 14:13-14). And we are empowered by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:15, 26). We don't think that it is wrong to offer prayers addressed

to Jesus or the Holy Spirit, of course, since it is the One God to whom we pray. But New Testament prayers are consistently directed to the Father. The practice of saying “in Jesus’ name, Amen” to conclude our prayers is likewise not wrong, even though it does not necessarily reflect Jesus’ intent. Rather than reciting a set formula, Jesus wants us to remember and act on the authority he has given through the Spirit every time we pray.

Many models for prayer have been developed over the years. Some follow the ACTS model, which encourages well-rounded prayers of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (requests). We suggest that to be biblically-shaped people, the Psalms should be an important guide. Privately and publicly, the Psalms work wonderfully to guide our prayers and give expression to our deepest needs and highest praises. Jesus also left us with a model prayer, which we know as The Lord’s Prayer. This is a unifying prayer, used by countless past and present believers, which still works well in personal and corporate prayer. Along with reciting the words of The Lord’s Prayer, we can use its outline to shape our prayer life according to the Master’s plan (see bibliography for Dodd’s great guide for this). Jesus teaches us to begin by focusing on God’s holiness, God’s authority, God’s purposefulness. After we place ourselves humbly before our Father in heaven, we then confidently bring to Him our present needs: physical (daily bread), social (restored relationships), and spiritual (safety from temptation and the evil one). We conclude by turning our gaze from our present needs, to once again face God’s awesome glory and power.

A final issue of “God-talk” has to do with gender and God. We realize that this is a potentially explosive and political issue. As Mennonite Brethren, we acknowledge that God is revealed in the Bible through predominantly (though not exclusively) masculine language. We use masculine pronouns regularly to refer to God. But, being fallen people, we often forget that the masculinity of language is only grammar, a habit of limited human speech. We confuse masculinity (having to do with grammar and words) with maleness (having to do with sexuality and identity). We affirm that God is not male, but includes and transcends both male and female. We do not want to burden our God-talk with the power imbalance that afflicted male-female relationships after the fall (Gen. 3:16). This imbalance has been healed through Jesus (Gal. 3:28). Thus we should take care to avoid giving the impression that God speaks only through male voices. We can do much to enrich our congregations by encouraging women to express their voices in public readings, prayers, preaching, worship leading, and so on. It is men and women together who

reflect the image of God.

Idolatry

The Lord forbids all idolatry, as expressed from the First Commandment (Exod. 20:3) to the closing line of one of the last letters of the New Testament (1 John 5:21). Idolatry in the form of offering worship to an image or statue is not a huge threat for most North Americans, though we realize it can be an issue in other cultural contexts and in popular New Age practices. But in a larger sense idolatry is a grave temptation for us. We always live with the temptation to make anything but God a priority in our lives. Our jobs, our recreation, our wealth, our desire for material things, our families, our political party, our nation—all these and more can become rival gods. Whatever competes with God for our allegiance and trust is as much a rival god for us as Baal was for the Hebrews in the Old Testament. The church's ongoing task is to call believers away from idolatry of every kind, and into the freedom of serving God alone.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit brings unity to the Christian church (1 Cor. 12:13). Unfortunately, the work of the Spirit has sometimes become the subject of division and distrust. The New Testament records several occasions in which the Spirit performed a mighty work, but afterward the devil moved in quickly to tempt, deceive, and try to destroy the work of God (Matt. 3:13—4:11; Acts 2, 5:1-11, 8:14-24).

The Bible tells us to earnestly desire the spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14:1), but only as they are used for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7) and tested by wise discernment (1 Thess. 5:19-21). Current questions about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, being filled with the Spirit, and the function of charismatic gifts have created confusion for some believers. Following is a brief overview of Mennonite Brethren interpretation in these matters.

The language of the New Testament in regard to the Spirit involves both “baptism” and “filling.” Baptism by the Spirit is the experience of every believer at conversion and is symbolized by water baptism. It is a one-time experience. Romans 8:9-11 teaches that if one does not have the Spirit of Christ one does not belong to Christ. According to Mennonite Brethren interpretation, the Scriptures do not instruct that a dramatic, emotional, post-conversion experience is needed to live a full Christian life. In Acts 2 Peter declares conversion, water baptism, and Spirit baptism as concurring events (v. 38). Scripture does teach, however, that Christians need to grow in surrender to the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26). We are commanded to be

continuously filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). It is not a one-time event, but an ongoing surrender to the will of the Lord. Filling is obedience to the Spirit of God. Filling produces the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

Spiritual gifts are listed in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4. None of the lists is complete and it appears that the New Testament is not exhaustive in listing the gifts. The gifts themselves include gifts that involve human talents that can be developed through study and practice, and supernatural phenomena often called sign gifts that defy categorization and explanation. The teaching makes clear that differences in giftedness should never become a source of division or result in feelings of superiority or inferiority.

Many believers have discovered great freedom in the sign gifts. Paul in Corinthians, for instance, commends speaking in tongues, both as a private prayer language and as an element in worship when accompanied by interpretations. Healing is encouraged via prayer by the elders (James 5:14-15) but also may be experienced as a special gift. Other phenomena such as spiritual laughter and being slain in the Spirit do not have scriptural basis or authority.

Paul encourages believers to grow in the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1-5). Although prophecy may have an element of prediction, predictive prophecy should be carefully tested. False prophets are detected not only by predicting things that do not come to pass but also by failure to submit to the body and by making contradictory statements. Prophecy may address concerns of the church, but differs from teaching in that it tends to be a special word for a congregation or individual for a strategic moment. The congregation should test all prophecies. Prophets should submit to the congregational leadership (1 John 4:1-6; 1 Cor. 12:29-32).

Gifts are given by the Spirit to the body and for the body. Individualistic use of the gifts is not in keeping with the Spirit's intent. Gifts are given to equip and build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:7-16).

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ARTICLE 2

Revelation of God

God's Self-Revelation

We believe that God has made Himself known to all people. God's power and nature have always been evident in creation. The Old Testament reveals God as the one who established a covenant relationship with Israel to make known to all people the eternal plan of salvation. God revealed Himself supremely in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit continues to make God known to individuals and the church; this revelation is always consistent with the Scriptures.

The Written Word of God

We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture. The person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament bears witness to Christ, and Christ is the One whom the New Testament proclaims. We accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice.

Gen. 9:1-17; 12:1-3; Exod. 6:2-8; Ps. 19:1-11; 119; Matt. 5:17-18; Luke 24:27, 44-47; John 1:16-18; 16:13; Acts 8:34-35; Rom. 1:18-21; Heb. 1:1-2; Col. 1:15-23; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Pet. 1:16-21.

Revelation of God

COMMENTARY

Revelation is the act or process by which God makes Himself known to human beings. Since all people are made in the image of God, they have the potential for receiving light from above and for responding to divine revelation.

God's Self-Revelation

Because of our fallenness and spiritual blindness, we are all in desperate need of divine help if we are to come to a saving knowledge of God. Such a knowledge of God and His salvation plans for the human race cannot be attained by diligent research or by religious strivings. It must come to us from outside of ourselves and is beyond our own ability to discover (Job 11:7).

That God was willing to make Himself known to a sinful and lost human race is a sign of His marvelous and infinite grace. Left to ourselves we could not truly know what God is like, nor discover His purposes for humanity.

Although we are deeply grateful that God chose to make Himself known, our knowledge of God and His ways is limited (Job 26:14). It is the hope of Christian believers that they will know God more fully in the coming heavenly kingdom (1 Cor. 13:12).

God reveals Himself to human beings in a variety of ways. God's self-disclosure is often divided into two categories: "general" and "special" revelation. General revelation implies that God has not left Himself without a witness to humanity in general. God reveals Himself in nature (Ps. 19:1-4; Acts 14:17; Rom 1:20). God also makes Himself known in His judgments (Rom. 1:18) as well as in His gracious acts in human history. Our consciences also bear witness to a general revelation.

However, it is only by God's "special" revelation that humans can come to know His saving plans. This revelation too was given in a great variety of ways—in dreams and visions, by angelic visits and divine theophanies, by the voice of God and by the interpretation of His mighty acts in the history of His people Israel. Always God acts with sovereign freedom; God speaks when and as He chooses.

Recipients of Divine Revelation

From the beginning of human history God in His sovereign grace chose the recipients of His self disclosure. These human agents who responded in faith and obedience to God's revelation in turn became messengers who shared with others the insights into God's will which they had received.

Although God had made Himself known even in pre-Patriarchal times (Gen. 3:13; 9:1-17), it was with the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) that God began the process of revealing Himself in a special way to the people of Israel. By restricting His self-revelation primarily to one particular people, God was not indifferent to non-Israelite people. Rather, God chose Israel to receive the light of salvation and to become a channel of blessing to all the peoples of the world.

Beginning with Moses, whom God chose to be the deliverer of Israel and the mediator of the covenant which God established with this redeemed people, God continued to make His purposes known progressively through the messages which He gave to Israel's prophets. And in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4) God made Himself known supremely in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1,2), in whom the prophetic promises of salvation were fulfilled. Jesus is called the "Word" of God (John 1:1,14).

Revelation in Christ

By his incarnation, his life among the people, his marvelous teachings, and above all by his death, resurrection, and glorious exaltation, Jesus revealed God the Father, who so loved this world of humanity that He sent His only Son to deliver it from eternal death (John 3:16; 14:8-11). No one has ever seen God, but God's Son, who is close to the Father's heart, has made God known (John 1:18; Matt. 11:27).

Christ stands at the very center of the Christian faith; in him God brought His many acts of self-disclosure in human history to a climax (Eph. 1:9,10). But the process of revelation continued for some time even after Christ had completed his work on earth, had returned to glory, and poured out his Spirit. It went on in the life of the early church, as written in the New Testament where the events of the life of Christ were recorded and interpreted.

The witnesses to this final revelation in Christ were the apostles, whom Jesus had chosen to be the depositories of his words and works. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). The apostles who were witnesses of the Christ-event were not replaced when they passed off the scene. Their writings are the foundation documents of the new people of God, the church, and they remain authoritative for Christian believers for all time. With the writing of the apostolic books the biblical canon came

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to a close.

The Record of Revelation

Moses and the prophets have left us a record of the revelation given to them in the pages of what Christians call the Old Testament. Although the books of the Old Testament are not God's final word to humanity (Eph. 3:5), they were inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20,21). Jesus and the apostles viewed the Old Testament Scriptures as the word of God without any reservation (Matt. 5:18). Not only did they constantly quote the Old Testament, but found people and events in these Jewish Scriptures which foreshadowed the coming of Christ and his saving work.

Since the people of Israel spoke Hebrew in the days of the prophetic writers, God's revelation came to Israel in that language (with a few portions in Aramaic). In the providence of God an alphabet was available by which God's messages could be put into writing, as were the necessary writing materials. The writers who put God's revelation into this very human form availed themselves of a variety of literary genres—narrative, poetry, wisdom sayings, and a unique type of literature called prophecy.

Although Jesus and his contemporaries spoke Aramaic, the witness of the apostles to the words and deeds of the Messiah were recorded in Hellenistic Greek, the language spoken in all the Mediterranean lands. Since Christ established a new covenant, the collection of apostolic books is called the New Testament.

From the early centuries of the Christian era up to the present, the Bible has been translated into many languages, and so today God continues to reveal Himself through the message of the Scriptures. When people embrace God's self-revelation in this written Word of God they become members of the new people of God, the church. The church stands in continuity with the genuine Israel of the Old Testament and its members are therefore called children of Abraham (Gal. 3:29).

Understanding Revelation

For Christian believers, the Bible, in which prophets and apostles have left us the records of God's self-disclosure, remains normative in matters of doctrine and ethics. It is therefore of great consequence that Bible readers interpret God's Word carefully. Although the people of God may never fully agree in their understanding of the details of the books of the Bible, it is of utmost importance that they agree on the fundamental message of the Scriptures.

The Bible is the story of how God in His grace carried out His plan

of redemption for a lost human race. The Scriptures, however, should not be read simply as a history book. One can find valuable information on many areas of human knowledge in the Bible, but God's revelation, as recorded in the books of the Bible, focuses primarily on the salvation of humankind by a holy and gracious God.

Since most Christians read the Bible in a translation, it is important that they recognize that all translations are attempts to render the original texts in the current languages of the peoples of this world, and are to some degree already interpretations of the biblical texts. We should therefore be grateful that God has given the church biblical scholars who are conversant with the original languages in which the books were written.

The writers of the Scriptures were divinely inspired and so the Bible reader needs the help of the Holy Spirit to comprehend the basic message of God's Word (John. 16:8-11; 1 Cor. 2:4). Satan has so blinded the minds of unbelievers that they cannot grasp the saving message of the Scriptures until God by His Spirit opens the eyes of their hearts (1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 4:18).

Believers too need the help of the Spirit of God to understand what God has revealed in His Word (Eph. 1:18; 1 Cor. 2:10-16). Jesus promised his followers the help of the Spirit in their effort to understand the teachings and works of Jesus (John 14:26; 16:13). This should not, however, be understood to mean that the Spirit will explain the textual and literary intricacies of the biblical books. Although prayer and godliness are prerequisites for obedient listening to God's word in the Bible, they do not by themselves guarantee a correct interpretation of the biblical text. It is therefore of importance that we test our understanding of biblical teachings in the fellowship of believers and in the light of the long history of the Christian church.

In our efforts to understand God's messages in the Scriptures, we must make sure that we understand the meaning of the words of the biblical writers and the context in which they are found. We also must pay attention to the grammatical structures of sentences and paragraphs. Moreover, we must take into account the many literary genres of both the Old and the New Testament books. The New Testament, for example, makes use of a new type of literature called "Gospels." There is also a great amount of epistolary literature, not to mention narrative and even apocalyptic literature.

The biblical writers used many figures of speech to express themselves and often there are no exact equivalents in modern languages. To interpret the Bible literally would then mean that we seek to understand the imagery of the Bible and discern what message the

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inspired writer wanted to convey to readers. The writers had specific meanings in mind when they recorded the messages conveyed to them by God, and it is our duty to discover these meanings and then to apply them to new situations that arise in the life of the individual believer and the church. Establishing the original meaning of a text is our first task; the second is to ask ourselves what this text might mean for us today.

All literature reflects the culture of its day, and that holds for the biblical books as well. God's revelation has come to us in the dress of ancient cultures, Semitic and Greco-Roman. We should then be careful not to carry the cultural practices of an ancient world over into our contemporary life. Our task is to discover the permanent and universally applicable teachings of the Bible and to apply these to our life in today's world.

Old and New Testaments

The relationship of the Old Testament to the New is one of the more difficult questions believers face in the interpretation of the Bible. Since the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we can assume the fundamental unity of the message of the Bible. In fact, individual passages should always be understood in the light of the wholeness of the Scriptures.

However, Jesus and his apostles clearly indicate that the books of the Old Testament belong to the period of preparation. The New Testament books, by contrast, come from the time of fulfillment. It follows, then, that the Old Testament should be seen in the light of God's final revelation in Jesus Christ. One can see this clearly from the recorded sermons in the book of Acts, which begin with a review of salvation history and conclude with God's final revelation in Christ. Although the Old Testament like the New was inspired by God, it was God's preliminary word. This approach to the Bible was underscored particularly by our Anabaptist forebears at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century.

The ongoing self-disclosure of God in human history, leading to the climax of divine revelation in Christ, can be called "progressive" revelation. Progressive revelation means, among other things, that God in His grace spoke to men and women in past ages in ways they could understand. From time to time God made His saving purposes for humanity known more plainly to the recipients of this revelation. Finally, God made Himself known through His own Son, Jesus Christ, in whom the hopes and promises of the Old Testament were fulfilled.

From the high point of God's final revelation in Christ, the church now looks forward to the end of the present age when Christ will

come again. His glorious appearance at the end of human history is also called a revelation (1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Thess. 1:7).

A question that arises from time to time in the life of the church is whether God continues to reveal Himself directly to His children. The word “revelation” is used occasionally for insights which God gives to individual believers. Theologians prefer to describe such insights as “illumination.” Paul prays that the Ephesians might receive a “Spirit of wisdom and revelation” (1:17). He speaks of the things “God has revealed to us” (1 Cor. 2:10). Moreover, He assumes that a word of revelation may be spoken when believers gather for worship (1 Cor. 14:6,26,30). Such insights into God’s ways, however, must always be in harmony with the revelation of God in the Scriptures. For the Christian church the written and inspired Word of God remains the authoritative guide for faith and practice.

Revelation of God

PASTORAL APPLICATION

We confess that God has revealed the truth about Himself to all people. God began by revealing Himself through creation. Just as we learn about an artist from her work, we learn about God through creation. If creation was all we had, we would not know about God's mighty acts of salvation: the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, Pentecost, the *Parousia* (Christ's second coming). If creation is a good but incomplete picture, the Scriptures guide us to a more complete knowledge of God and open to us a relationship with Jesus as the fullness of God's revelation.

Mennonite Brethren have long been known as people of the book. As a church our focus has not been on creedal statements but on the study of Scripture. We try to be people of the Word because we believe that in the Scriptures God has revealed His heart to us. The oft-repeated phrase, "What does the Bible say?" is understood to be the dynamic equivalent of the question, "What is God telling us about how to live?" Historically Mennonite Brethren at their best have lived with the passion of the early Anabaptist reformers, the passion that right understanding must be followed by obedience. Although Mennonite Brethren have not been unaware of more personal, subjective communication from God, these insights of illumination are characteristically checked with Scripture and with the community of believers. The written Word of God is accepted as inspired and as the authoritative guide for faith and practice.

Public Scripture Reading

Getting to know God's heart through Scripture will help us become grounded in God and in faith. At the heart of God's revelation is an invitation to a special relationship with God. The Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to build us up in faith and to expose things in our lives that need change.

The Lord Jesus made the reading and interpretation of Scripture the starting point of his ministry. As a boy in the temple, Jesus was disputing with the teachers of the law about its interpretation (Luke 2:46-49). As he opened his public ministry in the synagogue, Jesus interpreted his mission by reading Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18-19). On that occasion Jesus was concerned not only with the reading of the text

but with its dynamic fulfillment in his ministry. In his disputes with the Pharisees and priests, Jesus showed great facility with the Hebrew Scriptures. His ministry was capped by a day-long walk with two disciples in which Jesus used Moses and the prophets to interpret his life. Jesus modeled the centrality of Scripture in community life and worship.

The New Testament church made the reading and interpretation of Scripture a central component of its worship gathering. In the book of Acts the sermons of Peter, Stephen, and Paul are marked by Scriptural citations and interpretation. The believers at Berea received special commendation for their eager examination of the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 17:11). In Romans 10:17 Paul reminds us that faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. The emphasis is placed on hearing the message, a good reminder of the significance of audible expression. In 1 Corinthians 14:26 Paul instructed the Corinthians to be orderly in their worship, using among other liturgical elements “a word of instruction.” Based on what we know from contemporary Jewish worship, it seems most likely that the early church depended on individuals to use Scripture readings in their informal liturgy. To the Ephesians Paul wrote that they should sing psalms (Eph 5:19), another creative use of the Bible in worship.

Traditionally Mennonite Brethren have used the liturgical element of Scripture reading to encourage the broad use of gifts by church members. Often church leaders whose capacity for proclamation is limited have been asked to read the Scriptures and pray. Young persons with potential in biblical proclamation have been invited to make brief comments about the passage they are about to read. With proper instruction Scripture readers can develop gifts in proclaiming the gospel.

Worship planners are encouraged to make Scripture reading a key part of worship gatherings. Lectionary readings are one method being used to introduce the voice of God into congregational worship. The common lectionary, available in the *Book of Common Worship*, offers a planned three-year reading schedule. Each week readings from the Old Testament, the psalms, the epistles, and the gospels are suggested. Worship leaders may wish to develop their own systematic plan for reading the Scriptures in public worship. Public reading of the Bible is not to be neglected.

Personal Scripture Reading

Personal Bible reading and study are also modeled by biblical figures. Philip the evangelist encountered the Ethiopian court official

reading Isaiah and interpreted the text for him (Acts 8:26-40). Paul continued to be a student of the Scriptures, asking from prison for scrolls and parchments (2 Tim. 4:13). Scripture study, meditation, and memory characterized early believers.

Churches should foster the disciplines of Bible reading, study, and memorization. Club programs and Sunday school activities help motivate Bible study. Life-changing Scripture study involves prayerful preparation, careful observation, thoughtful meditation, personal application, and faithful obedience (Rumford 227-232). Daily reading in various parts of the canon, including the gospels, the epistles, the psalms, and so on, should characterize Christians.

Translations and Versions

A proliferation of biblical translations and versions has come to characterize the North American Christian milieu. Confusing arguments about the superiority and “unique authority” of various versions can befuddle many Bible readers. Pastors and congregations help bring unity to their community by choosing to follow a single or primary version for public worship. Students of the Scriptures broaden their understanding by using a variety of versions.

How should one reply to those who insist that the King James Version has greater merit than others? Experience shows that logical argumentation alone may not be enough to counter the strong attachment some have to the King James. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the newer translations benefit from superior textual witness, more contemporary language, and greater accessibility for those who are new to Bible study.

The New International Version maintains great popularity among Mennonite Brethren because of its readability. Those who prefer to use inclusive language to refer to humans favor the New Revised Standard Version. The New American Standard Version gives the closest word-for-word translation from the original languages.

Words of Knowledge and Prophecy

Dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment perspective seems to have rekindled interest in the paraphenomenal dimension. People want to know God’s will. They want to be able to anticipate the future. Uncertainty about personal life becomes increasingly unacceptable when science claims to control the public domain, and yet huge paradigm shifts destabilize society. Reliance on supernatural or magical insight increasingly tempts Christians as well.

Several words of caution are in order. First, all claims of prophetic illumination must be consistent with the biblical revelation. No pro-

phetic word can be granted greater authority than the Bible itself (Deut. 13; 18:9-22). Second, the Old Testament prophets in their struggle with false prophets warned against accepting oracles of salvation when God had announced judgment. Similarly, words that promise prosperity and health should be tested with special scrutiny. Third, every word that claims special insight must be tested within the community, especially by local church leaders. Fourth, be aware of the increasing penchant for the magical. Exercise caution in following those who promise insights that avoid community discernment in struggling to know God's direction.

Community Hermeneutics

The commentary on this article of faith outlines the need for hermeneutical sophistication in understanding the various genres of biblical literature. One will pursue the study of poetry with different exegetical tools than are used with historical literature, for example.

The commentary also insists that interpretation of Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit within the community of believers. God promises that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. God's followers, guided by the Holy Spirit, enter into active dialogue with others in the Christian community and discover that God reveals the truth, giving people confidence to live in challenging, changing times.

There are several practical implications of this truth. First, teachers who have learned both to discern the will of God and to use exegetical tools that include facility with the original languages are to give leadership in biblical interpretation. Although they have no greater authority because of their academic preparation, the church does well to show them respect as they proclaim the Word of God. Second, when issues become too complex or divisive for a single congregation, we do well to consult with other congregations in our conference. The Acts 15 model is appropriate for us today. Third, mutual discernment may test our unity. In an increasingly diverse world, consensus will not always come quickly. Mutual trust will need to be nurtured especially in times of dissension. Fourth, discussion should be characterized by charity. Fifth, healthy conflict can actually build church health (1 Cor. 11:19).

Knowing God

The Creator invites the created into relationship. As we meet God in the Scriptures we find ourselves—like the women and men whose stories are captured in the Scriptures—invited into an intimate relationship with God. As we get to know the heart of God through Scripture and as we serve God's purposes, we grow in a dynamic

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relationship with God. Getting to know God changes us. As we get to know God as revealed in the Bible, we develop convictions about the kind of people we ought to be. As we come to understand the Scriptures, we come to care deeply about a daily, moment-by-moment obedience to God. We learn to know God as revealed in creation, the Scriptures, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Christian community.

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ARTICLE 3

Creation and Humanity

Creation

We believe that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and they were very good. All of creation expresses God's sovereign will and design, but remains distinct from the Creator. The universe belongs to God, who takes care and delight in sustaining it. Creation declares God's wisdom and power, calling all to worship Him.

Humanity

Humans, the crowning act of creation, were designed to live in fellowship with God and in mutually helpful relationships with each other. God created them male and female in the image of God. The Creator gave them the mandate to rule and care for creation as a sacred trust, and the freedom to obey or disobey Him. Through the willful disobedience of Adam and Eve, sin entered the world. As a result, human nature is distorted and people are alienated from God and creation. Creation is under the bondage of decay. Humans and all creation long to be set free.

The New Creation

Sin, guilt, and 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.

Gen. 1-3; Ps. 8:6; 19:1-6; 24:1-2; 89:11; 95:5; 104; Prov. 8:22-31; Isa. 40:12-31; 44:24; John 1:1-4, 10; 17:5; Rom. 1:19-20; 5:17, 21; 6:4; 8:18-25; 1 Cor. 8:6; 15:20-27; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6; 5:16-19; Gal. 3:28; 6:15; Eph. 1:4, 9-10; 2:11-22; 4:24; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 11:3; Rev. 4:8-11; 21:1-5; 22:13.

Creation and Humanity

COMMENTARY

The purpose of this article of faith is twofold. First, it is designed to affirm what the Scriptures teach about the relationship between God and the created universe. Second, it is intended to make a statement about humanity in regards to its origins, its role in creation, its present condition, and its ultimate destiny.

Creation

The purpose of the first paragraph is to respond to some widely-held beliefs in our society about the relationship between God and the universe. On one hand, the notion that the universe is the result of chance and that life on earth is the outcome of blind fate is generally accepted as true. The existence of the universe is no longer consciously associated with the intentional and benevolent action of a personal, loving, all-powerful Being. Darwinism, usually called the theory of evolution, has throughout the 20th century been the most powerful cause behind this development. In its most popular formulation, the theory teaches that the existence of the universe and the presence of humanity on the earth are the result of a powerful process which was set into motion by chance. According to Darwinian theory, randomness is the basic principle behind the formation of the universe rather than the intention of a personal and loving God.

On the other hand, it has become fashionable, particularly under the influence of the New Age movement, to believe that there is some universal force in which all living things participate. According to this world view, human life has no special value and human individuality has no other destiny and purpose than to be dissolved in this impersonal life force. This concept, popularized by the New Age movement and by such movies as *Star Wars*, is known as pantheism.

Because we live in a society in which there is increasing confusion about God and nature, it becomes correspondingly vital for the Church to proclaim that there is a fundamental difference between Christianity and pantheism. Pantheism teaches that God is the sum total of the vital forces which animate the universe. The implication is that if the physical universe were to cease to exist, God, or whatever is understood as the primal force in the universe, would cease to exist as well. The Christian faith teaches that the universe is temporal

and contingent. In other words, the universe has a temporal beginning and an end, and it depends on a historical intervention of God and His continual sustenance for its existence.

Pantheism and evolutionism not only affect how we view the universe and God, they also profoundly influence the way we perceive human beings and define what it means to be human. If the universe is indeed the result of an accident, and humankind the end-product of a blind evolutionary process, then human life has no ultimate meaning and significance. The purpose of each person's life can then be focused on the need to transmit one's genes and to contribute to the evolution of the human race. Once this purpose has been fulfilled, there is then no need for the person's continued existence and no further purpose beyond that person's contribution to the genetic survival of the race.

The end-result of such evolutionism, as well as of New Age ideology, is virtual elimination of the notion of a personal, moral, benevolent God. At this point it is important to realize the grave implications of such a choice. We cannot pretend to eliminate the notion of a personal God, as portrayed in Scripture, without also eliminating a certain understanding of what it means to be human. It is ultimately impossible to understand the fundamental character of human nature and existence without an absolute point of reference. In the absence of such a context, subjectivity becomes the only operative principle in defining the relationship between humankind and the world. Humanity then becomes its own point of reference; it literally becomes the center of the universe. Such a philosophical stance has formidable implications for the whole spectrum of ethics and human endeavors. The way we view human life and how we deal with ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, palliative care, law enforcement, the nature of the state, and so on, depend entirely on our frame of reference. Without God, we are condemned to forgetting what truly defines human nature and thus the rationale for compassion.

The Scriptures teach that the universe is not the result of some random, anonymous, or blind primal force. According to the creation account found in Genesis, the universe was created by a personal, moral, and compassionate being who wishes to be in a loving and reciprocal relationship with humanity (Gen. 1:1-2:1; Ps. 8:3-8; 24:1-2; 89:11; 95:5; 104:1-35; Prov. 8:22-31; Isa. 40:12-31; John 1:1-4, 10; 17:5; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 11:3; Rev. 4:8-11).

Humanity

The biblical record emphasizes the uniqueness and the sacredness

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of human life. According to the Scriptures, human life has special value and dignity because men and women are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 9:6). This most basic trait indicates that human beings are called to represent God in creation. In biblical times, the ideal king or his representative was characterized by a profound love for his subjects and by an overriding concern for the welfare of his entire kingdom. The ideal king did not abuse his power by exploiting and impoverishing his subjects; he was to give his total attention to promoting peace, prosperity, and justice in his realm (Ps. 72). As representatives of God, human beings are responsible to care for God's creation and to manage it for the benefit of all its present and future inhabitants. The mandate to rule the earth in no way legitimizes the selfish and shortsighted exploitation made possible in recent history by technology. On the contrary, as God's representatives humans are accountable to God for wise use of the earth's resources.

This special relationship between God and humanity that declares humankind as created in the image of God, however, does not tell the whole story. It is universally recognized that there is something wrong in human nature. While human beings are capable of noble accomplishments, human history and our own self-awareness force us to recognize that there is something warped in the deepest recesses of the human heart (Rom. 3:9,23; 5:12; 7:7-25; Eph. 2:1-3). According to the biblical record, the genesis of this deep distortion of human nature can be found in humanity's ability to exercise free will (Gen. 3:1-24; 4:1-13).

At this point it is important to note that as tragic as the story of the fall might seem, it is also a powerful affirmation of the value God attributes to human free will. Genesis 3 reminds us that human beings have the capability to make significant choices, and that these choices shape their future. This flies squarely in the face of all the reductionist and deterministic philosophical systems which have shaped human history over the centuries. The stars do not predetermine the character and destiny of human beings, as the ancient Mesopotamians believed and as many of our contemporaries accept. Men and women are not solely the result of genetic, family, sociological, or psychological factors. Even demons cannot exert absolute control over the human spirit (Mark 5:1-20). The story of the fall forcefully affirms that human beings have the capability to exercise their free will in respect to good and evil, and can thus influence or even radically change their destiny (Gen. 2:16-17; Josh. 22:5; 24:14-15; Prov. 2:1-5; Rom. 12:1-2). But as the biblical text records, human beings decided to disobey God, resulting in alienation from God, from themselves, and from nature. The consequences of this disobe-

dience have been catastrophic for the human race. Death and suffering in all of its manifestations have resulted directly from this unwillingness to trust God (Rom. 5:12).

The New Creation

In spite of the precarious character of humanity's condition, the biblical record forcefully asserts that disobedience and its devastating effects on humanity and creation are not final. God loves humanity and is unconditionally committed to bringing about His original project to create a people composed of men and women who will freely love and serve Him for all eternity. God has provided a way to recreate what was destroyed through human disobedience. 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. The first signs of this new creation are visible in those who accept God's invitation to be reconciled to Himself through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17, 21; 6:4; 8:18-25; 1 Cor. 15:20-27; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6; 5:16-19; Gal. 3:28; 6:15; Eph. 1:4, 9-10; 2:11-22; 4:24; Col. 1:15-17; Rev. 21:1-5).

Creation and Humanity

PASTORAL APPLICATION

A basic need in life is to know where we are from, why we are here, and where we are going. These essential issues are addressed in Article 3 of the confession. Questions regarding the origin of life, our relationship to the environment, and God's unfolding plan for His creation are all part of this discussion. Article 3 gives us a biblical framework for understanding our part in the universe.

Scripture and Science

To state that God is the Creator of the universe tells us where we come from. While many study the planets, stars, and furthest reaches of space to try to discover the origins of the physical universe and life, Scripture tells us, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Our universe did not evolve by chance. We are not part of a random and chaotic accident. Rather, we are part of God's design. God is the one to whom we owe our existence.

Robert Jastrow, an internationally known astronomer and authority on life in the cosmos, makes the following comment:

It is not a matter of another year, another decade of work, another measurement, or another theory; at this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For scientists who have lived by their faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. They have scaled the mountains of ignorance; they are about to conquer the highest peak; as they pull themselves over the final rock, they are greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries (115-116).

This raises the question of how theology relates to science. The church has been wrestling with this issue since the time of Galileo. Today we are aware of the debate between creation and evolution. One view, known as "biblical creationism," seeks to counter scientific theories of evolution. It mines the Genesis account for scientific data more than recognizing its theological intent. Scripture does teach that God created the heavens and the earth and that human beings are unique among God's creation. Exactly how God accomplished this is not altogether clear. Some in our churches understand Scripture to teach that God created the universe in six 24-hour days no more than 10,000 years ago. Others leave room for God to have used

longer periods of time, including an evolving process of creation that incorporates some of the findings of modern science. We should allow for differences in our views of creation and exercise mutual respect for one another. To pit an interpretation of Genesis against the findings of science or to label people as either biblical creationists or evolutionary atheists does not serve us well.

A more helpful approach is to allow biblical teaching and scientific inquiry to inform each other. John C. Polkinghorne is a Cambridge physicist who is both a renowned scientist and an Anglican clergyman. In his book *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, Polkinghorne articulates a faith which is strengthened rather than threatened by scientific inquiry. He is able to affirm God as Creator and embrace a scientific view of the universe which is fluid, flexible, and open to divine providence. Polkinghorne leaves the process God used in creating the universe open to scientific investigation. In his mind creation remains a mystery worth exploring. We must be careful in our preaching and teaching about creation to affirm only what the Bible says. Scripture and science need not be antagonistic.

God and Creation

The trend in our postmodern culture is to move from a mechanistic to a more “spiritual” view of the universe. Movies such as *Star Wars* and *The Lion King* obscure the distinction between God and nature. God is reduced to an “impersonal life force” or nature is deified as a “circle of life.” This relates to the issue of worship. God is replaced by nature as the ultimate reality. The result is that creation is worshipped instead of the Creator—an act Paul attributes to human disobedience (Rom. 1:25).

Excessive concern for the environment can also lead to nature worship. In addressing past neglect of the environment, the temptation in our culture is to “spiritualize” nature, granting it divine status. Such feelings can take on an aura of worship. Divine reality is said to be found in nature itself. Any distinction between God and creation is lost.

Such a position is problematic for at least two reasons. First, its attempt to rescue nature without reference to God rings hollow. No one cares more for creation than God its Creator. Any concern for the environment must remain grounded in God’s love and care for His universe. To worship creation at the expense of the Creator undermines the very foundation of environmental concern. Second, creation itself recognizes its dependent relationship to God and gives Him glory as Creator and Sustainer of the universe (Ps. 19:1-6; 24:1-2; 104). As God’s creatures, we are to follow creation’s lead in worshipping God instead of nature.

There are also implications for congregational worship. We should encourage outdoor worship settings in God's creation. Church camps, summer worship services in the park, and outdoor baptisms can all enhance our praise to God. However, when some propose that experiencing God in the beauty of nature is an acceptable alternative to gathering regularly with God's people for worship, we should raise the question of where our worship is focused. While we appreciate God's creation and marvel at God's handiwork, our worship is to be directed not to creation but to God the Creator.

Humanity and Creation

How do we as human beings relate to creation? There are two extremes to avoid. One is to consider human beings as merely one life form among others with no more significance than the grass, the trees, or the animals. Compare, for instance, the degree of public interest in saving threatened animal species to the plight of starving children. There is a bumper sticker that says, "Save a whale; Harpoon a human." For many, animal rights have become more important than human rights.

Scripture teaches that human beings are unique among God's creation. Only people are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27). This sets us apart from all of creation. Psalm 8 speaks about our significance in relation to the vast expanse of the universe and the animals, birds, and fish which inhabit our planet. We are made just a little less than God (Ps. 8:5). God has crowned us with glory and honor beyond that of other life. Although all life is valued, no life is more valuable than human life. People who are more committed to the health of their pets than the well-being of their fellow human beings distort the value of human life. What we believe about human life has implications for ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and genetic research. (See article 14, "Sanctity of Life")

There is a second extreme to avoid. It advocates that our superior position over the rest of creation gives us the right to use or abuse it at will. Exercising dominion over the earth becomes a license to dominate, deface, and destroy. A commercial for an oil company stated, "Nature is tough, but we are tougher." This attitude treats the earth as a commodity which can be bought and sold, exploited and abused, consumed and discarded.

Concern for the environment in recent decades has corrected much of this attitude, but many churches tend to lag behind in this area. A survey taken to determine attitudes toward the animal world, for instance, revealed that the more frequently a person attended religious services, the greater the person's tendency was to hold

domineering or oppressive attitudes toward nature (Granberg-Michaelson, 2-3). What could account for this?

One reason may be a reluctance to be identified with extreme environmentalist agendas. Another reason may be an inadequate view of the future. If God is going to create a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:11-13; Rev. 21:1-5), why preserve the present environment? A gospel song puts it this way, “This world is not my home, I’m just a passin’ through.”

Such a cavalier attitude toward creation fails to recognize two things. One is God’s ultimate intention in reconciling all things in Christ, which includes God’s creation and God’s creatures (Eph. 1:9-10; Col. 1:19-20). A second is God’s continual mandate to care for His creation in light of His restorative goal for the universe (Gen. 1:28; 2:15; Ps. 8:6).

Scripture teaches that environmental responsibility is a Christian mandate. Of all people, Christians should be the most responsible when it comes to the environment. Why? Partly because of our call to care for others by addressing, for example, the threat of pollution, the need for sustainable development, the concern for global survival, and so on. But the ultimate reason for environmental responsibility is that Christians understand what it means to have a personal relationship with the Creator—the one who made us, who made the world, and who cares for all His creatures and His creation. If we love and respect our Creator, we will care for His creation. This includes a conscious effort to reduce consumption, respect natural resources, and recycle materials in our homes, workplaces, and churches.

Humanity and Creativity

God created us in His image. He placed within us a desire to build, to plant, to imagine, and to create. Our expressions of morality, sexuality, and creativity all reflect God’s image. Although marred by the fall, human life is still full of God-given possibility and potential.

The church has an opportunity and an obligation to encourage a full expression of God’s creative gifts among its people. Our congregations are noted for excellent preachers, teachers, and musicians. What about artists, poets, carpenters, and chefs? There are many more creative gifts we can celebrate in the church. Arts and craft festivals, drama and dance presentations, fashion shows, food fairs, and flower displays are all ways to reflect God’s creativity.

God also created us as male and female to display His likeness. This includes the active participation of both men’s and women’s gifts in various areas of service. God grants gifts irrespective of gender. God’s image is distorted when men and women are discouraged

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from developing and using their creative gifts.

God has given us the freedom to express our human creativity in ways which bring Him glory. We reflect God's image when we work together in creative harmony as responsible creatures in God's world.

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ARTICLE 4

Sin and Evil

Sin and Its Consequences

We believe that the first humans yielded to the tempter and fell into sin. Since then, all people disobey God and choose to sin, falling short of the glory of God. As a result, sin and evil have gained a hold in the world, disrupting God's purposes for the created order and alienating humans from God and thus from creation, each other and themselves. 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. Satan, the adversary, seeks to rule creation and uses sin to corrupt human nature with pride and selfishness. In sin people turn from God, exchanging the truth about God for a lie, worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. Sin opens individuals and groups to the bondage of demonic principalities and powers. These powers also work through political, economic, social and even religious systems to turn people away from holiness, justice and righteousness. Whether in word, deed, thought or attitude, all humans are under the domination of sin and, on their own, are unable to overcome its power.

Gen. 3; 6:11-12; Ps. 14:1-3; 36:1-4; 52:1-7; 58:1-5; 82; Isa. 53:6; Ezek. 16:49-50; Amos 2:4-8; Mark 7:20-23; John 8:34, 44; Rom. 1:21-32; 3:9-18, 23; 5:12-14, 18-19; 6:23; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 2:1-3; 6:12; 1 Pet. 5:8-9; 1 John 1:8-10; Rev. 12:9.

Sin and Evil

COMMENTARY

The reality of sin and evil can be traced throughout the biblical story and is clearly seen in our own experience. Our understanding of sin and evil grows out of both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Sin and its Consequences (Old Testament)

The Genesis account of creation and the fall lays the foundation for the biblical view of sin and evil (Gen. 1-3). God created the world and pronounced it good. Sin and evil subsequently intruded on and corrupted this good creation when Adam and Eve yielded to the Tempter and chose to disobey God's command. From the beginning of the Bible, therefore, sin and evil are problems that require a solution. This contrasts with other views of evil, such as the perspective portrayed in the Babylonian creation myth which reflects the prevailing world view during the time of Genesis. In that explanation, where the world was created from the murdered body of a god, evil was understood to be intrinsic in the fabric of creation. Evil and sin were considered facts of life to be endured, not problems to be solved.

