

From our Churches

Author: Maurice Martin

Church: Mennonite Church Eastern Canada

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Questions of Mennonite Faith

A Pastor Responds

The following answers were written in response to a student's request for information on Anabaptism and Mennonite faith. The questions outlined are ones the student asked to have answered.

1. What are the basic doctrines of the Mennonite faith?

We are of course Christian, so share with other groups core Christian beliefs. (See the summary of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*). As you may or may not know, there was a major upheaval in the Christian Church in Europe during the 16th century called the Protestant Reformation (ca. 1515). That began with Martin Luther (hence the Lutheran church), and John Calvin (hence Presbyterians and other similar denominations), etc.

In approximately 1525, a group in Zurich, Switzerland was initially part of the Protestant Reformation, led there by Ulrich Zwingli, pastor of the cathedral in Zurich. Zwingli was in agreement with Luther's notion that only what is taught in Scripture should be adhered to by the true church, not some of the traditions and practices that had emerged over the centuries in the Catholic church. To this end he felt the Bible should be available in the language of the people, so he preached directly from his Greek New Testament and translated into German as he preached from the Gospel of Matthew. Several young men, (students like yourself) including Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz and others were very intrigued by all of this, and asked to meet with pastor Zwingli for discussions and Bible study.

But they soon became impatient with their pastor! He seemed unwilling to go so far as the study of scripture seemed to lead them.

You see, the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli) were not able to get beyond the notion that they lived in a Christian society (what we call "Christendom"). Indeed, babies were "christened" or baptized as infants as a sign that they were entering this society. It was a society in which the goals of the Church and of the state were essentially the same. And the rules were enforced by Law and the Sword.

As Conrad Grebel and his friends dug more deeply into the Bible, they met one evening (January 21, 1525) to study the New Testament and learn from it what it meant to be the true Church of Christ. They made an important discovery which shaped much of the rest of their beliefs after that and distinguished them from both the Catholic Church and other Reformers. They discovered that people in the New Testament became followers of Christ by their own volition and free choice. In other words, they discovered that we are to be Christians BY CHOICE, NOT BY BIRTH. And we were called to live our lives as a counter-cultural expression of our beliefs and core values. We are thus to be distinct from society around us in many ways.

They then examined their own experience and realized that having been baptized as infants meant they did not really make their own choice. So they decided to baptize each other, right then and there, using the pitcher of

drinking water that sat on the kitchen table. For this they were given the nick name "Anabaptists" i.e. "rebaptizers."

This was all seen as very DANGEROUS to the stability of the State. Such freedom of choice was too radical! So they were forbidden to meet, and told they must baptize their babies by the eighth day. They refused, and were thus outlawed, some in fact martyred - burnt at the stake, beheaded, or drowned - all because of their core value WE MUST BE CHRISTIAN BY CHOICE.

By 1527 they were being hounded literally "from pillar to post" and were like a scattered flock of sheep. Because of their strong belief in freedom of choice and personal conscience, their beliefs began to vary. So they met in a Conference at the town of Schleithem, and developed their first Confession of Faith. And that included seven articles:

- i). Concerning Baptism, as described above, for adults, upon personal confession of faith, not done to infants by adult proxy.
- ii). The Ban - That people had to make their own commitments to Christ as individuals is true, but this should not lead them into individualism - but rather they would give and receive counsel from each other with scriptures in hand to determine what is right and true belief. Those who were not ready to thus conform to these core beliefs were banished from fellowship (the ban). The true church is a discipling community of faith (the root word within discipleship is also the word "discipline.")
- iii). Breaking of Bread - i.e. the eucharist or Communion (Lord's Supper) was a covenant renewing event. The focus was not only on what Christ's death does for the believer (bread and wine being symbols of the body and blood of Christ) but was also seen as a renewal of their baptismal vows, to live faithfully as Christians. That included being willing to die for their faith, if need be, and certainly to share with their sisters and brothers in community, in self-giving love. So communion is not only about "Jesus and me" it is also about "Jesus and we."
- iv) Separation from the World. Includes the notion that true believers are "a people apart," called to live a life of faithful obedience to Christ. They did not assume that everyone in Christendom (as stated above) lives as Christ taught them to live, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount.
- v) .They believed congregations needed to be led by pastors, to teach people and support them in faith.
- vi) The Sword. They did NOT believe that the sword should be used to discipline Christians. Nor should Christians kill others in war. In short, they were from the outset pacifists.
- vii) .The Oath. They did not believe in swearing on the Bible (see Matthew 5 and James 5), but rather felt that one's word should suffice. In particular, the oath was often an oath confirming the authority of the state; but there were points at which their radical separation of church and state did not allow them in clear conscience to swear allegiance to the state.

