
Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective in Missional Perspective

by J. Denny Weaver

A Student's Question

Some years ago I chatted with a student at Bluffton University about the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.¹ This student and several of her friends were asking why the article on peace in the *Confession* appeared so far down in the outline—number 22 of 24 articles. To these students, this location of the article indicated its relative unimportance. If being a peace church is important and is what Mennonites are about, the student said, “We should move the article up so we can express who we are. We have had to live with the peace stance in our schools and have had to defend it more often than have some adults. This is why we *want* the article on peace near the top.” Follow-up conversations with church authorities produced no answers that satisfied these students.

The committee that had drafted the *Confession* certainly had not intended to convey a relative unimportance of the article on “Peace, Justice, and Nonresistance” through their placement of it within the whole. In fact, its placement follows a longstanding, time-honored way for Mennonites to structure their confessions of faith. However, I believe there is more to say to the student than simply reassuring her that she misunderstood the meaning of the location of the article, that “this is the way we have always done it.”

The conversation with this student stimulates reflections on the mission implications of the *Confession*. Obviously, she considered the *Confession* to be a window to the character of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA), not just in gen-

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¹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, adopted by the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church at Wichita, KS, July 1995 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995).

eral but also in its unique contributions to the wider Christian community and world. As Mennonite individuals and programs do mission—that is, portray an attractive gospel and invite people to faith and to the church—the *Confession* is one place to discover what one is being invited to and why it is worth joining. Indeed, on MC USA’s website, under the link “What We Believe,” there is a link to the *Confession*, implying that the document has application to mission; to seekers it is one picture of who Mennonites are. The *Confession* also speaks to current members, as indicated by the student’s question about the peace article being placed so far down on the list of issues of concern to MC USA.

Contemplating the implication from the student’s query reveals that a confession faces two audiences:

1. Internal audience: Does the *Confession* present a picture of the church we want to be, a church that lives up to the title of Peace Church? Does it speak to members such as the student? To those who are disillusioned with the church’s continued fragmentation?
2. External audience: Does the *Confession* communicate a distinct identity for Mennonites among other Christian denominations? After all, if Mennonites do not have a distinct identity, why bother to continue existing as a denomination? What does the *Confession* communicate to curious “nones,” who consider themselves religious or spiritual but find traditional denominations irrelevant? And what does the *Confession* communicate in a time of continual war and increased visibility of racism in our society?

In summary, the missional effect of the *Confession* would include not only the personal impressions it makes on individuals such as my students but also the cultural impact it has for groups outside the Mennonite churches. The following analysis of the *Confession* proceeds with these missional dimensions in mind.

Quick Answer

For me, it was easy to understand why the article on peace was so far down in the outline. That placement followed from the decision described in the introduction about the sets of articles into which the *Confession* is divided. The eight articles in the first set “deal with themes common to the faith of the wider Christian church.”² The second set describes Mennonite “practices,” and the third concerns “discipleship.” The fourth and final set, consisting of one article, treats the fulfillment of all things in the “Reign of God.” Since the wider Christian church is not pacifist and does not generally forbid the exercise of

² *Confession of Faith*, 8–9.

government-sanctioned violence by Christians, by definition the decision to start with agreements common to the wider church relegated peace and non-violence to a position in the third set on “discipleship.” In a case like this when the smaller partner in a conversation considers it most important to emphasize areas of agreement with the larger or dominant party, the distinct elements that give the smaller group its identity are inevitably relegated to the periphery of the discussion.

However, there’s more to the picture than this. For one thing, the placement of articles in the *Confession* generally follows a long and time-honored way of structuring Mennonite confessions. But more germane for contemporary purposes is the reality that significant developments in theologizing by Mennonites in North America have occurred in the decades since the conception and writing of the *Confession*. In fact, these developments are new in the longer history of doing theology by Mennonites. We now inhabit a different theological world. Awareness of these developments puts the *Confession* in a different light and indicates the way that a future confession could best serve the missional interests of Mennonite Church USA as a peace church.

The following sections deal both with the historical tradition of Mennonite theologizing and with new developments.