The account of the fall also illustrates that sin violates God's purposes for human relationships. Not only does sin result in alienation between God and people, it also produces alienation between individuals, between the genders, and between people and creation. The ultimate consequence of sin is death (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). Sin's consequence of alienation requires a solution of reconciliation (Gen. 3).

Furthermore, the account of the fall illustrates that it is the nature of sin to disguise itself as desirable (Gen. 3:6; 2 Cor. 11:13-15). The result, however, is that sin mars the image of God within humans. Every aspect of human nature is affected by sin. No single aspect—such as reason, sexuality, or the physical body—should be identified as the primary carrier of sinfulness (Gen. 3:14-19; Rom. 1:21-32). Since every aspect is affected, no human faculty—such as reason or conscience—provides an undistorted point of contact with God. Sin's consequence of depravity requires a solution in which God takes the initiative.

The stories of the people of Israel wandering through the wilder-

ness describe the many times they were guilty of rebellion against God; they were called a rebellious and stiff-necked people. The issue was one of denying authority to Yahweh. Either they chose to oppose God's authority directly by disobedience, or they chose to undermine God's authority indirectly by grumbling and complaining (Deut. 1:26-27; Ps. 78: 8, 17-20, 40-42, 56-57). This rebellion provoked the Lord to anger and resulted in condemnation and punishment of individuals and of the people as a whole. The problem of rebellion was addressed by Moses' repeated intercession to God for gracious forgiveness and by the people's renewed commitment to submit to the authority of Yahweh (Deut. 9:6-10:13).

Humanity continues to face the temptation to rebel against God by denying God's ultimate authority. The so-called modern world view, for example, is apt to place the authority of autonomous human reason above the authority of God. The postmodern world view tends to undermine any form of ultimate authority, including the authority of God to rule our lives. Under the guise of liberation from all submission, the postmodern view tempts people to the sin of rebellion against God.

In the Old Testament God initiated a covenant with the people of Israel to establish a relationship with them. This covenant outlined a vision of justice and righteousness for the coming kingdom of God. Allegiance to God meant following the law which included religious, social, and moral prescriptions. At one level sin or transgression meant missing the mark or failing to live up to the objective standard of the law. Both deliberate rebellion and accidental transgression of the law resulted in condemnation from God. Sin's consequence of condemnation required a solution of forgiveness that God provided in the Old Testament through the sacrificial system.

Sin, however, was not confined to individual disobedience to Yahweh or to a particular law. Throughout the historical books and the prophets we see that Israel's sin as an established nation consisted chiefly of idolatry. Idolatry meant that Israel broke the covenant relationship with Yahweh by turning away from God and by adopting the gods of other nations as well as the religious, social, and moral patterns they represented. Sin therefore involved collective rejection of Yahweh's covenant, which led to participation in systems of injustice. In response to their corporate choice, Yahweh handed Israel over to the power of these nations, who conquered and abused them.

Sin's consequence of enslavement requires a solution of liberation. In the Old Testament God saved the people from the powers that enslaved them by raising up judges or saviors to liberate the people and by offering them a renewed relationship with God (Judges 2:11-

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19; Dan. 9).

The Old Testament covenant theology taught that God would deal with evil within history. In other words, God would resolve the problem of evil by raising up a righteous nation and a righteous king. By the time of the New Testament, some within Israel considered this present world to be so corrupted by Satan, death, and the forces of evil that only the direct, radical intervention of God from outside history would be able to deal adequately with sin and evil.

Powers and Principalities (New Testament)

Sin is a power. Paul differentiates between sins and sin. He depicts sin as ruling over this present age, enslaving all creation and all people except Jesus and putting them under the power of death (Rom. 3:9-12; 6:6, 12-23; Eph. 2:1-3; 6:11-12). Sin is like a magnetic field that pulls all creation into its force and no human attempt, not even following the gift of God's revealed law, can break that force and free those within its grasp (Rom. 3:20; 7:5-25; Gal. 2:16).

Adam's sinful action allowed the power of sin to gain entrance into the world and consequently to pull all people except Jesus into its rule (Rom. 5:12-21). This understanding of original sin must be balanced by an emphasis on human responsibility. All people except Jesus choose to submit to the power of sin by behaving sinfully; all have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Often it is through the human pursuit of prestige, power, and security that people choose to turn away from God and allow the power of sin to gain a hold in their lives.

The synoptic gospels depict the power of evil as embodied in unclean spirits which exert great physical and moral influence over people. The chief of these demons is called Satan, the devil, or Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24-29). In the wilderness Jesus resisted Satan by challenging him with the truth of Scripture. In his ministry Jesus confronted and cast out unclean spirits and gave his disciples power to do likewise.

Paul uses the language of powers and principalities. Though not all necessarily evil, powers and principalities can be enemies of God and thus they can corrupt and enslave humanity (1 Cor. 15:24-25; Eph. 6:12). Groups, nations, and structures are susceptible to demonic forces. Structures such as governments, military forces, economic systems, educational or religious institutions, family systems, and structures determined by class, race, gender, or nationality can incite people to do evil they would not have chosen on their own. Such systems exercise a collective, enduring power far more destructive than the sum of the individuals who support or comply with them.

Sin and its consequences are described and developed from the

beginning of the Scripture to the end. Sin is an enormous problem that produces results of alienation, depravity, condemnation, and enslavement.

Although God provided ways of dealing with sin throughout the Old Testament, God's final solution to the problem of sin was to send Christ into human history. In his obedient life, death, and resurrection Jesus broke the power of sin and death. In Christ God raised up a Savior with power that is stronger than sin and who can liberate God's people from submission to the lordship of sin. God took the initiative and provided forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration through Christ.

Even though the power of sin is broken, humanity continues to experience the effects of sin and evil. We look to God's radical intervention in this world through Christ's final triumph to bring the problem of sin to its absolute solution.

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Sin and Evil

PASTORAL APPLICATION

In the church we believe that sin is a concept that must be understood with reference to God and God's plan for creation. It is not simply a moral term to describe what a society considers to be wrong. For example, when a shopkeeper defrauds a customer this is not merely breaking the law but also an instance of faithlessness to the customer and to God. Sin is any act, thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed, or the absence of these, that displeases God.

Sin and its Consequences

God is not arbitrarily offended. God has initiated a covenant with humanity, an agreement which establishes a relationship between God and people. Living rightly within this covenant relationship leads to *shalom*, a concept from the Old Testament prophets webbing together God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and peace. Throughout the Scriptures God outlines the expectations of the covenant relationship which promote His plan of *shalom* for creation.

In the church we regularly remind ourselves of who God is through our worship. Spiritual leaders must also take seriously the task of teaching and reminding the church of what pleases and displeases God. North American society is moving away from concrete definitions of right and wrong and toward a definition of morality in terms of relativism and tolerance. For many in society moral tolerance is now the only good, and moral intolerance the only evil. In this context it is increasingly important for the church to be intentional about teaching the biblical view of sin.

Sometimes pastors are hesitant to provide clear teaching about sin because of abuses of this teaching in the past. In the history of the Mennonite Brethren, some churches have defined sins with a list that goes beyond the Scriptural definition, banning activities such as dancing, playing cards, buying insurance, or choosing a spouse from another denomination. Jesus cautions about legalistic definitions of sin by pointing out that it is not outward activity that defiles a person but what comes from the heart. Keeping this advice in mind, the church must still provide concrete teaching about what constitutes sin.

Throughout the history of God's people the defining of sin has played an important role in forming the character of the followers of God. In the Old Testament the list of Ten Commandments plays a central role by describing in condensed form the conduct that accompanies a covenant relationship with God. In the New Testament the church (Acts 15:28-29) and Paul (Eph. 4:25-5:20; 1 Thess. 4:3-6) instruct new Christians coming from a pagan background with other lists of sins. Around the 13th century the church taught that seven deadly sins were fatal to spiritual progress: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

Personal Dimension of Sin

While being firm in teaching about sin, pastors also need to pay careful attention in their counseling to discerning the situations of individuals. For many spiritual leaders and others in power, for example, pride is a common and dangerous manifestation of sin. Liberation theologians remind us, however, that pride is often a sin of oppressor groups. These oppressor groups can assume that pride is a root cause of sin for everyone, and often warn the oppressed against the pitfalls of pride as well. In reality the opposite may be true. The root cause of sin for many oppressed people may not be pride but attitudes of passivity and self-depreciation. To overcome sin, the oppressed need to develop a healthy sense of pride, not be taught to confess it as sin.

While some come to the church with a shallow view of sin, others come carrying burdens of guilt. Any church with a high view of discipleship and ethics will have among its members those who are burdened by feelings of guilt that they do not measure up to the standards. In dealing pastorally with these individuals it is important to realize that not all guilt is bad. Guilt may be a means of grace, the work of the Holy Spirit convicting an individual of sin and leading to genuine repentance.

False guilt comes when a person has truly repented but has not been able to accept forgiveness or to forgive themselves. The injury of wounded psyches and broken relationships is often very deep, with lifelong effects. The journey toward forgiveness is neither automatic nor immediate. The church must walk patiently beside those struggling to forgive and to be forgiven, challenging them with the hope that complete forgiveness is God's way and a true possibility. Increasingly pastors are referring individuals seeking God's forgiveness and freedom to Christian counselors, who can provide more in-depth, long-term support.

The church should model and encourage the discipline of daily

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personal repentance and acceptance of forgiveness. In the worship service many congregations incorporate into the pastoral prayer a time for silent, personal confession followed by thanksgiving and acceptance of forgiveness from God.

Social Dimension of Sin

In the church we believe that one member's sin affects the spiritual health of the entire congregation. To be part of the body of Christ means we run counter to the individuality of our culture and take responsibility to lovingly bring to one another's attention the sins we discern. Pastoral counseling, Bible studies, and care groups can provide ongoing support for persons struggling to live a life of Christian freedom.

Because sin is a breach of a covenant relationship, the consequences of sin spread beyond the individual who is committing the sin. When a relationship has been violated, personal repentance is not always sufficient to restore the relationship. Churches also need to facilitate reconciliation between people.

The practice of the Lord's Supper emphasizes the need for forgiveness to be a regular part of all Christian relationships. The invitation to Communion emphasizes that participation is for people who are in right relationship with God and with each other. It is the responsibility of the church to teach that if church members have sinned against another and have not asked for forgiveness and reconciliation, they should abstain from Communion until they have confessed their sins to individuals wronged and have asked for forgiveness.

Jesus' teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18 places the responsibility for making relationships right not only on the offender, but also on the one who is hurt. The gospel instructs us to show love to all involved. We show love to the victim by actively supporting the one who may feel powerless to confront an offender who will not listen. We show love to the offender by limiting knowledge of the offense to persons or groups involved with helping bring about true repentance. It is in keeping with these principles of forgiveness that churches often call in trained Christian mediators to help resolve complex conflicts.

In the case where the believer has openly done something wrong, the New Testament illustrates that a public confrontation is in order. In Galatians 2 Paul admonishes Peter publicly because he sinned publicly. When a person refuses to repent of a sin after being openly challenged by the entire congregation, that person is to be put out of the church in order to encourage the person to rethink his or her position. Churches need to take this discernment very seriously.

God gives the covenant community of the church a large role to play in the actualization of forgiveness. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18). When the church gathers in the power of the Holy Spirit to discern the forgiveness of sins, God is there among them and will bring to pass what they discern together.

Life in the World

In the world where people do not live by the covenant relationship that God has established, Christians are frequently confronted by people who sin. Many of the psalms are cries to God by people who feel that they have been grievously wronged. The Scriptures counsel God’s people to trust God to protect them and not to take revenge themselves.

In response to sin in the world, the church also proclaims the message of liberation from the enslaving powers of sin. In a society which understands genetic disposition, addiction, victimization, and multinational corporate structures as powers which are greater than individual human will, the good news of the gospel comes in the form of liberation. Christians have the responsibility to take liberation from sin beyond the walls of the church. For example, some congregations have made public demonstrations in response to war; others attempt to shape political bills to promote justice; still others do long-term one-on-one work with people who need help overcoming addictions. By the work of Christ through the church God addresses situations of hopelessness and despair.

The message of Jesus’ liberation of people from the power of sin goes hand in hand with the message of Jesus’ liberation of people from the power of evil spirits that controlled them. Jesus cast demons out of people and gave his disciples the power to do the same. When the demons did not listen to Jesus’ disciples, he instructed them to pray and fast. There is still a place in the church for casting demons out of people—however, much care must be taken.

Today it is easy to take one of two extreme positions on the subject of demons. The first is a complete denial of the existence of personal forces of evil. The danger of this position is that

if we regard evil as impersonal, we may underestimate the depth of that dominion which behavior patterns, ideologies, and institutions exert over lives. People may regard these forces merely as a pressure which may be resisted or rejected. They may discover too late that they are borne along by an intentionality which they are powerless to break (Finger, vol. 2, 163).

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The second extreme is a view that demons are everywhere or that all problems are caused by these personal forces of evil, and that exorcism in the name of Christ is the only solution for these sins. The problem with this position is that it can cause much damage when put into practice. Many of our sins are caused when a God-given characteristic becomes unbalanced. For example, a healthy view of oneself made in the image of God can become pride; a healthy appreciation for God's gift of sex can become lust. Attempts to identify and exorcise demons without true spiritual discernment can damage the healthy, God-given characteristics of one's personality. Often, rather than the instant solution suggested by exorcism, God's way of liberation comes through accepting forgiveness and following biblical guidelines for long-term discipleship, thus allowing the Holy Spirit to shape our lives to God's glory.

In response to the reality of sin, the good news is that Jesus offers hope through forgiveness and liberation. The challenge for the church is to continually accept and actualize this forgiveness and liberation in ways that represent God's kingdom here on earth.

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Salvation

God's Initiative

We believe that God is at work to accomplish deliverance and 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, and have peace with God, and are called to love one another and live at peace with their neighbor. Those whom God is saving no longer live for themselves for they have been set free from sin and called to newness of life.

Exod. 6:1-8; 15:2; 20:2; Ps. 68:19-20; Isa. 43:1; Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 10:45; John 1:12; 3:1-21; 13:34-35; 16:8-11; Rom. 3:24-26; 5:8, 12-21; 8:18-25; 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 5:14-21; Eph. 1:5-10, 13-14; 2:8-9; Col. 1:13-14; 2:15; Heb. 2:14-18; 4:12; 5:7-9; 9:15-28; 11:6; 1 John 4:7-11; Rev. 5:9-10; 21:1-4.

Salvation

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Salvation is the most inclusive term used to describe God's program and action in response to the desperate needs of humankind and all the rest of the creation. Scripture accounts for and illustrates these problems beginning with the sinful actions of our first human parents. In our world we continue to see that humans are alienated from God, one another, their fellow creatures, the rest of creation, and even themselves. Just as sin is individual, corporate, and cosmic, so God's salvation addresses each area of God's purpose which has subsequently been damaged.

Salvation *From* and Salvation *To*

God saves from physical threats (Deut. 26:5-9; Matt. 8:25), from disease and physical maladies (Exod. 15:26; Ps. 103:3; Mark 5:28, 34; James 5:15), and from spiritual dangers such as God's wrath (Rom. 5:9-10), Satan (Acts 26:18; Eph. 6:11), and demonic oppression (Luke 8:36). 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" (Matt. 1:21). God's people are saved from the penalty (Luke 7:48-50), power (Rom. 6:12-14), and practice of sin (1 John 3:9-10). It is instructive to recognize that the New Testament writers frequently employ the same terms for salvation from matters such as illness and demon possession as they do from sin (e.g. Luke 7:50; 8:48).

The goal toward which salvation works is described in Scripture by three major images. First, there is *liberation* or *liberty*. Freedom for the formerly oppressed enables them to fulfill the law by loving and serving (Gal. 5:1, 13-14). Second, an important part of God's liberty involves *health* and *wholeness* as evidenced by Jesus' ministry in these areas (Mark 2:17). Third, the term *shalom*, found especially in the prophetic writings, is used in descriptions of a peaceful and just society where people live together harmoniously and where "nation will not take up sword against nation" (Isa. 2:2-4, see also 9:6-7; 32:15-18; Mic. 4:1-4; Zech. 2:6-12).

Salvation in Christ

Christ is the true Savior sent from God (Acts 13:23), and salvation

in the New Testament is described in terms of union with him. The believer is “in Christ” and thus a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17). Christ is portrayed as the vine, with believers being the branches (John 15:1-10). Christ is described as the cornerstone of a building (Eph. 2:21-22), and as head of the body (Eph. 5:23). Furthermore, “Christ in you” is the hope of glory (Col. 1:27), and Paul can say that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20 NRSV).

It is evident from all the above that 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 (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus’ earthly ministry demonstrates this breadth (Luke 4:18-21; Matt. 11:4-6), and he calls his followers likewise to embody it (Matt. 10:5-8; Luke 14:2-14).

Receiving Salvation by Grace through Faith

God’s initiative in salvation is motivated by His unfathomable love (1 John 4:7-11). The term *grace* is used to describe the marvelous 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 (Acts 2:38; Eph. 2:8-9). Repentance involves a new attitude toward one’s past life and actions, a rejection of trust in anything or anyone but Christ as Savior and Lord, and a commitment to behavior that reflects obedience to Christ.

Acceptance of God’s gift of salvation, described as a “new birth” (John 3:1-21; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23), occurs as individuals voluntarily receive it by faith. 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 (John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:14-15), a commitment of trust in Christ and Christ’s work (Rom. 4:18-25; Gal. 5:2-11), and actions which reflect such belief and commitment (James 2:14-26). Christ has instructed that those who become disciples should be baptized (Matt. 28:18-20). Mennonite Brethren understand this to be a public statement of identification with Christ and his body, and a symbolic act of receiving God’s cleansing from sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We do not baptize infants because they are not able to make an informed choice for Christ and against the world and Satan.

God’s grace not only accepts but also equips (Phil. 2:13) and transforms (2 Cor. 3:18) the believer and believing communities, who are then enabled to accept and serve others as God did them. The life of discipleship is not merely a response to God’s salvation, but constitutes a “working out” of that salvation (Phil. 2:12). Scripture also

exhorts that salvation must not be “neglected” (Heb. 2:3) but rather must be “held firmly” (1 Cor. 15:2). Believers have died with Christ in baptism so that as Christ was raised they “too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4 NRSV).

Salvation Involves Past, Present, and Future

The Bible describes salvation in terms of past, present, and future. The past, objective dimension is presented with the imagery of redemption (Deut. 13:5; Mark 10:45), justification (Isa. 43:25; Rom. 8:1), adoption (Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1; Gal. 4:5-7), and reconciliation (Col. 1:21; 2 Cor. 5:19). These images are used of each believer’s relationship to God, but they also (particularly adoption and reconciliation) reflect the corporate and communal implications of salvation for God’s people. Salvation means that we are becoming a family (Heb. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:1), a body (1 Cor. 12:12-31), and a building (Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:4-6). We are breaking down walls of hostility between us and reconciling ourselves to one another (Eph. 2:14-16; Gal. 3:27-28).

This communal dimension is an important aspect of salvation’s present, ongoing nature (Acts 2:47) and has been a consistent emphasis of Anabaptists regarding salvation. Jesus’ teaching employed the images of new birth (John 3:3-7; 1 Pet. 1:23) and the new covenant (Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3:6; Jer. 31:33). The psalmist speaks of a continuing process in which hearts are made pure (Ps. 51:10). This experience of sanctification is also described in terms of a “new person” who puts off the old nature and puts on the new nature (Eph. 4:23-24) and is transformed by being renewed in mind (Rom. 12:1). By the power of the Spirit believers are expected to act differently as disciples of Jesus (Gal. 5:25) so that true faith is evident by outward actions (1 John 3:9; James 2:24).

At a future time God will bring this age to a close and complete the defeat of Satan and death (Rev. 20:10; 1 Cor. 15:26). God’s complete salvation is therefore a future hope (Luke 21:28; Rom. 13:11; 1 Thess. 5:8-9). Though suffering may come, “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22; 24:13 NRSV).

A look to the future also alerts us to the cosmic dimension of salvation, when God will bring in the new heaven and the new earth (Isa. 65:17-25; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 3:12; 21:2,10). Scripture informs us that the purpose of all creation is to glorify God (Ps. 19:1; 69:34). While Jesus declares that human beings are worth more than the birds and the flowers (Matt. 6:26-30), he echoes the testimony of all Scripture that God cares for these creatures as well (Gen. 9:1-10, 12, 15, 17; Jon. 4:11; Hos. 2:18). The cosmos, presently “groaning” and “suffering,” will one

day be set free from slavery and the corruption it now experiences (Rom. 8:20-21; Isa. 11:6, 9).

In summary, salvation involves what God has already done, what God is doing, and the fullness God will ultimately bring.

Salvation

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Salvation lies at the core of the Christian experience. The gospel calls people to salvation—from slavery to sin into the freedom that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Salvation begins with *redemption* from slavery to sin and involves *adoption* as believers are *born again* into the family of God. Salvation from past sin, however, is only the beginning. Salvation continues in the present as the redeemed children of God live the new life that results from that freedom. The redeemed are *sanctified*—set apart for God’s use in the present. Salvation in the future includes the promise of life in the new heavens and the new earth. The cosmic dimension of salvation reminds us that all creation will enjoy the fruits of God’s saving activity. Our understanding of salvation has implications for both the individual’s response to the gospel and the church’s involvement in the larger saving purposes of God.

Atonement

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 upon 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 cap-

tives free. A variation of this emphasizes the role of human beings enlisted by Christ 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 (Matt. 7:21). Although early Anabaptists employed forms of the substitutionary atonement model, they also used other 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.

Personal and Corporate Faith

Faith is personal but not individualistic; people find their identity in the midst of a web of relationships with other people and among social structures. With gifts of the Spirit, God ministers to His people through other people. An important part of God's saving work is to form the church into a coordinated body, a family both ministering to itself and reaching out to receive others. In this growth, the local congregation should welcome the gifts that believers from other Christian traditions offer, as well as become more informed of its own heritage.

Through the centuries, Christian groups have taken several distinct approaches to the culture around them in recognition of the call to be "salt" and "light" both by embodying and witnessing to God's salvation. Those of the Anabaptist tradition have been hesitant to occupy positions of secular authority with the intent to manipulate structures toward the purposes of God. Nevertheless, Christians can have a significant influence within businesses and institutions, influencing them toward that which is in harmony with God's goals and values. Congregations need to equip their members as agents of God's transforming *shalom* without compromising the ways of Christ in doing so.

Salvation and Healing

In seeking to embrace and live out our salvation in Christ, the needs of individuals, families, and groups within the congregation can often be tremendous. In matters of healing and wellness, leaders should seek and welcome counsel from those who can assist them with godly wisdom. God equips some believers for ministries of

direct healing and deliverance. God also equips physicians and therapists with skills and insights which can be of help to God's people. While caution is always appropriate when receiving assistance from those outside the Christian fold, we may recognize and be grateful for whatever ways God's healing comes to us.

The ministry of exorcism has been recognized in the church since the New Testament period. Its appropriate practice, however, continues to be a matter of exploration and discussion among Menno-nite Brethren. While we should not discount the reality of the demonic, caution and an avoidance of extremism should be encouraged. Awareness of demonic forces within institutions and systems is another matter for urgent investigation regarding the church's role in ministering salvation and healing in the larger society.

Conversion and Discipleship

The nature of salvation was one of the key issues leading to the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia in 1860. It was the concern of the Brethren that salvation be a meaningful choice that resulted in a life of discipleship. This led them to form a new body of believers. Consequently "conversion" became an important part of Mennonite Brethren theology.

Salvation involves the past. One is saved from sin at the point of conversion when the need for salvation is recognized. When people realize their lost condition and understand the salvation Jesus offers, it is appropriate for them to respond in an attitude of repentance and commitment.

Salvation also involves the present. We are *being* saved. Present salvation is expressed in Christian discipleship and connection with the body of Christ, the church. Therefore it is important that new believers not only experience conversion but also grow in following the Lord.

Childhood Conversions

Conversion at an early age is a testimony of the presence of Christian teaching in the home and the church. Early childhood conversions raise pastoral issues concerning the nature of salvation. Children are spiritually sensitive and can respond to the work of the Spirit in their lives. It is important that their response be to the Spirit and not only to the desires or persuasion of parents or teachers.

Childhood conversions are often the God-given fruit of raising children in Christian homes. Conversion should be celebrated with children, their families, and the church. Parents and leaders must also help children and their families understand that conversion is only

the beginning and that spiritual growth should follow.

One of the ways discipleship is often expressed is through baptism and church membership. Baptism is an important event in the lives of young people; however, it is not the end of the process. Discipleship expresses itself through a lifestyle that is characterized by obedience to the teachings of Christ, Christian service, and involvement in the local church.

In some congregations the age of baptism seems to be lowering. The challenge for churches is how to affirm the desire of children for baptism yet encourage them to wait until they understand what it means to be accountable to the congregation. Since church membership is part of baptism, membership should call youth to a higher level of spiritual commitment involving tithing, praying for the church and its leaders, ministering in service and outreach activities, participating in worship services, and encouraging evangelism.

It is important that we validate, affirm, and celebrate childhood conversions. We do not want to hinder children from coming to Christ, for they are a part of the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:13-14).

Conversion and “Altar Calls”

Since salvation among Mennonite Brethren was traditionally associated with the dramatic event of conversion, opportunities were often given for this event to take place. As a result, revival and evangelistic services have had an important role in the history of the MB Church. Particularly in the past, altar calls were a significant way for people to express publicly their salvation. Those who responded knew people would be watching to see if their conversion was a life-changing experience. Though altar calls and other public demonstrations are not as common in our churches as they used to be, they can still provide opportunities to express new or renewed commitment to Jesus Christ.

We believe that each person’s life of faith has a beginning point. However, not all believers have a dramatic conversion experience where they can point to a specific time when they were “saved.” For some, conversion has been a process in which they have grown in their understanding of salvation and faith. Although they cannot point to a moment when they were “converted,” they know conversion has taken place. We can affirm and celebrate a variety of conversion experiences, whether dramatic or gradual.

Assurance of Salvation

The certainty of one’s salvation is a common concern raised by members of the body of Christ, particularly among new believers and

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those in the latter stages of life. Such an inquiry into one's spiritual status should not be viewed simply as a matter of doubt or a demonstration of "little" faith, but rather as a legitimate exploration into the nature and foundation of the salvation experience. Responding with sensitivity and encouragement to the questioning person can be a positive and edifying experience for both the inquirer and the one giving counsel. When believers express doubt over the assurance of salvation, the following may prove helpful.

Remind them that such a question is not uncommon among believers.

Caution them not to allow present *feelings* to be the basis of whether or not one is saved. Feelings come and go and are not a reliable standard in gauging one's faith in Christ.

Encourage them to respond to doubts concerning salvation with the *facts* of their experience of conversion and the teaching of Scripture. The following questions can be considered:

Do I know the facts about the person of Jesus? Do I understand that Jesus is God's Son, that he took on human form, that he died on the cross for my sin, that he rose again on the third day?

Do I believe the facts about Jesus Christ? Do I trust that Jesus accomplished what was said of him in Scripture?

Have I asked Jesus to forgive my sins and come into my life? Have I asked Jesus to be in control of my life?"

Do I consciously and deliberately strive to follow Jesus in my everyday life?

Those who answer affirmatively to such questions can be encouraged that they are most assuredly followers of Jesus Christ who have indeed received the gift of salvation. Questions answered negatively or with uncertainty should be responded to appropriately.

Those questioning their salvation can be reassured that the Holy Spirit lives in us to remind, teach, and assure us that we are indeed children of God. It can also be helpful to walk a person through the promises of Scripture concerning salvation, found in passages such as John 5:24; Romans 8:16; 10:9, 13; 1 John 2:3, 5, 6, 29; 3:13; 4:7; 5:10-13.

Age of Accountability

Are infants or young children who have died before accepting Christ as Savior still recipients of eternal life? This can be a sensitive

issue for parents and churches. We need to be sensitive to the emotions experienced by grieving parents, while remaining true to the testimony of Scripture on the matter of young children and their salvation.

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.

In Matthew 18:1-4 Jesus lifted up children as model participants in the gift of eternal life. By their very spirit toward the Lord and the things of God, these little ones would gain entry into heaven: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).

Jesus welcomed and blessed the little ones who came to him. "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'" (Matt. 19:14). Jesus declared that little children were heirs of eternal life without suggesting that they must first express a formal testimony of faith in him. It is true that we desire young children to make a formal profession of faith when they are ready to do so. However, the absence of such a declaration alone should not render them unsaved in our minds. Why? As Jesus said, "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

The Lord never taught that young children, unable to make a conscious profession of allegiance to the Lord, would experience anything other than a place in the kingdom of God. He held them up as those who would certainly be welcomed into the Father's presence.

Such a position is consistent with Anabaptist theology. Menno Simons was a fervent preacher of conversion and voluntary discipleship. At the same time he understood that children under the age of accountability were welcomed into God's kingdom. To Menno Simons these children were innocent, saved, holy, pure, pleasing to God and, as a result, partakers of the promise of heaven. "To innocent and minor children sin is for Jesus' sake not imputed. Life is promised, not through any ceremony, but of pure grace, through the blood of the Lord, as He Himself says: Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Simons, 131).

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Nature of the Church

Called by God

We believe the church is the people called by God through Jesus Christ. People who respond in faith are united with the local congregation by the public confession of baptism. Church members commit themselves to follow Christ in a life of discipleship and witness as empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Body of Christ

The church is one body of believers, male and female, from every nation, race and class. The head of this body is Christ. The church, united by the one Spirit, makes Christ visible in the world. The church exists as local bodies of believers and as a worldwide community of faith.

Worship

The church is nourished and renewed as God's people gather regularly to glorify God. The early church gathered on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The worshipping community celebrates God's faithfulness and grace, reaffirms its faithfulness to God, builds up the members of the body, and seeks God's will for its life and mission. As the church observes baptism, and the Lord's Supper, it proclaims the good news of salvation.*

Fellowship and Accountability

The church is a covenant community in which members are mutually accountable in matters of faith and life. They love, care, and pray for each other, share each other's joys and burdens, admonish and correct one another. They share material resources as there is need. Local congregations follow the New Testament example by seeking the counsel of the wider church on matters that affect its common witness and mission. Congregations work together in a spirit of love, mutual submission, and interdependence.

The New Testament guides the practice of redemptive church discipline. The church is responsible to correct members who continue to sin. Congregations forgive and restore those who repent, but formally exclude those who disregard discipline.

Gifts for Ministry

Through the Holy Spirit God gives gifts to each member for the well-being of the whole body. These gifts are to be exercised in God's service to build up the church and to minister in the world.

God calls people to equip the church for ministry. Leaders are to model Christ in their personal, family, and church life. The church is to discern leaders prayerfully, and to affirm, support, and correct them in a spirit of love.

Matt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20; John 13:1-20; 17:1-26; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4, 37-47; 11:1-18; 15:1-35; Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 5:1-8; 12-14; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Gal. 3:26-28; 6:1-5; Eph. 1:18-23; 2:11-22; 4:4-6, 11-16; I Thess. 5:22-23; I Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:7-9; I Pet. 2:9-12; 5:1-4.

* One form of the church's worship is the practice of footwashing which can be a meaningful reminder of the humility, loving service, and personal cleansing that is to characterize the relationship of members within the church.

Nature of the Church

COMMENTARY

The New Testament defines the church with many different images and word pictures. These images can be clustered into groups with similar motifs and themes.

Descriptions of the Church

One cluster of images describes the church as the people of God. The church is the people called by God. The accent is on God. God creates a people (1 Pet. 2:9-10; Rom. 9:25-26). The people of God in the New Testament includes all believers, both Jew and Gentile. This people replaces the temple as the place where God dwells (1 Cor. 6:19; 3:16-17; Eph. 2:21).

A second cluster of images describes the church as a community. Terms like “saints,” “faithful ones,” and “righteous ones” are always plural in the New Testament. Such terms describe the nature of the church rather than the individual Christian life. Thus the church is a saintly community, a “holy people” set apart by and for God. The church is described as “disciples,” “the way,” “slaves,” “friends,” “witnesses,” a “household.” Christians are described as “children” or as “brothers” and “sisters” in a common family. The point of all these images is that the church is a plurality of people viewed as a collective whole. And in the New Testament the whole is always prior to the individual and gives identity to the individual, rather than the reverse as in the western world.

The church is more than a community. A third set of images pictures the church in cosmic and eschatological terms. It is the “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), the “first fruits” (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15; James 1:18), the “new humanity” (Eph. 2:11-17; Col. 3:10), “God’s Sabbath” (Heb. 4:1-11) and “light” (Matt. 5:14-16; John 12:35; 2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Thess. 5:5; 1 Peter 2:9). The church is the fulfillment of God’s promises. The church is so grand that cosmic images are used to describe the church. These images assert that God is doing a new thing in the church; God is making all things new. The church is to be the fulfillment of what God intended in the original creation.

A fourth set of images pictures the church as the body of Christ. The church is a living body composed of many different members united together. Each member is necessary to the others and to the

growth of the whole. Christ is the head of this body. The church grows as different members are properly related to the head and to each other. Such imagery highlights the unity of the church in Christ and the diversity of gifts within the one body.

The People of God

The various images describing the church assert that God is creating a people through Christ and the Spirit. This people is an alternative or contrast-society in the world. It reflects the nature of God in its corporate life and witness. Though God reveals Himself in other ways, the church is the primary place of God's presence in the world and the primary means of God's mission in the world.

Article 6 of the confession highlights several themes emphasizing our desire to grow together as God's people. Our concern for unity is drawn from images such as the family of God and the body of Christ, and from teachings in 1 Corinthians 1-4, Galatians 3, and Ephesians 2. The unity theme teaches the oneness of different people in the church and in Christ.

The body of Christ has been a favorite image for the church among Anabaptists and Mennonite Brethren. Believers are united both to Christ and to each other to form one body. The church as the body of Christ is also the public witness of Christ to the world.

The theme of accountability in the covenant community reflects an understanding of what it means to be a family, a household, a people, a body, a bride, and follows explicit teachings that exhort believers to be accountable to each other (Matt. 18:15f.; Rom. 12:3f.; Gal. 6:1f.).

Worship in the Church

The early church gathered regularly for worship (Matt. 18:20; Acts 4:31; 11:26; 13:44; 15:6,30; 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:17,18,20,23; 14:23,26; James 2:2). The apostles encouraged such meeting together (Heb. 10:25).

The church gathers to celebrate the grace and goodness of God, to build up the believers, and to become a unified body (1 Cor. 11 & 14). The components of worship include proclamation, teaching, baptism, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, singing, offerings, and decision making (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11 & 14; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

One form of worship used in some Mennonite Brethren churches is the practice of footwashing. This practice is based on Jesus' example and teaching in John 13:1-20. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, he set aside the privileges of power and modeled true servanthood. Christians follow the example of Christ by "washing the feet of the saints" and by many other acts of hospitality, service and love (1 Tim. 5:10).

Discipline in the Church

Jesus instructed the church to be a disciplining community (Matt. 18:15-25). “To bind and to loose” means to engage in ethical discernment about what it means to be faithful, and then to hold people to that discernment by dismissing those who have violated the consensus of the church and liberating those who have not. Discipline is a function of discernment, pastoral care and renewal of individuals and the entire church (Gal. 6:1-2; Eph. 4:25; 1 Cor. 5:3-5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11). The goal of discipline is always restoration to Christ and the church.

The pattern for discipline begins with “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) in direct, one-to-one conversation with the erring believer. If there is no change, a small circle of additional church members becomes involved in the confrontation. The matter becomes a concern for the entire congregation if this step is ineffective. The person who repents is to be forgiven and nurtured in making the necessary changes. If the erring person continues in sin against the admonition of the church, the church determines the appropriate discipline. Such discipline is taught in the Scriptures both to protect the purity of the internal life of the church and the integrity of the church’s witness in the world.

While all believers are responsible for discipline in the church (Matt. 18:15-25; Gal. 6:1-2), church leaders have a special responsibility to give guidance and to carry out discipline (Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:5-11; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Heb. 13:17). Leaders are accountable to the church. They must be disciplined as well for incorrect teaching or misconduct. Such discipline, however, must be carefully tested because of the danger of gossip and unjust accusations (1 Tim. 5:19).

The purpose of church discipline is twofold. The first purpose is the restoration of the sinning brother or sister (Matt. 18:15f.; Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Cor. 2:5-11). The New Testament identifies a very limited number of things that justify excommunication: denying that Jesus has come in the flesh (1 John 4:1-6), persisting in sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:1-13) and causing division in the church by opposing apostolic teaching (Rom. 16:17-18). The second goal of discipline is to uphold the integrity of the church’s witness in the world (Matt. 18). The church loses its missionary witness when it does not discern the meaning of faithfulness to Christ in every age.

The practice of discipline in the church has become difficult for three reasons. First, the legalistic misuse and even abuse of discipline in Mennonite Brethren history has caused a reaction against the practice. Second, the mobility, individualism, and relativism of contemporary western society have made it difficult both to reach consensus on what constitutes sinful behavior, and to hold people accountable to

such a consensus. Third, the threat of litigation has made churches cautious in the practice of discipline. But none of these problems justifies the abandonment of church discipline. Discipline is necessary in the church for correction, renewal, pastoral care, Christian nurture and growth, and missionary witness.

Ministry in the Church

The New Testament teaches that all believers have received gifts by the Spirit for ministry in the church and in the world (1 Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4:11-16; Rom. 12:3-8). These gifts are to be exercised for the nurture and strengthening of the entire church.

The New Testament also teaches that the church needs leaders (Phil. 1:1; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3). The purpose of church leadership is to enable and administrate the diversity of gifts through teaching, correction, encouragement, and loving service. Church leaders are to be mature Christians who model Christlike conduct in their personal, family, and church life (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1.5-9).

The New Testament describes a twofold pattern of ministry involving deacons and elders (the latter also called bishops or pastors). But this pattern is not taught as normative for the church. The New Testament does not prescribe a specific form of church organization. What it does teach is that the church should do all things decently and in order for the purpose of building up the whole church (1 Cor. 14). The precise form of that ordering has varied in the history of the church and among Mennonite Brethren.

Nature of the Church

PASTORAL APPLICATION

The article on the “Nature of the Church” is one of the key elements in our Confession of Faith. Because Mennonite Brethren are with other Anabaptist groups part of the Believer’s Church tradition, what we say about the church is especially important in defining our identity. The Anabaptists came into existence in the sixteenth century because of concerns about the church, and the Mennonite Brethren Church was formed 300 years later for similar reasons. Our self-description as a Believer’s Church distinguishes us from those who practice infant baptism and puts us in the company of followers of Jesus who insist that being part of the church requires a personal surrender to the Lord.

The church plays a central role in the writings of the New Testament. When Jesus said that he would build his church, he was establishing the primary institution through which God has chosen to do His work in this world. The church of Christ is God’s agent of redemption in the world. Like many denominations, Mennonite Brethren are grappling with the issues of maintaining biblical principles regarding the nature of the church while being relevant in our post-Christian context. Article 6 summarizes our understanding of the church.

Membership and Commitment

The church does not choose whom God will call into its membership. We receive people into church membership who confess salvation through faith in Christ, obey his command to be baptized, and submit themselves to our Confession of Faith. We believe that joining the church as a member is an important expression of a commitment to a covenant relationship. At the minimum, this covenant is a declaration that “these are my people, and I am a part of this family of believers.”

Though the church ministers in the world, the New Testament calls believers to be different than the world. This kind of separation is based on our understanding of holiness. The church needs to model and display the character of holiness, which immediately marks a distinction from the world. Separation to God and to holiness is part of what it means to be the church. This develops as God’s

people gather regularly to minister to each other and worship God (see portions on worship in the Article 1 pastoral application).

Racism and Reconciliation

Racial hatred and division are serious issues for the church to address in our time. Various governmental and educational attempts at racial reconciliation have not produced significant results. The reason for this is these programs cannot touch the heart of a person, the root of the problem of racism. But the church of Christ, with its message of hope and reconciliation, can indeed make a difference. The church is perhaps the only body on this earth that can demonstrate in its own membership the ability to cross racial and cultural lines. Almost every community in North America is being inhabited and impacted by people of different races. The pastoral interpreter of the confession must contend seriously with this matter, seeking to pray for, teach, and demonstrate the reconciling power of the gospel. If the church does not move to confront racial division and demonstrate an alternative, our message cannot be taken seriously.

