Lessons from history on the uses of Mennonite confessions of faith

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A few years ago, I led a senior seminar for seminary students in their final year of the M.Div. program. One of their assignments was to fill out the Mennonite Church's ministerial leadership information form, which asks prospective church leaders to formulate their theological views in relation to the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.[1] A few students approached this assignment with trepidation. Although they were in basic agreement with the church's statement of faith, some had difficulty endorsing every phrase and preferred to state their views on certain matters a bit differently. We talked about the extent to which the church should tolerate theological diversity, about beliefs that should be considered foundational to the church's identity and those that could be viewed as nonbinding. At the root of the conversation was the question of the status of the church's confessional statements and the nature of their authority in congregational life.

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It is not surprising that the students focused on this question. In recent years, Mennonites have adopted a number of confessional documents, yet churches and conferences have not always been clear or have not always been able to agree about how these statements should function in the life of the church.[2]

Confessions of faith in church history

Throughout Christian history, confessions of faith have emerged under a variety of circumstances. In the first centuries of the church's existence, Christian communities produced confessional documents to prepare candidates for baptism. The Apostles' Creed, for instance, became part of the vow the catechumen

recited or responded to before submitting to the rite of baptism. Confessional statements were also used in corporate worship and confession of sin. The form of confession ranged from spontaneous ecstatic speech to ritual recitation that drew on fixed texts such as the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed.

Eventually the church used confessional statements to define right doctrine. As theological controversies intensified, the church felt compelled to draw lines demarcating the parameters of orthodox belief. One could no longer simply confess that one believed in Jesus Christ; one needed to confess more specifically what one believed about this Christ. The church relied on confessions to test whether clergy were theologically fit to lead. In the Middle Ages, when ecclesiastical authority became more centralized, and when church and empire moved closer together, concern for doctrinal orthodoxy heightened. Statements of faith came to function not only ecclesially but politically, with universal authority, and the liturgical uses of the confessions receded in importance.[3]

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In the sixteenth century, Protestants likewise used their confessions to define right doctrine, and in some cases their church statements became legal documents sanctioned by the state and serving as instruments of political as well as ecclesial unity. But Protestants also embraced the primary authority of Scripture (*sola scriptura*) over church tradition. The confessions were the church's commentary and summary of Scripture, and were binding only to the extent that they were in agreement with the biblical text. Lutheran confessions tended to have authority throughout Lutheran lands; the authority of Reformed confessions tended to be limited to a particular region or locale.

Anabaptist-Mennonite perspectives

As Cornelius J. Dyck has noted, Mennonites likely produced more confessions of faith than any other Reformation tradition.[4] Michael Driedger calculates that Dutch Mennonites in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries published nineteen confessions of faith plus two major collections. These statements and collections were often reprinted, so that by the end of the eighteen century more than 100 printings were in circulation.[5] During this period and into the nineteenth century, Prussian and Russian Mennonites also adopted many confessions.[6] Mennonites worldwide have evidently continued this tradition; the *Mennonite World Handbook* from 1990 indicates that 104 of 126 Mennonite conferences adhere to some kind of confessional statement.[7]

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Historians have disagreed about the extent to which Anabaptist and Mennonite confessions were authoritative in the churches. In the 1950s, Dutch historian Nanne van der Zijpp played down the importance of the Mennonite confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and emphasized their function as instruments of unity.[8] Others historians have noted that Anabaptists employed confessions within the church to teach and preserve distinctives, and outside the church to give an account of essentials of their faith to the authorities and to other Christian groups.[9] C. J. Dyck has pointed out that even the most liberal Mennonite group, the Waterlanders, did not adopt a take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward their confessions. Even undogmatic Mennonite groups expected leaders to take seriously what the church had formulated theologically in confessions of faith it had adopted.[10]

To say that Mennonites took their doctrinal statements of faith seriously, however, is not to suggest that their statements carried the same authoritative weight as the confessions of faith of other ecclesial traditions. As already noted, in Medieval and Reformation times political authorities often enforced the confessions formulated by theologians. Moreover, an ecclesiastical hierarchy usually constituted them “from above.” In contrast, in the absence of centralized ecclesial authority and political sanctions, Anabaptist and Mennonite confessional statements depended on congregational assent, and their authority was

representative rather than constitutive.[11] They were authoritative only to the extent that they were perceived as consonant with Scripture and reflected agreement in the congregations, a process often requiring widespread approval.[12]

The Waterlander Mennonites seem to have been especially concerned about the potential abuse of their confessional documents and expressed a reserved attitude towards them: “We understand that all propositions in confessions of faith do not bind every individual. Rather, one must look to God’s word and may accept confessions of faith only in so far as they are in agreement with the Bible.”[13] In later decades, the Waterlanders generally maintained this moderate view, affirming the value of confessional statements while recognizing their limitations.

The War of the Lambs

This view did not prevail, however, as Mennonites from all the groups throughout the Netherlands became embroiled in a bitter controversy about the status of confessional statements. Less moderate voices gained prominence, which led to a conflict that observers derisively referred to as the War of the Lambs.