There were of course many subsequent confessions of faith or creeds developed after that for two reasons: a) to gain clarity among themselves what they believed, and b) to explain to the authorities and the world around them what they believed.

2. Do Mennonites believe in the Trinity?

Yes, we have the same core beliefs as Christians generally do. Having said that, it has been explained in many ways by scholars and theologians for centuries, so I am not about to try to explain it very thoroughly here! Is it to do with the very character and nature of God? Or is it to do with how God is revealed to people? The core belief in any case is that in some significant way St. Paul was right when he wrote: "God was in Christ...." (II Corinthians 5:19)...reconciling the world to himself."

So one can speak of God the Father as the Creator God.

And one can speak of Christ the Son as the Redeemer God

And the Holy Spirit is the Sustainer God (the one who Sustains us in faith , the power of the Spirit)

Some people, including some Mennonites, find these helpful ways to restate the Trinity.

3. *What about heaven and hell?*

Mennonites, like other Christians, believe there is a final Judgment, and that traditionally leads to the notion that some are eternally consigned to punishment (hell) while others to reward (heaven). The more literal readers of scripture adhere to this belief.

Mennonites tend to focus first of all on the primary concern, which has to do with the Reign of God. We pray with Christians everywhere: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven."

But maybe Mennonites tend to focus more on the present reign of God than is emphasized in some other denominations. In other words, belief is not just a "fire escape from hell" or a "ticket to heaven." Rather, we believe the church is called to live now according to the model of the future reign of God when things will be made right in this world, and justice will prevail. We are not there yet! Things are not yet right in this world. But we believe we are called to live into such a better future, the kingdom over which God has appointed Jesus as king and Lord.

So, while many Christians acknowledge Jesus as "Saviour" (saving people from eternal damnation), Mennonites do too, but believe that we are called also to acknowledge Jesus as "Lord" and the Prince of Peace. We are called to follow in his steps ... Mennonites believe that the City of God (Kingdom of God) is not only a spiritual reality, but also is meant to be lived out in this world (a new earth as well as the new heaven). OR, to put it more colloquially, we tend to believe "If you want pie in the sky, you should pick your apples now!"

4. *Why do we live on the earth before going to heaven?*

The Biblical text spans all existence, and human experience, from Creation to Redemption - "on earth, as it is in heaven." When God created everything, God said: "It is good." Then things began to fall apart in human community - first by disobedience to God, then by human conflict. And in Christ, God puts it all together again, in the Kingdom that is coming... But we as Mennonites believe we should NEVER assume that any earthly kingdom (nation) fully participates in the Rule of God (not even the USA, who sing fervently "God bless America!").

5. *Why different types of Mennonites?*

First of all, Mennonites of all types have the same core beliefs. There are simply different ways to live out several of them. Especially the belief that we are called to be a "People apart" or a "counter-cultural community of faith." What does this mean in practical every day terms?

Some, like the Hutterites (a branch off the Anabaptist tree), believe that we should live communally. Others of us believe we should share liberally with those in need, both in our congregations, as well as around the world (hence the work of Mennonite Central Committee), but this does not necessarily mean we live communally. We simply live generously.