Cooperation with Other Christian Groups

Mennonite Brethren believe in cooperating with other Christian groups. We have supported various evangelical and inter-denominational bodies such as the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the National Association of Evangelicals. We cooperate with such groups willingly. More difficult, however, is the matter of cooperating with those who are Christian and whose political or social agendas we endorse, but whose theology makes us uncomfortable. Should we join forces to oppose abortion, for example, with those who do not view Christ as we do? Should we fight crime in our neighborhoods by entering into alliances with those whose theology is questionable to us? These are matters that cannot be answered in a general way, but become part of the responsibility and discernment of the local Mennonite Brethren church as it establishes an identity in its community.

Baptism in the Spirit and Use of Spiritual Gifts

Mennonite Brethren believe that the Holy Spirit is received at the time of conversion, and that the gift of the Spirit is not a second experience subsequent to salvation. We do believe in the continual and repeated “filling with the Holy Spirit.” Those who give leadership in our churches need to teach what is consistent with Mennonite Brethren understanding and practice in this area.

We believe in spiritual gifts. Given the contemporary concern

about overly busy schedules and potential “burnout,” individual Christians need to be given opportunity to discover and use their gifts both for the building up of others and their own fulfillment. Churches that follow some pattern of gift discernment find that their people serve with more enthusiasm and a greater sense of fruitfulness. The understanding of the gifts must be fleshed out by leaders who are committed to preparing God’s people for works of service. The church must encourage, equip, and empower people to use their spiritual gifts in ministry. Ministry is defined here as much more than merely serving on boards or committees. Ministry is not performed only by pastors. All Christians are ministers.

Our understanding of giftedness is important when the local church discerns leaders. Leaders should be chosen on the basis of gifts and character. Success in the world does not guarantee that a person is spiritually gifted for leadership in the church.

For many years, Mennonite Brethren generally discouraged the use of sign gifts, perhaps as a reaction to extreme pentecostalism. Today, however, use of all gifts is encouraged in most of our congregations. The practice of all gifts needs to be for the sake of the building up of the body of Christ, the church, and according to the principles given in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. It is understood that no gift is essential for every Christian to have, and also that no Christian has all of the gifts by him or herself.

The Relationship of Local Church and Conference

Each congregation regulates its own affairs, but also affiliates with the denomination. The work of the church is to be conducted in a spirit of interdependence, love, and submission to one another. In practice this becomes difficult when individuals or congregations operate with an overly independent spirit. It becomes especially awkward when a local church is having internal problems, as over doctrinal issues or the style of pastoral leadership. Pastors and local churches need to understand that because we have covenanted to be a conference together, we are also accountable to each other. When those charged with conference leadership sense a concern in the affairs of a local church and feel a need to intervene, the members of the local church should open themselves to such intervention. At the same time, members and leaders of the local church should feel freedom to invite conference leaders to assist in the resolution of difficult problems. Mutual accountability is part of the Christian life.

A congregation will sometimes appeal to its members to give the local church priority in their giving because all members have made a commitment to that church. Can that same local church, with integ-

ity, hold back giving to ministries we have committed ourselves to as a conference? The covenant community extends beyond the local church.

Accountability in the Local Church

There is another kind of accountability in the local church, the accountability of church members to and for each other. In an increasingly diverse society, it is important for people who join a local church to understand that they have agreed to make themselves accountable to each other in a number of areas involving personal, spiritual, family, moral, business, ethical, and other matters. Through the preaching and example of church leaders, mutual accountability based on our commitment to be a covenant community needs to be taught and practiced. Pastors need to make themselves accountable to their leaders at the conference level, and in turn church members need to be accountable to their local church leaders. Someone involved in wrongdoing once told her pastor, "I am glad I am not a member so that the church can't discipline me." Some years later after a change of heart, she came to the pastor and asked to join the church. Her reason for seeking membership was to be held accountable, recognizing that accountability was necessary for her protection and growth. All members of our churches should have such an understanding.

Church discipline is part of accountability. Where a Christian is believed to be involved in sinful actions, fellow believers or church leaders need to lovingly approach that person in accordance with biblical principles. It is not easy to practice both judgment and mercy, but that is the goal of all disciplinary action. Church discipline for Mennonite Brethren has changed from a time when it was often harsh to a day when it is often lax or even nonexistent. It is time to recover a healthier balance. The congregation has freedom to intervene in the lives of its members because of the covenantal nature of the local church.

Organization of the Local Church

Mennonite Brethren do not have a prescribed pattern for organization of a local body of believers. Congregations choose their own form of government and their own structure of leadership. While most MB churches are governed by some form of elder board or church council, in all these the larger congregation is given voice and involvement in making major decisions. The brother and sisterhood of believers implies that local churches take the time to discuss matters of direction and organization among the members of the congre-

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gation, rather than implementing changes solely by decision of a few. Open communication usually enhances the ownership of new ideas and plans. While it takes extra time to secure agreement of the congregation on a new direction, it often leads to greater involvement and commitment in the long run. The Scriptures describe the church as a *body* and a *family*. Both terms speak of communication and clarity between the members involved. Within such guidelines, each local church can determine the patterns of organization and leadership which best serve its needs.

ARTICLE 7

Mission of the Church

The Great Commission and the Great Commandment

We believe the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ is for all people. Christ commands the church to make disciples of all nations by calling people to repent, and by baptizing and teaching them to obey Jesus. Jesus teaches that disciples are to love God and neighbor by telling the good news and by doing acts of love and compassion.

The Witness

The Holy Spirit empowers every Christian to witness to God's salvation. The church as a body witnesses to God's reign in the world. By its life as a redeemed and separated community the church reveals God's saving purposes to the world.

Matt. 5:13-16; 22:34-40; 28:18-20; Mark 1:15; 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37; 24:45-49; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8; Rom. 1:16-18; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 3:10-11.

Mission of the Church

COMMENTARY

The redemptive design of both the Old and New Testament finds its continuance and fulfillment in the mission of the church. The Old Testament prepares the stage for Christ's mission. The New Testament gospels take us through the events of Christ's life and teaching, death and resurrection, which lead up to the mission assignment of making disciples of all nations. The book of Acts and the epistles tell the story of how the church implements the Great Commission. The primary task of the Christian church from its inception has been the propagation of the gospel to the ends of the earth, as exemplified by the New Testament church.

God's Mission Design for the Church

There are various biblical descriptions that help focus God's mission design for the church. Metaphors such as being salt, light, a fragrance, or an open letter strongly suggest having an impact within one's sphere of influence. Metaphors of action such as being ambassadors, witnesses, reconcilers, fishers of men, and co-laborers with God help clarify God's design for believers. Descriptions such as the Jerusalem church growing in numbers daily (Acts 2:41), the Antioch church seeing great numbers of people turning to the Lord (Acts 11:21), and the Thessalonian church having their faith in God known everywhere (1 Thess. 1:8), help to focus on the mission of the church. Paul's teaching to the Ephesians to prepare God's people for active mission with all the gifts of Christ's body (Eph. 4:11-12) gives support to the missional design of the church.

Effective mission involves both word and deed. The scriptural design for representing God's kingdom connects the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) with the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37-40). In both the Old and New Testament God's people are known for their expressions of love and kindness within a society of poverty, injustice, and hopelessness. God's people are mandated to live within a covenant relationship where God is our God and we are His people demonstrating grace, justice, faith, and works.

The Mission in Preparation

The mission mandate known as the Great Commission was given

after Christ rose from the dead. The content of the mandate was not new to the followers of Christ. When Christ called his disciples to follow him, he indicated that they would become fishers of men (Mark 2:17). Later he gave them power and authority over demons and sent them to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal (Luke 9:5-6). The seed thoughts of the Great Commission were also clearly evident in Christ's prayer for the believers in the world (John 17).

When Christ gave the mandate to make disciples of all nations, he gave meaning to the gospel both in words and by example and declared the cost of following and serving him. Christ was a model to his disciples in how he interacted with people, including the poor, the rich, the helpless, the sick, the prominent, the curious masses, and the hidden individuals. Christ was their model in lifestyle witness.

The Mission Declared

The Great Commission mandate (Matt. 28:18-20) is a victory statement that flows from the lips of Christ who had just overcome the world of sin and death through his sacrificial death and victorious resurrection. It is now possible for the entire world to be saved, hence the command, "Go and make disciples of all nations." This Great Commission statement has been hailed as the great missionary charter and the church's mission statement since the first century. The Great Commission brings focus to the church's life and work in a number of ways:

It declares Christ as having all authority over heaven and earth, qualifying him to give the mission assignment to the church. No other authority can challenge Christ the King.

It clarifies the mission results in terms of disciples made. The task is to make disciples who will disciple others. There is a commitment implied that involves serious followership.

It commands the mission assignment to be worldwide. All people are to be gathered into the kingdom regardless of race. It is an all-inclusive mission vision with no limits or exceptions.

It assigns mission responsibility and initiative to all believers. Everyone who believes is expected to be a witness and a discipler.

It expects the believers to be identified by baptism. The Great Commission makes baptism a sign of Christian discipleship. It signals sincerity and commitment to the kingdom body.

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It describes the new followers as learners and practitioners of the faith. A life of Christian discipleship is profiled in the Great Commission mandate.

It promises Christ's partnership and presence in the implementation of the worldwide mission assignment, until the very end. Christ remains vitally connected as the Savior and the inspiration in the midst of the church's mission assignment.

The Great Commission starts with Christ's authority and concludes with Christ's continuous presence. This non-negotiable assignment is to be carried out worldwide by all those who belong to Christ. The assignment is clearly focused in its purpose of making disciples or diligent followers of Christ. The primary motive for this mission assignment is not so much the plight of the unconverted or the eternal blessing of the believer. Its primary motive is the church's calling to love neighbors and to make disciples of all nations.

The Mission Implemented

The Scriptures expect the church to be involved in redemptive action in society as a sign of God's kingdom in the world. The body of Christ authenticates its faith through an integrated witness of deeds and words.

The Witness of Commitment:

Holy life in community is a powerful witness. When society sees the church living as a transformed community in the world, the church is being faithful to Jesus' description of believers as salt and light (Matt. 5:14-16). Simple obedience to the Scriptures through lives of devotion, worship, and faith gives credibility to the Christian life. The steadfast faithfulness of the church disarms and impacts would-be critics who are looking for inconsistencies among Christians. This witness of faithfulness is the first step in fulfilling the Great Commission.

The Witness of Love:

A very practical part of living out our faith is that of loving our neighbor (Mark 12:31). This witness of Christian love as commanded by Christ is a powerful representation of God's love for the world. Our love needs to find practical expressions in our neighborhoods, workplaces, and homes. The body of Christ demonstrates its faith through deeds of love and the generous giving of self to the interests of others.

When the world observes the faith community showing concern and compassion by protecting the vulnerable, defending the power-

less, and helping the poor and hurting, they have truly expressed the heartbeat that Christ had for the underprivileged. Christ provides a paradigm for the church to follow his example of caring for the needy, feeding the hungry, liberating the captives, and healing the sick (Luke 4:18-19).

The Witness of Community:

The corporate life of the church is in itself a powerful witness to the watching world. As the church functions in unity and love, it reflects the image of God. The daily life of the body of Christ is a fragrance to others (2 Cor. 2:15). The unity of the church attracts (John 17:23). In a word-weary society, authentic expressions of joy, fellowship, and worship have great impact. Caring and praying are two further dimensions of community witness.

The Witness of Peace:

The community of faith is also about showing redemptive love within a society of alienation and violence. Kingdom characteristics express themselves through acts of peace and justice. Christians need to stand on the side of those who are disadvantaged and discouraged. Peaceful alternatives to violence and actions to defend the powerless become statements of love and goodness in themselves. Followers of Christ the Prince of Peace must also be expressions of peace in their world.

The Witness of Words:

The Spirit of God empowers the body of Christ to speak boldly regarding the good news of Christ (Acts 1:5). Personal stories and testimonies of changed lives are very powerful. The church gathered also needs to present a clear statement of what Christ came to do for humankind. Each Christian has a story to tell of how Christ forgives sin and gives new purpose and meaning for life. The combined witness of the church body and of individual Christians is what the world needs to hear (2 Cor. 3:2). The witness of words flows with power when joined with the other aspects of witness. For our witness to be fruitful it needs to be integrated into all of life. Not that our works save us (Eph. 2:5) but our deeds will identify the genuineness of our faith when we appear before God to receive our rewards (Matt. 25:31-46).

The Mission Requirements

For the church of Christ to be effective in the implementation of the Great Commission, it needs to align itself with the biblical require-

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ments for effective outreach. The records of Scripture provide a number of indispensable realities for fruitful witness and evangelism.

Empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8):

It is the Spirit of God that empowers the believer for witness. The Spirit guides, enlightens, reminds, convicts, intercedes, and provides new life. The Spirit also opens witnessing doors and makes us attractive and effective through the fruit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts.

Confidence in the Gospel (Rom. 1:16; 10:17):

Effective witness is the result of being confident that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. The gospel of Jesus as the only Savior who can forgive sins is good news. Faith comes from hearing the word. Therefore, we are not ashamed of the gospel.

Unity and Love Among Believers (John 17:23; Eph. 4):

Christ made it clear that love and unity among believers is a powerful incentive for people to come to Christ. A disruptive or disunited church has little to offer a seeking world. Love and unity have evangelistic drawing power for which Christ prayed.

Faithful Obedience to Christ (John 15; Gal. 5):

Christ links fruitfulness to faithfulness. If Christians remain in the vine and keep connected to the Lord, they will experience joy and answers to their prayers. Christlikeness through keeping in step with the Spirit brings power to our life of words and deeds. Witness is destroyed through lack of integrity but enhanced through prayer and faith.

Love Relationships (Luke 10:27; Mark 12:31):

Loving one's neighbor is the main bridge to winning people to Christ. Expressions of love through deeds of kindness create an environment for effective relationships. When those in the church show love, care and respect for others around them they reflect the spirit of Christ.

Priority for the Church (John 20:21-23):

As Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, so the church has been sent on a redemptive mission. This priority must be expressed both individually and corporately. The church has no more right to keep the faith to itself than individuals have the right to live selfishly. At the corporate level the church takes responsibility to provide opportunities for the world to hear and respond to the message of Christ.

The Mission Urgencies

Christ presented the mission of the church with a sense of urgency. There are a number of realities that motivate the church to faithfulness in its mission:

People are redeemable. God loves the world and wants all people to have eternal life and to live a life empowered by His purpose and presence. People can be set free and given a life of joy, peace, and purpose (John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:17).

There is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only way to the Father. Christians are called to proclaim Christ as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6; Acts 16:31).

People are lost and condemned in their sins without salvation in Christ. The good news is that Jesus has died for our sins and offers forgiveness as a free gift to all who believe (Rom. 3:23; 5:1).

To make disciples is a command of Christ. The will of God is for the world to hear and believe. The primary task for the believing world is to make Christ known among all the nations. The mission of Jesus has become the mission priority of every church (Matt. 28:18-20).

The day of the Lord is coming and only those who have accepted Christ are assured of life eternal. There is an urgency of time in preparing to meet our God. (1 Cor. 15:50-58).

Conclusion

Even though our witness for Christ is expressed in various ways, both corporately and individually we have a clear redemptive purpose. The gospel of God's kingdom finds complete fulfillment in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Mission of the Church

PASTORAL APPLICATION

The following perspectives may be helpful in our understanding of the mission of the church. First, conversion is not an end in itself. We are admonished by the apostle John, “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). Disciple making is described as “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded” (Matt. 28:20). The evangelistic task must never be separated from the nurturing task. Healthy churches empower people to use their gifts both in outreach and in nurture. Christians are to be both salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16).

Second, contrary to popular perceptions, the call of Jesus is not merely an individualistic call to salvation. Rather, it includes a call to join “the company of the committed,” to become a member of the body, to share in the “fellowship of the saints.” This corporate dimension dare not be omitted in our shattered individualistic world. It is the testimony of God’s presence and rule in the world.

Third, this corporate dimension is also vital to evangelism. It is the church that offers the context for evangelism. How the members of the body relate to one another, how they live out their faith, provides a powerful witness. It creates a plausibility structure out of which unbelievers can make sense of the gospel. It offers the world an alternative society, one in which the Gospel is actively worked out.

A Temptation to Specialize

In an age of individualism and specialization, deference to the “expert” tempts us to relegate the execution of the Great Commission to those designated by the church for that purpose. In our tradition this includes those called evangelists, missionaries, and pastors.

While we must recognize the special giftedness of designated servants, we must insist that the commission includes all those who claim to follow Jesus. Indeed our history as a denomination and as members of the wider Anabaptist tradition is one marked by missionary zeal shared by a broad spectrum of people.

It is vital that we regain the zeal of our spiritual ancestors who understood the requirements of personal holiness to include speaking the words of the gospel and living out its implications in everyday life. It may be that the current reliance on the trained expert has its

origin in our preoccupation with technique. A witness, however, is simply one who tells what he or she knows. Effective witness is found not in technique but in faithfulness, consistent living, and the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

An Exclusive and Inclusive Message

Given the increased attraction of universalism, we must insist on the exclusive way of salvation. “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 NRSV). We must resist the impulse to accommodate this focus to the pluralism of our world.

We do well to remember that the call to new life in Christ is also inclusive. It is to “all who receive him.” We must take care to remember the admonition of the apostle that the dividing wall has been broken down (Eph. 2:14). It would be good for congregations to take a more serious look at where they are located. The homogenous principle of the church growth movement tends to justify where and how we do church. How might we be more faithful in bringing the good news to the “least of these”?

Diversity needs to involve more than “separate but equal” congregations in the denomination. Individual congregations need to demonstrate that the social, racial, economic, and gender walls have indeed been broken down. Even when our culture teaches that only separate but equal multiculturalism works, we must demonstrate that God’s reconciling love brings every variety of people together to love and care for one another. This unity in diversity becomes the hallmark of a vibrant, witnessing community of faith.

The mission of the church needs to find expression in the daily life of the local church. Mission should be revealed in the atmosphere of the church gathered and scattered. As a people whose purpose is built around good news, we believers should live joyful, hope-filled lives. People arriving at a worship service have reason to expect the event to radiate faith, hope, and love. The mission of “good news” should be reflected in every way possible.

A Two-Part Call

Mennonite Brethren Christians can enjoy a unique position in the wider Christian community when they understand the gospel in terms of both evangelism and social concern. We must without reservation call people to repentance and reformation of life in Jesus. We must be clear and culturally accessible in this proclamation and live out the social implications of the good news by caring for those in need and proclaiming God’s peace and justice in the wider community.

The news of God's reconciling love is holistic, encompassing spiritual, social, relational, and physical aspects of human experience. The atonement that Jesus accomplished was to redeem the spiritual and physical creation. As ambassadors of reconciliation, we proclaim in word and deed the all-encompassing nature of Christ's redemptive power. We must give the cup of water and we must do it in Jesus' name!

Historically, Mennonite Brethren have been leaders in cooperative ventures to meet physical needs in Christ's name. Although structures are changing, the strong tradition of cooperating with other Anabaptist denominations in the work of Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Mutual Aid, Mennonite Economic Development Agency, and the like needs to be continued. Loving neighbor and obeying the lordship of Christ involves both communicating God's love verbally and demonstrating it through our actions (Matt. 25:31-46).

Growing a Healthy Church

We can accomplish the church's mission only to the extent that the church itself is healthy. Mennonite Brethren use various tools to encourage congregational health. Essential elements for healthy congregational life include empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships. A leadership team that knows where the congregation should be going provides visionary leadership. Leaders call out people for active ministry, motivate them, and equip them for ministry. This mobilization of gifts encourages members to use the gifts they have to do the work they enjoy most and can do most effectively.

The decisive factor in congregational health is passionate spirituality. When Christians live their faith enthusiastically and with growing commitment, the church grows in health. Inspiring worship is characterized by active participation by the people, whether the forms are more liturgical or free, more contemporary or traditional. Growing congregations use small groups to provide a secure environment, personal relationships, and the opportunity to share spiritual experiences. These small groups enable brothers and sisters in the faith to grow as disciples. Evangelism that uses as its starting point the needs of the people who are to be reached is relational evangelism. This does not negate the theocentricity of evangelism, calling people to submit to God's sovereignty, but understands that the gospel addresses all aspects of life. In growing churches the relationships of people to one another are characterized by a high degree of love and caring for those inside and outside the church.

A Vision as Wide as the World

Historically we have defined ourselves as a missionary movement. This over-arching theme has inspired great missionary endeavors around the world. It may also explain why the “Mission Church” is considerably larger than the “Sending Church.” As a denomination, we have consistently shown ourselves ready to pledge our lives and our fortunes to spreading the gospel around the globe. Indeed some of us may have done this to the exclusion of our responsibility to take the good news to our own neighbors and those who are different from us in our own community.

Here again we must emphasize the multifaceted nature of our commission. “As you are going, make disciples...” is probably the correct reading of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). If so, the responsibility falls on all of us wherever we are going. Because the call to follow Jesus is to all, however, we must not lose the urgency of sending credible witnesses not only to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, but also to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It is the responsibility of the local church to foster compassion for those in need, a vision for the lost world, a prayer focus for mission workers and the world, and a plan for sending workers into mission (Matt. 9:35-10:1).

Christian Baptism

Confession

We believe that when people receive God's gift of salvation, they are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism is a sign of having been cleansed from sin. It is a covenant with the church to walk in the way of Christ through the power of the Spirit.

Meaning

Baptism by water is a public sign that a person has repented of sins, received forgiveness of sins, died with Christ to sin, been raised to newness of life and received the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a sign of the believer's incorporation into the body of Christ as expressed in the local church. Baptism is also a pledge to serve Christ according to the gifts given to each person.

Eligibility

Baptism is for those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commit themselves to follow Christ in obedience as members of the local church. Baptism is for those who understand its meaning, are able to be accountable to Christ and the church, and voluntarily request it on the basis of their faith response to Jesus Christ.

Practice

We practice water baptism by immersion administered by the local church. Local congregations may receive into membership those who have been baptized by another mode on their confession of faith. Persons who claim baptism as infants and wish to become members of a Mennonite Brethren congregation are to receive baptism on their confession of faith.

Matt. 3:13-17; 28:18-20; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:2-6; I Cor. 12:13; Col. 2:12-13; Gal. 3:26-27; Eph. 4:4-6.

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Christian Baptism

COMMENTARY

Baptism is a very important act in the New Testament. The Great Commission highlights its significance. The only command in the commission is to “make disciples of all nations.” The command is defined by two explanatory phrases, “baptizing them” and “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded” (Matt. 28:19-20). Discipling involves baptizing and teaching. Why baptism? Because baptism means death to the past, cleansing from sin, and incorporation into a new community of faith. People cannot be discipled apart from their liberation from the bonds of the past and their recentering in a new community of faith. The missionary assignment given the church by Christ is to disciple people by baptizing them and instructing them to observe the teachings of Jesus.

It is important to remember that the early church was a first generation movement, and everyone entering the church was a first generation believer. Conversion and baptism were essentially one event; the faith decision, receiving of the Holy Spirit, and incorporation into the church (baptism) occurred in very close relation to each other.

The meaning of baptism is interpreted in 11 primary texts in the New Testament (Rom. 6:3; 1 Cor. 6:11; 10:2; 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5; 5:26; Col. 2:12; Tit. 3:5; Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 3:21). These make it clear that the term “baptism” has different meanings in particular texts. Each text must be examined in order to put together the puzzle of the larger whole.

Baptism as Incorporation

Romans 6:3, Galatians 3:27, 1 Corinthians 10:2 and 12:13 define baptism as incorporation.

Romans 6:3 and Galatians 3:27 describe baptism as “into Christ.” The phrase means incorporation into the community of which Jesus is the head, not only the initiation of a mystical union with Christ, or an individual relationship with him. The meaning of incorporation in Romans 6:3 is underlined by a parallel phrase in 1 Corinthians 10:2. There baptism is spoken of as “into Moses.” This does not refer to baptism into an individual relationship with Moses, but into the people of whom he was the head or leader.

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Baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13 is “into one body,” into the church of which Christ is the head. Baptism means to become part of the people of whom Christ is the head, the leader. Baptism as incorporation means leaving one’s past and becoming one with the church of Jesus Christ. The Acts 2:47 reference to the Lord adding “to their number daily those who were being saved” describes the incorporation of new people into the church.

Baptism as Cleansing

First Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 5:26, Titus 3:5, and Hebrews 10:22 speak of baptism as cleansing.

Immoral behavior in 1 Corinthians 6:11 is declared inappropriate for Christians because they have been washed and sanctified. The “washing” is usually understood as a reference to baptism. Baptism signifies a cleansing from sin that makes sinning inappropriate.

One evidence that Christ loved the church in Ephesians 5:26 is that he cleansed “her by the washing with water through the word” in order that the church may be pure, holy, without blemish. The “washing with water” is usually interpreted as baptism.

Titus 3:5 describes the salvation effected by Christ as “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Again, the washing reference is another way of speaking of baptism, this time linked with the reception of the Holy Spirit.

In Hebrews 10:22 Christians are exhorted to approach the presence of God “having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” The washing of the body with pure water is a reference to baptism. Baptism involves cleansing that enables Christians to enter the presence of the holy God.

Baptism represents a cleansing from sin that makes former life patterns inappropriate, and that opens access to the presence of God. This aspect of baptism is in continuity with the practice of baptism in Judaism and by John the Baptist (“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”—Mark 1:4).

Baptism as Unity

First Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:27, and Ephesians 4:5 link baptism and unity or oneness.

Baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13 incorporates people “into one body” which affects sociological unity in the church. Jew and Greek, slave and free are united into one community, and one Spirit nurtures all. Baptism has the same consequence in Galatians 3:27. It erases the critical distinctions between people, Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/

female. Different people and social classes are united through baptism into Christ.

Baptism means oneness in Ephesians 4:5, as does one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God. Baptism unites diverse people into one people. Baptism signifies unity in the church, creating one body out of very different people, even former enemies.

Baptism as New Life

Colossians 2:12 associates baptism with new life in Christ. Fullness of life in Christ is a function of being circumcised with Christ (meaning, died in his death), being buried with Christ in baptism, and being raised through the faithful working of God.

Baptism is associated with new life, the life of the kingdom of God, and fullness of life in Christ.

Baptism as Salvation

One baptism text, 1 Peter 3:21, is notoriously difficult. It links baptism and salvation, the only such explicit association in the New Testament. According to the passage the water of Christian baptism corresponds to, is a type of, the water which saved Noah and his family.

The meaning of baptism as salvation is clarified by a “not/but” phrase: “not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God.” The “removal of dirt from the body” can be read as a reference to moral cleansing, as in James 1:21. That meaning is underscored in the next phrase, “the pledge of a good conscience toward God.” “Good conscience” is synonymous with “pure heart”; it refers to genuine inward purity. Baptism is not asking God for “a good conscience” but results from “a good conscience.” The “pledge to God” is an action directed toward God. In this passage moral cleansing is presupposed by the act of water baptism.

How does baptism save? Probably in a way similar to something Jesus said on several occasions in the Gospels, “your faith has saved you.” Salvation requires both a divine initiative and a human response. The “not/but” phrase qualifies the statement that baptism saves. It saves in that it follows the process of repentance and cleansing that produces a good conscience, which in turn constitutes a pledge on behalf of the baptized person to God.

The Meaning of Baptism

Baptism means the incorporation of people who have been cleansed from sin and gifted with new life into the church as one body. Each component meaning of baptism is significant. Baptism is a powerful

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sociological event. It incorporates believers into the church. It erases all of the cultural, racial, ethnic, class, and gender distinctions that divide people in the world. Baptism effects community and levels the ground in the community.

Baptism is also a powerful salvation event. It involves a process of profound repentance and cleansing from sin and evil. And it is associated with a new quality of life, the life of the kingdom of God, a life of fullness in Christ.

The New Testament texts on baptism teach that baptism is vitally connected to these ideas of incorporation, unity, cleansing, and new life. It is important as the first means identified by Jesus in discipling people. Baptism links a series of actions and decisions that change people: repentance and cleansing, incorporation into the community of the church, oneness with the people in the church.

Historically baptism has been interpreted either sacramentally, as mediating the grace of God, or symbolically, as symbolizing an internal reality that has occurred. Anabaptists have rejected the sacramental understanding of baptism and opted for a symbolic meaning. However, a more holistic understanding walks between the two options. Baptism is less than sacrament, but more than symbol. It effects real change that reflects both divine grace and human reality. It does this in close association with the faith decision (repentance and trust) and the receipt of the Holy Spirit, and not apart from them.

Mennonite Brethren have used the term “sign” to express this meaning. A “sign” is a biblical term that refers first of all to an act of God (God delivered Israel from Egypt, Exod. 10:1, Num. 14:11; Jesus performed signs, John 2:11, 12:37, 20:30; the apostles did signs and wonders, Acts 4:16, 6:8, Rom. 15:19). Second, a sign also refers to human action (the Israelites put blood on their doorposts as a sign, Exod. 12:13; unleavened bread was a sign, Exod. 13:9; the law was given to Israel as a sign, Deut. 6:8; the Sabbath was a sign, Exod. 31:13, Ezek. 20:20).

While the New Testament does not describe baptism as a sign, it can be understood in this way. It represents both God’s saving action in Jesus Christ and the response of human beings to God’s action. It is a sign of God’s faithfulness to the covenant with believers, and the commitment of believers to follow God faithfully in the midst of His covenant people. As such, it effects change in the lives of people.

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Christian Baptism

PASTORAL APPLICATION

The transition from belief to practice in the ordinances of the church can be difficult, perhaps even more so than with other confessional articles. Following are some of the practical issues we grapple with in practicing the teachings of the confession in the area of baptism.

The Importance of Teaching

Clear and adequate teaching on the meaning of baptism is always important for the church and especially for those being baptized.

Many people who become Christians today do not understand the necessity of baptism, and have never been present at a baptism. Careful biblical teaching helps such persons understand that baptism is more than just an outward physical act. We want persons being baptized to appreciate and experience the full benefit of this act of obedience to Christ. Therefore it is important that each facet of baptism be clearly taught and understood.

Most of us grow in our understanding of baptism over time. Like other important decisions in life, the value of baptism grows for us as we learn more about its meaning. The more we can help people make this a mature and responsible act, the richer the value will be for them and for the church.

The Age of Baptism

Since we understand baptism to be a highly visual, public sign of new life in Christ, it is natural to baptize persons as soon as possible after the conversion experience. In fact, in the New Testament conversion and baptism are linked as two parts of the same experience. This is because the early church was a first generation church and it was mostly adults who became believers. However, in following generations with the conversion of children, often at a very early age, it became a more difficult matter.

The confessional statement seeks to address this matter by introducing three qualifying statements as general principles. First, “baptism is for those who understand its meaning”; second, it is for those who “are able to be accountable to Christ and the church”; and third, it is for those who “voluntarily request it on the basis of their faith

response to Jesus Christ.” These three statements should not be interpreted in a simplistic sense; rather, they should be interpreted in the light of the “Meaning” section of the confession. For example, candidates should be able to demonstrate understanding and personalization of the five statements which explain salvation: having “repented of sins,” having “received forgiveness of sins,” having “died with Christ to sin,” having “been raised to newness of life” and having “received the Holy Spirit.”

A temptation pastors face is to acquiesce to the pressure to baptize young children. Though their understanding of salvation may represent an authentic initial spiritual experience, it may not represent an adequate understanding for baptism. Therefore, considerable sensitivity and discernment are needed both to avoid quenching the inner aspirations of the young believer, and to avoid trivializing the ordinance by baptizing children who do not have an adequate understanding of the act.

Baptism Without Incorporation into the Local Church

Since we believe that baptism is the “sign of the believer’s incorporation into the body of Christ as expressed in the local church,” we have tied baptism and membership in a local church together. The local church is the expression of Christ’s body on earth.

There is considerable pressure today to separate baptism from church membership. This attitude reflects the increasing tendency towards individualism in our culture. Accountability and submission are not readily accepted concepts. Since our North American societies are driven by constitutional guarantees of personal rights, the call to mutual submission and accountability is strange language to many believers.

Increasingly converts want baptism but not incorporation into the local church, which demands accountability, submission, service, and stewardship of time and resources. Some converts see themselves as members of the universal church but not the local church.

At the heart of this matter is the question of the relevance of belonging to a church. For many persons there is a longing to belong to God but a hesitancy to commit to a particular congregation. The church is often seen as an institution which is more of a hindrance to maturity and service than a blessing which enhances Christian faith.

The problem can be addressed in several ways. First, we must never deny the personal nature of the Christian faith. But we also must not confuse the personal nature of salvation with individualism.

Second, we must teach the biblical truth that Christians need each other just as one organ or tissue of the body needs the others in order to function and to be sustained. The importance of systematic and thorough teaching of what it means to be part of Christ's body, the church, cannot be over emphasized. Third, we must work more intentionally at creating communities of faith where each member is held in esteem, where members find an affirmation of giftedness, where Christians are built up and admonished, and where service to Christ and each other is encouraged. Fourth, as leaders we must model the meaning of life in the body with each other and with Christ as the head of the body. Finally, it is important to conduct baptism in the context of a local church body, and to make the event an experience which the entire body shares. Individual, small group, or camp/retreat baptisms are generally not ideal for the individual or the church.

The Rebaptism Question

Our confessional statement affirms that "Persons who claim baptism as infants and wish to become members of a Mennonite Brethren congregation are to receive baptism on their confession of faith."

Two pastoral issues are relevant in this area. The first involves people who, a long time after making some kind of commitment to Christ, have a life-changing faith renewal experience. The new experience calls into question the earlier commitment. Such people may assume that the earlier experience, including baptism, was meaningless and needs to be repeated. Pastoral discernment here is critical. It may be that the person in fact has entered into a personal relationship with Christ for the first time, and therefore needs to be baptized. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for important experiences or decisions of life to be more fully understood long after the event or in light of new experiences. New experiences need to be integrated with former experiences for life to be whole. Therefore, the most appropriate pastoral response is to help integrate the old and the new rather than to invalidate the old. Married people understand that the marriage ceremony does not reflect the depth of relationship which develops over time, and sometimes much later in life. The later experiences do not invalidate the initial commitment and ceremony, but build on it.

The second pastoral issue concerns new persons coming to our congregations from traditions in which they were baptized as infants. Two different issues often emerge for such people. First is the validity of the prior baptism, or the relation of the infant baptism to the believer's baptism. For the parents of the individuals the original

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baptism was most likely a thoughtful and important act. Nothing is accomplished by putting down the infant baptism, or by comparing the two experiences in a competitive way. It is better to acknowledge the earlier baptism for what it was: the result of well-meaning parents seeking what they understood to be best for the child. We are then free to teach the purpose and value of baptism into Christ and the church as mature believers. We should try to clarify our understanding of biblical teaching without reflecting negatively on the good intentions of parents or on a meaningful family act. It may be helpful for the pastor to tell the church as part of the believer's baptism event that the person was presented for baptism by his or her parents and that what is occurring now is different. This can become a teaching opportunity helpful for others with a similar background. In many cases it may also be wise to suggest that a person explain in advance to family and friends the decision to be baptized as an adult, and to invite family and friends to be present for the baptism.

It is important to recognize that the issue can become further complicated when persons have made a verbal confession of faith at the time of their confirmation, which they may see as their personal statement of believing faith. In other words, we baptize after the personal statement of faith; they have been baptized before the statement of faith, though that statement may well have been given with all sincerity, integrity, and belief.

The second issue involving those baptized as infants is the leadership/service qualifications of non-rebaptized persons. Often these are mature believers, well-instructed in the Christian faith, who have become involved in our church life. Having not taken part in believer's baptism, however, they are disqualified from membership in the local congregation. This problem is often compounded because in such cases some congregations place no restrictions on service in the church; others allow non-leadership service; others ban all types of formal service in the church. Each of these practices can create pastoral problems.

All we can do is counsel patience and understanding for such persons. Often through time they either come to accept rebaptism; or they simply stay with the church as fellowshiping adherents and never join the church; or they eventually fade away to another congregation which has a more open view of membership.

ARTICLE 9

Lord's Supper

Meaning

The church observes the Lord's Supper, as instituted by Christ. The Supper points to Christ, whose body was broken for us and whose blood was shed to assure salvation for believers and to establish the new covenant. In the Supper the church identifies with the life of Christ given for the redemption of humanity and proclaims the Lord's death until he comes. The Supper expresses the fellowship and unity of all believers with Christ. It is a supper of remembrance, celebration and praise which strengthens believers for true discipleship and service.

Practice

In preparation for the fellowship of the Lord's Supper, all believers examine themselves. All those who understand its meaning, confess Jesus Christ as Lord in word and life, are accountable to their congregation and are living in right relationship with God and others are invited to participate in the Lord's Supper. The normal pattern in the New Testament was that baptism preceded participation in the Lord's Supper.

Matt. 26:26-30; Acts 2:41-42; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:23-32.

Lord's Supper

COMMENTARY

The institution of the Lord's Supper is narrated in four accounts in the New Testament: Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-22; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. The Supper is interpreted by five themes in these accounts.

Major Themes

Three themes are common in all four accounts of the Lord's Supper. One theme is "this is my body" in reference to the bread. A second theme is the association of the blood of Christ and the establishment of a covenant ("This is my blood of the covenant" in Matthew and Mark; "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" in Luke and 1 Corinthians 11). The third theme is the Supper as an anticipation of the future ("not drink . . . until that day" in Matthew, Mark, Luke; "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" in 1 Corinthians). The central meaning of the Lord's Supper is defined by these three themes.

The Lord's Supper, first of all, points to the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Second, the Lord's Supper is a covenant event; it establishes a covenant between God and the people of God. Third, the Supper points to eschatological fulfillment and the messianic banquet.

The historical roots of the Lord's Supper are the context for understanding the death of Christ and the establishment of a covenant. The Supper was observed as part of the Jewish Passover, the great event of liberation and salvation of Israel through the Exodus. Salvation through blood/death and the establishment of God's covenant with Israel are the key components of meaning in the Passover. The Lord's Supper during Passover signals the inauguration of a new exodus from bondage to liberation and the inauguration of a new covenant. The people of the new covenant are those who accept God's salvation through Jesus Christ and who enter the covenant community established by the life and death of Jesus.

Additional Themes

In addition to the three central themes, two others are found in the various accounts. First, the cup as a symbol of Christ's atoning death is added to the "covenant" interpretation in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The “cup of blood” is “poured out for many for forgiveness” in Matthew, the cup “poured out for many” in Mark, the cup “poured out for you” in Luke. Jesus’ death as a covenant event offers forgiveness of sin to the people of the covenant.

Second, the Lord’s Supper is described as an event of remembrance in Luke and 1 Corinthians 11. It reminds believers of the life and death of Christ for them to establish the covenant.

These themes represent the continuity of past, present, and future. Christ died in the past in order to forgive and establish a new covenant in the present that is to be fulfilled in the future.

Covenantal Implications

In addition to the interpretations of the Lord’s Supper within the four narratives of the Supper, Paul outlines two interpretations of the Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 11:27-34. Both interpretations center on the covenant theme. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul is combating the problem of idolatry. He reverses the order of the Supper; the cup precedes the bread in the interpretation. The sacrificial element is connected more explicitly to the covenant theme. The sacrificial death of Jesus is for the establishment of a covenant, a covenant of oneness, a body, a partnership of being. Because Christ is one, the body of Christ or the covenant community is one. The Supper produces an intimate relationship among those who participate. The oneness with Christ and each other precludes a covenant or partnership with the gods behind the idols.

Paul interprets the meaning of the church in terms of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34. The sacrifice of Christ does not only establish a relationship between the individual and Christ; it also establishes the covenant community of God’s people. Paul interprets the “this is my body” phrase to refer to the church. “Recognizing the body” (v. 29) means to see the connection between belonging to Christ and belonging to the church. Failure to practice oneness within the church shows that one does not belong to Christ, and thus is subject to judgment. The problem in Corinth is that people were fragmenting the covenant community which God established through Christ by disregarding their unity as members of the body. The members of the church are exhorted to heal the divisions among them and “to wait each other” so that the Supper may represent the oneness in Christ and the church.

Observance

The Supper as covenant and as remembrance explains why the early church observed the Supper often, probably at every gathering

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of believers in house churches and in larger gatherings. Israel renewed the covenant by remembering the exodus in Passover. Christians renew the covenant by remembering the life and death of Jesus.

Meaning

In the larger Christian church the Lord's Supper has often been interpreted sacramentally (it mediates the grace of God) or symbolically (it symbolizes an internal reality). As in the case of baptism, we interpret the Lord's Supper as less than sacrament but more than symbol. Mennonite Brethren have used "sign" to talk about the meaning of the Supper. It represents both God's saving action and new covenant in Christ, and the recommitment of believers to faithfulness in covenant with God and fellow believers. Believers are reunited with Christ in the event and with each other. That is why the Supper is often called "communion." It both represents and effects community—renewed fellowship with Christ and with fellow believers. The Supper also is called "eucharist," which simply means "thanksgiving," because it celebrates God's salvation and covenant through Christ and looks forward to the eschatological fulfillment of Christ's kingdom. The Supper is called "the Lord's Supper" or "Lord's Table" because Christ established it and invites believers to participate in the Supper.