The conflict erupted during a time when questions of Mennonite identity were at the forefront. As Mennonites were becoming a part of the cultural mainstream, some leaders saw a need for greater discipline within the churches and called for greater accountability and loyalty to the confessions of the church. Others advocated a more a relaxed attitude. In 1657, for instance, two leaders in the Flemish Mennonite church in Amsterdam, Galenus Abrahamsz and David Spruyt, presented a nineteen-article manuscript that denied that any church could be the one true church. They advocated that church leaders conform solely to New Testament principles and not demand uniformity in doctrinal and other church matters.[14]

In 1660, Mennonite church leaders met under the chairmanship of Thieleman van Braght in an attempt to resolve the dispute. Those meeting determined that a single new and authoritative confession of faith based on the older confessions should be formulated. Further, they decided that Galenus Abrahamsz and David Spruyt should be asked to conform to the teachings of the church or give up their ministry. But the two

Amsterdam preachers refused these alternatives, arguing that only their local congregation—not a meeting of congregations—had the authority to make such decisions. An attempt to influence the Amsterdam congregation failed because many members did not share the views of the larger body.[15] The acrimony reached new heights when David Spruyt proclaimed from the pulpit that "synods and the like were the work of the Antichrist."[16]

The confessionalists held their ground and soon took further action. Van Braght released his *Martyrs Mirror*,[17] a project he had been working on for some time, which built on the martyr tradition begun a century earlier.[18] In van Braght's view, Mennonites were succumbing to worldly pleasures and distractions, and he intended to call them back to the faithfulness of the early church and the sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrs. But in issuing his martyrology van Braght was also advancing the confessionalist cause. His introduction in the *Martyrs Mirror* included the Apostles' Creed and three Dutch Mennonite confessions of faith. The three confessions, van Braght argued, "might seem in superficial ways to be different, but, as was the case with the whole tradition of Christian faith since the time of the first persecutions, all orthodox confessions elaborated on the same unchanging beliefs."[19]

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Van Braght's use of the martyr tradition did not impress his opponents, and the dispute widened, as did the nature of the theological debate. Eventually the conflict spread throughout much of Holland and into other Dutch provinces. When in the spring of 1664 the differences of opinion could not be resolved, the two factions moved apart; the confessionalists came to be known as Zonists, the anticonfessionalists came to be known as Lamists. The Zonists continued to work toward church unity on the basis of the confessional tradition, a new constitution, and a five-article document requiring preachers and deacons to conform to the principles of the confessions. Over time, the tension between the two factions diminished, although the Zonists and the Lamists remained divided until the early nineteenth century.

Michael Driedger has noted, “It is ironic that the root of the schism which led to the creation of the Zonist and Lamist societies was disagreement over the strategy of using confessions of faith to repair or avoid schisms.”[20]

Striking a balance

Mennonite confessions of faith were initially useful in giving Mennonites a theological orientation. They helped congregations preserve Anabaptist distinctives, were instrumental in bringing Mennonite groups together in a process of integration, and facilitated ecumenical conversation with outsiders. However, as history has shown, statements of doctrine could also become instruments of disunity. The War of the Lambs resulted when Mennonite churches wanted to give confessions of faith a kind of authority that left little room for dialogue or theological diversity.

We should not fault the confessionalists for their interest in doctrinal integrity. By the middle of the seventeenth century they probably had reason to be concerned about preachers who were calling for a freer form of piety. History has shown that Mennonite groups that cared little about doctrinal matters eventually ran into problems, including loss of identity and an inability to resist the temptations of modernity.[21] However, at the dawn of the modern era, the confessionalists failed to recognize that religious pluralism and theological diversity were emerging realities that would require skillful and careful handling. If the church was going to survive and be a life-giving organism, it would need to find creative and constructive ways of dealing with these challenges. Neither a dismissal of confessional statements nor a rigid confessionalist stance would serve the church well in meeting the challenges of the age.

Notes

[1] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, Waterloo: Herald Pr., 1995).
[2] On this issue, see Ben C. Ollenburger, “*Sola Scriptura*/No Other Foundation and Other Authoritative Sources?” in *Without Spot or Wrinkle: Reflecting Theologically on the Nature of the Church*, ed. Karl Koop and Mary H. Schertz (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000), 65–92.
[3] See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, third edition (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1979).
[4] Cornelius J. Dyck, Foreword to *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God:*

Mennonite Confessions of Faith, Text Reader, no. 2, ed. Howard John Loewen (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 17.
[5] Michael D. Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age,* St Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2002), 51.
[6] See "Confessions of Faith," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing Hse.; Newton: Mennonite Publication Office; Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1955), 1:679–86.
[7] See Dieter Goetz Lichdi, ed., *Mennonite World Handbook: Mennonites in Global Witness* (Carol Stream: Mennonite World Conference, 1990), 324.
[8] Nanne van der Zijpp, "The Confessions of Faith of the Dutch Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (July 1955): 175–6.
[9] See "Confessions of Faith," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia,* 1:679.
[10] Cornelius J. Dyck, "Hans de Ries, Theologian and Churchman: A Study in Second Generation Dutch Anabaptism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1962), 182–3.
[11] Piet Visser, *Broeders in de geest: De doopsgezinde bijdragen van Dierick en Jan Philipsz. Schabaelje tot de Nederlandse stichtelijke literatuur in de zeventiende eeuw* (Deventer: Sub Rosa, 1988), 1:112.
[12] James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation* (Waterloo: Herald Pr., 1991), 83.
[13] W. J. Kühler, *Geschiedenis van de Doopsgezinden in Nederland, 1600–1735* (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1940), 202–3, quoted in Driedger, *Obedient Heretics,* 52.
[14] Driedger, *Obedient Heretics,* 54.
[15] See "Galenus Abrahamsz de Haan," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (1956), 2:431–4.
[16] Driedger, *Obedient Heretics,* 55.
[17] Thieleman Jansz. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror,* 5th ed., trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottdale, Kitchener: Herald Pr., 1950).
[18] For a succinct history of the Anabaptist-Mennonite martyr tradition, see Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1999), 197–249.
[19] Driedger, *Obedient Heretics*, 56.
[20] Ibid., 60.
[21] A helpful summary of the history of this development may be found in some of the writings of Sjouke Voolstra. See, e.g., his "Mennonite Faith in the Netherlands: A Mirror of Assimilation," *Conrad Grebel Review* 9 (fall 1991): 277–92.

About the author

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