

The Hokkaido Confession of Faith and Mission in Japanese Context

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Introduction

This article is written in response to the critical situation we are facing in Japan, where the ongoing nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima is still far from settled, and invisible radioactive substances are destroying the beautiful creation of God. A change in our peace-oriented constitution has become much more likely under the leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his Liberal Democratic party. The party's proposed draft of a revised constitution would make the emperor the head of state, set up a national defense force, and permit the right of collective self-defense to be exercised.

According to Scripture, life is the most precious gift from God and he commanded that we should choose this gift instead of death.² It is this same life that is being threatened in a wide range of dimensions in Japan, and perhaps equally in other countries. We must think seriously about what it means to be a Christian and to follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ in today's world. The newly adopted Hokkaido Confession of Faith is a reflection of this attempt to follow Jesus today. It expresses an understanding of mission from a Japanese context, but many believe firmly that this confession will be of benefit to fellow Christians facing similar difficulties elsewhere. It is our hope that we are faithful to the good news of Jesus Christ, and the mission of God to bring about peace and justice, and, with the leading of the Holy Spirit, to combine our efforts so that we may be called children of God.

Hokkaido is in the northern part of Japan and is the second largest of four main islands in this country. Mennonite missionary work began here in 1951. There are eighteen Mennonite churches in the Japan Mennonite Christian Church Conference, with a combined membership of approximately 450. The conference has two centers for reinforcing Anabaptist–Mennonite core values,

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² Deut. 30:15–20, Ps. 72:13–14, John 1:1–5; Rom. 8:2.

namely the values of the fellowship of believers, discipleship, and the peace witness. The Peace and Mission Center provides an annual seminar on various social and missiological issues. The Mennonite Education and Research Center provides various lectures and seminars on theology, Anabaptist studies, and biblical studies. It also publishes a quarterly newsletter called *Kakehashi* (“The Bridgebuilder”), which has served the fellowship among Anabaptist denominations in Japan for more than twenty-five years.

Japan Mennonite Christian Church Conference (Hokkaido) Confession of Faith

Adopted by the 61st General Conference of the Japan Mennonite Christian Church Conference, May 18, 2013³

The Japan Mennonite Christian Church Conference is a people of God, a community of the Lord, and in the Anabaptist–Mennonite faith tradition that began in the sixteenth-century Reformation. Congregations in the conference cooperatively share in the work of evangelization. Each congregation is autonomous, independent, and self-supporting, but as disciples of Jesus Christ we hereby establish the Japan Mennonite Christian Church Conference Confession of Faith to reaffirm our shared faith today with the hope of further deepening our mutual fellowship and cooperation.

The Lord Jesus Christ is at the center of our confession of faith. The Lord preached the good news of the kingdom of God, walked the way of the cross, and through his teaching, his life, and his death, he redeemed us from sin and calls us to be disciples. The risen Lord defeated death and is at work ahead of us even today. We follow this Jesus Christ, to which the Old and New Testament give testimony, as our sole savior and sole role model for our faith and life, and we worship God the Father of Jesus Christ.

We are a branch of the worldwide body of Mennonite churches. With this in mind, we join our Mennonite brothers and sisters in confessing the “Shared Convictions” statement (adopted by the Mennonite World Conference General Council in March 2006).⁴ This expresses the faith that unites Anabaptist–Mennonites who walk in the path of the disciples in today’s world.

We are also a branch of the people of God, and separated into various churches around the world. Remembering this, we join all brothers and sisters

³ This is an official translation confirmed by the conference. Ken Johnson Shenk translated it at the request of the Mennonite Education and Research Center.

⁴ “Shared Convictions” was adopted by Mennonite World Conference General Council, Pasadena, California (USA), March 15, 2006.

in confessing the creeds of the worldwide church, starting with the Apostles' Creed.⁵

The Lord Jesus Christ will one day come to make all things new. We have been granted imperishable hope. As we wait for that day, we live, work, and strive to faithfully walk in the path of the Lord's gospel. Protect us, O Lord, and guide us.

This we believe:

1. Jesus Christ is the Word of God the Father, and is revealed by the Holy Spirit.
2. The church is a community of believers which learns from the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
3. Believers listen to the Lord Jesus Christ, serve each other, and love their neighbors.
4. Believers care for creation, build peace and justice which come from Christ, and participate in the work of the Kingdom of God.
5. Following Jesus' nonviolent way of life, we as believers do not participate in war.