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Lord's Supper

PASTORAL APPLICATION

The Lord's Supper has a long history. The roots of the Lord's Supper are found in the Exodus event of Israel's national history.

Setting the Stage

God instituted the Passover meal to remind Israel that salvation from bondage in Egypt was at great cost. The lamb which was slain and eaten on Passover night, and whose blood was applied to the door posts of the homes of the covenant people, was to be an eternal witness to the salvation which God would miraculously provide (see Exodus 12:1-30).

The disciples of Jesus, on the night before his execution, ate the Passover meal together with Jesus. On his instruction, the meaning of the Passover was changed to symbolize the sacrifice and salvation provided by Jesus the Lamb of God (Matt. 26:17ff.; Luke 22:7ff.; Mark 14:12ff.; John 13:21ff.), whose atoning death ended forever the need for animals to be sacrificed.

Jesus promised that this meal would continue on into eternity where, after his atoning death, resurrection, and ascension, he would drink new wine with his bride, the new people of God, in his kingdom (Matt. 26:29).

So, when the church gathers to partake of the Lord's Supper it brings not only all of biblical salvation history into memory, but also projects its thinking forward to the day when we will drink new wine with the Savior in paradise.

The Need for a Pastoral Application

The Scriptures provide us with some clear teaching regarding the meaning and practice of the Lord's Supper, but we do not have finely-tuned details to address the practical questions which arise in our church life. The call to practice the Lord's Supper is clearly taught in the Scriptures but since our culture is so far removed from the New Testament days, we need to think carefully about its meaning and practice in our times and in our churches. The paragraphs which follow are intended to address some of the practical issues facing our churches as we seek to be true to our understanding of the biblical teaching concerning the Lord's Supper.

The Importance of Teaching its Meaning

We can no longer assume that all who attend our congregations understand the Lord's Supper in the same way. It is important that we clearly teach what we understand the Bible to say about this commemorative meal. Three issues will need to be addressed.

First, we as Anabaptists understand the Lord's Supper to be a "sign" event. This is in contrast to other Christian traditions which believe in transubstantiation (the belief that when the elements of the Lord's Supper are sanctified through prayer they actually become the physical flesh and blood of Christ) or in consubstantiation (the belief that when the elements are sanctified through prayer, the real presence of the Lord Jesus is in and around and among them).

The Anabaptist position is that the Supper is an ordinance and not a sacrament. Grace, pardon, forgiveness, and new covenant are not effected through participation in the Supper, but rather participation in the Supper represents the fact that grace has been accepted and people have entered a new covenant relationship and community. In the Supper we eat and drink to the reality that we are the redeemed people of God. In participating, we acknowledge the sacrificial death of Christ on our behalf, our incorporation into the new covenant people of God, and celebrate our union with Christ in the church.

Second, the Lord's Supper is uniquely a church event. The normal pattern in the New Testament is that baptism precedes participation in the Lord's Supper. Our historic practice also required baptism as a prerequisite to participation in the Lord's Supper. It is the church which celebrates its union with Christ. Care must be given so that the Lord's Supper does not become something other than a celebration of our unity with Christ. For example, we strongly discourage using this symbolic meal at weddings to symbolize the union of a woman and a man in marriage.

Third, it is important that we understand the context of the Lord's Supper. It calls us to the past, to remember that which has happened in history and to us; it calls us to the present, to examine ourselves in the light of the new life to which we have been born again; and it calls us to the future, to do this repeatedly until the end of history.

The nature and all-inclusiveness of the Lord's Supper, in that it embraces all three tenses of human experience, means that care must be given that we do not rush into it nor lead the church mechanically through its practice. In a world where we seldom stop to reflect on the meaning of our faith-life, the Lord's Supper calls us to silence and reflection. Celebration in this setting flows from us to God through thoughtfulness and meditation.

The Administration of the Lord's Supper

Many questions are voiced regarding the matter of who may administer the elements of the Lord's Supper. Must a pastor be present? Who may distribute/serve the elements? May a family have a legitimate Lord's Supper in the home? Can it be practiced at youth retreats, camp weekends, and other such gatherings away from the home congregations? May shut-ins have the Lord's Supper privately in homes and hospital rooms?

The confessional statement addresses these matters only by inference, noting that it is "the church" which observes the Lord's Supper. It then appears that what the church sanctions is approved for practice.

Further, the New Testament does not assign the leading of the Lord's Supper to clergy. In fact, the New Testament goes in the opposite direction by assigning priesthood to all believers. At the same time, the church "binds and looses," so it is expected to provide guidance and direction in order to preserve the meal's integrity and holiness. Many of the New Testament churches met in homes where the Lord's Supper was regularly celebrated in small groupings, but they were not leaderless. There is something very intimate and powerful about a small gathering focusing attention on salvation through participation at the Lord's Table. Care must be given that the Lord's Supper not become trivialized.

The matter of frequency is also an issue. Some church traditions celebrate weekly, others monthly, some even annually. Many Mennonite Brethren congregations have settled on a pattern of about once a month. This seems to provide an effective guard against it becoming an empty, oft-repeated ritual, and yet offers adequate frequency of opportunity to express thankfulness and joy in salvation.

In our tradition small pieces of bread and grape juice are usually used as elements. Though most of our churches no longer serve wine, there are still some congregations who choose to do so. In a day when both voluntary and clinical abstinence may be necessary, this also needs consideration and review.

It may be helpful to vary the bread symbol occasionally to help reinforce the idea that the elements are the sign rather than the reality. The settings may also vary. It may be a workable idea to combine the Lord's Supper with a meal occasionally so that both fellowship with God and with believers are set side by side.

Participation in the Lord's Supper

In recent years some congregations have chosen to invite believers who are not baptized to join in the Lord's Supper. This raises a num-

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ber of questions. Who is invited to the Lord's Supper? Who may participate in its practice? This matter may be addressed at several levels.

First, it is imperative that it be the *Lord's* table. He is the convener, the one who invites us to participate. The participants are those who have heeded the invitation to become the people of God, the bride, the church. There is a very intentional exclusiveness to this invitation. Only those who have made a deliberate personal choice to believe in Jesus as Savior, have repented of their sins, and have received forgiveness of sin and eternal life are invited to the Lord's Table.

The second issue is the age of readiness. When are young Christians old enough to participate in the Lord's Supper? The confessional statement puts it this way: "All those who have understood its meaning, confess Jesus Christ as Lord in word and life, are accountable to their congregation and are living in right relationship with God and others are invited to participate in the Lord's Supper."

Children usually think more concretely than abstractly. To understand the Lord's Supper means that one must be able to separate event from symbol. The confessional statement infers this kind of stance when it states that the Supper "points to Christ" and that in the Supper "the church identifies with the life of Christ."

When preadolescent children and/or their parents press for participation, a gentle shepherding visit to review the confessional material is wise. It is well to affirm children for their love for Christ and their desire to follow and obey him. This can become the foundation for a discussion which will help them to begin to understand what they do not yet know in fullness. It is usually wise to reassure children that waiting will result in a more mature and joyful participation in the event.

Another issue is the call to self-examination before participation in the Lord's Supper. If this self-examination results in the need for confession or restoration, it is preferred that this be dealt with immediately. Each believer in the congregation is to live in mutual accountability. First Corinthians 11:27-32 infers that when repentance and confession have been made, participation is encouraged. Resistance to repentance is grounds for non-participation. If confession will have to be accomplished following the Lord's Supper, a heart commitment to do so is adequate preparation for participation.

There is another side to this question that needs pastoral counsel and leadership. The Lord's Supper by definition is for us as humans, women and men who are marked by sinfulness. It is sinners saved by grace who are invited to this Supper. If we overemphasize the ideal of moral perfection and under emphasize the redeeming grace of Christ, we will tend to focus attention on our unworthiness rather

than to celebrate our new status as adopted children of God.

Finally, we are comforted by the knowledge that God sees the heart and inner life of each believer. Some will feel unworthy and will not participate while others who are unworthy will participate anyway. In the end, it is God's table, and God is the final arbiter of all that happens at His table.

Discipleship

Following Jesus

We believe that Jesus calls people who have experienced the joy of new birth to follow him as disciples. By calling his followers to take up the cross, Christ invites them to reject the godless values of the world and offer themselves to God in a life of service. The Holy Spirit, who lives in every Christian, empowers believers to overcome the acts and attitudes of the sinful nature. Filled with love and gratitude, disciples delight to obey God.

United in a Distinct Community

Christians enjoy fellowship with God and other believers. At baptism believers are joined to the local church, commit themselves to build up the body of Christ and witness to the good news of the Christian hope. In community members grow in maturity as they demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit, use their spiritual gifts and practice mutual accountability in the disciplines of the Christian life. Christians confess sin, repent and experience God's grace in the life of the Christian community.

Demonstrating True Faith

Jesus teaches that discipleship is the way of self-denial and promises blessing for those who suffer for righteousness. Disciples are to resist worldly values and systems, the sinful nature and the devil. Disciples give generously and reject materialism which makes a god out of wealth. Disciples treat others with compassion and gentleness and reject violence as a response to injustice. Disciples speak honestly to build others up and reject dishonest, vulgar and careless talk; they seek to avoid lawsuits to resolve personal grievances, especially with other believers. Disciples maintain sexual purity and marital faithfulness and reject immoral premarital and extramarital relationships and all homosexual practices. To be a disciple means to be true to Jesus in everyday life.

Ps. 1; 119; Amos 5:24; Matt. 5-7; 18:15-20; Mark 8:34-38; John 8: 31-32; 13:34-35; 15:14-15; Acts 2:41-47; Rom. 1:24-32; 8:1-30; 12; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 11:1; 12:1-13; 2 Cor. 8-9; Gal. 2:20; 5:16-26; 6:1-2; Eph. 4:11-12, 15-16; 5:1, 18; Phil. 2:6-8; Col. 3:1-17; 1 Thess. 4:3-8; 5:17; 1 Tim. 1:9-11; 2:1-8; 4:6-8; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Heb. 12:1-3; 13:4-5; James 1:22-27; 4:7; 1 Pet. 2:20-25; 3:15; 5:8-9; 1 John 1:3, 6-9; 2:15-17.

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Discipleship

COMMENTARY

Jesus commanded the disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). We call this the Great Commission. Jesus called for people to imitate his lifelong commitment to God. Discipleship involves the decisive act of the will to commit oneself to live as a follower of Christ as the Bible teaches. Discipleship involves following Jesus in personal commitment to him, uniting in a distinct community with other believers, growing up into Christ through spiritual disciplines, and demonstrating true faith through an obedient lifestyle.

Following Jesus

Discipleship begins with a personal commitment of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Bible refers to this commitment as the new birth (John 3:3-8; 1 Pet. 1:3). When people commit themselves to Jesus Christ, they receive the gift of eternal life (John 1:12) and they commit themselves to live as Jesus did (1 John 2:4-6). One of the marks of genuine new birth is the desire to obey the commands of Jesus.

In the contemporary world the term “discipleship” may be foreign to those unfamiliar with Christianity. In the world in which Jesus ministered the concept of following a master, or becoming a disciple, was commonplace. Disciples were students who committed themselves to learning from a master teacher. The discipleship Jesus offered involved not only learning his teachings but also committing to follow Jesus by imitating his life. In this article we seek to describe what following, or imitating, Jesus means.

Disciples do not conform themselves to the pattern of the present age but have their lives and mindsets transformed in their aim to please God (Rom. 12:1-2). The concept of a present age as opposed to the new age in which God rules is Pauline. Paul writes of “this world” as a complex of political and spiritual powers seeking to control and warp human thinking. Paul speaks of a battle for the minds of humanity (2 Cor. 10:4-5). He envisions a battle between the believers and the spiritual evil forces that follow the ruler of the sinful kingdom (Eph. 2:1-3; 6:10-18). The present age is contrasted with the

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new age, the inbreaking reign of God which has already begun (2 Cor. 5:17) but has not yet been fully revealed.

In this new era of God's reign disciples are marked by a servant lifestyle. Service involves both worshiping God and meeting human need. True religion involves both praising God and serving fellow humans (Heb. 13:15-16; James 1:27).

All believers are baptized by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). All believers have received the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9), and all are called to be continually filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). Spirit-filling is the equivalent of being obedient to the commands of Christ. Spirit-filled Christians have an obligation to live as God's children (Rom. 8:12-17). Paul uses the image of stripping off the sinful lifestyle and being clothed with righteous deeds (Eph. 4:17-5:21; Col. 3:5-17). The image of putting to death the old self and putting on new life is also suggested (Rom. 6:1-4).

United in a Distinct Community

Discipleship is not a solitary lifestyle. When Jesus called the initial disciples, it was a call not just to follow him but to join a community of followers. In the contemporary culture which values rugged individualism but recognizes personal inadequacy, the call to community offers hope. The Scriptures teach that the community is a source of support and encouragement for those in need (Gal. 6:1-2). In the community believers are to be accountable to and for one another (Matt. 5:23-26; 18:15-20).

We teach that baptism is not only a personal witness of new life in Christ but also a commitment to join Christ's body as expressed in the local congregation (1 Cor. 12:13; Acts 2:41-47). Through baptism and church membership disciples acknowledge their task to build up Christ's body (Eph. 4:16). Each individual is called to witness for Christ (Acts 1:8). At the same time the church witnesses corporately through its proclamation and lifestyle.

Growing Up into Christ

Discipleship is learned by doing. Christians grow in their faith by practicing the classical spiritual disciplines. The Bible is the believers' guide for faith and practice. Followers of Jesus heed the biblical admonition to read, meditate on, and memorize the Word (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2; 19:7-14; 119:9,11,105; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:14-17).

In the conflict with the antichristian world system, prayer is the weapon that protects and fortifies the believer. Through prayer the Christian communicates with God. Prayer and fasting give strength for the battle with the demonic world (Mark 9:29; Eph. 6:10-18) and

become the means by which the Spirit directs the church (Acts 13:1-3). In prayer believers ask God for the courage to be faithful witnesses (Acts 4:29-30; Col. 4:4). Prayer offers communion with God and comfort in times of testing.

Confession of sin has largely become a private act in the contemporary church. Historically, the reasons for this privatization are at least twofold. First, Protestants reacted against the abuses of the confessional rites of the medieval Roman Catholic Church by eliminating the practice altogether. Second, although confession of sins characterized early Anabaptists, an excessively legalistic practice of banning and other extreme forms of church discipline have also contributed to the present situation. Biblical teaching is clear, however, that believers should confess their sins one to another (James 5:16).

Disciples are also characterized by the discipline of sharing resources within the community. Members are to use their spiritual gifts to build up the body (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:7). Material resources are to be shared as there is need (Deut. 15:7-11; 2 Cor. 8:13-15).

The Scriptures teach that growth is God's gift and also that growth results from personal and corporate disciplines. Nowhere is the juxtaposition clearer than in Philippians 2:12-13. From the human perspective, growth in Christ involves work—specifically, the call to obedience. From God's viewpoint, growth is a gift—something that God purposes and produces.

Demonstrating True Faith

The New Testament leaves little doubt that two antagonistic systems are at war for humankind. Galatians 5:16-26 not only provides a list of competing characteristics but also offers the image of conflict between the Spirit and the sinful nature. In 1 John 2:15-17 we read that love for the world is antithetical to loving God. In a world of pluralism and tolerance the biblical message of conflicting systems may sound outdated. The conflict may at times be more insidious and less obvious, but the battle is, if anything, even fiercer in our day.

For Jesus, the essence of discipleship involved death to self (Mark 8:34-38). Jesus himself understood his mission as one which was leading inevitably to death on the cross. As Christians we understand that Jesus' death had an unrepeatable, substitutionary character. Romans 5:6-11 teaches that Christ died for us.

Jesus also taught that his death to self was a model for disciples to follow. We understand that death to self by definition demands self-denial. Self-denial involves an attitude that surrenders the right of insisting on personal vindication. Cross-bearing puts that attitude into acts of obedience to Jesus despite any cost. For many believers

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cross-bearing has meant and continues to mean persecution and martyrdom. To accept Christ's lordship removes control of our lives from self and places it in the sovereign love of God. As slaves to Christ, we are called to follow Jesus to death without regard for personal comfort or safety.

Article 10 lists several antithetical statements that describe death to self in practical terms. Disciples reject materialism and are stewards of financial resources (see Article 15). They reject violence and follow the Christian call to love and nonresistance (see Article 13). Disciples reject dishonest behavior and are called to show integrity by speaking honestly and by doing business in a fair manner (see Article 12). Disciples reject immorality and commit to be sexually pure (see Article 11).

In summary, following Christ must be demonstrated in life. The church has expressed this notion throughout the ages. When confronted by a believer who argued in favor of continuing his pagan trade because he must live, the church father Tertullian asked, "Must you?" The Anabaptist reformer Hans Denk said, "To know Christ one must follow him in life." In the 20th century Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The cross is laid on every Christian...When Christ calls persons, he bids them come and die."

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Discipleship

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Discipleship is the norm for all believers. Discipleship means that every believer is called to follow, learn from, and imitate Christ. Devotion to Christ and spiritual growth are not only for a special few. Our calling as a church is to accept people at different stages in their discipleship journey and to stimulate them toward Christlikeness.

Discipleship as Modeling

Our confession asserts that discipleship involves being united in a distinct community, a local church. This means entering into a covenant relationship with other disciples, not simply becoming part of an institutional program.

Imitation is a key concept in the biblical teaching of discipleship. God's people are called to be like God, to imitate the character and actions of God. Jesus invites his followers to "learn from him." The apostle Paul tells Christians to follow his example as he followed Christ.

Discipleship happens when mature Christians walk with younger believers in their spiritual journey. Effective modeling requires frequent contact between people over an extended period of time. As believers experience a variety of life situations together, they have opportunities to develop Christian attitudes, values, and actions, and to discuss the principles that guide a Christlike lifestyle. Discipleship also involves learning to practice disciplines that lead to spiritual growth. These include regular prayer, Bible study, meditation, fellowship with other Christians, and sharing of one's faith. A mentoring relationship provides a context for mutual accountability in the practice of these disciplines. Congregations are strengthened when they are intentional about facilitating discipling relationships.

Positive Christian modeling should also take place within the biological family. A church should place high priority on protecting and nurturing families and challenging them to consistent discipleship. At the same time a church should avoid doing for families what they should do for themselves. Instructing parents to love their children and accept responsibility for educating them in the faith is a key to building spiritually healthy people and relationships within the church

The prevailing mood of our culture encourages personal independence and individualism. To counter this many churches are developing small groups within the larger church family. They offer a viable context for deepening relationships, growing spiritually, meeting special support needs, maintaining accountability in a secure setting, and providing opportunities to sharpen ministry skills.

Developing a variety of small groups and ministry teams helps meet the diverse needs within a church family, with each group providing a context for discipleship. Even task-oriented groups become opportunities for discipleship when they seek to build relationships as they conduct business. Church groups need to share more readily how their faith impacts the decisions they make.

Discipleship and Accountability

Discipleship implies accountability within a community. This accountability can be practiced on several levels. One-to-one relationships and small groups can provide a context for encouragement, challenge, reproof, and correction.

The New Testament teaches that the attitudes and actions of each believer affect the life of the entire body. Congregational discipline ministers to those in the church that are in bondage to sin. Discipline must never be carried out in a spirit of hostility but should be administered in love with the desire to produce conviction, repentance, and restoration. Care must be taken to practice corporate accountability with a clear understanding of relevant Scripture and God's pattern for church discipline. At the same time leaders and congregations should inform themselves of the various legal issues that this type of accountability may involve.

Discipleship and Separation from the World

Jesus instructed his followers to be in the world but not of the world. Some have understood this separation to mean cultural isolation and the avoidance of particular cultural activities. They associate discipleship with a rigid lifestyle—the more austere, the more godly. Our confessional statement seeks to present non-conformity as a call to separation from the godless values and evil practices in the world. Disciples are set apart as they dedicate themselves to God, aligning their values to God's values and their lives to God's purposes.

Disciples separate themselves from evil practices, but they can never separate themselves from the practical need to love people. Believers are called to be salt and light in a lost world. The perceptive disciple on a redemptive mission will live with the tension between influencing the community and satisfying the expecta-

tions of other believers. Jesus certainly frequented the wrong places and met with the wrong people according to the religious legalists. Yet he neither condoned a sinner's sinfulness nor left the sinners to continue in their notorious ways.

Jesus prayed not that the Father would take his disciples out of the world but that He would protect them from the evil one. Great sensitivity is needed to teach disciples to avoid evil but not necessarily every association with victims of the evil one.

Discipleship in Everyday Life

Jesus teaches that discipleship is the way of self-denial. As his followers take up the cross, they consciously decide to represent Christ in the various situations of life. They choose to respect other believers as fellow creations in Christ. They give time and attention to others' interests and money for their welfare. They treat people of other faiths with respect and recognize that it is a privilege to share time, money, and possessions to help spread the Gospel and to help the needy.

Disciples learn to speak edifying and encouraging words, avoiding harmful talk. When they are required to speak the truth in unpleasant situations, they do so gently and in love. They determine to be honest and to eliminate evasiveness in business and with government. When personal conflicts occur, disciples work toward reconciliation.

The New Testament instructs believers not to take other believers to court to settle a wrong. In the past, some Mennonite Brethren have taken these instructions to mean that a Christian should never go to court. On closer examination, we see that Christians do not take each other to court because both parties submit to one and the same authority, God, in matters of justice. However, when there is an injustice to be addressed and the other party does not submit to the laws of God, the Bible remains silent on how to proceed. Frequently believers are asked to make court appearances.

Pastors need to know how to give counsel concerning the use of courts. We believe that the Christian disciple upholds the justice system in our society, including going to court with nonbelievers if necessary, as long as it is for the good of society and not for personal revenge.

Believers will face inevitable conflicts. They must continue to love each other while finding solutions that are not destructive to interpersonal relationships nor to God's purposes for their congregation. In society Christians must take initiative to defend the powerless, speak out against injustice, and work towards solutions which recon-

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cile those in conflict.

Some of the decisions disciples make as they follow Jesus in everyday life come at great cost to personal plans, hopes, ambition, and self-interest. As believers grow in discipleship, they also grow in their love for God and experience an intimacy and love with Jesus, which is like “finding the pearl of great price.” They know joy, peace, and fulfillment as they are transformed into mature disciples by the liberating work of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

ARTICLE 11

Marriage, Singleness and Family

We believe that marriage and the family are instituted by God. The church blesses both marriage and singleness and encourages families to grow in love.

Marriage

Marriage is a covenant relationship intended to unite a man and a woman for life. At creation God designed marriage for companionship, sexual union and the birth and nurture of children. Sexual intimacy rightfully takes place only within marriage. Marriage is to be characterized by mutual love, faithfulness and submission. A believer should not marry an unbeliever.

The community of faith blesses and nurtures marriage relationships, and makes every effort to bring reconciliation to troubled marriages. Human sinfulness, however, may sometimes lead to divorce, a violation of God's intention for marriage. With truth and compassion the family of God offers hope and healing while continually upholding the biblical ideal of marital faithfulness.

Singleness

Singleness is honored equally with marriage, sometimes even preferred. The church is to bless, respect and fully include those who are single. Those who remain single may find unique opportunities to advance the kingdom of God. God calls all people, single and married, to live sexually pure lives.

Family

God intends family relationships at all stages of life to be characterized by love. Children are a gift from God. Godly parents instruct and nurture their children in the faith. Parents are to discipline their children wisely and lovingly, not provoking them to anger. Children are to honor and obey their parents.

Gen. 1:26-31; 2:18-24; 5:1-2; 12:1-3; Exod. 22:16-17; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Deut. 6:4; 24:1-4; Ps. 127:3-5; Prov. 31; Matt. 5:32; 10:34-39; 19:3-12; 22:23-33; Mark 3:31-35; 7:9-13; 10:6-11; Luke 16:18; Rom. 7:2-3; 14:12; 1 Cor. 7:8-40; 2 Cor. 6:14-15; Eph. 5:21-6:4; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; 5:3-16; Heb. 13:4; 1 Pet. 3:1-7.

Marriage, Singleness and Family

COMMENTARY

The Bible teaches that the covenant commitment of marriage is for establishing a lifelong relationship which will provide the context for child rearing. Some will not marry, and Scripture teaches that single persons are positioned to serve the Lord without the distractions of family life. The Bible forbids divorce, laments its occurrence, restricts remarriage, but suggests that pastoral care for those who have experienced divorce should include forgiveness and restoration to fellowship. Article 11 deals with the matters of marriage, divorce, singleness, and family.

Marriage

Marriage in the Old Testament:

God created humans as sexual beings, male and female (Gen. 1:27). The creation narrative expresses the Creator's design for men and women. Humans, male and female, are given the mandate to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth . . ." (Gen. 1:28 NRSV). It was not good for a man (Adam) to be alone; God saw that he needed a helper as his partner (Gen. 2:18). The narrative teaches that "a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24 NRSV). In this pristine state the first pair was naked, yet unashamed (Gen. 2:25).

The story seems to suggest several principles. Marriage has multiple purposes. First, marriage responds to the human need for intimacy. Man and woman were created to be companions. Second, it provides the context for reproduction, a mandate that is part of the creation order that God saw as "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Marriage is the foundation for families. Third, marriage is the context for starting a new family unit. At marriage, the narrative teaches, the man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife. Fourth, marriage is the context for sexual intercourse. Husband and wife cling to each other as a single flesh. Fifth, intimacy seems to be blessed with a sense of holy mutual delight. There is a frankness, a loosening of restrictions, that is encountered in marital union. Sixth, marriage is a one-to-one commitment. Although later Old Testament saints engaged in polygamy,

the creation order does not anticipate that this practice is good. Seventh, marriage is heterosexual. Creation order precludes the possibility that homosexual union will be blessed with the goodness of marriage between a man and woman.

The narrative of the fall (Genesis 3) indicates that sin has marred the goodness of creation. The distortions include an alienation between the first marital pair, which is destined by the curse of sin to continue to afflict later couples. The wife faces pain in childbirth and pain in her relationship with her mate, characterized as desire for her husband who would rule over her (Gen. 3:16).

The legal code reinforces the creation mandate. Adultery is prohibited in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18). An extensive catalog of rules related to sexuality includes prohibition of incest and homosexual unions (Leviticus 18 contains a series of these rules). The law assumes that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman for life.

The Old Testament narrative raises issues for marriage. The complications of Abraham's relationship with Sarah when he takes Hagar as a surrogate include not only the pain that Sarah feels but alienation in later international relations with the children of Ishmael. Jacob's wives and concubines struggle in the face of jealousy and favoritism. David, the man after God's own heart, acts like an ancient near eastern despot by taking multiple wives and faces the consequences of the resulting rivalries within his family. His son Solomon attempts to establish his royal power by taking 1,000 wives and concubines.

The prophets use the demand for loyalty within the marriage covenant as an illustration to confront Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Hosea takes a wife of prostitution to demonstrate what Yahweh has experienced in the covenant with Israel. Malachi condemns a husband's failure to be loyal to the wife of his youth (2:14-16).

The wisdom literature, especially the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, celebrate the joy of marriage. Proverbs calls a happy marriage a gift from Yahweh (12:4; 18:22; 19:14). Ecclesiastes teaches that a man should enjoy life with the wife he loves (9:9). Song of Solomon celebrates the sensual delight of intimacy.

Marriage in the New Testament:

When Jesus teaches about marriage, he bases his instruction on the creation mandate (Mark 10:6-9). Jesus cites the maleness and femaleness of the marriage partners, the resulting unity of the marriage union, and the permanence of the covenant commitment. Jesus assumes that marriage is a gift from God.

The best interpretation of Paul's household rules of Ephesians

5:22-33 and Colossians 3:18-19 recognizes the revolutionary character of Paul's instruction. Paul addresses the wife as an independent moral individual, calling her to be subject to her husband. This call is part of a larger instruction for mutual submission (Eph. 5:21). The word comes from military terminology, indicating that there is a proper way for members of the household to align themselves with one another. The husband, who receives about twice as many words of instruction as the wife in Ephesians 5, is called to exercise headship as Christ did for the church. This imitation of Christ's love is to be characterized by self-giving devotion. If the husband loves the wife as Christ loved the church, foot washing rather than demanding service and obedience will be the rule.

First Peter 3:1-7 also gives instructions to wives and husbands. Wives are warned against seeking beauty in "outward adornment." Husbands are warned that neglecting their marital vows may hinder their prayers.

Divorce

Although both Old Testament teaching and Jesus agree that divorce contradicts the will of God, both also recognize that, due to human hardness of heart, divorce is a reality.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

Four important truths are noted in this text of Mosaic civil law. First, Moses accepts the occurrence of divorce. When he writes, in part, "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him ... and writes a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house ..." (24:1), Moses simply acknowledges that marriages fail. He doesn't harass the man who is filing the divorce, nor does he rail against the violation of the sanctity and permanence of marriage.

Second, the grounds for divorce in Hebrew society were very general and rather ambiguous. The words of the Deuteronomy text refer to the wife "who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her..." (24:1). The phrase "something indecent" may have included adultery with another man, but this is highly unlikely because the penalty for adultery was death, not divorce (22:22).

Third, a divorced woman who has married another man may never again marry the first husband even if her second husband has died (24:2-4). She may, however, marry her first husband if she has remained unmarried after the certificate of divorce has been issued. The reason given for this restriction is that, if she has remarried and her second husband has either divorced her or has died, "she has

been defiled” (24:2-4).

And fourth, Moses, quoting Yahweh, gives a warning: “Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance” (24:4). The context of this statement is the remarriage of a man to his former wife after she has had a second husband. The defilement of the land is not due to divorce being present within the people of God—this is simply part of human tragedy and fallenness. Rather, defilement occurs when a man, who has divorced his wife, remarries her after she, in the intervening period, has been married to another man.

Malachi 2:13-16:

Although the prophets use the image of divorce to indicate the broken covenant between Yahweh and Israel, it is Malachi who addresses God’s response to divorce. In Malachi 2:16 God says simply, “I hate divorce.” The context links divorce to violence. The broken covenant is an act of violence against the spouse, the children, and the institution itself.

In Jesus’ day, the matter of divorce was hotly discussed. There were two schools of thought on the subject. The school of Shammai, named after a very influential rabbi, was conservative and rigorous in its position. “It maintained that man ‘must not divorce his wife unless he has found her in a matter of shame’” (Beare, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 154). The rival school of Hillel held a much more permissible position. A man could divorce her for the merest trifle, ‘even if she burnt his food in cooking it’” (Beare, 154).

Matthew 5:31-32:

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus enters the debate and, as with adultery, strengthens and raises the standard immeasurably. With the phrase “But I tell you...,” Jesus, while not slamming the door on divorce, calls for a new way of living. The words of Jesus can be divided into three distinct parts. First, Jesus concedes that divorce is a reality in society. Divorce, however, must never be trivialized. The only legitimate grounds for divorce is *porneia*, a debated term which may be defined as “unchastity, fornication of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse” (Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Vol. I. p. 15).

Second, the divorced woman is at risk to commit adultery (5:32b). The clause, “causes her to become an adulteress” is somewhat ambiguous in meaning. We can read this clause two ways. First, the words have been taken to mean that in the very act of having been divorced by her husband, the woman now commits adultery. Although some

scholars support such a reading, it is very difficult to pin “adultery” on a person who is divorced but who has either not remarried and who is not sexually active. Second, we can interpret this clause to mean, perhaps more logically, that the divorced spouse who has been divorced for *porneia* is continuing in her ways. The words of Jesus then are to be taken as a caution against the newly divorced person living in a reckless, promiscuous manner.

The final word of Jesus is very troublesome: that is, whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Old Testament Hebrew culture was a strongly patriarchal society. Women were regarded as the property of men. Therefore, it was the prerogative of men to initiate divorce procedures, although the parallel synoptic passage also includes women in this role (Mark 10:1-12). By saying “anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery,” Jesus likely regarded “the remarriage of the divorced woman as adultery both on her part and on the part of her new husband” (France, *Matthew*, 123). Therefore the statement places the same value judgment on all post-divorce sexual liaisons regardless of gender.

Mark 10:1-12 (Matthew 19:1-9):

Jesus revisits the question of divorce in Mark 10 after some Pharisees question him. First, Jesus clarifies the Mosaic law as not commanding but allowing divorce. Second, Jesus attributes divorce to hardness of heart. Third, Jesus uses the creation mandate to enjoin life-long marital faithfulness. Fourth, Jesus reiterates his earlier teaching that remarriage involves adultery. Although one may read the text to prohibit all remarriage, it is at least clear that Jesus is teaching that for a married person to get a writ of divorce *for the purpose* of marrying a more appealing person is as adulterous as an affair. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 Paul repeats the Lord’s command and calls for celibacy for the divorced.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20:

What this text adds to the discussion is the profound biblical understanding that sexual union between two persons is more than simply sex. In the act of sexual union, Paul argues rhetorically, a person (in this case, a man and a prostitute) are inseparably united as one “with her in body” (6:16). In fact, through this sexual act “the two will become one flesh.” The act of sexual union is such a powerful bonding force that it is likened to our union with the Lord: “But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit” (6:17). Little wonder that Jesus concedes that *porneia*, illicit sexual union, is grounds for divorce. This adds power to Paul’s cry of warning: “Flee from sexual immorality” (6:18).

Although Scripture warns against remarriage for divorced persons, remarriage has become rather common among believers. The confession of faith implicitly recognizes that divorce and remarriage is a pastoral concern by calling the church to offer “hope and healing” to the divorced. The pastoral application of Article 11 deals with the issues of remarriage.

We need to caution one another about the complexity of remarriage. Many will do well to avoid the complications of remarriage and remain single. Those who contemplate remarriage must address issues of the characteristics which led to marital failure, relations with former spouses, and relations with children from earlier marriages.

Singleness

The creation narrative teaches that humans are created with the need for intimacy. The Genesis text appears to assume that the common pattern for finding intimacy will be within the marriage covenant. Although it is not specifically stated, the Old Testament narratives seem to assume that singleness is not a desirable state.

Within the Old Testament, however, we do find the roots of a theology of service that recognizes the unique contributions of single persons. Yahweh commands that Jeremiah the prophet never marry as a sign to Israel (Jer. 16:1-4). The marriages of Ezekiel and Hosea face interruptions related to their mission.

The story of Ruth results in marriage, but her relationship as a single person with the widow Naomi is characterized by covenant loyalty which is often cited as an example for a couple about to be married. Ruth pledges to go with Naomi, to join her people, and to worship her God. She declares an inseparable love for Naomi.

In the New Testament both Jesus and Paul minister as single persons. Although Scripture is silent regarding Jesus’ celibacy, Paul encourages the church at Corinth to consider celibacy as a gift from God (1 Cor. 7:1-9, 25-35). The benefits of singleness include freedom from distractions that a spouse and children create. Single persons in difficult times are not preoccupied with the security of their family members. Paul considers singleness to be superior to marriage, at least for those who have the gift of celibacy.

The church is called to recognize the honor due, even preference for, the single state. The church must take care not to exclude single persons from church life or from ministry. Special concern must be given to include those who live as singles.

The need for intimacy presents unique challenges to the single person. Sexual chastity is the biblical mandate for single persons (1

Cor. 7:8-9). The need for partnership recognized in the creation story, however, is not absent in the celibate person. Healthy and pure relationships for single persons are necessary for living fulfilling lives in society.

Family

The family in the Old Testament:

The family is the God-ordained social structure designed to nurture children. The primary confession of Israel in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 teaches that spiritual training best happens within day-to-day family life. The Old Testament develops three themes which declare God's intent for families.

First, children are seen as a gift from God to families. Children are a blessing (Ps. 127:5). The stories of the births of Isaac to Sarah, Jacob and Esau to Rebekah, Joseph to Rachel, and Samuel to Hannah are central to the story of the people of Israel.

Second, children are commanded to honor and respect their parents. Not only were children called to "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12), but it was also a capital offense to curse or to strike one's father or mother (Exod. 21:17).

Third, the blessings of being a covenant people were to be perpetuated through parental instruction and guidance (Deut. 6:1-25). This instruction was to include reciting the narrative of deliverance from Egypt, of keeping the feasts and holy days of Israel, and of speaking of these things each day.

Deuteronomy 6:1-25 highlights four distinct points: First, wellness results when children hear about the great salvation deeds of God and live a life of obedience to the commands of God (6:1-3). Second, the heart of the covenant with Yahweh is to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (6:5). Third, when the people of Israel would enter the promised land, this knowledge of God would keep them from turning to pagan gods (6:13-19). Fourth, when the people are a long time-period away from the Exodus events and their children ask what these symbols and stories mean, they are to be answered clearly and unambiguously (6:20-25).

The family in the New Testament:

Although Jesus blesses the children who were brought to him by their parents (Mark 10:13-16), Jesus makes it clear that in the kingdom of God our family ties take second place to obeying the will of God (Mark 3:31-35; Luke 14:26). In a real sense, the new community of faith which emerges through belief in Jesus Christ is family for

believers.

Jesus' relationship with his parents reflects his primary commitment to God the Father and the reign of God, as well as his concern for family. In the story of young Jesus at the temple (Luke 2:41-52) it is recorded that Jesus went back to live with his parents in Nazareth and continued under their authority (2:51). Thus "Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and men." When Mary comes to see her son during his ministry, Jesus seems to postpone contact with her until he has completed his teaching (Mark 3:31-35). At the cross Jesus speaks to the beloved disciple about caring for Mary (John 19:26-27).

Church leaders are to model healthy family life. Among the leadership qualifications mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, godly leaders are to be those who also demonstrate their ability to manage their families and households well (vv. 4,12).

In Ephesians 6:1-4, we have the most definitive text of the New Testament on the subject of children and parents. The fifth commandment (Exod. 20:12) is repeated to remind the new people of God of the obligation of children to be courteous and respectful toward their parents. Added to this well-known epithet is an equally important command to parents: "...do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (6:4).

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Marriage, Singleness and Family

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Those who apply this confessional article to the life of the church will have to get used to seeing through a glass darkly. That does not mean God's *design* is unclear. The ideals for singleness, marriage, and family are clearly visible in the Bible—put into place from the very beginning. But sin wreaks havoc on God's design. The fallout from broken relationships, marriages, and families often makes it difficult to see a clear pastoral path. So it is important to be at peace with some ambivalence in this area of ministry.

It is equally important, however, to seize every opportunity to promote the ideals. These include sexual purity, believers marrying believers, lifetime marriages, loving families, and fulfilling singleness. The best times to preach and teach these ideals are in the absence of crisis—when individuals and couples and families are relatively healthy. There are also times, of course, when teaching and counsel need to be offered in situations of difficulty and brokenness. Thus there are two positions from which Article 11 can be applied: a proactive position and a reactive position.

Proactive Applications

Take Care of Yourself :

It is hypocritical to offer help in the interpersonal, marriage, and family relationships of others when the “helper's” own relationships in these areas are unattended. Before presuming to speak to the difficulties of other singles, couples, and families, care-givers must be open to hearing the voice of God in their own relationships. Before offering practical steps to others, there must be a continuing willingness in one's own life to forgive and be forgiven.

Continue Learning:

The temptation in all pastoral work is to rely on momentum. There is so much to do and so little time to pursue new insights and develop new skills. But faithfulness in ministry, especially in these relationship areas, demands it. Read. Attend conferences on singleness, marriage, and family. Take a single person to lunch and invite candid

comments on how they experience life. Interview some people within the church family who have survived a divorce and ask them to rate the church's performance during that time. Spend an evening with some "empty nesters" who have done a great job of parenting, pumping them for their secrets. Invite yourself to an older adult meeting in the church and ask them whether they feel part of a family. Such vulnerability will open new windows for learning.

Establish Guidelines:

The worst time to decide how to respond to a failure in a relationship is when there are names attached. Every "decision" at that point will be taken personally and judged subjectively. It is better to anticipate the all-but-certain eventualities in the life of a church and be prepared with a set of response guidelines.

How one approaches such a "documented response" is critical. The temptation is to draft something that fits all people at all times and in all places. Hence the church formulates "Position Papers" and "Policy Statements." But simple formulas rarely satisfy the complexities surrounding issues such as divorce and remarriage and even more rarely provide a redemptive response. It is better to establish a set of guidelines for creatively working through complicated failures in human relationship.