Some feel that we need to more visibly demonstrate both "who" we are, as well as "whose" we are (Christ's people). So the Amish stopped the cultural clock, if you will, in 1693 and refused to change with the changing styles. Old Order Mennonites did that in 1889 when the Old Order split took place in Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ontario. So obviously, as new inventions came in, such as the automobile and radio, they rejected those as being "worldly."

MOST Mennonites (99%?) drive cars and have radio and TV. But we still keep asking ourselves: "Have we thrown the baby out with the bath water on the matter of nonconformity to the world?" Certainly our pacifism, not signing up to go to war, has been a fairly consistent "counter-cultural" act among all Mennonites, whether they drive a buggy or a car. And, while we urban Mennonites no longer raise barns (after destroyed by fire) as a way of demonstrating community and mutual aid to those around us, we find other ways to do this.

So, in general terms, it is in the practicality of daily living, not in theological/philosophical discourse that Mennonites vary. (By the way, did you know there are 70 different sects of Muslims? Mennonites are not alone in enacting belief in a variety of ways.)

6. Where will humankind be in 100 years?

Who knows?! We have come from pre-modernism to modernity, and now we live in the post-modern world. And oddly enough, we have Mennonite groups who reside in all three spheres.... and modernity constantly attempts to pull people out of pre-modern thought and life, but the Old Order seem to have in part been able to resist that. They probably are not even aware that there is such a thing as "post modernity." And a large part of me says that maybe they are fortunate in that regard; though they too are fully aware that they have to at some points adapt to survive in this present world.

All I know is that "truth is stranger than it used to be!" Of course, the changing technology makes my head spin! Will we be out in space somewhere? I only hope that we spend as much energy exploring our "inner space" as we do "outer space."

If your question implies whether I think the world will still exist in 100 years, I will say "probably". But would I recognize the world if I were present then? Maybe not! I know global warming is real, though some want to deny it. As one dinosaur said to the other: "Isn't all this stuff about global cooling just a myth?!"

7. Regarding homosexuality.

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* states clearly that sexual union is to be between a man and a woman, in marriage.

HOWEVER, we know that not everyone lives happily within this definition. We know that some people are oriented to homosexuality. Some argue that they should therefore simply stifle their homosexual urges and remain celibate. Others argue that both heterosexual and homosexual people are part of God's good creation, therefore we should recognize gay covenant relationships. Some feel it is a matter of "righteousness", that homosexuality is a sin. Others focus on the matter of "justice," that gay people deserve equal treatment and human rights.

Unfortunately, seldom do "righteousness and justice kiss" as we read in Psalm 85:10. It has become a "wedge" issue for some.

I personally have been pastor to several gay people. In the midst of much that is confusing, two things have become clear to me, as a place to stand:

1. They did not CHOOSE to be gay, they DISCOVERED IT.
2. They tell me they are committed to Christ, and I believe them. After that....much conversation needs to continue.

In the Mennonite Church we grappled at great length with the issue of divorce and remarriage, (which is mentioned more often in the New Testament than homosexuality), and seem to have come to some sort of accommodation. I am bemused as to why homosexuality seems to be a different kind of debating point.

Sometimes people argue that allowing gay marriages would undermine the institution of marriage. Well.... perhaps 6-8% of people are gay, and by all reports, perhaps 2% of them would even choose to enter into a gay marriage. So.... 2% of 8% of people are going to "undermine" marriage?! I think the heterosexual community is doing a fine job at wrecking marriage by themselves! (divorce rates approaching 50%)

And of course, the institution of marriage itself is under siege too by the fact that many people, including some Mennonites, choose to cohabit "without benefit of matrimony."

8. How do we know the Bible is not just another old book?

This question invites you to take a whole seminary course to figure out just how the Bible came to us, what it means, etc. So I can't answer this in one sentence!