The Historical Context in which the Confession Emerged

Only very recently has the question of where to start a confession become debatable. The impact of starting with general Christian statements is much clearer today than when the *Confession* was adopted in 1995. For one thing, the outline of the *Confession* followed a pattern that had characterized Mennonite theological writing since at least the seventeenth century. Already in 1527, Swiss Anabaptists adopted the Schleithem Articles, edited by Michael Sattler, which focused on issues that characterized Anabaptists.³ On the Mennonite Church side of the negotiations that produced the *Confession*, the confessional tradition began with the Dordrecht Confession, produced in 1632 in an effort to bring unity among Dutch Mennonites. This Mennonite Church tradition also produced a statement of “Christian Fundamentals” in 1921 and the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*⁴ of 1963. On the side of the General Conference Mennonite Church, an important early confession was the Ris confession of “Mennonite Articles of Faith” in 1766, also by Dutch Mennonites. Although the General Conference avoided adopting an official confession, they did issue “Articles of

³ John H[oward] Yoder, trans. and ed., *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, Classics of the Radical Reformation, vol. 1 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1973).

⁴ *Mennonite Confession of Faith*, Adopted by Mennonite General Conference, August 22, 1963 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1963).

Faith” in 1933 and a “Statement of Faith” in 1941 that was adopted by their seminary. The introduction to the *Confession* places itself in these confessional traditions.

These summaries of faith, although differing in their details, all begin with a statement about God followed by some combination of statements about Jesus, sin and redemption, and the Spirit before moving to discussions of the church, ordinances, and ethical issues such as rejection of violence. They conclude with final judgment and last things. In Dordrecht, “Defense by Force” is number 14 of 18 articles; in the very lengthy Ris confession, “Of Revenge and War” is number 29 of 36 articles. The *Mennonite Confession of Faith* lists “Love and Nonresistance” as article 18 of 20.⁵

This same general organization characterized Mennonite theological writing for much of the twentieth century. Mennonite writers started their theological statements with lists of things held in common with the wider Christian church and followed with lists of distinct beliefs of Mennonites. In fact, this was the assumed, proper way for Mennonite theology to proceed. On the fundamentalist and conservative and evangelical side of the Mennonite theological spectrum, writers made clear lists of beliefs accepted by all Christians and then items emphasized by Mennonites. Nonresistance or rejection of the sword, of course, appeared in the second category. This approach appears, for example, in a historical sequence of writings of fundamentalists John Horsch and Daniel Kauffman, traditional Mennonites Harold S. Bender and John C. Wenger, and evangelical Ronald Sider. On the progressive or liberal side of the Mennonite spectrum, the divide is less prominent between general statements and Mennonite beliefs, but the pattern is visible in a sequence that includes Cornelius H. Wedel, J. E. Hartzler, and Edmund G. Kaufman.⁶

In this light, the *Confession’s* approach is not remarkable. In fact, it followed what was assumed to be a tried-and-true approach of accepting a foundation from the wider Christian tradition as an unquestioned given, and then adding particular or distinct Mennonite issues to that assumed foundational beginning point.

Not surprisingly, these efforts at theological summary—whether in the form of confessions or in other writing—assumed that a general theological

5 For the text of all these statements, along with discussion of their original contexts, see Howard John Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America: An Introduction*, Text-Reader Series, no. 2 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985).

6 For a description of how these writers developed their lists, see J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium*, foreword by Glen Stassen, The C. Henry Smith Series, vol. 2 (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., copublished with Herald, 2000), 50–65.

foundation or beginning point existed outside of Mennonites. After all, while Mennonites as a distinct tradition had existed for a bit more than four centuries, the Christian tradition stretched back nearly two millennia. This beginning point beyond Mennonites comprised what the *Confession* called the “historic creeds of the early Christian church.” They were “assumed as foundational for Mennonite confessions from the beginning, [and] are basic to this confession as well.”⁷