The genius of "guidelines" is that they can be cited rigidly or flexibly, in consultation with the Holy Spirit. For example, if the Marriage Guidelines state that "the couple must be open to submitting to a discernment group when extraordinary issues arise" and a couple currently living together is unwilling to do that, one can simply say, "those are our guidelines." On the other hand, if the guidelines also state that "application for marriage must be submitted to the church at least four months in advance of the wedding date" and a repentant couple six months pregnant wants to get married before the baby comes, one can flex with some integrity for it is "merely" a guideline.

Whatever a given community establishes as a non-negotiable needs to be applied uniformly. Given the complexity of most marriage and family issues, inflexible positions and policies should be few and thought through carefully.

Program Marriage, Family, and Singleness Enrichments:

It would seem obvious that marriages and family systems need to be repaired before they fall apart, not after. Still, churches continue to invest considerably more resources trying to rebuild marriages and families rather than working to reinforce them. It is the wrong formula. Investments in marriage and family enrichment will pay

huge dividends, while returns on crisis interventions will continue to be meager. Enrichment efforts and expenditures may not always produce quantifiable results, but failure to do so will—in the form of more broken homes.

Leaders and congregations should also consider ways to provide enrichment opportunities for often overlooked singles and single parents. These could focus on particular needs and challenges facing singles such as the call to sexual purity, the need for relational fulfillment, the discernment of ministry gifts, the enhancement of parenting skills, the development of support networks, and so on.

Give Attention to Curriculum:

Another proactive step is the intentional introduction of relational curriculum. It begins at the preschool level with lessons on how to get along with one another. It appropriately introduces elementary age children to their human sexuality. If the church is reluctant to offer the Creator's version, the Deceiver's version will rush in to fill the void. By the time our children are at the middle school level, if they don't have some strong convictions about their self-worth and God-honoring ways of relating to one another, it is too late. Yet very few churches intentionally move their children through a curriculum that can grow healthy Christian singles, marriages, and families.

Premarital counseling ought to be lodged in the youth curriculum. Such an assertion simply faces up to the fact that most important decisions about dating, marriage, and family begin to firm up in junior high or middle school. If sexual purity, believers marrying believers, and lifetime marriages are ever to become defining values they need to be established long before courtship.

Dedicate Children:

Rightly understood and carried out, child dedications can proactively provide parenting advantages. Child dedications are fundamentally mislabeled—they are more accurately parent dedications. With their Christian sisters and brothers as witnesses, parents make a vow to God to provide their children with a Christian home.

Practical responses from the church family might include mentor couples or prayer partners for the parents dedicating their children. Minimally the dedication service should signal in some way a reciprocal commitment from the church family. It has been said that "It takes a village to raise a child," but even more certainly it takes a Christian community to raise a child.

Affirm Singleness:

Too often the presence and the particular needs of singles and single parents are ignored in congregations where “traditional” family units predominate. Many larger churches are able to invest resources and staff into effective singles ministries, but smaller churches seldom have this option. In such cases it is imperative that thought and effort be put into how singles and single parents are being integrated into church life.

Just as there are ways to disregard singleness, there are also ways to validate it. Often this involves simple things such as setting an odd number of chairs around tables or making sure singles are welcomed and included in small groups and fellowship activities. Qualified singles should be encouraged as much as anyone toward involvement in worship leading, administering the Lord’s Supper, serving in leadership and team capacities, and pursuing other ministries and positions in the church. Singleness is best affirmed not so much by making special provisions for unmarrieds, but by intentionally including them in the ordinary life of the church family.

In some areas, however, more specific steps should be taken. First, we need to consider our use of language. Sermons and teaching can incorporate not only stories and illustrations about family and married life, but also about other life situations including singleness. References to church members could be termed more often as “households” rather than “families.” Names and emphases for Bible classes and small groups can be reviewed—for instance, if a Sunday school session referred to as the “Young Marrieds” is also the only class available for career-age singles or young single parents, such a name will immediately put up a barrier against attendance by those singles.

Second, we need to be consciously inclusive with church activities and functions. Of course it is appropriate to target certain activities toward marrieds and families, but not all activities. In many ministry and social events we need to make it clear that singles are not only welcome but essential to the proper functioning of the body of Christ and the full enjoyment of the fellowship of believers.

Third, we need to refute the unsaid but ubiquitous assumption that those with spouses and children are somehow more blessed of God than those without. It is appropriate to offer regular reminders that ultimate worth is found in our relationship with Christ and his body rather than in earthly ties or marital status.

Fourth, Paul’s teaching should be emphasized regarding the unique capacity and calling of single persons to serve God and others without the distractions of family life. This is not just a word for

singles—it can also serve as a strong reminder to the whole congregation that every believer, whether married or unmarried, is called first to serve the Lord wholeheartedly and commit loyally to the family of faith.

Reactive Applications

Request for Marriage:

Marriage is not a command. While it is held in highest regard in Scripture, even providing an apt picture of God's love for His people (Hosea 1-3; Eph. 5:21-33), it is not a mandate. Marriage is a decision. It is a decision of such huge proportion that each couple requesting marriage should be required to go through a well thought-out pre-marriage process.

The first step should be an initial interview by the pastoral leader who will likely walk with the couple through the pre-marriage work and officiate at the wedding. The initial interview should be understood as a singular session without any further obligation from either side. It is an opportunity to explore the faith journey of the prospective bride and groom (are they believers/non-believers?), their previous relationships (has there been a divorce/loss of a spouse?), their present relationship (are they living together/sexually active?), and their expectations for marriage (is it a lifelong commitment?). Gathering these conversations together brings, finally, an opportunity to lay out the guidelines for marriage in that particular faith community (see "Establish Guidelines" under Proactive Applications).

These guidelines should include a minimum time frame from the time of the initial interview to the wedding date, probably not less than four months. This provides the amount of time necessary to walk a couple through the pre-marriage process. The guidelines should require premarital counseling, which is helpful in determining strengths and growth areas in a couple's relationship, and in dealing with a variety of issues impacting marriage. Finally, the guidelines should call for the couple's openness to submitting to a discernment group at any time in the process, initiated at the counseling pastor's discretion. When extraordinary or complex issues arise, it is helpful to share the burden of discerning readiness for marriage with a group of wise members of the faith community.

At the end of the initial interview both the couple and the pastor have the option to continue down the road together toward marriage, or not. Sometimes the answer will be clear immediately. Sometimes it may be good to mutually commit the decision to an agreed-upon time of prayer. Once the decision to continue is made, however, it should be understood as a long-term commitment on the part

of the pastor, reaching well beyond the wedding day.

Divorce:

Each pastoral leader and church body needs to hammer out a practical theology of divorce in advance. That may be something other than what we believe about divorce, even though what we believe profoundly impacts our practical responses.

The reactive dimension of such a practical theology (it should also have a proactive dimension) produces a plan of action beginning at the point of knowledge that a marriage is in trouble. It should include guidelines for identifying a point person for possible intervention, referrals designed to address reconciliation, ministry involvement during a divorce in process, support systems for the couple and children, referrals for divorce recovery, and information-sharing with the church family. Even though each marriage failure plays out a bit differently, it is important for the pastoral leader to at least have a game plan for hope and healing.

Request for Remarriage:

Those who deal with the practical application of the biblical material relating to re-marriage tend to make one of two equal and opposite errors: either they apply the texts too “legally” or too “gracefully.” It is easy, for example, to apply Jesus’ words in Mark 10:11-12 as an injunction against remarriage—as a mandate never to solemnize a marriage where there has been a divorce. It is equally easy to apply a “cheap grace” where vows become trivial and multiple marriages acceptable. What is difficult is a pastoral response that maintains integrity with Jesus’ hard sayings and abounding grace.

There is no explicit biblical warrant for remarriage, other than the death of a spouse. In fact the material addressing this issue directly in the New Testament tilts toward remaining single. Therefore requests for remarriage remain one of the most enduring pastoral dilemmas.

The approach that retains the most integrity with Scripture is for the community of faith to make remarriage decisions on a case-by-case basis. This is the best assurance that “law” and “grace” will be applied redemptively.

As a practical matter, the specific “community of faith” that would directly address such a case needs to be a small (6-8 people), spiritually mature cross-section of the church family. That requires a set of guidelines for identifying and putting into place such a group. Such guidelines are best embedded in an overall set of marriage guidelines, communicating a cohesive theology of marriage.

ARTICLE 11

Among the responsibilities of the small group are the following: to listen to the couple's story, assess the degree of healing following the divorce(s), mediate forgiveness (if necessary), offer insights, and determine readiness for marriage. A great deal of care must be taken to assemble a group with the spiritual maturity and the gifts to do this kind of work. For the process to have integrity, however, the couples must submit to the group for a final decision regarding marriage within that community of God's people.

Support:

A failed relationship may not only leave the affected parties emotionally paralyzed, it can also paralyze the church. Fearing that they will do or say the wrong thing, or fearing that they will encourage a wrong decision, Christian sisters and brothers often withhold their support at a time when it is needed most. When a marriage or family is in trouble, the most immediate action needed is to reach out. Emotional support at these times should not simply be deliberated, it should also be delivered.

Discipline:

One way to maintain a balance between "law" and "grace" is to embrace discipline. Discipline should never be understood as punishment, but rather as spiritual conditioning for renewed commitment and service. To be effective such an understanding cannot be applied arbitrarily, but must rise out of a pre-existing discipline culture in the church.

In the midst of divorce proceedings, for example, both partners might be asked to set aside their ministry responsibilities in order to give full time and energy to the work of recovering their marriage. They may be asked to pair up with a mentor-caregiver who can gently lead them through the "heart work" associated with marital failure. If there is sin involved in the breaking of relationship, one or both partners might be asked to confess that sin to a small group of caring leaders. Should the divorce become final, discipline might require a regimen for healing and refitting for service.

Discipline should not be reserved only for public sins such as an illicit pregnancy or a divorce. It also needs to be applied to the more private sins that impact marriages and families: substance abuse, spousal or child abuse, premarital sex, adultery.

Discipline will always be painful and imperfect. But if it is applied with integrity and compassion it remains the best hope for recovering from relationship failures.

ARTICLE 12

Society and State

The State as Instituted by God

We believe that God instituted the state to promote the well-being of all people. Christians cooperate with others in society to defend the weak, care for the poor, and promote justice, righteousness and truth. Believers witness against corruption, discrimination and injustice, exercise social responsibility, pay taxes, and obey all laws that do not conflict with the Word of God.

God has given governments authority to maintain law and order and to punish wrongdoers. Followers of Christ respect and pray for those in authority so that peaceful order may prevail. We deplore the loss of life in the exercise of state-sanctioned violence.

Christian Allegiance in Society

The primary allegiance of all Christians is to Christ's kingdom, not the state or society. Because their citizenship is in heaven, Christians are called to resist the idolatrous temptation to give to the state the devotion that is owed to God. As ambassadors for Christ, Christians act as agents of reconciliation, and seek the well-being of all peoples.

Because Christ forbids the swearing of oaths, we simply affirm the truth in legal transactions. Believers do not participate in secret societies which demand the swearing of oaths or which otherwise conflict with the Christian's allegiance to Christ and the church. At all times believers are called to live as faithful witnesses in the world, rejecting pressures which threaten to compromise Christian integrity.

Exod. 20:13,16; Lev. 19:11; Ps. 82:3-4; Jer. 29:7; Dan. 2:21; 3:17-18; 4:17; Matt. 5:13-16, 33-37; 6:33; 17:24-27; 22:17-21; John 15:19; 17:14-18; Acts 5:29; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 5:6-13; Phil. 1:27; 3:20; 1 Tim. 2:1-4; Titus 3:1-2; James 5:12; 1 Pet. 2:13-17.

Society and State

COMMENTARY

The church of the new covenant looks to the pages of the New Testament for guidance in its relationship to the ruling powers under which it lives and carries out its mission. In Old Testament times the people of God, Israel, came to be identified with the nation-state. However, this theocratic ideal, according to which the people of God and the state were to coincide, was never completely realized. Because of the waywardness of the covenant people, Israel as a state came to resemble other nations.

When Israel as a whole broke God's covenant and became apostate, the prophets foresaw a day when God would make a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). However, even in the dark days of Israel's apostasy there were always those who remained true to God's covenant in the midst of a godless nation. This "sacred remnant" is the connecting link between the old and the new people of God, the church—all of them children of Abraham by faith.

The State in the New Testament

In contrast to ancient Israel, the new people of God that emerged on the day of Pentecost transcended all ethnic and national boundaries. Right from its inception the church had to come to terms with the governing powers, both Jewish (Acts 4:1-22) and Roman (Acts 16:16-40). It is then not to the Old Testament, but to the New that Christians must look for models on how to relate to the nation-state in which they happen to live. Although the New Testament writers do not give us explicit instructions on all aspects of the Christian's relationship to the state, the main lines of thought can be discerned.

The Gospels make clear that Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God. This was not an earthly kingdom with territorial boundaries. Rather, Jesus wanted to establish God's rule over the hearts and lives of those who were willing to commit their lives to Christ in faith and obedience. In the teachings of Jesus there is no confusion between the kingdom of God and the political state. Although it was popularly expected in the Judaism of his day that the coming Prince from the House of David would restore Israel to former greatness as a political kingdom, Jesus made it very clear that his kingdom was not of this world.

Our Lord rejected Satan's offer to give him the kingdoms of this world if Jesus would worship him (Matt. 4:8; Luke 4:5-8). When asked by Pilate if he was in fact a king, Jesus explained that his kingdom was not of this world. If it were, then his disciples would fight. And so the state had nothing to fear from Jesus and the messianic movement he had begun (John 18:11). Whereas the Zealots in Jesus' day, on one hand, tried to overthrow the ruling power by force, and the Sadducees, on the other hand, worked hand in glove with the Roman authorities, Jesus did neither. He did not agitate for the overthrow of the government, nor did he identify with the government. One of the reasons he didn't use "Messiah" as his self-designation (although he was fully conscious of being Messiah), was that the word had political connotations in the Judaism of his day. He was not a Messiah who would establish a Jewish political state, but who would suffer and die to atone for the sins of the world. He was not only the Davidic king, but also the Suffering Servant.

Jesus never questioned the legitimacy of the state as such. He gives us to understand that the state was instituted by God, but that the kingdom of God and the political kingdom are not coterminous.

The State Instituted by God

Jesus was born and lived all his life under Roman rule, as the Herods and the Roman governors exercised it. He taught his disciples by example not to offend the ruling powers (Matt. 17:24-27). He advised his contemporaries to give to Caesar what belonged to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17). He reminded Pilate, who condemned him to death unjustly and for political reasons, that he had no power over him unless it had been given to him from above (John 19:10,11). He forbade his disciples the use of force in their attempt to defend him (Luke 22:49-51), and warned them that those who took the sword were bound to perish by it (Matt. 26:52). Although Jesus was charged with sedition and crucified as a revolutionary, the Gospels make it plain that he was falsely accused and that he died according to the salvation purposes of God to atone for the sins of the human race, and not for crimes against the state.

The apostle Paul took the same position with respect to the state as did Jesus. Authority, he explains, is from God, "and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1 NRSV). Resistance to divinely established authority calls for punishment by the ruling powers. Government has been instituted by God for the good of society as a whole (Rom. 13:4).

It is implied that all governments have some sense of what is good and what is harmful for their subjects. In the context of Romans 13

Christians are warned not to repay evil with evil (Rom. 12:17). Whereas Christians are forbidden to kill others, the state bears the sword (Rom. 13:4). Nevertheless, even when the state diverges from the ways of God's kingdom, believers are to accept the state and be subject to it. State is not by nature divine in character, but it functions as God's servant in the present age. It is, however, provisional and temporary, for it passes away at the dawn of God's eternal kingdom.

The kingdoms of this world are not to be confused with the kingdom of God. Paul writes that the rulers of this age, because of their blindness and unbelief, crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8). He writes that behind earthly rulers there are supernatural evil powers that seek to use the rulers of nations to carry out their evil designs. He also cautions members of the church not to have their disputes settled before the courts of justice, not because of possible unjust rulings on the part of justices who are not believers, but because of their limited understanding of the nature of the church. When internal quarrels arise within the Christian community, believers dispense with the state without rejecting it or taking over what legitimately belongs to the state (1 Cor. 6:1-10).

The apostle Peter in his writings shows the same ambivalence toward the ruling powers as expressed by Jesus and Paul. He exhorts believers to accept and even to honor human authorities, whether the emperor or governors, who have been sent by God to punish the wrongdoer and praise the one who does right (1 Pet. 2:13-16).

Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, in which God's people are exhorted to submit to the demands of the state, must however be read together with Revelation 13, where the apostle John gives us a view of a state that has become totalitarian and satanic. When the state demands supreme loyalty from all its citizens, a loyalty which belongs to God alone, then believers must obey God rather than human authorities (Acts 4:19). In such a situation the church does not fight back (Rev. 14:9,10), but endures "the pain of unjust suffering" (1 Pet. 2:19), and follows in the footsteps of her Lord (1 Pet. 2:21), who when he was abused, did not return abuse, but "entrusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23 NRSV).

In light of the fact that the state, in whatever form it takes, is governed by different principles from those which guide the members of the kingdom of God, we must ask more precisely: What are the duties of Christians with respect to the state?

The Believer's Obligations toward the State

First of all, Christians are urged to pray for government leaders and all who are in high positions, so that they might lead quiet and peace-

able lives “in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim. 2:2 NRSV). Also, as good citizens believers are obligated to pay taxes. “For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants.... Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due...” (Rom. 13:6,7 NRSV). It is also a believer’s duty to treat the governing authorities with respect and honor (Rom. 13:7b; 1 Pet. 2:17b).

Moreover, it is incumbent upon Christians to obey the laws of the land, not simply because non-compliance brings penalties, but for reasons of conscience (Rom. 13:5). Also, the church is under obligation to seek the good of society. “Whenever we have opportunity,” writes Paul, “let us work for the good of all” (Gal. 6:10 NRSV). “Always seek to do good to one another and to all” (1 Thess. 5:15 NRSV). To Titus Paul writes: “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good...to be peaceable and considerate” (3:1,2).

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah encouraged the Israelite exiles in Babylon to do things which characterized good citizenship: be productive, raise families, seek the peace and prosperity of their adopted cities, and pray for the well-being of Babylon. Peter exhorts his readers to live honorably in society so that people “may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet. 2:12). No doubt the apostle remembered the words of Jesus who urged his followers to let their light shine before others so “that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

However, the state at times makes demands on its citizens with which believers cannot in good conscience comply. Although they are willing to give to Caesar what belongs to him, they are not willing to give to Caesar what belongs to God. To give the state one’s ultimate loyalty is idolatry.

And so the believer’s patriotism and love for homeland must always be tempered by the realization that the state often stands in opposition to the kingdom of God. The followers of Jesus must therefore avoid extreme forms of nationalism.

The Church in Tension with the State

Although the state is instituted by God for the common good of society, and believers are exhorted to seek the welfare of society and state, there are limits to the obedience that Christians offer to the ruling powers. This means that the church will always live in tension between the demands of the state and those of the kingdom of God, between the values of the culture in which it lives and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

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Believers will not, therefore, immerse themselves completely in the cultural practices of the day. Nor will they withdraw from society. Rather they will seek to live within cultures that are pervaded by evil practices, as salt of the earth (Matt. 5:16). Where possible they will take a stand against economic and judicial corruption, racial discrimination, mistreatment of the needy and disadvantaged, and all forms of violence against human beings. Such criticisms of evils that are harmful to society are not in contradiction to the respect Christ's followers show to the governing authorities. For example, when believers refuse to make oaths they do so in order to witness to the profound significance of truthfulness in any society.

There are circumstances in which Christians will have to suffer at the hands of the ruling authorities when they cannot in good conscience comply with the demands of the state. For example, we believe that as followers of Jesus we should refrain from violence and the taking of life, and for that reason not serve in the military. The practice of non-resistance, as taught by Jesus (Matt. 5:38-42), may at times lead to suffering at the hands of the state.

Moreover, Christians who take the ethical teachings of Scripture seriously will often stand in conflict with the current values of the society and of the state. Speaking out against such evils as abortion, violence, sexual immorality, gambling, and the like, will not always endear the church to the society in which it lives. Or when the state forbids the spread of the gospel, Christ's faithful witnesses may lose their rights or even their lives for the sake of the kingdom of God.

The church throughout the centuries has lived and carried out its mission under different forms of government. Although some governments have been friendlier than others, the church during its long history has had to suffer repeatedly at the hands of the state. Also the church has often failed to live up to the standards of the kingdom of God as set forth by Jesus and has caused much offense in the non-Christian world. It is therefore of utmost importance that Christ's followers avoid offending those still outside the church (1 Cor. 10:32). Believers must strive to live without compromising Christian integrity, working and waiting for the day when the kingdoms of this world will pass away and God's eternal kingdom will appear in all its glory.

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Society and State

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Article 12 of the confession deals with the relationship of Christians to the state. Attention is focused on the responsibility of government to “promote the well-being of all people” and to “maintain law and order.” As believers we are admonished to support the government with obedience, taxes, and prayer, while still remembering that our primary allegiance is to Christ’s kingdom, not to the state or society. In our complex modern world it can be difficult for believers to appropriately give allegiance to Christ’s kingdom while still respecting governmental authority and praying for leaders. Specific direction in the basic categories noted in Article 12 continues to be important.

The New Realities

According to Article 12, Christians are to cooperate with others in society to advance public welfare and order. Relationship to the state in previous years was often defined by a one-time encounter with the draft board, by conscription in time of war, or by an occasional encounter with use of the oath. We are now faced with more complex issues involving Christians and the state. In the United States, for example, we live in a time when the advancement of public welfare and the maintenance of law and order are increasingly distinguished from one another. In recent years the focus of government has steadily moved toward maintenance of law and order (as defined by more severe penalties for violations of the law and increased spending on prisons) and away from public welfare (as defined by spending and programs involving education, health care, and public works). Greater portions of our tax dollars are now being spent to punish rather than prevent and to incarcerate rather than to educate. These realities are being felt more keenly within our congregations as all levels of society and government look toward the church for help in addressing the resulting gaps in public care.

The pressure of state and society is to give priority to law and order. The desire to protect our families and maintain our personal and financial security may lead us in the same direction. It is our responsibility to act out of allegiance to God’s kingdom as citizens of heaven and those who look forward to the imminent return of Christ.

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We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation in situations of sin and brokenness. We cannot be ambassadors of Christ if our allegiance is rooted in a particular nation. This applies to the local congregation as well. Are we ready, as citizens of heaven and members of a local congregation, to respond to the needs of public welfare left unaddressed by the state? Are we ready to witness to the state about the need to defend the weak and care for the poor?

The New Influences

Relationship to government as defined primarily by issues of participation in the military, swearing of oaths, or payment of taxes can no longer be the sum of our focus when considering the modern pressures of society and state. We must more consciously consider the subtle and increasingly pervasive influences of the broader social order.

The historic position of the Mennonite Brethren is that we give primary allegiance to the kingdom of God, not the state. The history of Mennonite migrations and stories of conscientious objectors to military service provide ample testimony. With the decreasing overt influence of the state in our lives (such as in general conscription), issues of ultimate allegiance become less clear. Occupational pursuits, nuclear family priorities, and concern for immediate and long-term personal security are becoming greater influences upon decisions made in regard to the Christian's relationship with and witness in society.

On the congregational level, most local churches no longer spend significant time and energy on issues of military conscription or the exercise of oaths. This is true partly because of changing social realities and partly because many of these questions have been addressed or dismissed in the past when these issues seemed more urgent. However, specific situations do persist.

Congregations continue to have ample opportunity to exercise faithful witness to the kingdom of God in light of the pressures of society and state. Following are only a few examples of the many ways in which we can witness faithfully in the world while rejecting those pressures which threaten to compromise Christian integrity. These highlight some areas of "rub" that can occur while we dwell in this world, yet live as citizens of a higher kingdom who look forward to the unexpected and imminent return of Christ.

Diversity and Inclusion

What does it mean to witness against racism, sexism, and classism, and live as those whose citizenship is in heaven? In recent history

our national denomination has been mono-ethnic and solidly middle-class. It is now becoming more ethnically and economically diverse. A real challenge exists for those of Northern European ancestry who have historically held power and staffed the structure of the denomination. We must respond faithfully and with integrity to the existing under-represented congregations already a part of our structures, and the congregations of new immigrants and people of other backgrounds who wish to join our denomination. It is a great challenge to be accountable to one another, individually and as congregations, in the spirit of God's love for us. We must recognize our temptation to control others and trust God to work in others, finding appropriate ways to share our material wealth and privileged position without being manipulative. We have a tremendous opportunity within denominational structures to be a reconciling presence and healing light in an age full of the darkness of racism, sexism, and classism. We are called to become the church of Revelation 7:9—"a great multitude...from every nation."

Immigration Issues

What does it mean to witness against discrimination and defend the weak in an era of tightening and increasingly complex immigration regulations? Immigrants who are church members and illegal aliens share their illegal status and testify to the grace of God at district Mennonite Brethren Conferences. In light of such texts as the Old Testament injunctions to accommodate the alien and stranger (Deut. 24:17-18), Jesus' words about our responses to prisoners and strangers (Matt. 25:31-46), and the New Testament command to show hospitality to others including strangers (Heb. 13:1-2), we must take seriously the call to live faithfully by discerning appropriate responses to our immigrant sisters and brothers, and by rejecting the compromising pressures of public opinion and harsh and confusing laws.

Local churches, on their own or in combination with other churches, can actively address the physical and spiritual needs of the marginalized in their communities. Some congregations are attended by significant numbers of illegal immigrants. For many more congregations, immigration and documentation issues are very pressing. With the continuing adoption of congregations of recent immigrants into the denominational fold, we must consider more seriously the current changes in immigration law and the increasingly restrictive and confusing immigration policies with stiffer penalties. Can traditionally middle-class Mennonite Brethren churches respond compassionately to immigrant sisters and brothers living in our midst, yet in need? Faithful witness might even take the form of advocacy with

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elected officials, encouraging them to respond with compassion to those who are on the margins in our communities.

Prison Issues

What does it mean for ambassadors of the reconciling Christ to pay state taxes which support a system of retributive incarceration? In some states, residential burglary can mean a 25-year sentence in state prison. Is it enough to send letters and once-per-quarter packages to the ones incarcerated? As those whose allegiance is to the kingdom of God, we should work to address basic injustices in the system. When attachment to our material possessions is so great that we are willing to support long-term incarceration as punishment rather than address the individual and root causes of the offense, we are assenting to societal pressures that can compromise our Christian integrity.

Taking seriously the call to forgive and disciple others allows us to proclaim our allegiance to God's reconciling kingdom rather than the divisive kingdom of this world. Particular attention should be given to those publicly ostracized and often brutalized such as the homeless, recently released prisoners, legal and illegal aliens, and those marginalized because of skin color, manner of speech, or physical and mental abilities. Involvement with local organizations that minister to prisoners and work to find preventative solutions can also be a point of connection for local congregations looking for ways to embody the reconciling love of God.

Individual Security

What priority do we give our personal comfort and long-term security as those who resist the idolatrous temptation to give devotion to the state? This is another area in which we may find common practice at odds with Jesus' kingdom call. What is our responsibility to the increasing needs of those losing basic public assistance in our own communities or those experiencing overwhelming poverty in other parts of the world? Are we willing to share part of the interest generated by our capital or even to give some of our capital away? Will we encourage government to care for the weak and poor at the expense of state-guaranteed retirement benefits? It is a fallacy for citizens of heaven to believe that future security can be guaranteed on earth by trusting in our individual abilities to provide for ourselves or the state's ability to do so. The reality is that others perish, physically and spiritually, when we refuse to share. When we abdicate our Christian responsibility to care for others, we violate the spirit of Article 12.

The local congregation is an ideal forum in which to explore the undeserved blessings given to us by God, to witness to one another about our mutual dependence, and to support one another in making investment and retirement decisions that reflect the values of God's kingdom.

Daily Life

It is easy to overlook the significance of the ordinary. The state now permeates our lives to a degree that our forebears would not have understood. We depend upon the state for health, safety, consumer regulations, business incentives, vital networks of transportation, regulation of utilities, and for guarantees of minimum wages and benefits. We expect that government will guarantee safe food and water, security of our homes and families, and opportunities for persons to support themselves. It is our practice, if not our confession, to trust government for the provision of those things needed to sustain us on a daily basis. Ongoing discernment is needed to ensure that our ultimate trust remains in God over government.

Beyond the words we use to describe our relationship to God and government, there are a series of symbols by which we represent that relationship in the daily life of the church. Many sanctuaries contain a large Bible to demonstrate the centrality of the Word and a pulpit to emphasize the preaching of the Word, a cross to remind us of the sacrifice of Christ and perhaps a cup and plate to signify our communal sharing in Christ's sacrifice, horizontally aligned seating that orients us toward the word or perhaps semi-circular orienting us more toward the community of faith. Some congregations display the national flag with the Christian flag in a specific, subordinate relationship as is prescribed in the display of the national flag, symbolic of thanks and loyalty to the nation. The contradictory juxtaposition of such divergent symbols of loyalty cannot be ignored when considering what it means to give primary allegiance to God's kingdom.

It is in our daily life that our beliefs become real, to ourselves and to those around us. When we speak the words of God and live by the patterns of scripture, we exemplify our allegiance to God. Our churches also provide clues into the nature of our ultimate fidelity. The role of government, and its negative expression in unchecked nationalism, so obviously tearing people apart around the world, remains a great challenge for us in North America as we consider how to declare in word and deed and symbol where our ultimate allegiance resides. Our recognition of and response to the pervasive nature of government influence in our lives and churches has much

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to say about how we live out our Christian integrity and witness.

Participation in Government

Article 12 does not specifically address the issue of those who choose to participate directly in government. Christians are admonished to “cooperate with others in society” to achieve the ends God sets out for the state, but are clearly distinguished from the state. The article encourages prayer for and an attitude of respect toward government authorities. Some in our churches choose to participate more actively in the daily affairs of government through elected or other positions, and some work directly in law enforcement areas, potentially placing themselves in situations involving the use of deadly force.

While there is no outright prohibition to these activities in Article 12, a key consideration is the statement, “As ambassadors for Christ, Christians act as agents of reconciliation, and seek the well-being of all peoples.” In this area, as with other aspects of our relationship to society, there is a good deal of discernment necessary in following the example of Christ, who consistently challenged the rich and powerful and stood up for the poor and powerless. Involvement in political parties and governmental processes presents unique, and often difficult, challenges in following this model.

It should also be noted that simple abstention from direct involvement in governmental affairs does not free one from such considerations. There is much benefit and security derived from the proper function of government as instituted by God. Just as we recognize the pervasive nature of government influence in our daily lives, so we must recognize the security and freedoms that surround the majority. These benefits should not lessen our desire to follow the model of Christ who spoke boldly to the powers of his time and was willing to suffer the consequences for doing so. Whether we participate directly in government or are recipients of its benefits, we must continue to discern our relationship to the state and our response to pressures which threaten to compromise Christian integrity.

Finding Our Way

Over the years we have worked to find our way regarding the proper relationship of Christians to the state. In these changing times we continue to focus our attention and discernment upon a host of less obvious ways in which society and state can influence our lives, affect the needs of those around us, and compromise our commitment and witness as citizens of God’s kingdom.

ARTICLE 13

Love and Nonresistance

God's Community of Peace

We believe that God in Christ reconciles people to Himself and to one another, making peace through the cross. The church is a fellowship of redeemed people living by love. Our bond with other believers of Jesus transcends all racial, social and national barriers.

Christian Peacemaking

Believers seek to be agents of reconciliation in all relationships, to practice love of enemies as taught by Christ, to be peacemakers in all situations. We view violence in its many different forms as contradictory to the new nature of the Christian. We believe that the evil and inhumane nature of violence is contrary to the gospel of love and peace. In times of national conscription or war, we believe we are called to give alternative service where possible. Alleviating suffering, reducing strife, and promoting justice are ways of demonstrating Christ's love.

Exod. 20:1-17; Matt. 5:17-28, 38-48; Rom. 12:9-21; 13:8-10; I Pet. 2:19-23.

Love and Nonresistance

COMMENTARY

There have been many debates through the years about whether this article, “Love and Nonresistance,” should be relegated to a secondary role in our confession of faith. We have argued over how a citizen can be subject to governing authorities and also refuse military service. Or we have debated how this topic can be given such prominence in comparison to the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our biblical teaching on the article has languished in many of our churches because of such questions.

Teaching on this article must start with the good news of the gospel and develop out of a biblical concern for faithfulness as disciples of Jesus Christ. Peacemaking is rooted in the biblical teaching that Jesus is our peace. He broke down the walls that divide and alienate people, and created a new humanity (Eph. 2:14-22). Jesus called his followers to a life of sacrificial love in which even our enemies should be treated with grace and forgiveness (Matt. 5:43-48). We have often interpreted these teachings too narrowly, for instance as a prohibition against killing or going to war. It is that, to be sure, but it is more. Peacemaking goes beyond a reactive response to military involvement. Biblically it is understood proactively as seeking reconciliation and peace, and extending forgiveness and blessing to our neighbors, even our enemies.

This article is not an optional part of our confession. It describes our response to the violence, suffering, and injustice that is so much a part of contemporary society. It is particularly needed today because of the hatred and violence so prevalent in our families and neighborhoods and on the streets of our cities. This confession makes explicit our commitment to alleviate suffering, reduce strife, and promote justice as part of our witness in today’s world.

Peacemaking Begins with the Gospel

The heart of a theology of peacemaking is the reconciling work of Christ on the cross. Jesus came to address the broken relationship between God and humanity. In his sacrificial death our Lord not only redeemed us but reconciled all humanity into one. He broke down the walls of hostility between opposing cultures, societal factions, and between male and female (Gal. 3:28ff). He destroyed the barriers

which divide people. Through his death, former enemies are reconciled to live at peace as brothers and sisters in Christ (Eph. 2:11-18).

Our Lord not only made it possible for enemies to be at peace, but he called us to a ministry of reconciliation and peacemaking (2 Cor. 5:11-21). Jesus taught that the way of peace lies in extending forgiveness to those who have sinned against us, to bless our enemies rather than curse them (Matt. 5:43-48), and to bind up the wounds of those who are injured even if they are different from us (Luke 10:25-37).

Peacemaking Rather than Pacifism

The call to biblical peacemaking challenges us to be more than passive nonresistors. The word “peacemaker” combines the meaning of well-being or wholeness with the idea of action. A peacemaker is one who actively intervenes in situations of conflict in order to establish peace. Jesus teaches that one of the ways to live as peacemakers is to refuse retaliation. The idea is both clear and radical. Do not resist but turn the other cheek. Do not insist on legal rights. Surrender personal property. Do not resist those who demand assistance. Give money instead of lending when a loan is requested (Matt. 5:38-42). Luke observes that we should refuse retaliation because of who God is. He is a God of grace and mercy. We should therefore respond to oppressors in like manner (Luke 6:32-38).

This proactive biblical warrant for peacemaking is not only emphasized in the Gospels. The apostles describe the life of the believing community in the same manner. Followers of Christ are to serve their enemies (Rom. 12:20; 13:8-10), return good for evil (Rom. 12:17, 21; 1 Pet. 3:9), do good to all people (Rom. 12:17; Gal. 6:10), and pursue peace with all people (Rom. 12:18; 14:19; 1 Pet. 3:11).

Peacemaking involves more than refusing to retaliate, however. It includes loving oppressors. Jesus is unambiguous. We are to love the people who hate us (Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). He counters the morality which says “love your neighbors and hate your enemies” by challenging his followers to love even enemies (Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). We are to pray for our enemies (Matt. 5:44). Rather than destroying them, we are to love in order to enhance and enrich their lives (Luke 6:27-36). We are called to respond in such extraordinary ways that we communicate the mercy of God and reflect His nature (Matt. 5:46-47; Luke 6:27-36). Indeed, peacemaking always has Christ’s mission of the church in mind, to fulfill our Lord’s command to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20).

Peacemaking and the Kingdom

The redemptive work of Christ creates a new community of God’s

people who live together according to a new order based upon the teachings and example of Jesus. Jesus called people to respond to this kingdom by repenting, believing, and becoming members of the kingdom community. It is a unique community made up of people who were once enemies but are now reconciled to God and with one another. Their mission is to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18).

This new kingdom community lives in a unique relationship to the world system. The people of God are *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:15-16). They see themselves as pilgrims, strangers, and aliens whose citizenship is otherworldly (Heb. 11:8-16; 1 Pet. 2:9, 11; Phil. 3:20). They stand over against the worldly kingdom by keeping separated from the practices of the world. The apostle Paul describes this stance toward the world system as nonconformity (Rom. 12:2). Having been transformed so as to know and do the will of God, the people of God now live in love and unity with each other, leaving vengeance to God, and practicing suffering love (Rom. 12:14-21).

This new kingdom community has a new way of accomplishing its mission. It is the way of love rather than violence. Christ was clear in his comments to Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). When the Christian’s value system comes into conflict with the world system, priority is given to the kingdom of Christ. Christ is our example. In the face of ridicule and hostile forces he modeled purity of heart and a loving and gracious spirit: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23).

Peacemaking Inwardly and Outwardly

Jesus summarized the whole of his teaching with the command to love both God and neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40; Luke 10:25-37). The teaching of peacemaking must embrace both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of our love. The Scriptures emphasize that love for God can never remain only an upward and inward focus. Our love must extend to our neighbor. Jesus was clear that our neighbor includes anyone who is in need. Like the lawyer in Jesus’ day who asked “Who is my neighbor?” we want to limit neighbor love. Neighbor love includes all people—minorities, people of color, the poor, the aged, the physically and mentally challenged, and so on. Peacemaking is driven by a love that knows no social or cultural conditions or limitations.

Teaching on peacemaking should start in the family, the most basic social relationship. How we live within the home is more indicative of our peacemaking convictions than our nonparticipation in the military. Our focus on peacemaking must also include neighbor relations in our community. As peacemakers we respond with love and compassion to our friends and neighbors next door, to our business associates in the office, to our students in the classroom, to the stranger on the street. Peacemakers are concerned to do good for rather than condemn other races, welfare recipients, strikers, criminals, employers, employees, and others commonly criticized and even hated.

Moreover, peacemaking makes little sense in the social-political sphere if it does not also impact our relationships within the church. Christ's teaching on loving our enemies is especially relevant for those in the church who fight and feud with one another. Indeed, peacemaking must begin in the household of faith. Wherever the seeds of enmity and malice have been sown, peacemakers sow love by word and deed.

Love and Nonresistance

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Article 13 states clearly our commitment to alleviate suffering, reduce conflict, and promote justice as part of our witness in today's world.

We tend to respond to conflict and violence either by raising our voice and striking back, or by avoiding the conflict and walking away or remaining uninvolved. Christ chose a third option, peacemaking. He absorbed the evil and violence in himself, then released the perpetrators with grace and forgiveness, leaving vengeance and judgment to God. As followers of Jesus, our goal is a life of sacrificial love where even our enemies are treated with grace and forgiveness (Matt: 5:42-48). Christ calls us to be peacemakers—to stand between enemies to bring them together. To make peace is to stanch the flow of angry words, to cleanse the wound and bring healing to relationships. To make peace is to tear down barriers of misunderstanding and prejudice, anger, and hate, and to replace those barriers with bridges of acceptance, forgiveness, friendship, and love. This is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ; it is what we are called to be and to do as children of God. (Matt. 5:9)

A New Model

Jesus models a new way for the kingdom community to live, a way of love rather than violence. The paradox of the cross is that it is precisely through suffering and death that resurrection life comes. We are called not only to believe this paradox, but to live it. This new kingdom claims our highest allegiance. A critical issue for its citizens is how to be both loyal to God and loyal to civil governments (Rom. 13:1-7). Most Christians understand this to mean that Christians are called to obey the demands of the state whenever possible. This is not blind allegiance to civil authorities, however. The Bible emphasizes that members of the new kingdom community have a higher loyalty. Caesar is not lord; Jesus is Lord.

In the kingdom people are always more important than possessions. Persons who were created by God in His image, and for whom Christ died that they may be redeemed, are always more valuable than property. Citizens of the kingdom do not insist on legal rights. They surrender personal property. For followers of Jesus, defending

personal property (which belongs to God anyway) with lethal force is wrong, and represents a misplaced value system.

Article 13 specifically addresses issues of war and international conflict. Most conflicts, however are closer to home.

Marriage and Family Issues

It is time for the church to break the silence concerning violence in marriage and in families. Discipline of children should never leave scars or bruises, whether physical or emotional. The biblical teaching of mutual submission in marriage may never be used as an excuse for physical or emotional abuse. Most churches recognize that violence is grounds for marriage separation, at least on a temporary basis, until the aggressor has found constructive ways of managing anger.

The church must listen to and be an advocate on behalf of victims. It must hold abusers accountable. More than that, the church must teach and model peaceful ways of living as marriage partners and as families.