Let's parse your question a bit. You say the word "know." We cannot "know" matters of faith in the same sense as you "know" that 2+2=4. But then, if your boy friend or husband asks: "How do I know if you love me?" you realize there are various ways you "know" these things. And some of these ways come through the 'heart' not the 'head.'

The simplest irreducible way I can describe the Bible is to say that it is a collection of materials written by people as a witness or testimonial to the fact that they have both seen God at work in the world and experienced God at work in their lives. In other words, the Bible might be given the sub title "The Book of the Acts of God."

Another word you did NOT use in your question is the word "inspired." i.e. is the Bible inspired? Many have said it is, but "inspired" also has many layers of meaning: i) On one level, some have said that it is "God-breathed" (inspired), that every word therefore comes from the breath or mouth of God. ii) others use the word "inspired" to mean that God's Spirit moved people to write, but it was filtered through the human mind and experience. iii) others might use the word 'inspired' more like how people are "inspired" to write a poem, or music. etc.

It is NOT just another old book. But you have to figure out wherein lies its uniqueness. In what sense is it TRUTH? But in the final analysis, it is only Truth if it becomes for me a truth to live by. And maybe that is what "inspiration" must finally mean; that it would inspire me to live in a more godly and Christ-like way, as I was created to be by the Creator/Redeemer/Sustainer God portrayed in its pages.

9. *What side is God on during war?*

We Mennonites are by and large pacifists and do NOT believe war is God's best will for resolving human conflict. So we would not even wish to answer the question you pose! We would rather say that God is on the side of those who suffer, the poor, the lame, the blind.... all those whom Jesus came to heal and to whom he reached out.

In fact, the way you frame the question clearly illustrates why we as Mennonites, rooted in our Anabaptist beginnings, say that the kingdoms of this world do not wholly participate in the Kingdom of God, and indeed, often are in stark contrast to the Rule of Christ and his teachings.

I have on my shelf a series of books written by Mennonites on the topic of peace, called "The Peace Shelf" series. There are 15 books in the series, explaining our "peace position" on a variety of topics including war, jury duty, capital punishment, peace and justice, etc. etc.

WE see in many of the New Testament letters statements such as "Christ is our peace...." and we believe that is not only peace between us and God, but also peace with our fellow humans around the world. So, let me restate your question with an assertion: GOD IS ON THE SIDE OF PEACE!!

10. *Are your ministers paid?*

By far the majority of ministers in Mennonite churches in North America and Europe are paid. The Old Order and Amish ministers are not. They believe they are called to "earn their bread by the sweat of their brow" (Genesis 3), and work at daily jobs, mostly farming. They do their ministry work between their other work, and of course take Sunday off to lead worship and preach. If there is a funeral or other crisis, the pastor's neighbours will assist in chores to free him to do his ministry work. So they literally are called into ministry "from the plough to the pulpit." Without training, just whatever way they can study the Bible for themselves. So, in the more conservative Mennonite groups, pastors are unpaid nonprofessionals.

The generation just before me (I was born in 1946) in the Mennonite church as a whole tended NOT to be paid professionals, nor particularly trained for ministry. But we quickly have gone down that path so that most Mennonite pastors are both trained and paid today. I am not certain whether that is true across the rest of the world, where 53% of Mennonites live.

[YES, over 50% of Mennonites around the world live in more than 70 countries and are not white or German in origin. Africa and Indonesia, for instance, have many Mennonites.]

11. If someone were looking for the “right” religion, what should they look for? How can they identify the “right” religion, or are all religions right?

Of course, the post-modern answer is "Whatever is right for you!" Many of us have barely touched the realm of "inter-denominational" (among Christians) dialogue and understanding, let alone "inter-faith" dialogue and understanding (among the various world religions).

In the final analysis, I suspect it is going to be a combination of "what makes sense" and "what feels right" for you as you make your choice. For me, it also has to include: "Is it something I can live by?" not merely something to which I tacitly acquiesce. In other words, it has to somehow "make a difference" in my life...at least in time, and also for that life beyond time...