Reflections on the Confession of Faith

In 2013, the Japan Mennonite Christian Church Conference adopted its first confession of faith in over sixty years of mission history. Although the Mennonite population, including several Anabaptist denominations, is not very large and is a minority within the Christian minority in this country, we are confident that the Anabaptist–Mennonite faith tradition can make an indispensable contribution to the efforts of witness and service of the entire Japanese Christian body. Particular ways in which the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition can contribute include: holding the lordship of Jesus Christ against the worldly principalities and powers, in underscoring a costly obedience to Jesus Christ our Lord; and in proclaiming peace and justice according to the good news of the kingdom of God. In this short article I will review the theological impli-

⁵ “Creeds of the worldwide church” is a term used in the Western church tradition to refer to the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. It also refers to ecumenical creeds or universal creeds. These creeds are accepted by almost all Christian denominations in the Western and Eastern church traditions. Though the Eastern Orthodox Church doesn't use the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed in its liturgy, the contents of both creeds have never been denied in its history.

cations of the confession, as well as its significance to the mission and witness of Christian churches in the Japanese setting. We can summarize the basic characteristics of the confession as follows:

1. Following Jesus Christ as the central component of the Anabaptist–Mennonite faith tradition is clearly represented in this confession. Keeping the Christian faith means obeying the Lord Jesus daily, seeking for and living in the kingdom of God and his justice, and loving God and our neighbors.
2. This basic line of faith is observed by reading the Scriptures repeatedly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which is the spirit of Jesus Christ, and listening carefully to his voice in the congregation. This assignment is not just for ministers or pastors, but is a crucial ministry for every Christian in every fellowship.
3. Our confession avoids use of doctrinal words and phrases as much as possible, rather designating several guidelines for our Christian life. Doctrine has caused disputes and brought disunity and divisions among Anabaptist–Mennonites, as well as in the entire Christian church. Our unity is not built on dogma or doctrine, but on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ and obedient life in service to him.
4. The way of nonviolence is explicitly stated in our confession, which is rarely seen in other Christian traditions. This is an essential statement for our Christian witness and obedience.

Strongly emphasizing the lordship of Jesus Christ, this confession places him at the center, and this is indicated in its second paragraph. If this lordship of Jesus Christ is disregarded, the Christian church can incur the disastrous consequences of its own unbelief. In 1967, the largest Protestant denomination in Japan, the United Church of Christ (*Kyodan*), publicized the Confession on the Responsibility During World War II.⁶ It says with deep regret:

The church, as “the light of the world” and as “the salt of the earth,” should not have aligned itself with that war effort. Love of country should, rather, have led Christians to exercise a rightful judgment, based on Christian

⁶ Protestant churches in Japan originated from the work of foreign missionaries who came to Japan in 1859. Subsequently denominations from Europe and America were transplanted to Japan, and their mission work expanded. Proposals for union arose frequently among the several denominations, partly stimulated from abroad by the ecumenical movement, but ironically this union was implemented by the Religious Organizations Law in June, 1941.

conscience, toward the course our nation pursued. However, in the name of the *Kyodan*, we issued a statement at home and abroad in which we approved of and supported that war, and encouraged prayers for victory.⁷

Since the formation of the United Church of Christ in Japan, itself deeply connected with the militaristic government and its policy of advocating war, the *Kyodan* could not bear a faithful witness for peace and justice. Before World War II, an alliance of countries centered around Japan, Germany, and Italy, forming the Axis of Powers. During this period, an historic *Kirchenkampf* (“church struggle”) was fought by the Confessing Church against government-sponsored efforts to Nazify the German Protestant church. It was Karl Barth who played a predominant role in the struggle, and his work was well read by the leading *Kyodan* theologians at that time.⁸ His series of *Church Dogmatics* were highly recommended for theological studies and lectured on in the *Kyodan* seminaries, but his notable contribution in the struggle was completely ignored as if the Barmen Declaration against the Nazi and heretic German Christian movement did not exist.⁹ These *Kyodan* theologians who admired Barth kept silent, or even aggressively supported the war that was driven by Japanese militarism and the Absolutistic Emperor System.¹⁰ Their silence and support illustrates how Christian faith and theology can experience intellectual

This law was made after Nazi Germany’s *Gleichschaltung* or “forcible-coordination” policy by the Japanese militaristic government. The law forced all the Protestant denominations to unite into one church body, the United Church of Christ in Japan (*Kyodan*) and to cooperate with the government and its policy of advocating war. The *Kyodan* had been under government control since Japan’s defeat in 1945.