A related issue is violence to unborn children. It is hardly possible to be pro-peace without being pro-life as well. If we consider the life of our enemy to be sacred, we must also consider the life of the unborn to be sacred. In the same way, if we protect the life of the unborn, should we not also protect the lives of those who live in a country that our nation defines as its enemy?

Church

Surely the church is called to be a community of peace, providing an arena where the healthy exchange of differences is encouraged, supported, and resolved. Unfortunately, the church has too frequently been the place of bitter disputes and hurtful battles, harming its witness to the world.

Jesus taught that those coming to worship should first ensure that relationships with others are reconciled (Matt. 5:23,24). Before approaching the Lord's Table, we examine ourselves, seeking to determine whether our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters are open and clear (1 Cor. 11:27-34). In the past, some churches established peace committees designed to help fellow members resolve disputes—a decision which stands in contrast to our prevailing tendency to “mind our own business.” When we disagree within the Christian community, we should strive to do so as graciously as possible (Rom. 14).

Community, School, Work, and Play

Neighborhood disputes, racial tensions, and crime all provide further opportunities to promote justice, fight prejudice, extend love, work for peace. Community-based mediation services such as the Victim/Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) offer people an opportunity to practice peace-making by bringing people together, allowing for restitution, and moving toward reconciliation.

Schoolyard fights, labor/management tensions, violence among sports players and fans, are all variations on the same theme, and give Christians many opportunities to work for peace. For example, some schools have established playground reconciliation teams, where students are trained to negotiate (and, if necessary, arbitrate) settlements among their peers.

In the workplace we give employers and employees their due, and attempt to build bridges of trust and understanding. Truth, fairness, consideration, courtesy, and a love for others, even when we disagree with their positions, should mark the Christian's involvement in work-related disputes.

Christians should be encouraged to practice discernment in their entertainment choices. Television shows, movies, and computer games that glorify violence as a solution to problems stand in opposition to the way of the kingdom. In sports, vigorous yet friendly competition honors a worthy opponent. Insulting the referee or trash-talking the opposing team is not the way of Jesus. Our enthusiasm for the game is always tempered by our concern for the well-being of others.

National and International Disputes

For the Christian citizen, national and international disputes challenge a commitment to peace-making. The present-day dilemma of trying to keep the peace by the threat of force seems counter to Jesus' words of love for enemies.

We deplore our world's tendency to deal with violence by threatening or committing counter-violence. Such acts generally result in an uneasy truce or cease-fire, an escalation of the violence, or the displacement of the violence into underground forms of terrorism. Reconciliation, on the other hand, eliminates enmity and hate, and cuts the root that feeds the violence by building bridges of understanding, forgiveness, and friendship. It is a huge task, but far more productive in the long run.

We are grateful to God that governing authorities in North America have provided alternative service for Christians who, because of their faith convictions, choose not to enter military service. The church

should continue to counsel youth to offer themselves in loving service to reduce strife and alleviate suffering rather than take up arms in military conflict. The church should also continue to provide service opportunities where believers may bear witness to the love we have for all humanity, even our enemies.

What about those who accuse us of benefiting from the sacrifice of others, while refusing to get involved? What about veterans who believe they did the right thing, yet return from war with nightmares and tremendous feelings of guilt? What about members of our congregations who serve in police forces, where lethal force is sometimes expected in the line of duty?

Here the church will probably continue to live in tension between what we believe and the realities of life. Not all countries accept alternate service. Not all believers accept this teaching. As graciously as possible, let us agree to disagree with those who hold different views. Let us be faithful in proclaiming the gospel in its fullness. This includes calling people to suffer for the sake of Christ and to extend love to those who seem unlovable.

At the same time, we extend grace and acceptance, love, and support to those among us who disagree with us, or who find themselves making difficult decisions in their line of work.

Remembrance Day, Veteran's Day

We do not take lightly the sacrifice paid by others in wars in which we were unwilling to participate. Surely we would be ungrateful if we did not recognize and honor their struggle for peace. To remember and to pay tribute to their courage and commitment is certainly appropriate. There is no shame, however, in insisting that our weapons for peace are of another nature. Were we to stand idly by, doing nothing while others are fighting, surely that would be shameful. We are not called to do nothing, however; we are called to active peace-making. Christ calls us to lay down our lives daily for the sake of the gospel of peace. Our willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom should certainly be no less than those who have given their lives fighting for their country.

A High Calling

Though there may be disagreement surrounding certain aspects of Article 13, perhaps the greatest need in these issues is not more understanding but more obedience. At the heart, Article 13 calls for Christians to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Jesus said his followers must "take up their cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24 NRSV). He proclaimed, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called

children of God. (Matt. 5:9 NRSV).” There is no higher calling.

One of the most powerful ways to teach the principles of love and nonresistance, of peace and nonviolence, is by telling stories. Many from our congregations who have worked in missions, relief, inner city, reconciliation, and other such ministries can offer firsthand accounts and experiences in these areas. A variety of printed materials also exist that are suitable for varying ages and settings. Including such material in church libraries and discussing them in class and small group settings is highly recommended. The following bibliography lists several potential resources.

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ARTICLE 14

The Sanctity of Human Life

We believe that all human life belongs to God. Each person is created in the image of God and ought to be celebrated and nurtured. Because God is Creator, the author and giver of life, we oppose all actions and attitudes which devalue human life. The unborn, disabled, poor, aging and dying are particularly vulnerable to such injustices. Christ calls the people of all nations to care for the defenseless.

God values human life highly. Ultimate decisions regarding life and death belong to God. Therefore, we hold that procedures designed to take life, including abortion, euthanasia, and assisted suicide, are an affront to God's sovereignty. We esteem the life-sustaining findings of medical science, but recognize that there are limits to the value of seeking to sustain life indefinitely. In all complex ethical decisions regarding life and death, we seek to offer hope and healing, support and counsel in the context of the Christian community.

Gen. 1:26-27; 2:7; Exod. 20:13; Job 31:15; Ps. 139:13-16; Amos 1-2; Matt. 6:25-27; 25:31-46; John 10:11.

The Sanctity of Human Life

COMMENTARY

Christians have traditionally upheld the doctrine of the sanctity of life, but we must interpret it carefully. The biblical account of creation describes life as a property which comes from God. God gave life to all organic forms of creation. But man and woman are uniquely described as being made in the image of God and are given rule over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26-7). “And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

The Creation Account

Regarding the sanctity of life, several things follow from the creation account in Genesis. First, life is a gift from God. Second, man and woman have value, along with all of creation, because God imputes value on all that He has created. Third, the value of man and woman is distinct from that of the rest of creation because they are created in the image of God, a triune God who establishes a covenant relationship with them, and who sees relationships as central to being human. Here it is very important to note that it is not just biological existence in itself that makes human life sacred—there is a qualitative requirement. It is life in relationship with God and other human beings that is sacred.

A fourth reality that follows from the creation account is that human life is also distinctive in being given responsibility to rule over and care for the rest of creation (see Psalm 8). Fifth, it is God who gives human life value and transcendent worth. It is not something that we acquire or earn. Man and woman had worth before they did anything. The sanctity of life is independent of the value that can be placed on a person by virtue of efforts, accomplishments, talents, or any other measure.

The Fall

The story of creation is followed by the story of the fall. As a result of sin, life is full of pain and suffering—childbearing is painful and work is now by the sweat of the brow (Gen. 3:16, 19). To be human is to suffer. “Human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward,” Job reminds us (5:7 NRSV). God in His sovereignty can bring good even out of suffering. Jesus suffered and died that we might be

saved. Christians are to rejoice that we can participate in the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 4:13).

One other dimension of suffering needs to be noted. There is no such thing as a perfectly formed human being. We all suffer, some more than others, because of various defects. The sacredness of human life is not contingent on having a perfectly formed body. Human life must be seen as sacred, with warts, defects, and all. Christians are called to accept God's sovereign will in giving each of us our basic make-up. "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" (Rom. 9:20; see also 21; Isa. 29:16; 45:9).

The curse after the fall also included the pronouncement that there would be an end to life: "for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen. 3:19; see also Eccl. 3:19-20, 12:6-7). The Lord God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden lest they "take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever" (Gen. 3:22). While human life is sacred, death is inescapable. Our span of life is short and full of trouble and sorrow (Ps. 90).

The fact of death raises a central question as to the value of human life from an earthly perspective. In Matthew 10:26-31 Jesus advises us not to be afraid of those who have the power to kill our bodies. "Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (v. 28). Jesus also calls us to take up his cross, even to the point of losing our life as he did (Matt. 16:24-26). The cross has redefined the value of earthly human life, just as it has redefined the issue of death—our salvation was brought about by the death of Jesus. Giving up one's life for the sake of Jesus Christ can therefore be seen as a Christian ideal.

Redemption and Resurrection

The story of the fall is followed by the story of redemption which culminates in a resurrection life. We must therefore be careful that we do not misinterpret the principle of the sanctity of life in terms of seeing our human earthly life as an absolute good. We do live on after death, and this adds another dimension to the sacredness of human life. The individual's personhood is not destroyed by death, but instead returns to the Creator (Eccl. 12:7), while the physical component reassumes its original form (Gen. 3:19). It is because we hope for a resurrected body that our earthly body is given a value beyond its temporal existence (1 Cor. 15). We must be careful not to think only in terms of physical bodies and the sacredness of biological life. The significance of the resurrection is found in the reestablishing of a relationship with God and with all the saints (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

New Testament Perspectives

Jesus repeatedly affirms the value of human life. He warns us against worry, encouraging us to look at the birds of the air who are fed by the heavenly Father, and then reminds us that we are “much more valuable than they” (Matt. 6:26). And later Jesus becomes even more specific: “Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:30-31). Paul specifically addresses the status of our bodies, reminding us that we are the temples of the Holy Spirit and that we are not our own. “Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:20).

Jesus carefully instructed his disciples about the value of children (Matt. 18:2-4, 13-14). Further, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female in Christ’s church (Gal. 3:28). In bestowing His blessing on humans, God does not distinguish between the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). Believers are exhorted by James not to discriminate between rich and poor (2:1-11). “Love your neighbor as yourself” (James 2:8; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39). Human beings have equal value, according to the Scriptures, and thus the principle of the sanctity and dignity of life should extend to all.

Moral Implications

Abortion:

Abortion involves the refusal of a divine gift of human life. It is a betrayal of God’s intention for creation. Although abortion is not specifically referred to in the Bible, there are frequent Old Testament references indicating reverence for life in the womb (Exod. 21:22-25; Job 31:15; Ps. 139:13-16; Isa. 44:24; 49:1-6; Jer. 1:5). Abortion does not honor God’s sovereignty over human life.

Euthanasia:

What is often referred to as active euthanasia is wrong because it violates the principle of the sanctity of life and fails to acknowledge that it is ultimately up to God to determine the time of our death (Deut. 32:39). This is clearly illustrated in the story of the Amalekite who killed Saul after he had been fatally wounded. Saul requested this because he was in the throes of death, and the Amalekite saw “that he could not survive,” so he killed him. Nonetheless, David had this man punished (2 Sam. 1:1-16). Active euthanasia is not the answer to imminent and painful death. Instead, we must accept suffering and pain as an inevitable part of life after the fall, asking God to give us the grace to suffer with dignity. Scripture does, however, accept administration of the soporific aid to someone in great agony of death (Prov. 31:6-7), although Jesus specifically refused even this

on the cross (Matt. 27:48).

Active euthanasia must be distinguished from what is perhaps inappropriately labeled “passive euthanasia.” Death is a consequence of the fall and needs to be accepted as a normal part of a broken world. “There is a time for everything ... a time to be born and a time to die” (Eccl. 3:1-2). Christians must beware of the “tyranny of the possible” in medical science. There are times when it is quite appropriate to refuse extraordinary measures to preserve or prolong life.

Suicide and Assisted Suicide:

Suicide too needs to be seen as a violation of the sanctity that God places on human life. It can be seen as a violation of the sixth commandment, as it may plausibly be seen as murder of oneself. Life needs to be appreciated as a gift from God. We did not choose to be born. Nor should we choose to bring about our own death. God alone, the author of life, has absolute dominion over our lives (Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam.1: 5). Hence no human being possesses the right to dispose of life on his/her own authority. It is equally wrong to assist someone in committing suicide.

Suicide, however, must be distinguished from the sacrificing of one’s life for another person or for the cause of Jesus Christ. Our Lord laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11), and some of his followers are called to do the same.

The despair and suffering that often are a precursor to suicide need to be seen in proper biblical perspective. Life after the fall is invariably full of suffering and pain. But there is meaning in suffering and pain. Christ calls us to join him in bearing the suffering and pain that resulted from the fall (2 Cor. 1:5). The frequently heard secular slogan of dying with dignity needs to be replaced with a Christian call to suffer with dignity. We need to help each other bear the pain that life often brings (Gal. 6:2). We need to mourn with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15).

This communal dimension to bearing suffering and pain also extends to the way in which we as Christians make the complex ethical decisions surrounding life and death. Where ethical issues are not clear-cut, we are called to practice discernment (Phil.1:10; Rom. 12:2). It is the church as a community that tries to “find out what pleases the Lord” (Eph. 5:10) as it searches the Scriptures together, speaks truthfully to one another, and submits to one another (Eph. 4:15; 5:21).

The Sanctity of Human Life

PASTORAL APPLICATION

As Christians, we acknowledge God as the giver and sustainer of life. The biblical account of creation reminds us that it is God who first breathed life into human form and called it good. Christians have understood this statement to mean that God values human life, and that the nurture and care of physical life is a part of the stewardship mandate given by God.

In our technological society, the giving and taking of life is often understood to lie primarily within human jurisdiction. Increasingly both birth and death are events to be managed. Issues such as genetic engineering, the use of fertility drugs, and the ability to sustain a heartbeat even though brain function has ceased have complicated what once seemed to be the natural cycle of life and death. This article seeks to help the church wrestle with the complicated sanctity of life issues its members face, both personally and professionally.

Celebrating and Nurturing Individuals

Congregations and pastors perform a number of symbolic acts to celebrate life. Births, anniversaries, educational or professional achievements, as well as other special occasions are frequently acknowledged with flowers, cards, or public announcements. But the care and nurture of life must move to a deeper level if it is to significantly impact those in our care.

Nurturing the individual is a discipleship task. Opportunities should exist within the church for every individual to grow from where they are to where God wants them to be. Small group gatherings for Bible study, prayer, and support can often provide intimate settings for the nurture of spiritual and emotional life. Personal visitation and prayer by pastoral staff is also important for the nurture of individuals within the congregation. The care and nurture of children and young people are an extension of Jesus' love for children and his desire that all come to know the Father.

Many of us will recognize these things as a part of normal pastoral care. When we think further about the implications of the sacredness of life, we must open our eyes to the ways in which this care can be further expressed. Making our church facilities accessible to

those with special physical needs, for example, acknowledges their place within our congregations. Providing and maintaining equipment for the hearing impaired can be a significant ministry to an often overlooked group of people. Objecting to building codes which require handicap access is not only a poor witness to the community, but also suggests that the church wants only “whole” people. Likewise, to teach against abortion, while failing to provide a place for the handicapped child within our Sunday school program, suggests that we are unwilling to see the image of God within each person. Intentionally withholding ministry from certain populations of people may be a grievous sin against God, who longs for all people to know Christ.

The teaching and preaching ministries of the church are excellent opportunities to influence the attitudes of those around us towards others. Care should be given in the kinds of stories and sermon illustrations we use. Making women, teenagers, the elderly, or any ethnic or social group the butt of jokes is usually inappropriate and will be noted by those in the audience. The dignity of life should extend to all. However, we should also be cautious about the present-day preoccupation with the rights of the individual. The dignity of human existence is God-given, not self-imposed, and we invite all people to actively participate in the family of God.

Opposing Actions and Attitudes Which Devalue Human Life

Expressing opposition can be a necessary and valuable part of the church’s witness to the world. Appropriate forms of opposition may vary with each situation and should be discussed within the church community. Consider degrees of opposition on a continuum. One extreme is to do nothing. Praying, contributing resources, voting for appropriate candidates or issues where laws are involved, and writing letters to the editor or to government officials are ways to increase active opposition without being physically present. Counseling unwed mothers, protesting legally at life-devaluing sites or retailers, and even adopting an unwanted child are instances of more personal involvement. There are times when opposition could mean breaking human laws through civil disobedience. Individuals should not make such decisions without prayer within the context of the church community.

At the end of the continuum is opposition that breaks God’s law. Committing murder, for instance, by killing an abortion doctor adds wrong to wrong. We also do well to remember Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount when he extends the prohibition against mur-

der to the hatred of one's brother or sister. Characterizing political leaders, or anyone who holds differing opinions, as evil or stupid reflects poorly on the church's witness.

Caring for the Defenseless

Caring stems from compassion, and compassion is the work of God in human hearts. Emphasizing God's tenderhearted mercy and grace toward all can be done through preaching and teaching, by prayer and example. Exposure to the plight of the defenseless through mission and service trips, media presentations, and personal testimonies increases awareness of the need for the application of God's mercy and grace.

Acts of caring that channel God's mercy and grace inside the church include prayer in public worship, communicating respect in speech and print, and remodeling facilities to make them accessible to everyone. The church itself becomes defenseless, in a sense, as a captive audience when it gathers. Regulating the public address system to enhance worship and to avoid hearing damage, being sensitive to visiting individuals and groups to ensure that content and presentation are appropriate, and making considerations for all believers present to participate in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, reflect an attitude of caring for the defenseless.

The Church extends caring beyond its walls by sending regular financial support to agencies that meet specific needs locally and globally, and by encouraging individuals to participate with such agencies to meet needs. Caring is also extended when individuals of the church become involved in such activities as volunteering in clinics, retirement centers, and safe houses, offering foster care, and providing home maintenance and other services to the aged and challenged. These outward acts are as valuable to the body of Christ as involvement within the church.

Decisions Regarding Life and Death

To state in the confession that "ultimate decisions regarding life and death belong to God" reminds us of the opportunity the church has to witness to the high value of life and God's sovereignty over it. While the issue of murder is easily seen as wrong, other decisions regarding life and death may be less clear.

Medical Issues:

Pastors, counselors and medical personnel are called to help individuals and families sort out complex medical decisions. This must be done with care, recognizing that such decisions are often made in

times of crisis. As Mennonite Brethren we do not condone determining the time of death through an act of euthanasia. At the same time, helping to determine when to stop aggressive medical procedures can be an act of compassionate care for both the dying and for those who stand alongside. There are times when it is quite appropriate to refuse treatment (for example, when disease is already widespread), or to reject the use of artificial life-support systems. These kinds of decisions are best made in community—with the individual, the family, the physician, and a praying church family cooperating and seeking a wise decision.

Encouraging people to donate organs can be a life-affirming act in the midst of what is often personal tragedy. The decision to accept or reject an organ transplant should also be carefully considered. The giving or receiving of human organs can be understood as a matter of stewardship. As members of an affluent society with access to abundant medical resources, we may be tempted to see these resources as a part of our natural human rights. We remember again, however, that the dignity of human existence is God-given rather than self-imposed, and caution needs to be exercised in a culture preoccupied with individual rights.

Assisting people to make wise choices in their use of medical technology and resources can serve as a witness to our confidence in God's ultimate care and provision. Nurturing attitudes of gratefulness to God, who is the ultimate healer and sustainer of life, reminds us that our trust is in His care for us. While we greatly value the technology that allows us to sustain and care for life, we must not forget that this earthly life cannot be sustained indefinitely. We also witness to God's grace in the way we endure suffering and approach the end of our earthly life. Helping congregations think about these issues before the point of crisis is wise. There are many Christian doctors and medical personnel who might serve as resource persons for Sunday school classes or other study groups. Those who are suffering or in the last stages of life can be inappropriately marginalized in our congregations if we avoid these important issues.

Fertility Issues:

The Old Testament charge to “be fruitful and multiply” has ethical implications for Christian couples. Many choose to see family planning as a part of responsible stewardship—not only of personal resources but also of the earth's resources. It is appropriate for pastors and counselors to help couples think through the implications of their decisions regarding birth control methods and fertility procedures. For example, choosing birth control methods that prevent

fertilization rather than methods that induce abortion reflects our belief that life is never to be regarded as waste material. It is also appropriate to call for responsible use of fertility drugs and procedures. Methods such as warehousing of fertilized eggs or the use of selective abortion to reduce the risks of multiple births seem an affront to the dignity of human life and God's design for its conception. This can be a very emotional issue for couples who are having difficulty conceiving and great care must be taken in helping couples work through these issues. It must be remembered, however, that our worth in God's eyes and our place in the Christian community are not based on our ability to reproduce. At the same time, to ignore the pain of couples who cannot conceive is to deny a very real grief.

Recognizing the Limits of Medical Science

Pastors who maintain a diet of reading material covering a wide range of current topics and issues, including scientific/medical breakthroughs and treatments, will find themselves better able to recognize limits to the value and use of such findings. However, recognizing such limits and applying them to individual situations may require more discernment than any one pastor can provide. Since application in this area depends largely on individual cases, there are others such as family members and physicians that will share in the responsibility for determining these limits. Good communication and rapport with others in these settings is vital to carrying out the pastor's unique role.

The pastor's role can include assessing a person's underlying beliefs, fears, and spiritual condition, presenting appropriate Scripture, and providing assurance of God's faithfulness and promises through counsel and prayer. In cases where end-of-life decisions are being made, the pastor's role should be readily accepted and offered graciously in support of individuals and families in need.

Positions such as those on local ethics boards are often open to pastors and people within local congregations who have medical/philosophical training and experience. Such opportunities provide unique ways to bear witness to God's sovereignty in matters of life and death.

Offering Hope and Healing, Support and Counsel

Churches offer hope to all through the proclamation of the Gospel. This hope is effective for this life and the next. Where individuals have suffered injustice or felt the pain of life-devaluing procedures or situations, the church can do more than speak of salvation's hope to come. Hope is available already to provide freedom from guilt and

shame, fear and despair. The Holy Spirit manifests such hope through the church in ministries of healing. As people are invited to receive salvation so they should be invited to receive healing. Such healing may require confession and repentance, counsel or more medical care. The Bible calls the church to pray, and on occasion, to fast to effect healing.

Hope is evident through ministries of support and counsel. Small groups form an excellent environment for support and invite members of the congregation to participate actively in the ministry of healing. Where more intensive counseling seems necessary, the church can draw on the resources of Christian counselors and agencies. Pastors should be clear about the limits of their personal abilities to provide counseling services. Developing good working relationships with Christian counselors increases the ministries of the church and is an effective way to offer hope and healing to those in need.

It must be remembered that many of the decisions concerning life and death are enormously complex. The boundaries between right and wrong are often difficult to determine. We should be cautious in our approach, acknowledging the limits of our knowledge and the ultimate grace of God.

Stewardship

God's Creation Mandate

We believe the universe and everything in it belong to God the Creator. God has entrusted the care of the earth to all people, who are responsible for managing its resources. Good stewardship uses the earth's abundance to meet human need, but resists the unjust exploitation of the earth and its peoples. All God's gifts are to be received with thanksgiving and used responsibly.

Responsible Living

To confess Jesus as Lord transforms values. Jesus warns that we cannot serve both God and wealth. Preoccupation with money and possessions, self-indulgent living and eagerness to accumulate wealth for personal advantage are not in keeping with the teaching of Scripture.

Generous Giving

The Bible teaches cheerful, sacrificial, and proportional giving through the church in grateful response to God's goodness. Christians do not claim any of their possessions as their own, but manage all their resources, including money, time, abilities and influence, in generous ways that give glory to God. They do not despise the poor but practice mutual aid within the church and share what they have with others in need. God's people seek to embrace a lifestyle of simplicity and contentment.

Gen. 1:28; Lev. 25; Deut. 15:7-11; Ps. 24:1; 115:16; Prov. 14:31; Amos 6:4-7; Mal. 3:6-10; Matt. 6:19-34; 25:14-30; Luke 6:38; 12:13-21; Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 1 Cor. 4:7; 16:2; 2 Cor. 8-9; Gal. 6:7; Eph. 4:28; 1 Tim. 6:6-10, 17-19; James 2:1-7, 15-16; 5:1-6; 1 John 3:16-18; Jude 11.

ARTICLE 15

Stewardship

COMMENTARY

Stewards are persons who hold something of value in trust for another through care and management, and who give an account to an owner. In the widest sense, humanity has a stewardship responsibility for Earth. Moreover, the church is distinct from all other human agencies in that it holds in trust the treasure of the gospel (1 Cor. 4:1). In the narrowest sense each individual is accountable as a steward of God's gifts.

Stewardship of the Earth

Divine Concern for Creation:

Christians are obviously included in the "creation mandate" which calls for humans to "have dominion over the earth" as illustrated in the Garden of Eden by Adam, who was mandated to till the ground and guard it (Gen. 1:28-31; 2:15). God, the undisputed maker and possessor of all (Gen. 1:1; 14:19; Ps. 24:1) has compassion for the land and its creatures and cares for all His creation (Jonah 4:11; Ps. 104:10-30; 36:6; Joel 2:22). The prophets envision a time of harmony between humans and animals (Isa. 11:1-10; cf. 65:25; 35:1-7,9; Hosea 2:18). God's salvation plan also includes the eventual creation of a new earth (Isa. 65:17; Rom. 8:20-22).

Human Responsibility for Creation:

To be a steward of the earth means to manage well such natural resources as water and forests, and to tend plants and animals with the same compassion God shows. Examples from biblical law substantiate this. Bird nests are not to be destroyed (Deut. 22:6-7). Animals are to be cared for (Deut. 25:4; Prov. 12:10). Limits are put on the use of trees for war (Deut. 20:19). The ground, which produces what creatures need, is not to be exploited—a teaching made clear in the provision that the land be left fallow every seventh year and also during the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25).

Morality and the Environment:

There is a strong link between the moral life of a people and the condition of the natural world. Humanity's violence brought the Noachic flood (Gen. 6-9). Havoc on the earth will be the consequence of

human evil (Hos. 4:1-3). Jeremiah paints a scene not unlike a nuclear winter, an outcome, as the larger context makes clear, due to human wrongdoing (Jer. 4:23-26). It is in large part because of human greed that land becomes a desert due to deforestation, soil deteriorates with overuse of chemicals, fish and birds die from water pollution. The conclusion follows, positively stated, that the earth will be helped by unselfish, compassionate, and responsible living by its human inhabitants.

Responsible Living

Realigned Perspectives:

Responsible living includes a full acknowledgment that life, time, abilities, opportunities, and material goods are from God. God is the source and rightful owner of all (Ps. 24:1). He is the origin of human life (Gen. 2:7; 21-23), and gives the gift of procreation whereby human beings come to life (Ruth 4:13; 1 Sam. 1:27). God gives the power to get wealth (Deut. 8:18; 1 Chron. 29:12), as well as abilities such as craftsmanship (Bezalel and Oholiab in Exod. 36:1) and insight (Solomon in 1 Kings 3:10-12). The land is repeatedly designated as “gift” or “given by God” to Israel. Deuteronomy alone has 30 such statements (e.g. 5:31; 9:6; 26:9). It was God to whom patriarchs such as Abraham and Isaac and Job owed their material prosperity (Job 42:10). God is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

God’s generous gift-giving calls for the human response of thanksgiving to the Giver. Believers are warned against an attitude of arrogance (1 Tim. 6:17-19). The successful and well-to-do are to resist the temptation to boast (Deut. 8:11-17). The attitude instead is to be one of gratitude. Moreover, since God’s gifts are in the nature of “trusts,” humans are accountable for the way these gifts are managed and used.

Managing God’s Gifts:

All God’s gifts—abilities, wealth, time, the environment—are to be managed well. The gifts of life and its pleasures are to be enjoyed (1 Tim. 6:17). Neither Old nor New Testament censures the rich for being rich, but both give ample instructions on the use of wealth and warn against temptations that come with wealth.

Jesus condemns selfishness but not all self interest. Wealth is to be used as an investment to “store up *for yourselves* treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:20, emphasis added). One cannot serve God and wealth (Matt. 6:24). Intent on seeking first the kingdom of God, Christians will order their finances according to that priority (Matt. 6:19-21, 33). Every spending decision, it has been said, is a spiritual

decision.

A repeated exhortation is for people to be mindful of the poor. God expresses a preferential outlook toward the poor. The prophets have sharp words for those who exploit the poor (Isa 3:15; Amos 2:6-7). The poor are not to be shunned but helped (Deut. 15:7-11; Prov. 17:5; 19:17; cf. Eph. 4:28). The early church cared for the poor and took offerings for them (Acts 6:1-7). Believers are admonished not to neglect the poor (James 2:14-17; 1 John 3:16-18).

Counsel on Wealth:

Amos strikes hard at the rich, noting their penchant for lavish expenditures for furniture, food, entertainment, and cosmetics. Luxurious living becomes wrong where there is an unconcern for the “ruin of Joseph”; in other words, inattention to the physical or spiritual impoverishment of others (Amos 6:4-7). The “urge to splurge” should be curbed. Instead of “conspicuous consumption,” Christians should be known by “compassionate concern.”

Materialism is the eagerness to have and to hold possessions and the preoccupation with money for self-advantage. Materialism, according to Jesus, is both foolish and sinful (Luke 12:13-24). A third of Jesus’ parables deal with economics; in these Jesus insists on accountability and warns against selfishness which utilizes abilities and money only for enhancement of the self to the exclusion of others. Paul warns against the love of money (1 Tim. 6:6-10). Contentment is urged, as is simplicity of life (Phil. 4:11; 1 Tim. 6:8).

Covetousness is prohibited (Exod. 20:17) and strong warnings are given against grasping and greed (Luke 12:15; Jude 11). Israel at Kadesh Barnea, when trying stubbornly to grasp the promised land, was denied it (Num. 14). Elijah the prophet severely reprimanded King Ahab for wanting to seize Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21). Gehazi coveted...and lost! (2 Kings 5:20-27). Grasping is a twin to coveting. The seriousness of coveting, accompanied in this instance by deceit, is demonstrated in the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).

Generous Giving

Motivations:

Teaching about generous financial giving is concentrated in 2 Corinthians 8-9 where Paul lists reasons for generosity. First, generosity follows the self-giving model of Jesus (8:9). Second, our contributions bring good to the lives of others, through which God is glorified (9:12-14). Third, generosity brings large benefits to the contributors (9:6, 14; also Luke 6:38; Gal. 6:7). Fourth, giving follows the example

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of others who model spiritual maturity (8:1-5). Fifth, giving helps achieve the goal of equality (8:14). Sixth, generosity is the tangible response of gratitude to God (9:15). It is sinfully self-serving and contrary to kingdom living to be tight-fisted or so attached to things (cars, properties, money, stocks, homes, expensive vacations) that finances are unavailable for God's kingdom ministry. It has been well said: "We are voting for God's rule when we give."

Guidelines:

Paul urged regular, systematic, and proportional financial contributions (1 Cor. 16:1; cf. Deut. 16:17). The tithe represents a standard (Matt. 23:23; Num. 18:26; Mal. 3:10), but Christian giving goes beyond the tithe (1 Cor. 16:1-2; Luke 21:2-4). In the words of another: "Tithing is not God's plan for raising money, but his plan for raising his children." Generosity is the antidote to the sin of covetousness. Christian giving calls for administrative prompting and planning (2 Cor. 8:16-9:5). With many noble causes competing for a Christian's generosity, the believer will rely on prayer and the Spirit's guidance in money-matter decisions. The principle of storehouse tithing, interpreted as supporting financially the agencies of the local church and the denomination, is sensible and sound (Mal. 3:6-10). For the Christian, giving should not be burdensome. The believer has good reason to give cheerfully, with joy, even exuberance.

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Stewardship

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Christian stewardship is the faithful, wise, and responsible management of God's created order. The focus of this article is on the stewardship of the earth's resources and of personal resources.

Stewardship of the Earth

God has given humans the responsibility to be stewards of creation. Good management involves both protecting the earth from destructive exploitation and developing resources for the good of humankind. The church can provide helpful information and teaching that will enable its members to discern how best to manage the potential of the earth without damaging the environment.

Raising consciousness toward environmental concerns can be achieved through various activities. Encouraging recycling through special drives or community activism, for example, has both practical and symbolic value. Taking care to conserve water and energy also furthers participation in environmentally friendly practices. Using recycled materials and avoiding use of products that damage the environment can both raise awareness and help protect the earth. Periodic encouragement of such activities by the congregation is consistent with the creation mandate to rule over the earth.

Although Mennonite Brethren have become increasingly urban, we continue to have a large number of our people engaged in agriculture. Farmers are often faced with the conflict between using chemicals to increase productivity and avoiding the use of chemicals to protect the environment. Instead of avoiding the issue, the church that takes seriously its role in stewardship of the earth will create forums in which these difficult questions can be addressed.

Strategies for Generous Living

Jesus' message regarding money is that it is a means for living, not an end in itself. A closer look at Jesus' life and message can open the way for a fulfilling life lived for God. The focus must be that of 1 Peter 3:15: "Simply concentrate on being completely devoted to Christ" (Phillips).

Strong forces are at work to distract us from Christ. We are not likely to take steps toward solving a problem if we do not recognize

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a problem. Scripture points out our bent toward greed and the eventual impoverishment to which it leads. Personal stock-taking is a healthy and necessary exercise. As part of such a check we might gather data. We might keep a weekly time log involving the following areas (and others as appropriate):

Time used to earn/spend money

Time used for personal care (sleep, exercise, etc.)

Time used for relaxation/entertainment

Time with family/friends/neighbors

Time in church-related activities

Time spent ministering/volunteering

Time with God

Such an audit may not evaluate the quality of time expended in each instance, but it is a beginning. The overall profile begins to take shape. Where we spend our time is a strong indicator of our stewardship values.

Prioritizing Kingdom Interests

To live as a Christian is to learn to live as fits the reign of God. While it is Christian to work to make a living, what becomes problematic is becoming so absorbed in making money that spiritual interests are crowded out. In establishing our lifestyle, we make choices that exhibit our priorities. A lifestyle includes choices about housing, furnishings, clothing, luxuries, entertainment, investments and savings, and giving. Such decisions are made with a set of priorities in mind.

We are constantly exercising priorities. For example, we may settle for purchasing a small used car because for us the decor of the home or a high-quality entertainment center is more important than mode of transportation. Others may choose to live in cramped living quarters with minimal comforts if by so doing they can indulge their yearnings for sightseeing and travel.

Inject into these equations a devotion to Jesus and his kingdom, and the prioritizing process takes on complexity. For example, will any of the above priorities shift to using one's travel money to spend

time as a counselor at a Christian camp, or to volunteer for short-term missions or relief work? Would one spend less on eating out and more on hospitality to international students?

Success and wealth are high priorities for many North American Christians. Jeremiah the prophet called for a priority higher than either of these. "Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight" (Jer. 9:23-24 NRSV). To know God, which means to live in dynamic connection with God, is a value higher than wealth or success.

For a believer, greatest value is attached to Christ and his kingdom. Ideally, a Christian should want more than anything in the world to see God's justice and righteousness prevail and kingdom causes succeed. Christians decide that their time and resources need to be committed to the kingdom. The implication is straightforward: money and time are shifted from other areas of life to kingdom work. If \$500 is given toward a need or ministry, that \$500 will not be available for investment in stocks or purchase of a bigger, better refrigerator.

Stewardship Assumptions

The concept of stewardship turns on several assumptions, each of which plays itself out practically in our lifestyle. One basic assumption touches on ownership. In Western cultures, individuals own things. In some cultures, the group owns and shares things. In places where Baal was worshiped, the king owned the land. Christians say all belongs to God. A fitting response is thankful contentment (Phil. 4:11-12). If God is owner, I have strong reason to be thankful both for what is termed a little and what is termed a lot. A lifestyle of excessive consumerism is fueled by discontent. A further implication of seeing properties as God's gift is that we are blessed in order to be a blessing. Like other gifts of God, material abundance is to be used for the benefit of others (James 2:14-17; Matt. 10:8).

A second assumption involving stewardship is management. Management includes attention to creative production and oversight of finances and income. Every Christian is a manager of assets in the interest of the owner, God. An appropriate amount is retained for the livelihood of the manager, but the object is to enhance the owner's gains. One objective of money management is to place the resources in secure investments. Jesus teaches that the most secure investment is the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:19-34).

A third assumption in exercising stewardship is accountability. Christians should exercise social responsibility in making their investments. One's gifts are not a private affair. There is a public dimension to the exercise of stewardship. Jesus warns of an end-time audit (Matt. 25:14-46). The church can offer accountability groups to its members that will allow for discernment in both specific investments and general lifestyle issues.

Legalism and individualism stand as dangers at the extremes. Rules cannot be easily standardized. In some cases expenditures involving costly goods or properties may be a praiseworthy use of resources, while in other circumstances such expenditures would be detrimental or even deplorable.

Practical Hints for Effective Stewardship

Following are a number of suggestions that can help focus efforts toward effective stewardship for God's kingdom and the simplifying of one's lifestyle in an age of materialism and consumerism:

Establish a mission statement with respect to your money. Consider what ideals, income level, standard of living, investment, savings, and retirement issues are important to you and consistent with God's rule in your life.

Acquire possessions according to criteria of usefulness rather than status. Cars and clothing, for example, call for excessive outlays if status is a major criterion. If usefulness is the criterion, expenditures are almost certainly less.

Cultivate the habit of generosity. Experience the freedom that comes from giving things away.

Make matters of investments and larger expenditures the subject of prayer and counsel. Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Don't neglect the guidance of individuals in the community of faith.

Refuse to accept the propaganda of advertising and consumerism. It has been observed that "Contradicting the present is the central evangelical task in our time." Be wary of seduction by today's endless ads and sales pitches that promise happiness and fulfillment through acquiring more and having more. Remain in control of your expenditures.

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Work, Rest and The Lord's Day

We believe that God's act of creation is the model for human activity. While sin has corrupted work and rest, redeemed people are called to restore labor and rest to their proper place.

Work

As creatures made in the image of God, Christians imitate the Creator by working faithfully as they are able. They are to use their abilities and resources to glorify God and to serve others. Because they bear the name of Christ, all believers are called to work honestly and diligently and to treat others with respect and dignity.

Rest

As God rested on the seventh day, people are called to observe regular times of rest. Rest is an act of thankfulness for what God has provided. It is an act of trust, reminding humans that it is not their work but God who sustains them. Rest is an act of hope, anticipating the future rest assured by the resurrection of Jesus.

The Lord's Day

Following the New Testament example, believers gather together to commemorate the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the first day of the week. On the Lord's day, believers joyfully devote themselves to worship, instruction in the Word, breaking of bread, prayer, fellowship and service, limiting their labor to work of necessity and deeds of mercy.

Gen. 1:26-31; 2:15; 3:14-19; Exod. 20: 8-11; Lev. 25: 1-7; Deut. 5:12-15; Ps. 46:10; 95:6-11; Eccles. 3:13; Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 24:1-36; Acts 2:1; 20:7; Rom. 14: 5-10; Eph. 6: 5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 2 Thess. 3:6-10; Heb. 4:1-10; 10:23-25.

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Work, Rest and The Lord's Day

 COMMENTARY

Work and leisure are among the central concerns of North American Christians. We believe that God created people for both work and rest, but in our rebellion we have corrupted both labor and rest. As a redeemed people, the church is called to restore labor and rest to their proper places in human life.

Work

Work is a pervasive and essential element of human existence. The action of God in the creation of the world is described in Genesis as work (Gen. 2:2-3). In the Garden, Adam is given the work of naming the animals (Gen. 2:18-20). Similarly, Psalm 104:23 indicates that it is the nature of persons to engage in labor. Thus work itself is not a consequence of the fall into sin. One of the consequences of sin is that God cursed the ground, thereby changing work from joyful participation with God into a painful struggle against the elements (Gen. 3:17-19). Work can be corrupted by human injustice as in the case of Egypt enslaving Israel (Exod. 1-13).

Human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). One of the ways in which people are made in God's image is that they are by nature social. It is by being both male and female that humans reflect the image of God. The connection between social nature and work is seen in Genesis 2. God seeks a helper for Adam. That is, it is not good for Adam to work alone in the garden. The only suitable helper for Adam is another person (Gen. 2:18-25). Work is part of the created social nature of human beings.

Genesis 1:26 explicitly links being made in the image of God with having dominion. Two things should be noted about the notion of dominion. First, dominion implies action. Humans are to be responsible for the proper use of and care for creation. Second, the command to have dominion over the "fish...birds...every living creature...the whole earth" (Gen. 1:28-30) should be understood to involve responsibility for all of creation. While it is not explicit in the biblical text, it is fair to understand human responsibility to extend to the products of human culture as well as to the natural world. In addition to caring for

the creatures which God has created, humans are also responsible for use of such elements of human culture as economics, art, music, sport, education, politics, and the like. Work of all sorts is the responsibility and proper end of human beings.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:10 Paul articulates an important principle for understanding work: "We gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (NRSV). Individuals are responsible to work as they are able. Paul is also clear that providing for personal needs is not the only, or even the primary, reason for working. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 he indicates that at the beginning of the week believers should set aside a portion of what they have to help those who are in need. While people are responsible for themselves, they are also responsible to use their work to provide for others.