The content of these early-church confessional statements concerned primarily Christology and the relation of Jesus to God. Thus, the Apostles’ Creed notes conception by the Holy Spirit and Virgin Birth and then jumps to suffering and crucifixion, burial and descent into hell, and resurrection and sitting at right hand of God. The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) declared Jesus to be “one in being” or “one in essence” with the Father, which is accepted as a statement of the deity of Jesus. The Council of Constantinople (381 CE) repeated and reaffirmed this language. Asserting the deity of Jesus then brought to the fore the question of Jesus’s earthly form and how he related to humanity. In 451 CE, the Council of Chalcedon addressed that question with the assertion that Jesus was one undivided person who was “fully human and fully divine.” The final addition to this idea complex came from the three Cappadocian Fathers, who suggested the term “person” for each of Father, Son, and Spirit, and thus the formula “one God in three Persons” to identify a triune God with distinguishable Persons.

All these Mennonite confessions and writings assumed an orientation within these historic statements. At the same time, they expressed awareness that this creedal language from the fourth and fifth centuries differed from biblical language. They thus exercised varying degrees of departure from creedal terminology and a preference for biblical expression, with American Fundamentalists the most willing to use creedal terminology.⁸ What was common in all these instances? Each confession or summary assumed that Mennonite theology should begin with—perhaps make foundational—doctrines that came from some entity beyond Mennonites in the wider Christian tradition. More on these efforts later. The *Confession* clearly follows this tradition of Mennonite faith summaries.

For many Christians, these formulas and statements of “one in being with God,” “fully human and fully divine,” and “one God in three Persons” have been removed from their historical context and raised to the level of unquestioned givens or transcendent truth. For theologians, these formulas have functioned in one form or another as the assumed correct place from which all the-

⁷ *Confession of Faith*, 7.

⁸ These variations are apparent in the texts of the confessions, which are collected in Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God*.

ology takes its cues. In this way, they constitute a standard theology, or, perhaps better stated, a standard starting point or framework for theological reflection.⁹ To the extent this standard framework is accepted as an unquestioned given, deviations and departures from it would be problematic. Innovations in theology would be judged on the extent to which they agreed with this standard framework.

The *Confession* reflects the state of Mennonite theologizing as described thus far. Although it was formally adopted in 1995, it was already being talked about in 1984.¹⁰ Prior to those decades, the approach of starting with shared or borrowed convictions from the standard framework was assumed. As previously noted, the *Confession* also followed that standard approach for an outline of Mennonite theologizing. The Mennonite dimension followed. Like previous statements, it used biblical language as well as some distinctly Mennonite emphases in the early articles—for instance, the fact that Jesus “loved his enemies and did not resist them with violence” is called “an example to follow.” Language of Trinity, essence, substance, person, human nature, and divine nature appears in the commentaries.¹¹ The intent to provide a Mennonite cast to the standard program is also apparent in the subtitle “in a Mennonite Perspective.”

In 1984, a debate about whether Mennonites might have an alternative to the standard framework for summarizing their faith was barely an embryo of what would later develop. For example, in 1983 (then) Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS) organized what was, to my knowledge, the first Mennonite theology conference with “systematic theology” as a theme.¹² The

⁹ Some traditions will prefer to call this standard program “orthodoxy.” But consider the difference between calling it a “standard” beginning point versus an “orthodox” beginning point. When it is “standard,” one recognizes its origin in a historical context, and in other contexts one might envision alternative kinds of statements. When it is “orthodox,” the formulas have been elevated above historical contingency, and one has entered the realm of unquestioned givens and transcendent truth verses error. One does not envision truthful alternatives to orthodoxy.

An additional element of the standard program is some version of satisfaction atonement, which received its seminal form from Anselm of Canterbury’s *Cur Deus Homo* (1098).

¹⁰ Marlin E. Miller, “Mennonites: A Confessional Christian People?,” in *Mennonite World Handbook: Mennonites in Global Witness*, eds. Diether Götz Lichdi and Loretta Kreider (Carol Stream, IL: Mennonite World Conference, 1990), 172.

¹¹ *Confession of Faith*, 10–15, quote 13.