7 “The Confession on the Responsibility During World War II of the United Church of Christ in Japan (*Kyodan*)” was approved by the *Kyodan* Executive Committee, February 20, 1967, and issued on Easter Sunday, March 26, 1967. This citation is from the Revised English Translation issued on January 20, 1982. Accessed April 10, 2014. <http://uccj-e.org/confession>

8 The influence of Karl Barth upon Japanese Protestant theologians began in early 1920s, particularly among those who were not satisfied with both the predominant liberal theology and a newly developing fundamentalism. For these theologians, the former seemed too optimistic about human reality and powerless to sinful reality in the world, and the latter seemed irrational and ignorant. Neo-orthodoxy, or Barth’s theology of the Word, soon became an influential alternative to both.

9 *Church Dogmatics (Kirchliche Dogmatik)* is the thirteen-volume unfinished major work of Karl Barth. It was published in stages from 1932 to 1967.

10 From the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to the defeat of Imperial Japan in 1945, Japan was under the rule of the emperor’s despotism (Absolutistic Emperor System). Under the regime, the people were deprived of civil rights and liberties;

deterioration without obedience to Jesus Christ. Christian faith can be Christian only in discipleship and on the way to the cross. The centrality of Jesus Christ is a touchstone of the Christian faith and theology. Without this notion, the mission of the church itself can easily degenerate into heresy.

This exclusive character of Christian faith, in which only Jesus Christ is worshipped and obeyed, paradoxically contains a radical inclusiveness in its nature. In Matthew 8:5–13, Jesus proposed to a Roman centurion that he would go to the Roman military camp to save his servant. The story is astonishing, mainly because of the chosen conversation partner, but also because of the place where Jesus is willing to go. The action Jesus proposes could have caused a furious response from the Jews, but Jesus doesn't seem to consider this. If we take seriously Jesus' radical inclusiveness, and become willing to heal and visit even our enemies, the church's focus will no longer remain on doctrinal disputes.

In the course of the adoption of our confession, there appeared a repeated criticism from a conservative or fundamental circle in our churches that issues of Christian doctrine should be added to the confession, such as on original sin or vicarious atonement. But it is crucially important for Christians to make clear that the ultimate norm of biblical interpretation is Jesus Christ himself, rather than doctrine. The Christian creeds and confessions are called *norma normata* (a rule that is ruled), while the Bible is called *norma normans* (the rule that rules), but we can affirm that Jesus himself is the sole *norma normans* for all Christian thinking and action. God's call to his people is to serve others in need both materially and spiritually, not to judge each other over the subjects of Christian doctrine. Our unity should be built on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ, not on doctrine.

Implications for the Japanese Context

Since the start of the Abe Administration in 2012, the political and military tensions in Northeast Asia have continued to intensify. The Japanese government seems to give priority to policy that supports building up its military power instead of seeking peace and reconciliation in this region. Additionally, the government is zealous for the constitutional amendment described above, and to resume nuclear power plant operations, despite the strong opposition of citizens.

the semi-feudal landlord system, which squeezed tenant peasants into paying heavy rents, prevailed in rural areas. The present Constitution of Japan came into effect in 1947. The constitution established the people's sovereignty, renunciation of war, fundamental human rights, the National Diet as the supreme state organ, local autonomy, and a series of other democratic and peaceful provisions that serve as pillars of democracy.

The essential ministry of the Christian church is to serve the mission of God. This is the very reason the church exists. As a people of God, we are called to be a faithful servant for God's mission. In *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, David Bosch says that "there is church because there is mission, not vice versa . . . To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love."¹¹ Bosch continues:

The primary purpose of the *missiones ecclesiae* can therefore not simply be the planting of churches or the saving of souls; rather, it has to be service to the *missio Dei*, representing God in and over against the world, pointing to God, holding up the God-child before the eyes of the world in a ceaseless celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany. In its mission, the church witnesses to the fullness of the promise of God's reign and participates in the ongoing struggle between that reign and the powers of darkness and evil.¹²

Thus the missionary task of the Christian church is not about self-extension, but fundamentally is about active participation in radical witness against principalities and powers that are embodied in various forms of evil — including in socioeconomic, political, and military dimensions.

During World War II, the Japanese Christians committed a grave mistake in obeying structural evils, which led this and neighboring countries to destruction. The only way to avoid such a mistake again is to listen to the Lord Jesus Christ, serve each other, and love our neighbors (article 3 of the Confession of Faith). We must follow him faithfully, even to the point of radical inclusiveness. Maintaining this stance, we seek the *shalom* of God, and might overcome our internal theological conflicts that cause division. Moreover, we might even serve as a catalyst, inspiring the people in Northeast Asia to mutual understanding and reconciliation.

11 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

12 Ibid., 391.