Paul's instructions to slaves and masters in Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1 give some indication of how Christians can redeem the corrupted world of work. Paul does not directly condemn slavery. However, he does give instructions to slaves which command them to live as if they are not slaves. Rather than shirking their duties, stealing, and being insubordinate, the slaves are to act responsibly and faithfully. They are to act as if they are free people. Similarly, masters are to treat their slaves justly, fairly, and in the way that one would treat an equal. Paul told Christians to act in such a way that the evils of slavery were significantly undermined and disarmed.

The consumer capitalism of contemporary North America lends itself to another kind of slavery. Some people find themselves working in factories which provide very little meaningful connection between worker and product. Others find themselves selling products that they realize are of little ultimate significance. Some find themselves in management being pressured to demand more productivity with less compensation for workers. A variety of social pressures combine to make work seem like meaningless drudgery. The words of Paul provide a light for the Christian worker in our society. God calls workers to use their time honestly in performing work, to do quality work even if they have little control over the final product of their work, and to remember that their performance functions as a witness to God.

Rest

Exodus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 5:15 give complementary explanations of the command to rest on the Sabbath. In Exodus 20:11 the command to honor the Sabbath is grounded in the pattern of creation demonstrated by God. Deuteronomy 5:15 recalls God's deliver-

ing Israel from slavery in Egypt. These two passages remind us that rest is an opportunity to thank God for creating us and also for redeeming us.

Sabbath laws remind us that observance of Sabbath rest is an act of trust. When the Israelites wandered in the desert, they were required to trust that manna would not rot when kept for the Sabbath (Exod. 16:22-30). Similarly, when Israel was commanded to observe Sabbath years in which they did not plant or harvest grain, the people were called to show by their actions that they trusted in God to provide for them (Exod. 23:10-11; Lev. 25). Economic and military security provide contemporary temptations to put our trust in something other than God. The call to Sabbath observance calls us to examine carefully whom we as a people rely on for provision.

Hebrews 4 reminds us that rest is not yet fully realized (4:1). The future rest promised by God is the result of faith in Jesus (4:2) and on obedience to God (4:6). The future rest will be a time when rest and work are no longer at odds (4:9-10). This provides believers with the strength to redeem both work and rest in a culture which corrupts both aspects of life. Hope sustains people in the face of adversity.

The Lord's Day

The only use of the term "The Lord's Day" in the New Testament occurs in Revelation 1:10. Roman culture set aside certain days as "emperor's days." The commitment of the early church to celebrate a "Lord's Day" is in direct contrast to the idolatrous pagan culture in which they found themselves. Today one of the idolatrous temptations that North Americans face is to worship the god of leisure. Leisure is a counterfeit rest. Many of us have confused rest with leisure, glorying in our own accomplishments rather relying on God as our provider. We believe we have earned leisure, not recognizing rest as a gift from God. Contemporary North American Christians are again called to proclaim a day of the week as the Lord's Day rather than thinking of the weekend as "time for myself."

It is clear that New Testament believers gathered on the first day of the week to remember the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 16:1-2; Acts 20:7). It is a long tradition of the Church to imitate the practice of those believers. The first day is appropriate as a day set aside for worship in that it reminds believers of the creation (Gen. 1:1), the resurrection, (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), and the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). As noted earlier, Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 remind us that there is an intimate connection between rest and worship. This suggests that a regular part of worship should be remem-

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bering the mighty acts of God on behalf of His people. One of the ways that we remember the acts of God is through the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In other ways our worship should also involve remembering what it is that God has done in creating and sustaining a new people.

As counterpoint, however, it is useful to remember the words of Paul in Romans 14:5: "Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds" (NRSV). Paul reminds us that our observance of a day of worship is a convention that we adopt. It does not matter which day is used. Clearly it is essential that Christians set aside some day to worship.

As new creatures we are called to redeem our work. As a redeemed people, we are called to tangibly show our thankfulness, trust, and hope by setting aside our work for a time. Our rest should be characterized by worship of God and fellowship with other people. Our worship and fellowship should be a foreshadowing of the time when believers of all nations and languages rest in the presence of the triune God.

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Work, Rest and The Lord's Day

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Work and rest are major issues for the North American church. We are a society driven by a deep-seated need to be busy, either with economically profitable activity or with recreation. Our self-image is tied to this need to be busy: we are useful, worth something, when we are productive. Our values and priorities regarding time use are shaped by the drive to busyness. Therefore the Confession of Faith sees the importance of biblical teaching regarding our work, our need for rest, and our observance of the Lord's Day.

Work

A major component of our lives is the work we do. John Redekop, in an article in *Faith Today* (Sept/Oct 1989, 18-23), estimates that the "average working Canadian spends some 88,000 hours on the job from the first day of full-time employment until the retirement celebration." He concludes that "most of us spend almost 40 percent of our waking time at work."

But biblically speaking, work is more than just time spent "on the job." Work includes taking care of one's household (providing food, shelter, security, stability), providing the infrastructure so that society can function (government, health care, transportation, commerce, etc.), and exploring the breadth of creation (science) and the heights of human culture (the arts). It is important for the church to communicate that all types of work are honorable as ways of living responsibly. The executive, the mechanic in the garage, the stay-at-home mom or dad—all these ought to be helped to find the God-given dignity and purpose of their work. One congregation has celebrated this by having a "Labor Day" Sunday in which everyone is to come to church in their week-day work clothes. (Of course, that would only work if it weren't already the normal practice!) Testimonies and teaching focused on the world of work would be appropriate for such a day. Another church had an adult Christian Education series focusing on the world of work. People who worked in different jobs were interviewed with the following three questions: "What are the greatest rewards of your work?" "What are the larger or

global forces that affect your occupation?” “How do you integrate your faith and your occupation?”

In our teaching, it can help us if we distinguish between our “vocation” and our “occupation.” Our occupation is what takes up our time: business, housekeeping, professional duties, the farm, school, and so on. Our vocation, on the other hand, is our “calling” from God (1 Cor. 7:17). It is God’s uniquely tailored will for our spiritual growth, within a certain set of occupations and roles. Our calling, our vocation, is to become Christ-like in whatever we do; our occupations form the stage on which this transformation takes place. Sometimes, our vocation will lead us to change occupations: some have moved out of the military, or out of a business with unethical practices, or into full-time pastoral work, as a result of following the call of Christ. We want all Christians to understand that they have a calling, a ministry. Ray Bystrom is helpful as he describes vocation in his first of a ten-part series on “Ten Words For Those Who Work” (*Marketplace*, 24/6, p 11). He says, “a sense of God’s calling in one’s life should prompt all God’s people—not just clergy and missionaries—to do the very best, whatever their trade, job, occupation or career (Col. 3:23). As Martin Luther King once said, ‘If you are called to be a street sweeper, you should sweep streets as Michelangelo painted or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. You should sweep streets so well that the host of heaven and earth will say, Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’”

Ministering to Those Out of the Work Force

What about those who aren’t in the work-force? Churches ought always to be careful that we do not rank people according to their occupation (James 2:1-5). We tend to place a lot of value on what we do: “I am what my job says I am.” And we unconsciously take a second step: “I’m worth what my job says I’m worth.” This is a dangerous assumption that needs to be firmly resisted by the church. We must learn to find our worth not in what we do, but in who we are in God’s sight. Especially in communities with high unemployment, or where there are people with disabilities that keep them from working, or with a lot of retirees, it is important that we project the message that all people have dignity in God’s eyes, regardless of their job situation.

How can we effectively pastor these people? We can be careful that our first question to newcomers isn’t automatically, “So, what do you do?” Furthermore, we should make sure that Paul’s word in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 (“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” NRSV) isn’t directed at those who can’t work, but at those who refuse to

work. As to the situation of the unemployed, there are several things that the church can do. First, we must be careful to recognize the emotional and financial stress that the unemployed will face. It is the role of the church to remind the unemployed that their value as a person is not tied to having a paying job. Without minimizing the pain of unemployment, the church can offer the person who is temporarily out of work opportunities for meaningful service within the community. Second, persons with disabilities are often marginalized in the workplace. It is the role of the church to witness for the worth of these people and to take the lead in seeing to it that people with different abilities are afforded opportunities for meaningful labor. Third, if we accept the work of God as our model, we will not view our work as primarily a means to an enjoyable retirement. Rather, the most fulfilling retirement is one filled with activity (work) that is less driven by immediate needs and more by our interests and abilities.

Work and Meaning

A further challenge arises from the apparent meaninglessness of some modern work, a futility that many people experience as a trap, even a kind of slavery. Some may perform jobs which are repetitive or seem to lack larger value, or sell products that appear to have little ultimate significance. Others may suffer the stress of trying to achieve higher productivity with lower compensation. Many modern pressures can make work seem meaningless or even sinister. This is a true challenge for the church that seeks to bless and dignify the Monday to Saturday world. Ecclesiastes is a helpful starting point, both as an empathetic expression of this meaninglessness, and for its eventual conclusion: delight in the daily blessings (food and drink, 3:13), and persevere in serving God the Creator (12:1,13). Christians should be helped to go further than this. Through the guidance of the Spirit, dreary occupations can be transformed so that they, or the relationship-building that they permit, become spiritually-focused activities, such as the fishermen whom Jesus called to start “catching people” for the kingdom (Mark 1:17). Whatever the job, Christians are called to work honestly and well, knowing their performance and attitude serve as a witness to God.

Rest

As a denomination with its roots in northern Europe, Mennonite Brethren tend to display what has been called the “Protestant work ethic”: industriousness, frugality, and a general reluctance to pause and enjoy the fruits of labor. At present, many North American Christians are indistinguishable from their non-Christian counterparts in

their obsession with work at the expense of rest and leisure. While there is truth to the proverb that “idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” we miss the blessing of rest when we equate idleness with rest and leisure. Scripture reminds us that we were created with a need for both work and rest. Never was rest secondary to work. Rest and work, when held in proper balance, provide the God-ordained rhythm of life that is necessary for life in the kingdom of God. In his book *Margin* the physician Richard Swenson, challenging his readers to a restored balance and margin for stressed lives, says “it is at Sabbath time we suspend dominion work and instead worship the dominion-Maker.”

We want to make sure we have a clear and biblically sound understanding of “rest.” Rest is not just inactivity (which might seem a chore to many people). Rest is what allows for the renewal of body and spirit, and is therefore something uniquely individual. At the same time, the biblical Sabbath laws teach us that rest should have a corporate dimension, since the whole household (the socio-economic unit of family, workers, livestock) is included in the Sabbath command (Exod. 20:10). We suggest that this kind of rest should be visible both in our social and spiritual households: our homes and our churches.

Families have chosen to celebrate Sabbath in different ways, such as in a special meal with time set aside for prayer and Scripture reading, or with a special family night. (See Carol Brazo, *No Ordinary Home*, for an inspiring window into Christian Sabbath-keeping; Eugene Peterson’s chapter on the Sabbath in *Working the Angles* is also helpful). Further, we ought to be careful that we do not practice the discipline of rest at the expense of the balance of our time. It doesn’t work to cram seven days’ worth of work into six, so that we can say that we are “taking one day off” each week. That runs against the grain of the biblical concept of rest as a discipline and a sacrifice. Part of the blessing of a period of rest is to show us that we are not in control, that we are dependent on God and His providence. The ideal Christian life is not a hurried life; it is a life where leisure and perspective are an active part of the fabric of every day, every hour; not just during one day in seven.

The Meaning of Sabbath

We stand to learn something from a Jewish understanding of the Sabbath. In Jewish tradition, the Sabbath rest is seen as a “sensual” time: a time to delight, through all the human senses, in the goodness of God’s creation. The Sabbath rest gives opportunity for intimacy with God. Jewish tradition says that God loudly announced the Ten Commandments to Moses—all except the Sabbath command. This

one he whispered, because the Sabbath is for intimacy with God. Pious Jews will recite from the Song of Solomon to welcome the Sabbath, first because Solomon's poem celebrates the sexual intimacy which is the climax of the creation story, and second because the Sabbath is seen as a wedding celebration between God and His covenant people. This perspective helps us as Christians to understand the sensual and life-giving blessing of biblically appointed rest.

Whatever form it takes, whatever activities it includes or excludes, we want to make sure that the primary intentions for the Christian's period of rest are upheld: a sacrificial expression of thanksgiving to God and trust in God, a time of blessing and peace, an opportunity to delight in the goodness of God's world. The same holds true for a congregational (or smaller group) commitment to observe a Sabbath rest. This kind of rest takes discipline and submission to the group consensus as to how it will be observed. As the discipline of rest is internalized, the blessings become primary, and the Sabbath rest is allowed to have its way with us as God intended: for spiritual, emotional, and physical renewal.

The Lord's Day

There are two main pastoral issues that arise when it comes to the Bible's teaching about the Lord's Day. First, how (and when) should we observe it? Second, what is the connection between the biblical teaching of Sabbath rest and the Lord's Day? We will be helped if we discuss the second question first.

The biblical Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day are not to be equated. That is, we do not observe the Lord's Day as if it were literally a Christian Sabbath. While many Christians may hold to that practice, we must reject it as inconsistent with an Anabaptist approach to the Bible (in the same way that Anabaptism rejects the notion of baptism as a Christian [infant] circumcision, church leaders as the Christian equivalent of Old Testament priests, a church building as the counterpart of the Old Testament temple, or a Christian nation and its wars as functionally equivalent to Old Testament theocratic Israel). The Lord's Day may be the occasion for us to practice principles which we derive from the Sabbath, but it is not a Sabbath in the Old Testament sense.

What about the "sanctity" of the Sabbath? (Gen, 2:3, Exod. 20:11). Are we not in danger of desecrating something which God blessed at the beginning of creation? We have to say, first of all, that God's blessing was placed upon the seventh day, not the first, and therefore a strict practice of the sanctity of the Sabbath would lead us to observe Saturday (or more specifically, Friday sundown to Saturday sundown),

as do Jews, Seventh Day Adventists, and a few other groups. The actual “sanctity” of the seventh was never, Scripturally speaking, transferred to a different day.

But two things changed with Jesus. First, he proclaimed himself to be the Lord of the Sabbath, and therefore to have a greater status and authority than Sabbath observance itself. Second, he appointed with his resurrection the first day of the week as the day on which the New Creation broke into this world system. The question of “sanctity” was pressed further at Pentecost, when the first believers were “all together in one place” on the first day of the week (Acts 2:1). The Holy Spirit, who is the source of all divine sanctification, was poured out onto a people. Thus God’s blessing and sanctity are now seen above all in a sacred people, the messianic community of the Spirit, and not in sacred times or places. While the seventh day may still be sacred, the Church is more sacred in God’s eyes. When a church is divided because it cannot agree on whether or not a certain activity is “permitted” for a Christian on Sunday, this division is more grievous to God than any perceived “breaking” of a Christian Sabbath.

All of this goes to say that we do not look to the Sabbath law as our primary source for understanding what the Lord’s Day is about. We look to Jesus, the power of his resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit. And so we return to our original question: How should we observe the Lord’s Day?

It is best to celebrate the Lord’s Day on the first day of the week, Sunday, as has been the practice from the earliest days of the church. To do so is a significant theological statement: we say that history matters. Celebrating Sunday as the Lord’s Day says that we believe that God intervened in history, that the transcendent Lord of the universe intersected with this broken planet on a particular Sunday morning centuries ago. It says that we are part of an unbroken line of descent from another supernatural event, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which signified the birthing of the true people of God. We know from personal experience that we don’t need to observe a friend’s birthday on the particular day; but it feels more appropriate to do so. In the same way, it is most appropriate to celebrate God’s greatest acts in history on the day they really happened.

The New Testament communities of faith assembled on the Lord’s Day. It was, we may say, a spiritual family gathering, for the purpose of encouraging and prompting people “toward love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24). Our practice of “going to church” derives from this assembling of the saints, and thus the church-related gathering is an important part of celebrating the Lord’s Day. We will want to make sure that our church gatherings do indeed reflect the New Testament

concerns for what can and ought to happen when God's people gather (see Article 6, Nature of the Church, and portions on worship in the pastoral application of Article 1, God).

Alternative Days

For most of us, Sunday provides a good opportunity to practice the discipline (and receive the blessing) of biblical rest. Because of this, we have chosen to say in our confession that believers limit their labor "to work of necessity and deeds of mercy." For some, however—those who work in "essential services" such as health care and public safety, for instance—Sunday rest may not be an option. These people ought to be encouraged to find other ways of practicing the discipline of rest, and urged to consider ways they can honor Jesus (and thus the Lord's Day) through their occupational services. Pastors and others who invest heavily in Sunday activities often feel that Sunday is definitely not a day of rest. Churches should ensure that their workers can practice a biblical rest. Churches should make sure that their pastors, especially, are able to take necessary sabbatical rest (both weekly and longer term) in order to maintain a God-honoring and healthy pattern of work.

Some congregations hold their main church gatherings on days other than Sunday. How do we evaluate this? First, the New Testament is clear that the day is not of primary significance (Rom. 14:5-6). Any day can honor the Lord. The motive for non-Sunday services is generally given as outreach and flexibility. Wise church leadership will, we suggest, distinguish carefully between these two motives, because "flexibility" is a two-edged sword that can both enhance and cripple a church's outreach. It will enhance it, of course, by allowing more people to come at more convenient times, and often with a choice of the kind of church gathering being offered.

But such flexibility can also cripple a church by masking a possessiveness of one's time. It can permit a major area for discipleship, submitting one's time-use to God, to go untouched. If a midweek gathering is used so that people can "get in" their hour or two of church, leaving them free for a weekend at the cottage, we would do well to discern what impulses and motivations lie behind this. An attitude that says "the weekend is my time" tells us that there are some spiritual issues which need addressing, issues of stewardship and submission to Jesus. We ought also to be on guard against idolizing the modern gods of recreation and sports. Unchecked enthusiasm for sports and recreation can weaken commitment to gathering with the family of God.

Some will respond, "But isn't it better for people to come to a midweek gathering than not go at all?" The answer, obviously, is yes. But

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the healthy church will not ignore potential concerns in this area—just as it will not ignore the condition of those who might “religiously” attend Sunday morning service but live ungodly lives for the rest of the week.

Gifts of Work and Rest

The pattern of work and rest is a gift from God the Creator. Work is part of our divine calling or vocation. Rest is a spiritual discipline that needs to be recovered. The Lord’s Day is best observed as a time for worship, fellowship, and service. While legalism can destroy the spirit of biblical Sabbath teaching, the divine plan of work and rest is the model for productive and sustainable Christian living.

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ARTICLE 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.

God's Universal Witness

God has not left anyone without a witness to the Creator's goodness and power. Due to human rebellion, people have chosen to suppress the truth. While elements of truth may be found in other religions, Scripture warns against false teaching. Christians treat people of other faiths and philosophies with respect, but lovingly and urgently proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation for all peoples.

Sovereignty of God

God loves the world and does not want anyone to perish. In sovereign grace God may communicate with people in ways that are beyond human comprehension. 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. The Judge of all the earth will do what is just.

Gen. 18:25; Ps. 19:2-4; Eccles. 3:11; Isa. 46:1-10; 55:8-9; Ezek. 33:1-20; Jonah 1-4; Matt. 8:5-13; 25:31-46; 28:18-20; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 9:51-56; 12:47-48; John 1:12; 3:16, 36; 4:8-42; 12:12-26; 14:6; Acts 1:8; 4:12; 10:1-8, 34-36; 14:16-17; 17:22-31; Rom. 1:18-24; 2:1-16; 10:9-21; 11:33-35; 1 Cor. 3:11; 12:3; 1 Tim. 2:4-5; 2 Pet. 3:9; Rev. 20:15.

Christianity and Other Faiths

COMMENTARY

As growing cultural and religious diversity continues to change the makeup of many of our communities, it is important to consider questions regarding Christianity and other faiths. Article 17 of the Confession of Faith deals with these issues.

Jesus is the Only Way

The first section of Article 17 makes three major points. First, it rejects a pluralistic view of religions by declaring that “Jesus is the only means of reconciling humanity with God.” Second, it notes that “salvation is available to all.” Third, it identifies those people who “have the assurance of eternal life.”

Rejection of Pluralism:

In North American culture, pluralism has become the dominant way of thinking about religious faith. Pluralism is the view that the major religious faiths (and perhaps all religious faiths) are equally valid paths to God. Scripture is clear in rejecting pluralism.

Jesus’ understanding of himself was that he alone was the path to God. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman Jesus clearly regarded himself as the way of knowing God, rather than going to the mountain in Samaria or the temple in Jerusalem (John 4:8-26). John 14:6 records Jesus saying explicitly, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” It is clear that the early church believed Jesus was the only way to salvation (Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15; Heb. 12:24). Regarding Jesus as the only way to God is consistent with and a fulfillment of the Old Testament recognition that Israel is God’s chosen people. Access to God comes through a particular people—the nation of Israel—in the old covenant, and through a particular person—Jesus Christ—in the new covenant. Finally, the practice of the early church is a clear rejection of pluralism. A variety of religions flourished under Roman rule and culture. The church called both Jews and pagans to turn to Jesus the Messiah and submit to his lordship.

Salvation Available to All:

While the gospel came to the Jewish people first, it is not limited to

them (John 4:22; Acts 10). God actively desires that all people be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). The vision of the new heaven and the new earth is one in which people from every nation will be present (Isa. 66:18, 22-23).

Assurance of Eternal Life:

It is clear from Romans 10:9 and 13 that those who place their faith in Jesus will be saved. Thus they have the assurance of eternal life. However, these verses do not say that *only* those who put their faith in Jesus will be saved, allowing for the possibility that others may be granted eternal life. If others are granted eternal life, they are unaware of it. Thus they do not have the *assurance* of eternal life. This suggests the issue of the fate of those who have not heard the gospel. That will be addressed in a later section of this commentary.

God's Universal Witness

The second section of Article 17 treats two issues: the content of other religions and the persons who profess other religions.

The Content of Other Religions:

God is made known outwardly to all people through creation (Ps. 19:1, Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:18-20) and inwardly to all people through a moral conscience (Rom. 2:15) and a sense of the divine (Eccl. 3:11). Though God makes Himself known, not all people are consciously aware of God. The corruption of sin blinds many to God as revealed in creation and conscience (Rom. 1:18-23). Still, at Athens Paul recognized a searching for God on the part of followers of idols (Acts 17:16, 23) and philosophical systems (Acts 17: 18) and allowed that there may have been an elementary knowledge of God even in pagan religions (Acts 17:28).

According to Paul, the knowledge of God that is acquired through creation and conscience is sufficient for people to be "without excuse" for failing to acknowledge God (Rom. 1:20; 2:14-15). It appears that this knowledge of God can, in principle, lead to salvation, if people live according to the law they have (Rom. 2: 6-8, 14-16). Paul is clear, however, that all people have sinned against God and stand guilty before God (Rom. 3:20,23).

Persons Who Profess Other Religions:

Disciples of Jesus are called to treat others, including enemies, with love (Matt. 5:44; 22:39). The pluralistic culture often interprets love and respect as prohibiting disagreement. The gospel of Jesus Christ, however, is often offensive (1 Cor. 1:23). It demands one's

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ultimate loyalty, rejecting all previous loyalties (Mark 10:29-30) and is a “two-edged sword” which may cause internal turmoil for the person hearing the gospel (Heb. 4:12). So love and respect do not demand that we refrain from disagreement or potential offense as we present the gospel. However, as Paul did in Athens, we must try to identify points of contact between what people already believe and the gospel of Jesus (Acts 17:16-34). British theologian Alister McGrath invites Christians to look for these points of contact with nonbelievers. Points of contact are those elements of a person’s world view that coincide with a Christian world view. Don Richardson, in such books as *Peace Child* and *Eternity in Their Hearts*, provides fascinating examples of points of contact with a variety of different cultures. If the believer can identify some points of contact, these can provide a way of inviting a nonbeliever to consider other elements of the gospel.

Sovereignty of God

The third section of Article 17 addresses two issues: the fate of those who reject the gospel and the fate of those who have never heard the gospel.

Those Who Reject the Gospel:

The Bible is clear that those who reject the gospel of Jesus are condemned by God (John 3:18; 1 John 2:23). Condemnation by God is eternal separation from God (2 Thess. 1:9) and is a “second death” (Rev. 2:11; Rev. 20:6).

Those Who Have Never Heard:

This topic involves a very difficult question. Is it possible for those who have never heard the gospel to be saved? As noted earlier, it is in principle possible to be saved by works of righteousness, but no one will in fact be saved that way since all have sinned. If salvation is possible for those who have never heard the gospel, it will be salvation by faith. As noted earlier, knowledge of God from creation or conscience is sufficient for accountability to God. Is having faith in God as known only through response to creation or conscience sufficient for a saving faith?

To bring some order to our thinking about this issue, let us consider two statements:

(A) The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus provides the only possibility of salvation for human beings.

(B) A person must have explicit knowledge of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and must explicitly put his or her faith in Jesus in order to be saved.

These statements may seem to be two ways of saying the same thing, but there is a significant difference between them. Statement (A) describes the event that makes salvation possible. Statement (B) tells what a person must believe in order to receive salvation.

Consider three views on the fate of the unevangelized. Pluralism holds that both (A) and (B) are false. Inclusivism holds that (A) is true but (B) is false. Exclusivism holds that both (A) and (B) are true.

Pluralism holds that there are many ways to God, all equally valid. As noted earlier, Mennonite Brethren reject pluralism.

The inclusivist holds that (A) is true but (B) is false. That is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the source of the salvation for anyone who is saved. However, it is possible for someone to be saved by Jesus without realizing it is Jesus who is saving them.

Inclusivism reminds us of the distinction between general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is the information about God that is available to all through observation of creation. Special revelation is the direct revelation of God through Jesus and through the words of Scripture. Everyone receives general revelation. Some people do not receive special revelation. According to the inclusivist, people who have never heard of Jesus may be saved if they respond appropriately to the knowledge of God that they have gained through general revelation. Nonetheless, if they are saved, they are saved because of what Jesus did on the cross.

The exclusivist says that both (A) and (B) are true. That is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the source of salvation, and in order to be saved a person must explicitly acknowledge that Jesus is the Savior. If a people have never heard of Jesus, they cannot be saved because they cannot explicitly put their trust in Jesus. General revelation alone cannot be sufficient for salvation. Special revelation is necessary.

Since inclusivism and exclusivism agree that (A) is true, that salvation is only possible through Jesus, the question is whether or not (B) is true, that only confessed faith in Jesus can save. Some texts seem to support exclusivism by suggesting that explicit knowledge of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is necessary for salvation. John 3:18, for instance, says, "...those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (NRSV). Similarly, 1 John 5:12 says, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life"

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(NRSV).

Some texts, such as Romans 10:9 and Acts 4:12, are often used to uphold exclusivism but do not really support it. As noted earlier, Romans 10:9 and Acts 4:12 say that all who believe in Jesus will be saved; they do not say that only those who explicitly believe in Jesus will be saved.

On the other hand, some texts seem inconsistent with exclusivism. First Timothy 4:10 says, “For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (NRSV). This suggests that some might be saved without explicitly believing in Jesus. Furthermore, the Old Testament patriarchs and others mentioned in Hebrews 11 did not have explicit knowledge of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Similarly, people who have never heard the gospel are for all practical purposes in the same position as the people prior to the advent of Christ. It was possible for them to put their faith in God through the revelation given them. Some such believers, such as Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17-20) and Jethro (Exod. 3:1), were outside of the line of Abraham. In the same way, some who have not heard the gospel of Jesus may nonetheless have faith in God. We are not privileged to know all of the ways that God makes His saving grace available to human beings (Isa. 55:8-9).

Article 17 wisely does not endorse either inclusivism or exclusivism since there is not a conclusive answer to the question of the fate of the unevangelized. As recorded in Abraham’s conversation with God regarding the fate of Sodom, God will judge justly (Gen. 18:25).

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Christianity and Other Faiths

PASTORAL APPLICATION

With increasing frequency, pastors and church leaders in North America face questions about the relationship of Christianity to other faiths, as the communities surrounding our churches become more religiously diverse. A useful way to describe the growing diversity of faith commitments in North America is “religious plurality.” This is somewhat different than “religious pluralism,” a term often used to state a philosophical position which considers all faiths to be equal paths to God (see Article 17 Commentary).

Motivation for Mission

While we do not agree with religious pluralism, Article 17 approaches the reality of religious plurality in a positive way: it states that “salvation is available to all.” In other words, the good news of Jesus Christ which we know from the New Testament is also good news for people who are committed to other faiths. The way of salvation which God opened for us through the death of Jesus is open to people of other faiths as well. This approach encourages believers to strongly affirm Jesus as the Only Way.

The phrase “the assurance of eternal life” indicates one of the dimensions of salvation which Christians have the privilege of sharing with people of other faiths. Scripture speaks clearly to this hope, which comes through the gospel alone. But this is just one of many aspects of salvation in the New Testament which could be highlighted. One could also speak of the defeat of the powers of evil, sin, and death, liberation from the oppressive power of the enemy, and the abundant life that Jesus promises to those who follow him.

Pastors and church leaders can help congregations strengthen their motivation for mission by providing preaching and teaching on the truths which propelled the first Christians to evangelize their world. Mission is motivated by our desire to proclaim God’s sovereign authority in the world, God’s love for the world, and God’s desire that no one would perish but all come to repentance. The Scripture passages listed in support of Article 17 suggest good starting points for such encouragement.

The article sounds a definite call to action, stating at the end of the second section that the Christian way is to “lovingly and urgently

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proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation for all peoples.” Similarly, the end of the third section describes proclamation of the gospel among all peoples as “our task.”

Living Among People of Other Faiths

Article 17 was drafted partly in response to demographic developments in North America, where people of many religions are moving into the communities surrounding our churches. It is useful to note, however, that Mennonite Brethren churches in other parts of the world, such as India and Congo, emerged in the midst of competing faiths. They continue to function as minorities in their societies. Many in these churches have already thought through important questions about other faiths, and may be in a position to help their MB sisters and brothers in North America.

The Bible offers many helpful resources for questions surrounding people of other faiths. The New Testament was written at a time when the Christian population was a tiny minority in the midst of competing faiths. The witness to Jesus recorded in the gospels, the Christological confessions in the letters of Paul, the bold evangelism of the first Christians recorded in Acts, all took place in a multi-faith atmosphere. All of these biblical stories thus become very relevant for the situation which is emerging in North America.

For example, Philippians 2:5-11 provides a solid foundation for preaching the divinity, incarnation, and exaltation of Jesus. Similarly, Colossians 1:15-20 is a great launching pad for preaching Jesus' pre-existence, supremacy, and role in creation. Hebrews 1:1-4 proclaims the centrality of Jesus in the way God has spoken to the world, and Romans 10:9-13 makes unmistakably clear that Jesus is Lord of all people. The Gospel of John announces the truth of God's one way of salvation through his son Jesus Christ.

Non-Biblical Approaches

Another reason that the question of other faiths has become more urgent is that some Christians are attracted to non-biblical approaches to religious plurality. One popular solution is an idea of “tolerance” which says that to be kind to people of other faiths, Christians need to say that all religions are equal. This secular notion copes with religious diversity by stating that all religions are true and none false. In this non-Christian view, Jesus becomes only one savior among many.

But this runs counter to the witness of Scripture. The central teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus is Lord of all, and that there is no other Lord (see article by John E. Toews listed in the bib-

liography). The danger in accepting secular solutions to religious plurality is that they can lead to denial of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Christians begin to choose non-biblical views over the New Testament witness to Jesus, there is cause for alarm. The challenge for church leaders is to help our congregations think of their non-Christian friends with love and generosity, while still holding firmly to the truth about Jesus.

Attitudes Toward Other Faiths

Article 17 takes a cautious approach to the question of truth in non-Christian faiths. But it affirms that “God has not left anyone without a witness to the Creator’s goodness and power” (see Rom. 1:20), and lists Acts 10 (Peter and Cornelius) and Acts 17 (Paul in Athens) as helpful passages for this question.

A good idea for shining further light on this question is to consult Mennonite Brethren who have experienced world religions firsthand. Invite speakers from African and Asian MB churches, or missionaries who have studied other faiths and lived among people of other faiths, to interact with your congregations.

Respecting People of Other Faiths

Article 17 is straightforward, however, on the Christian attitude toward people of other faiths. It says that we are to treat them with respect. This opens the way for many practical expressions of respect and friendliness.

First, we can express cross-cultural neighborliness. Cultural differences with people of other faiths can provide contact points for building good relationships. Mennonite Brethren are a culturally diverse, global fellowship. This cultural diversity is not something which poses a problem for us. Rather, it is something we can affirm and celebrate. As we show appreciation for the cultures of others, we build a strong foundation for discussing spiritual issues where there may be disagreement.

Second, we can engage in interfaith conversation at the local level. In the context of friendly relationships, Christians should confess their faith to others and listen carefully to how others describe their faith. Both of these actions show respect to people of other faiths. Avoid stereotyping or caricaturing other faiths. Rather, learn to know other faiths as their practitioners themselves experience them. Many people of other faiths are grateful when Christians show a strong faith of their own and do not hesitate to speak openly of it.

Third, we can take opportunities to cooperate on social issues. Christians and people of other faiths frequently find themselves on

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the same side in public issues of morality. Many people of other faiths share the very important perception that human life is lived in response to a Creator God who gives humans laws for their behavior. This can lead to similar views on such issues as abortion, sexual morality, and the education of children. Standing together with people of other faiths on these social issues is another way that Christians can treat others with respect.

Trusting in God

Some worshipers in our congregations struggle with questions about the eternal destiny of those who have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. Article 17 does not give an answer to that question, but leaves it “in God’s hands.” It counsels trust that God will do what is right.

As the article suggests, it is good to maintain a measure of modesty concerning how much we humans know about God’s ways in these matters. However, Christians should act upon what can be clearly known from Scripture. Strong motivation for mission is based on the deep conviction that the good news about Jesus is the power of God for the 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.

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Christ's Final Triumph

We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ will return visibly and triumphantly at the end of the present age. The church must always be prepared to meet the Lord, living in expectation of his imminent return.

The Last Days

In these last days, between the first and second coming of Christ, the church carries out its mission in the world. Believers often endure suffering and persecution because of their witness to Christ. In spite of opposition by evil powers, the church is assured of the final victory of Christ's kingdom. These last days come to an end with Christ's return.

Death

Since Christ destroyed the power of death by his resurrection, believers need not be afraid of death, the last enemy. Christ's followers go to be with the Lord when they die. When Christ returns they will be raised and receive new bodies. Believers who are alive at Christ's coming will be transformed and will also receive new and glorious bodies, fit for life in God's eternal kingdom.

Judgment

When Christ returns he will destroy all evil powers, including the Antichrist. Satan and all those who have rejected Christ will be condemned to eternal punishment in hell, forever separated from the presence of God. Believers must appear before the judgment seat of Christ to have their lives examined and their labors rewarded. By God's grace they will enter into the joy of God's eternal reign.

The New Creation

All God's children will be united with Christ when he appears, and they will reign with him in glory. Pain, sorrow and death will be abolished, and the redeemed will be gathered into the new heaven and new earth where together with the angels they will worship God forever. God will make all things new, and God will be all in all. This is the blessed hope of all believers.

Matt. 24:29-31; 25:13; Mark 13:32-37; Luke 16:9; 23:43; John 14:1-3; Acts 2:17; Rom. 8:18-

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22; I Cor. 3:13-15; 15:26; 2 Cor. 5:10; Phil. 1:23; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 5:1-11; 2 Thess. 1:5-12; 2:1-12; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:2; 9:26-28; 1 Pet. 1:20; 4:7; 1 John 2:18; 3:2-3; Rev. 19:17-21; 20:7-15; 21-22.

Christ's Final Triumph

COMMENTARY

The apostle Peter saw the beginning of the last days in the outpouring of the Spirit of the risen Christ on the first Christian Pentecost. Quoting the prophet Joel, he explained, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Acts 2:17). The coming of the Spirit marked the completion of Christ's redemptive work on earth, and so one can say that the first coming of Christ inaugurated the last days. "In these last days," said the writer to the Hebrews, "he has spoken to us by his Son" (1:2).

The Last Days

John in his first epistle told his readers that they were living in "the last hour" (2:18). Writing to the Corinthians, Paul reminded the church that "the time is short" (1 Cor. 7:29), and Peter said "the end of all things is near" (1 Pet. 4:7). James also underscored that believers in the first century were living in the last days. "Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (5:8). And the writer to the Hebrews wanted believers to encourage one another "all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:25). In the last book of the Bible we have several references to the brevity of this interim between the first and second coming of Christ (Rev. 1:1; 22:7,20).

From the first century on the church has lived in what the New Testament writers call "the last days." They were inaugurated by Christ's saving work and the outpouring of the Spirit, and they will end when he returns in glory. During this interim the church carries out its mission in the world. The church's witness to Jesus as the only way of salvation often leads to persecution and intense suffering, as Jesus predicted. The seer of Patmos saw the saints coming home to glory "out of the great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14). In spite of suffering, the church triumphs in the end because Christ conquered all evil powers by his death and resurrection.

A question that often puzzles believers is: How could the end of this age be near in New Testament times, when Christ has not yet come after 2,000 years of waiting? To that we can only say that God views time differently from the way we do. With Him a thousand years are like a day, and a day is like a thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8). Believers always live at the borderline between this world and the next, and for that reason they are encouraged to be spiritually awake

at all times, ready to meet the Lord when he comes.

Death

Although Christ by his resurrection broke the power of death, death is the last enemy to be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26). And so, as the return of Christ at the end of the age is delayed, believers must die. A great many will be alive when the Lord comes (1 Thess. 4:15), but a great number have already died during this long time of waiting, working, and watching. Death confronts us not only at the end of life's journey, but we are conscious of death throughout life. And while believers naturally fear the process of dying, they are not "in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb. 2:15).

The biblical writers use a variety of figures of speech and euphemisms when they speak of the death of believers. It is seen as the dismantling of a tent (2 Cor. 5:1), a departure (Phil. 1:23; 2 Tim 4:6). "Sleep" is a common euphemism for death (1 Thess. 4:14, 1 Cor. 15:51). Dying is compared to undressing (2 Cor. 5:3,4), and to the sowing of seed in the ground (1 Cor. 15:42,43).

We do not have detailed information on the state of believers who die during this time, between the first and second advent of our Lord. However, we know that death cannot "separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38,39). Even in death Christians are said to be "in Christ" (1 Thess. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:18). "Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord," writes Paul (Rom. 14:8). The clearest statement on the intermediate state of the dead in Christ is found in Philippians 1:23, where Paul, facing martyrdom, boldly states: "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." If to be with Christ after death is far better than life here on earth, we can say with the apostle John, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on" (Rev. 14:13).

The Last Day

We do not know how long the last days, the end times, will be extended. However, we should not accuse God of delaying the second coming of Christ, for He extends this time of waiting in order to give people an opportunity to repent (2 Pet. 3:9). But when God's hour strikes, the last days will come to an end with "the last day."

Jesus spoke repeatedly of "the last day" (John 6:39,44,54; 12:48). This last day is also called "the consummation," the wrap-up of this age (Matt. 13:39,40,49; 24:3; 28:20). Sometimes the last day is called simply "the day" (1 Thess. 5:5; 1 Cor 3:13; Heb. 10:25), which is really shorthand for "the day of the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2). It is known also as "the great day" (Jude 6; Rev. 6:17; 16:14), and "the day

of Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6; 2:16). It is both “the day of wrath” (Rom. 2:5), and “the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30). Also it is called “the end” (Mark 13:7; 1 Cor. 15:24).

How close we are to the end is not known, although, as Paul said already in the first century, “our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here” (Rom. 13:11,12). Christians are warned not to try to set dates for the end of the age, the last day. “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Christ will come as a thief in the night; that is, we cannot predetermine the time of his coming (1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10).

In Mennonite history there have been some sad incidents in which dates were set for the return of Christ. Since such predictions have always proved to be wrong, and since our Lord warned us not to set dates, we should be wary of all attempts to determine the imminence of Christ’s return by observing political, economic, or social developments in our society. Jesus did mention a number of “signs of the times,” but they are the kind of signs that attend the life of the church throughout the present age—persecution, famine, earthquakes, war, and the like. They are not meant to encourage speculation on the time of Christ’s second advent, but rather to make the followers of Christ aware of the kind of world in which they would carry out their mission (Mark 13:5-13).

When Christ returns at the end of the age, all the dead in Christ will rise, and the living saints will be transformed. “We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Cor. 15:51,52 NRSV). This is called the first resurrection (Rev. 20: 5,6), for “the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.”

The bodies which we now have were designed by God for life on this earth, but “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50). And so believers will be given new bodies when Christ returns, which are like “the body of his glory” (Phil. 3:21 NRSV). “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15: 42-44 NRSV).

Millennium

The one passage in the Scriptures that mentions the millennial reign of Christ (Rev. 20:1-10) has been understood in different ways by Mennonite Brethren. Post-millennialism, in which it is thought that before Christ returns, this world will witness a golden age in

which Christ is acknowledged as King, is not generally held by Bible readers in our churches.

Some Mennonite Brethren espouse amillennialism. According to this view Christ's reign was inaugurated at his first coming. Satan is now bound and the spiritually dead are being raised to life and enjoy the blessings of God's kingdom. At the end of the millennium (however long this period might be), Satan is loosed once more and he makes a final onslaught on God and His kingdom. But Satan and his followers are totally defeated and banished forever from the presence of God.

Pre-millennialism is more widely held by Mennonite Brethren. According to this understanding of Revelation 20, the millennium follows the second coming of Christ. However, there is diversity of thought on the nature of the millennium. Also, the thousand years are understood by some not mathematically but as a symbolic number. Because of these different views, and because our understanding of the millennium does not affect our daily life and mission in any significant way, Mennonite Brethren prefer not to include a particular view of the millennium in their Confession of Faith.

Judgment

Judgment is not a palatable subject, but if we want to be faithful to the Scriptures we cannot avoid this "elementary" doctrine (Heb. 6:1,2). And whereas God's wrath against human wickedness is revealed from heaven even now in the judgments that strike humankind from time to time (Rom. 1:18), there will yet come a "day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5 NRSV). In sermon and parable Jesus, the kindest person that ever lived on this earth, proclaimed loudly and clearly that a day of judgment was yet to come (Matt. 7:19; 8:12; 25:31-46; John 3:16; 5:29). The apostles too made it very clear that the ungodly "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thess. 1:9 NRSV).

The Devil, the archenemy of humankind, and all his hangers-on will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20:10), "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). The same fate awaits the Antichrist, who emerges at the end of the age, and whom Christ will destroy with the breath of his mouth (2 Thess. 2:8). Those who have rejected the gospel will suffer eternal punishment (2 Thess. 1:8, 1 Pet. 4:17) as will all apostates (Heb. 10:26,27). "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath" (John 3:36 NRSV).

The punishment of the wicked is described in various ways. They

are said to go to hell (Matt. 5:22,29,30; Mark 9:43,45,47). Hell is also called “the lake of fire” (Rev. 19:20; 20:14,15). Jesus spoke of “the fire of hell” (Matt. 5:22). It is also a place of darkness “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). It is called “the second death” (Rev. 20:6), punishment and destruction (2 Thess. 1:9, 1 Cor. 1:18). By contrast, believers are rescued “from the coming wrath” (1 Thess. 1:10 NRSV).

The Eternal Reign of God

Those who put their trust in Christ and his redeeming grace have the hope of eternal life. Jesus promised his disciples that he was preparing a place for them and that he would some day come and take them to himself (John 14:2-6). He calls this glorious place “my Father’s house” (John 14:2) in which there are many rooms—room enough for all the saints of all the ages. When Christ comes in clouds of glory he will take those who belong to him home to glory, “and so we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:17). The Father’s house is “a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Cor. 5:1). Jesus also spoke of the “eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9).

This heavenly home of the saints is also known as paradise (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4). “To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7 NRSV). In one of his parables Jesus uses a very Jewish figure of speech for heaven, calling it “Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22 KJV). People will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, says Jesus (Matt. 8:11,12). In Revelation 19 John describes the bliss of the redeemed in terms of a great wedding feast in which the Lamb and his bride celebrate their eternal union. One of the pictures of heaven that is expanded in some detail is that of the holy city, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21, 22). This is “the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). Throughout the ages the saints have looked forward to “the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14), the heavenly Mount Zion (Rev. 14:1).

In this age we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7); we see by means of “a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12 NRSV), but when the last day comes we shall see Christ face to face. “We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). To see God is to see His glory. Jesus prayed that his followers might see the glory which he had before the foundation of the world (John 17:24). The sufferings of this life “are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

When we appear before Christ at the end of the age (2 Cor. 5:10), he will reward us for all that we did in his name. Each person will receive his or her rewards according to their labors (1 Cor 3:8). God will not overlook our work and our love for others (Heb. 6:10). When believers enter the gates of glory “they will rest from their labor” but “their deeds will follow them” (Rev. 14:13).

To be with Christ in glory means to experience joy at its deepest level. God will wipe away all tears (Rev. 7:17): “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4 NRSV). All of God’s children look forward to the day when they will “enter into the joy” of the Lord (Matt. 25:21,23 NRSV). And while we wait for that day we have the assurance that God “is able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy” (Jude 24).

Christ's Final Triumph

PASTORAL APPLICATION

The article on “Christ’s Final Triumph” raises practical pastoral issues in two basic areas: the first involving death and the after-life and the second involving eschatology and the “last days.” The Bible calls Christians to live their lives with the end in view. With such a perspective, the Master is given free reign to align our life priorities and nurture us to maturity. Such a life will receive, without reservation, the acclaim of heaven as the words “well done” are sounded.

The teaching of this article is a comfort to the believer and a warning to the nonbeliever. It speaks words of assurance to all believers, especially those struggling, weary, or grieving death. It is a call of repentance and faith to the careless and indifferent.

Watchfulness is a distinguishing characteristic of the Christian living with the end in view. This watchfulness pertains not only to the timing, but to the resultant lifestyle as well. Only unprepared Christians live as though they will almost certainly have upwards of 70 years before their work is presented before the Judge. The completion date may be hastened dramatically on two fronts: by death or Christ’s second coming.

Perspectives on Death

The common denominator of life is death. People are confronted with this reality as they witness the death of someone else or face the prospect personally. These experiences provide an excellent opportunity for ministry and pastoral care.

Christians are prepared to face death at any time. They live confidently in the knowledge that death is a summons home to the place where their real citizenship resides. They feel their mortality, but it’s not an altogether unsettling thought. Though keenly aware of life’s uncertainty, they are not morbidly preoccupied with death and dying.

When faced with imminent death because of disease or old age, it’s normal to face the prospect with anxiety. The passage from life to death is a trip with few road maps, except that of our Lord Jesus. Certainly some apprehension is to be expected.

To prepare for the passage, rehearsal of the promises of Scripture concerning God’s children can be particularly helpful to bring assur-

ance. It is the strength of the relationship with God more than the extravagant beauty of heaven that is likely to encourage the believer.

End-time judgment for believers should not be dreaded, but seen as report card day. Graduation is not in question, but different awards will be received on the basis of faithfulness. If one's name is in the "Book of Life" there is no reason to fear. In Jesus Christ, the believer stands firm.

Medical science has sometimes made decisions regarding extension of life difficult. While Christians enjoy life, they have less need to prolong it by extraordinary means. They know that life on earth is not the final reality. However, neither assisted suicide nor active euthanasia should be pursued since it is God's exclusive right to give and take life (see Article 14: The Sanctity of Human Life).

The Christian Funeral

A Christian funeral is permeated with an undertone of hope. That is not to say that grief should be suppressed. Death still brings distress and sadness as with any prolonged separation from a loved one. Full victory will be gained when the cycle of life and death is broken, when life alone will prevail for eternity. Grieving is a reality, but so is hope.

The funeral or memorial service is an act of worship. Planning for the service gives an opportunity for healthy remembering of the life and for grieving the loss of the deceased. The goals of the service are to honor the life of the loved one, as well as to encourage the family, friends, and community to continue living with meaning, hope, and purpose. The funeral meditation is an opportunity to reflect on the purpose of life with reference to God as Creator, Christ as Redeemer, and the Spirit as Comforter. Finding a central metaphor suggested by the life of the person being memorialized can give focus to the meditation and encouragement to the grieving family. If a family does not confess faith in Christ, they may be open to brief but challenging words of comfort and hope based on the message of God's grace in Christ. The pastor must take care not to violate trust by using someone's sorrow as a pulpit for hard-edged judgment or opportunistic evangelism. At the same time, the pastor must not project a notion of "cheap grace." Many have found that clearly articulating the message of God's grace opens the way for evangelistic opportunities in later conversations with grieving family and friends.

Different areas may have different funeral customs. It is important for a pastor to be aware of cultural and regional sensitivities. Some prefer to practice a more intimate burial service followed by a public memorial service. Others insist on an open casket at the funeral fol-

lowed by burial. (For help in planning the funeral, see the Kindred Productions publication *Following the Call*, 138-40.)

Some may have questions about cremation versus burial. Both the Old and New Testaments assume burial as a customary means of laying the body to rest. However, there is no theological issue which would prevent choosing cremation. Sometimes, however, fire is associated with judgment and family sensitivities become the more crucial consideration.

Priorities in Light of the Second Coming

For the watchful Christian, the second advent is a blessed hope. No matter what joys are experienced on earth, they will certainly be eclipsed by the joy of meeting our loving Lord and Savior in the air. Therefore, the watchful and prepared Christian “packs light.” We hold lightly to material possessions because we realize that the world and everything in it will wear out and disappear. We exchange the temporal things of this world for eternal gain, thus planting our hearts firmly on heaven’s soil. We realize that the Judge will consider how wealth and time were used for God’s kingdom, and that hoarding and indulgence will be viewed negatively.

One should be aware that in times of prosperity and wealth, interest in prophecy and Christ’s return tends to be diminished. Where hardship and persecution or their prospect become the norm, the longing for Jesus’ coming usually intensifies. Those living in times of greater ease and prosperity are more likely to be caught off guard at Christ’s appearing.

Just as death can be unexpected, the watchful believer understands that Christ’s coming will surprise many. No one knows or can know when God will give the final signal. From time to time, especially during times of millennial fervor, self-proclaimed prophets set dates as specific as a certain day or as general as a certain year. No attention should be paid to such speculations regardless of the means employed to predict the time of Jesus’ return. Such predictions are not only presumptuous, but thoroughly unbiblical. Only the Father knows the time.

However, we do well to study the nature of the events which will signal the coming of the end. Biblical prophecy should be studied in balance with the rest of Scripture. Ignorance of it may result in lack of readiness. Making it the prime focus over an extended time often leads to excesses, skewed perspectives, and even division. It can result in a people who are “so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good.”

Watchful believers are aware that the battle for the minds and

souls of people will intensify. Deceptive signs and wonders will be the catalyst for some to turn away (Matt. 24:24). Alert Christians will avoid being mesmerized by flash and sizzle, but will rather seek after the will of God for their lives. The message God has given us in His Son is more than sufficient to live a Spirit-filled life.

If we are watchful and living in right relationship with God and others, our priorities will not need dramatic last-minute realignment. Prepared lives are characterized by alertness and self-discipline. These attitudes find their expression in lives of prayer, purity, and sacrificial service (Matt. 25:31-46).

A Perspective of Peace

Another characteristic of a believer who has an end-time perspective is peace. Christ's triumphal return at the end of this age is a quiet assurance in a world of political turmoil and economic uncertainty. The fast pace of changing world events, wars and bombs, genetic manipulation, crime, or large-scale atrocities may lead one to conclude that the world is out of control. To know that God hasn't abandoned this world to fate or to the whims of humans but to a triumphant, climactic victory over the destructive forces of evil is a source of great comfort. As Christians we are assured through our faith that God's plan remains secure. God tolerates human disobedience for the time being, but overall control is never in question. Every pastor has occasions in public teaching or private counseling to reassure believers that the final reign of God is sure.

A similar sense of calm prevails when faced with questions of personal injustice. Revenge and retaliation are not ours to carry out. These are God's domain. We know that God sees every abuse that occurs and will bring about a greater justice than we could ever accomplish. With this knowledge we find it possible to forgive, releasing individuals to God's care.

This does not mean that we take a passive stance toward all matters of injustice. Where people are oppressed, we seek to intervene on their behalf. We do not believe we can create the millennial kingdom through human effort, but we work for justice because we belong to such a kingdom.

With the end in view, we also face hardship of various kinds with considerable perseverance and hope. We know that suffering is a given for this world only and that in the next there will be no tears. Our pain is a tool which God may use to shape us into the masterpiece He desires.

Our society is focused on success. Every person is encouraged to set goals and plans for the future. These plans may include econom-

ARTICLE 18

ic freedom or personal fulfillment. Often the greatest void in these pursuits is spiritual commitment. In this climate, the hope of heaven and the assurance of heavenly rewards can be an incentive for focused living. “Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thess. 4:18).

Liturgical Version

ARTICLE 1

God

Hear, O people:

The LORD our God, the LORD is one!
Almighty in power,
perfect in wisdom,
righteous in judgment,
overflowing in steadfast love.

The LORD is our Sovereign,
who reigns over all things visible and invisible.
The LORD is our Shepherd,

who rescues the lost and the helpless.

The LORD is a consuming fire, perfect in holiness.

The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in
tender mercy.

Holy and pure is the Father in all His ways!

Creator of heaven and earth,
in whom we live and move and have our being;
who hears us when we pray,
who opens to us the way of salvation,
who unites us in the one family of faith.

Holy and true is the Son in all His ways!

Image of the invisible God,
eternal Word who was made flesh,
conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary
to be Servant of all and Lord of all.

Made like us in every way, yet without sin,
He suffered, was crucified and buried,

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and was raised to new life on the third day.
Savior of the world,
who loves us with an everlasting love,
who reveals the fullness of the Father,
who intercedes for us His followers,
and calls us to be His witnesses
until He returns in glory to judge the world.

Holy and wise is the Spirit in all His ways!
Power and presence of God,
divine Gift to all God's people,
who convicts us of sin,
gives us the new birth,
guides us into all truth.
Enriches us with gifts for service,
and cultivates the fruit of maturity.
Divine Comforter and Counselor,
who prays for us when we do not know how,
who baptizes us into the one body,
who gives a foretaste of the glory to come.

Blessed be the name of the LORD!
Blessed be the name of the Father,
the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
one God forever and ever! Amen.

ARTICLE 2

Revelation of God

The glory of God is written boldly in the skies,
carved deeply into the landscape of this earth.

Lord, since creation You have shown all people
that You exist, and have all power.

Merciful God, open our eyes
to see the heights and depth and breadth
of Your glory and Your steadfast love
which fills the world.

In the fullness of time,
God revealed Himself by the Son, Jesus Christ,
who is the brightness of God's glory,
the true likeness of God's essence.

Christ, the law and the prophets look forward to You,
hoping for the day of Your arrival.

The New Testament calls us to follow You and abide in You.

We believe that all Scriptures are inspired by God.
They are profitable for teaching,
for pointing out error and setting us straight,
and for training in right living,
so that everyone who belongs to God
may be well-equipped for every good work.

Almighty God,
Your Spirit moved among the ancient prophets and
writers,
reminding them of the truth,
shaping the eternal message of salvation.
Move among us now, and speak to us,
so that we might hear Your Word with
understanding,
and respond with obedient hearts.

ARTICLE 3

Creation and Humanity

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Beauty erupted out of blackness,
perfection sparkled where chaos once reigned,
a universe clean and pure.

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it;
the world, and all that fills it.

O Lord, You delight in Your creation,
and all creation delights in Your care
and sustaining presence.

But who are we, that You should take notice of us,
we poor mortals, that You even look at us?

O God, You were not content with beauty alone.
You desired love, and created us in Your image
to love You and live with You.
Male and female You made us, in Your image.
You gave us the world, to name it and tame it,
to enjoy it and offer it back to You,
in ministries of exploration and care.

Holy God, we failed You at the beginning,
we have sinned ever since.

As sin entered the world through one man,
and death through sin,
so life and salvation have entered
through Jesus Christ.

God's light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness cannot put it out.
We live with the pain of Eden's curse,
we live with the promise of Eden regained.

All creation waits with bated breath,
for the glorious return of Christ,
who makes all things new;
and God shall be all in all.

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad,

let the sea roar, let the fields celebrate!
 Then shall all the trees of the field rejoice before the Lord,
 for He comes,
 He comes bringing justice to all the earth.

ARTICLE 4

Sin and Evil

Out of the depths we cry to You, O Lord;
 in Your mercy, hear our prayers.

We confess that formerly we were dead in sin,
 cut off from You,
 cut off from each other,
 rebels wandering in a wilderness of our own making.
 We long to put off the sin that so easily entangles,
 but in our own strength, Lord, we cannot.

Father in heaven, do not lead us into temptation!
 The human heart is deceitful above all things;
 how dare we trust in ourselves?
 Pride and greed make their home within,
 and we so quickly turn to worship anything but You.

Father in heaven, rescue us from the Evil One!
 The devil prowls around,
 like a lion seeking someone to devour.
 Powers and principalities rage against us,
 seeking to deceive and enslave.
 Yet greater is He that is in us,
 than he that is in the world.

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.
 Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.

ARTICLE 5

Salvation

We believe that there is no name under heaven
that can save us, except the name of Jesus.

For God so loved the world,
that He gave His only Son,
that whoever believes in Him shall not perish,
but have eternal life.

Since that sad day when sin entered the world,
indeed, before the foundation of the world,
our God has been a saving God:
covering our shame,
covering our sin,
covenanting in faithfulness
to receive all who call upon the name of the Lord.

We were too weak and blind to help ourselves;
but while we were yet sinners,
Christ died for us.

O blessed cross, our tree of life,
on which was shed the precious blood of Jesus,
in which we find the healing of the nations.

In Christ we are the new creation;
the old has gone, the new has come!
Together with all creation,
we eagerly await the day
when the heavens and earth will be renewed,
and we will gather in joyous worship
around the throne of God,
singing songs of thanks
to the Christ who was slain, and now lives.

We confess that all must receive salvation
as a gracious gift of God.

For it is by grace that we are saved,
through faith, and not by works,
so that no one can boast.

We confess that all whom God adopts
are brought together as sisters and brothers,
one new people of God.

When we are together with all the saints,
we grasp how wide and long and high and deep
is the love of Christ.

We confess that all who receive the love of God
respond with lives of service and beauty.

For we are God's works of art,
created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

Give thanks to the Lord!

God's steadfast love endures forever!

ARTICLE 6

Nature of the Church

No one can lay a foundation
other than the one which was laid,
which is Christ Jesus.

He has called us from darkness into His glorious light.
He builds us into a holy temple,
a house of prayer for all the nations,
and the gates of hell will never overpower it.

You are the body of Christ
and individually members of it.

God's Spirit makes us one,
breathing unity into diversity,
breaking down the walls that divide.

There is neither male nor female,
nor any walls of nation, race, or class,
but one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one body.

We commit ourselves
to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,
as we live out our mission to be Christ's hands and feet,

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ears and mouth, mind and heart,
His body for a broken world.

You are a holy people, a royal priesthood,
God's special property, created to do His will.

We gather to build up the body of believers
and to make God's praise glorious!

We celebrate God's faithfulness and grace,
we hear the word of the Lord, bread for our soul,
we offer prayers as incense to the Lord,
we prod each other on to love and good works,
we seek God's will for our life and mission,
we baptize, eat and drink as Christ commanded,
awaiting with joy the Great Banquet to come.

Bear one another's burdens,
and so fulfill the law of Christ.

And when we fail, merciful God,
bring us lovingly back to Your truth,
so that we might learn again
how to bring each other back from sin and error.
We commit ourselves to the common good of Your people,
humbly submitting to one another,
according to our Lord's example and Spirit.

When Christ was enthroned at the right hand of God,
He poured out His Holy Spirit upon His followers,
men and women, young and old, according to the promise of the
Father.

We receive God's Spirit as the gift and promise of eternal life.
We yield ourselves to the Spirit,
that God might work through us,
in our ministry to the body and our mission to the world.

God gives the church spiritual gifts
to equip the whole body for ministry.
Those with gifts of leadership have a high calling,
as models of Christ-like living
and servants entrusted with the care and equipping of God's people.

We receive those whom God has given to us
and commit ourselves to pray for them,
to support them and correct them in a spirit of love.
Bless them, O God,

bless us through them,
 that Your people might be built up
 and Your good news announced to all the world.

ARTICLE 7

Mission of the Church

You are the light of the world!
 Let your light shine,
 so that all people might see it
 and praise your Father in heaven.

God, we love You and live for You.
 Help us to love our neighbors as ourselves,
 sharing the good news with boldness,
 showing the good news with deeds of limitless love.
 We are not ashamed of this good news:
 it is Your power for salvation,
 to everyone who believes.

All authority in heaven and on earth
 is given to our Lord Jesus Christ.
 Therefore, go and summon all nations to follow Him,
 baptizing them and teaching them
 to observe all that He commanded.

Let the nations praise You, O God,
 let all the nations praise You!

Spirit of God, fill us with power to be Your witnesses.

We offer ourselves to the Lord of the Harvest.
 As ambassadors for Christ,
 purify us and use us to proclaim His salvation.
 We commit ourselves
 to spread the good news of peace with God
 to those who are near and to those afar off.
 Strengthen us to work with joy
 as we look forward to the Day of Harvest,
 when the redeemed will gather in God's presence
 to celebrate forever the boundless riches
 of Jesus Christ our Lord.

ARTICLE 8

Christian Baptism

Jesus our Lord was baptized
to fulfill all righteousness.
All who turn to Jesus are also called
to pass through the waters
and embark on a life of obedience and abundant joy.

Blessed is the one
who hears the call of Jesus and follows.
Blessed is the one
cleansed by Jesus' forgiving love,
washed and made new by His Spirit,
welcomed into the Father's family.

Baptism is a public sign of repentance
and the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism signifies that we have died with Christ,
that we might also be raised to newness of life in Him.

Baptism is a pledge to serve Christ
according to the gifts God has given.

Baptism announces that we belong to God:
we take His name upon ourselves,
and His people become our people.

So submit yourselves to God,
and commit yourselves to the church family
that God has entrusted with your care.

[optional blessing for baptismal candidates:]

May the Spirit descend like a dove,
and the blessing of God rest upon you:
"Well done, my dear child,
with you I am well pleased!"

ARTICLE 9

Lord's Supper

Taste and see that the Lord is good!

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.

Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Listen! The Lord who fed the thousands on the hillside,
 who fed the twelve in the upper room—
 listen, He stands at the door and knocks;
 if we hear His voice and open the door,
 He will come in and eat with us.

Jesus invites all His disciples to feast at this table.

All who are members of God's covenant family,

living in obedience to God

and with integrity towards their spiritual brothers and sisters,

gather to celebrate their communion with Christ and each other.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,
 have mercy on us!

Forgive our sins:
 our pride and self-sufficiency,
 our bitterness and division.

Help us to examine ourselves,
 and give us the grace to repent.

We will leave the gifts of our worship at the altar
 until we have made right that which needs mending
 with You or in the church.

And then, O Lord, Your kindness and forgiveness
 will feed our very souls.

On the night He was betrayed

the Lord Jesus took the bread,

gave thanks, broke it, and said,

"This is my body, which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me."

Father, we bless You for the bread,
 for this sign of Jesus' body,
 for His life of compassion
 and His example of humble service.

LITURGICAL VERSION

This loaf unites us in the one Body,
and strengthens us for ministry.
Lord, remember Your Body,
and deliver us from evil.

In the same way, Jesus took the cup,
blessed it, and said,
“This cup is the new covenant in my blood.
Do this, as often as you drink it,
in remembrance of me.”

Father, we bless You for the cup,
for this sign of Jesus’ shed blood,
for His death on the cross
and His sacrifice for sin.

This cup welcomes us into a covenant of forgiveness,
and promises us the riches of eternal life,
for Christ, our Passover lamb,
has been sacrificed,
and we have been brought over
from death into life.

As often as you do this,
you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.
Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

ARTICLE 10

Discipleship

Jesus calls us to walk with Him,
to follow Him.

Through the power of Your Spirit,
we will take up our cross,
we will live ready to suffer,
to surrender our rights, even to die,
for the cause of Christ our King.

Jesus calls us to walk with each other.
Do not neglect to meet together,
but encourage each other to love and good works.

God, You have given us to each other,

that together we might discover
 Your holy and perfect will.
 We ask for wisdom in time of uncertainty,
 for courage in time of difficulty,
 for humility in time of defeat.
 We commit ourselves to a life of discipline,
 ready to receive correction and offer
 encouragement
 as the Lord directs,
 so that we might be built up
 into a holy and beautiful temple,
 pleasing to God in every way.

As followers of Christ, we are also “friends of God,”
 and enemies of the darkness that rules this present age.
 Rescue us from its seductive power,
 empower us to live boldly as citizens of the Age to Come.

We reject the world’s use of power to oppress and impress.

Fill us with Your love and humility;

make us peacemakers, who know the power of sacrifice.

We reject the world’s desire to hoard and squander wealth.

Fill us with Your generosity;

make us poor in spirit, who know the wealth of
 simplicity.

We reject the world’s lust for pleasure and lack of self-control.

Fill us with Your purity;

make us to hunger and thirst after
 righteousness,

as those who know the pleasure of feasting on God’s will.

May we grow to be like Christ,
 thinking His thoughts, speaking His words,
 embodying His passion to serve and to save the lost.

As Christ called us,

we want to joyfully call others to walk with us,
 and together follow Him in this new life.

ARTICLE 11

Marriage, Singleness and Family

We believe that God designed human life to begin in a family, and be blessed by the family.

Even more, God desires all people to become part of the family of faith.

The blessing of God is on those who receive God's gift of singleness.

We bless them and receive them fully as members and ministers in the family of faith.

The blessing of God is on those who receive God's gift of marriage.

We bless them and ask that God would empower them to love, forgive, and submit to their partners in the spirit of Christ.

In the beginning, God established marriage as the union of one man and one woman for life-long companionship, intimacy, and the nurture of children.

We commit ourselves to uphold the honor of the marriage covenant.

O Lord, keep us from temptation.

Strengthen us to flee any desire for sexual union beyond the bonds of marriage.

And fill us with compassion and wisdom to bring healing to the faltering and the fallen.

The blessing of God is on those who receive God's gift of children.

We bless them and ask that God would strengthen them for the many challenges of parenting. May they bring up their children to love and serve God,

by instructing them in the faith,
 disciplining them with gentleness,
 blessing them with favor,
 and not provoking them to anger.
 May their children respond
 with love, respect, and obedience,
 maturing as believers who take their own place
 in the family of faith.

ARTICLE 12

Society and State

God in His mercy established government
 to promote the well-being of all people.

We commit ourselves to pray for our leaders,
 and to work for justice, truth, and righteousness
 in our homes,
 in our communities,
 and in all the nations of the world.

We ask for the Spirit's guidance
 to make us keenly aware
 of those who suffer discrimination and
 injustice.

In serving them, we are serving Christ.

God requires governments to uphold and bless what is good,
 and restrain and punish what is evil.

We commit ourselves to obey all laws
 that do not conflict with the Word of God.

We grieve for all acts of violence
 and all victims of evil.

We deplore the loss of life that comes from violence.

In the spirit of Christ,
 we seek to bring God's justice
 by reconciling victims and offenders.

We seek to be truthful and gracious in all we say,
 avoiding the practice of swearing oaths,
 but letting our Yes be Yes
 and our No be No.

LITURGICAL VERSION

The citizenship of believers is in heaven,
and God's Kingdom demands absolute allegiance.

We seek the well-being of our governments,
but reject overbearing nationalism
as an idolatrous claim for our loyalties,
and an affront to the God of all nations.
We also reject membership in any secret society
as an affront to the unity of the church of Christ.
We commit ourselves to always live lives
worthy of our heavenly citizenship,
for it has been purchased for us
with the priceless blood of Jesus.

ARTICLE 13

Love and Nonresistance

Greater love has no one than this—
to lay down your life for your neighbor.
Jesus has left us His example,
that we should follow in His steps.

For Christ is our peace,
who demolished all divisions
and made us one new family
united by His one Spirit in the bond of peace.
We proclaim that our allegiance to the name of Christ
is higher and stronger than any other loyalty.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
to which indeed you were called in the one Body.
Christ, let Your word dwell in us richly,
that we might teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.
Grant us courage to make peace among ourselves,
remembering that You ask us to leave even our acts of worship,
so that we might be reconciled to each other.

Blessed are the peacemakers
for they shall be called the children of God.
Lord God,

fill us with the love that flows from Your heart,
 that we might be agents of reconciliation in a broken world,
 ambassadors of the Prince of Peace in all our ways.
 Give us the patience to wait on Your judgments,
 rather than taking vengeance ourselves.
 Give us the strength to yield,
 returning evil with good,
 and trusting in the power of Your love,
 rather than our own love of power.

Jesus warned that in the last days
 there would be wars and rumors of wars.

Lord, strengthen Your children to be a sign to the world
 that one day You will bring an end to all war.
 Nations will beat their swords into plowshares;
 weapons of war shall become tools for peace,
 and the Tree of Life shall be given for the healing of the nations.
 But while we wait for that Day,
 free our hearts—and our mouths—
 to bless and pray for those who persecute us.
 Help us to live as people of peace,
 and deliver us from the time of testing.

ARTICLE 14

The Sanctity of Human Life

All human life belongs to God.

We have been created in the image of God,
 crowned with dignity and honor.

God opposes every action and attitude
 which devalues human life.

Since the beginning of time,
 God has shown Himself
 as a shield for the defenseless,
 caring for the poor and needy,
 providing for the widow and orphan,
 comforting the sick and lonely.
 Spirit of God, use us as Your instruments

LITURGICAL VERSION

for justice, peace, and blessing.

O God, You are Lord over life and death.
When You open Your hand to us,
we are filled with abundance;
when You take away our breath,
we die and return to dust.

Lord, You were present at the moment of our creation,
for You lovingly shaped us in our mother's womb.
We praise You, for we are wonderfully made!
Your care over our mortal body is unending.
It extends from that earliest spark of life
to our final breath.

God has given to us
individuals gifted in medical sciences and care-giving
who aid in His work of healing.

We receive them as a blessing to the human race.
We pray that God would use them
to promote the well-being of all people.
But we reject any medical procedure designed
to take life as an attempt to undermine God's authority over life
and death.

As God's children, we say with confidence:
whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.
Teach us to number our days aright, O Lord,
that we might gain a heart of wisdom.

ARTICLE 15

Stewardship

In the beginning,
God placed man and woman in the garden
to tend it and guard it.
Today,
God still entrusts us
with the care and responsible use
of our world and its resources.

We receive this task as a sacred trust,
and will manage our lives
in ways that honor God.

As stewards of God's gifts,
we commit ourselves to using the earth's abundance
to meet human need.

O Lord, save us from self-destruction fueled by greed,
protect us from unjust exploitation of the land,
keep us from destroying the beauty of Eden!

All that we have is God's,
time, talents, and possessions;
and without God we are nothing.
We worship and follow the One who,
though He was rich,
for our sakes became poor,
that we might become rich in Him.

Our lasting treasure is in heaven, O Lord.
Teach us to live lightly with our earthly treasure.
Forgive our preoccupation with comfort and luxury,
forgive our divided loyalty between God and Wealth.
Free us from anxiety over food and drink and
clothing.
Empower us to live simply,
content in every circumstance:
well-fed or hungry, having plenty or being in need.
We commit ourselves to a life of
cheerful, regular, and sacrificial giving,
managing all that we have and are
for the glory of God.

ARTICLE 16

Work, Rest, and the Lord's Day

In six days the Lord God made the heavens and the earth, and everything in them.

O Lord, You are the carpenter of creation,
the weaver of worlds.

You have blessed us, Your creatures, with labor,
and ask us to work honestly and with integrity,
employing our skills in ways that tell the world
that we are serving You.

Help us to treat all workers with respect,
and remember those who are without work,
that they may find their true calling in You.

On the seventh day God finished all the work of His hands,
and He rested from all His labors.

O Lord, You thought it a good thing
to pause,
reflect,
enjoy
what You had done.

Help us to do the same.

Help us to rest, thankful for our daily bread.

Help us to rest, enjoying a sweet foretaste of
eternal peace.

Help us to rest, relying on your goodness,
and not on our own activity.

Help us to worship You, the giver of every perfect gift,
and slow us down
so that we can
be still and know that You are God.

On the first day of creation, God said "Let there be light!"

On the day of new creation, God said,
"Let the light of Christ shine out of darkness,
the glory of God in the face of Jesus!"

We celebrate Jesus' triumph over the grave,
by gathering on the first day of the week,
for praise and prayer.

We celebrate the promised gift from the Father,
the Holy Spirit poured out on God's people,
by gathering on the first day of the week,
for teaching and sharing.

This is the day that the Lord has made.
Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

ARTICLE 17

Christianity and Other Faiths

Jesus said, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
No one comes to the Father except by Me.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord
will be saved.

O Lord, fill us with passion,
fill us with wisdom,
to proclaim Your name
to the ends of the earth.

O Lord, ever since You made this world,
Your handiwork shouts out Your glory;
Your signature has never been erased.
Your presence and power are evident
to all who have eyes to see.

Just as we confess that Christ is the Truth,
so we confess that echoes of God's truth
might be found in all places and times.
Open our ears, that we might listen and learn
from all the human family.
In the same way, open our mouths,
that we also might humbly share
what we have seen and heard and touched.
We desire that all people would be brought
from darkness to light,
from bondage to freedom,
from unknown gods to the love of Jesus.

LITURGICAL VERSION

Almighty God, You desire that no one
should be eternally destroyed,
but that all should come to new life in Christ.
Even so, there is a way that ends in death.
We confess that those who are without Christ
are under the judgment of God.
The Judge of all the earth
will do what is right.

For the wages of sin is death,
but the gift of God is eternal life
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

ARTICLE 18

Christ's Final Triumph

The words of Him who is faithful and true:
Surely, I am coming soon!

The end of this age is drawing near,
and we live as a people of hope.
We await the appearing of Christ the King,
who comes to bring justice to the earth.

All around we see the work of the Enemy:
war and destruction, famine and death,
increasing more and more as the Day approaches.

We rejoice that the Enemy has been conquered,
and that Christ will reign
forever and ever.

The last enemy to be destroyed is death.
Christ has broken the power of death,
and therefore we will not fear.

We long for the day
when we will take off these mortal rags,
and put on the glorious robe of immortality,
that we might be with the Lord forever.

When Christ returns, the dead shall be raised,
and the living shall be transformed.

The righteous shall awaken to eternal life,
the wicked, to judgment and death.

On the day of resurrection,
we shall all stand before the judgment throne of God.

We yearn to hear the great words of welcome:

“Well done, O good and faithful servant.

Enter into your Master’s delight!”

But yet, Lord, over the many centuries,
Your children have waited and watched,
prayed and hoped.

In our spirits we ask,

How long, O Lord?

When will be the day of Your appearing?

It is not for us to know the times or seasons.
The form of this world is already fading away,
and the Lord is not slow about His promise.
God is patient, not wanting any to perish,
but wanting all to receive eternal life.

Therefore we will watch and pray,
according to His promise,
waiting for the new heavens and the new earth,
where righteousness is at home.

We will gather in worship around God’s throne,
and praise and adore the God of our salvation,
for ever and ever.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Digest Version

1. GOD. We believe in the one true God, the source of all life, who reigns over all things as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who lovingly cares for all creation. God the Father planned the redemption of humanity and sent Jesus Christ the Son to be the Savior of the world. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God, bringing good news to the poor and triumphing over sin through his obedient life, death, and resurrection. God the Holy Spirit empowers believers with new life, indwells them, and unites them in one body.

2. REVELATION OF GOD. We believe God has made Himself known to all people. Beginning with creation and culminating in Jesus Christ, God has revealed Himself in the Old and New Testaments. All Scripture is inspired by God, and is the authoritative guide for faith and practice. We interpret the Scripture in the church community as guided by the Holy Spirit.

3. CREATION AND HUMANITY. We believe God created the heavens and the earth, and they were good. Humans, God's crowning act, were created in the image of God. Sin has alienated humanity from the Creator and creation, but God offers redemption and reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

4. SIN AND EVIL. We believe sin is individual and corporate opposition to God's good purposes and leads to physical and spiritual death.

5. SALVATION. We believe God saves all people who put their faith in Jesus Christ. By his obedient life, sacrificial death and victorious resurrection, Christ delivers people from the tyranny of sin and death and redeems them for eternal life in the age to come. All creation eagerly awaits its liberation from bondage into the freedom of the glory of God's children.

6. NATURE OF THE CHURCH. We believe the church is the covenant community called by God through Jesus Christ to live a life of dis-

cipleship and witness as empowered by the Holy Spirit. The local church gathers regularly for worship, fellowship and accountability, and to discern, develop and exercise gifts for ministry.

7. MISSION OF THE CHURCH. We believe the mission of the church is to make disciples of all nations by calling people to repent, to be baptized, and to love God and neighbor by sharing the good news and doing acts of love and compassion.

8. CHRISTIAN BAPTISM. We believe baptism by water is a public sign that a person has repented of sin, received forgiveness, died with Christ and has been raised to new life through the power of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is also a public declaration of a believer's incorporation into the body of Christ as expressed in the local church.

9. LORD'S SUPPER. We believe that in obedience to Christ, the church observes the Lord's Supper as a remembrance of his atoning death and to celebrate forgiveness, new life, and the fellowship and unity of all believers.

10. DISCIPLESHIP. We believe Jesus calls people who have experienced the new birth to follow him in a costly life of service to God. The power of the Holy Spirit transforms believers from the unrighteous pattern of the present age into a life of joyful obedience with God's people.

11. MARRIAGE, SINGLENESS, AND FAMILY. We believe that singleness and marriage are honored by God and should be blessed by the church. God instituted marriage as a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman for the purpose of companionship, encouragement, sexual intimacy, and procreation. Children are a gift from God and should be nurtured by parents in the ways of God.

12. SOCIETY AND STATE. We believe that God instituted the state to promote justice and to maintain law and order. Christians' primary allegiance is to Christ's kingdom. Believers are called to witness against injustice, exercise social responsibility, and obey all laws that do not conflict with the Word of God.

13. LOVE AND NONRESISTANCE. We believe that God in Christ reconciles people to Himself and to one another, making peace through the cross. We seek to be agents of reconciliation, to practice love of

enemies, and to express Christ's love by alleviating suffering, reducing strife, and promoting justice. Because violence and warfare are contrary to the gospel of Christ, we believe that we are called to give alternative service in times of war.

14. THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE. We believe that God is creator and giver of life, and highly values each person. Procedures designed to take human life are wrong. We oppose all attitudes which devalue human life, especially the defenseless lives of the unborn, disabled, poor, aging and dying.

15. STEWARDSHIP. We believe the universe and everything in it belong to God the Creator and that we have been entrusted by God to manage its resources. All God's gifts, including money, time, abilities and influence, are to be received with thanksgiving, used responsibly, and shared generously.

16. THE LORD'S DAY, WORK, AND REST. We believe God's act of creation provides the model for work and rest. In work, we use our abilities to glorify God and serve others. In rest, we express thanks for God's provision and trust in God's sustaining grace. In worship, we gather to commemorate the resurrection through worship, instruction, fellowship, and service.

17. OTHER FAITHS. We believe God's atoning work in Jesus is the only means of reconciling people with God. God has not left any without a witness to the Creator's goodness and power. Christians treat people of other faiths with respect, but urgently proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation.

18. CHRIST'S FINAL TRIUMPH. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ will return triumphantly at the end of this age to destroy all evil powers, condemn all who have rejected Christ to eternal punishment, and unite believers with Christ to reign forever with God in glory.

Sidewalk Version

We believe

in God as eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God created and sustains the universe. The eternal purpose of God the Father is to create a people who will bring glory to God forever. God alone is worthy of worship.

We believe

that God became human in Jesus Christ. Jesus came to restore the world because humans have rejected God in disobedience. Jesus taught and modeled the way of God's kingdom. He died on the cross, making it possible for us to accept a renewed relationship with God. He rose from the dead, broke the power of sin and death, and frees us to live in obedience to God's will.

We believe

that God the Holy Spirit invites all people to be reconciled with God and to join the global family of faith. Believers confess their faith, are baptized, and join in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and guided by the Bible, members of the church seek to live as followers of Christ and invite others to experience this new life.

As Christians we are called to turn...

- ...from ignorance of God to a personal relationship with God
- ...from bondage of sin and past mistakes to freedom, forgiveness, and healing
- ...from individualism to inter-dependence with others in the local church
- ...from lifestyle choices that harm us, others, and the earth to choices that nurture wholeness, healing, joy and peace
- ...from hating enemies and ignoring neighbors to showing love and justice to all

SIDEWALK VERSION

...from loving possessions to sharing with all in need

...from aimless existence to a mission of representing and proclaiming God's kingdom on earth.

As Christians we look forward to the day when God will once again send Jesus to bring all things under God's eternal rule.