¹² The published version of papers from the consultation is Willard Swartley, ed., *Explorations of Systematic Theology from Mennonite Perspectives*, Occasional Papers, no. 7 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984). Authors of papers include Marlin Jeschke, J. Denny Weaver, Thomas Finger, A. James Reimer, and Howard John Loewen.

participants were hardly representative of the diversity of Mennonite faith and theological reflection: all presenters were men; there were fewer than twenty in attendance; and, as I recall, all attendees also were men. Thus, when discussion began about a confession that both Mennonite Church and General Conference Church could agree on, the diversity of Mennonite ideas and the later emergence of distinct approaches or schools of thought for Mennonite theologizing were not yet visible.

The *Confession* was conceived in a time of theological tension. In 1984 pastors from both Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, who were concerned about what they considered liberal biblical scholarship in Mennonite colleges and at AMBS, organized a series of meetings at Smoketown, Pennsylvania. In response, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church set up wide-ranging sessions at Laurelville Mennonite Church Camp in Pennsylvania and at Camp Lake, Wisconsin, to process these concerns. In those conversations, a real but unofficial dimension was a sociological need to reassure people who held conservative views that they were being heard. Although the pressure was unofficial, this concern to assuage conservatives had an impact on the composition of the drafting committee and the writing of the *Confession*, which was to serve as a summary of shared faith within the two to-be-merged Mennonite denominations, one more conservative than the other.

A polity difference also impacted the context from which the *Confession* emerged: while the General Conference identified a center toward which people moved but without strict boundaries, the Mennonite Church tended to define clear borders. The General Conference constituency was thus worried that a confession might be used to define borders and exclude. To meet this concern, as a part of securing widespread acceptance of the final product, promises and assurances were given that the confession would not be used to exclude. However, when the confession was finished and it became a description of the new church, it also indicated what was outside the new church. Thus, inevitably, in spite of the promises about not using the *Confession* to exclude, some congregations and conferences did appeal to the *Confession* as the basis of excluding people who were LGBTQ.¹³

These authors preview discussions in coming decades about the proper approach to a theology for Mennonites.

13 Gerald J. Mast, "Pink Menno's Pauline Rhetoric of Reconciliation," *Pink Menno*, August 2, 2013, <http://www.pinkmenno.org/2013/08/pink-mennos-pauline-rhetoric-of-reconciliation/>.

Theological Developments Since 1983

Schools of Thought

In 1983 and 1984 when the *Confession* was first initiated, discussions and debates were in their infancy about the proper approach to theology for Mennonites. Beyond questions about agreement with the standard framework, the idea of different, or even competing, approaches and methodologies was just emerging as a new debate in Mennonite theologizing. This is no longer the case. In the nearly four decades since that first conference on systematic theology, a plethora of publications have appeared debating the proper character or methodology for an identifiably Mennonite theology or summary of faith written specifically for Mennonites.

Within that array of publications, clear orientations or approaches are visible, coalescing into what could perhaps be called schools of thought or general approaches to Mennonite theologizing. Here is my brief, stylized characterization of these schools of thought, with focus on the primary contributors and publications. Note that even the attempt to identify and describe these schools of thought is already to take up a position in the debate about a theology for Mennonites. My own location in these descriptions appears here as well as in the final section of the essay, where I make a suggestion for a future confession of faith.

1. The Standard Framework

One cluster of approaches to a theology for Mennonites works from within what I have identified as the standard framework. Several versions are identifiable. One version builds explicitly on the foundation of the christological formulas of Nicaea and Chalcedon and the Trinitarian formula of the three Chalcedonian Fathers. Practitioners of this methodology argue that these terms, while not biblical, express biblical concepts and are thus appropriate for contemporary Mennonite use. A. James Reimer, a participant in that first conference on systematic theology in 1983, emerged as the prominent advocate of Nicene Christology and Trinitarian doctrine as the bedrock of Mennonite theologizing.¹⁴ Many of his articles engaged in conversation with Mennonites of other perspectives, including some of my writing, and were later gathered into his seminal book, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*.

Although Darrin W. Snyder Belousek's work focused on classic atonement imagery more than Christology, he is another more recent strong proponent of

¹⁴ For example, see Reimer's essay "Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology," in A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, copublished with Herald, 2001), 247–71, as well as essays throughout this volume.

building theology for Mennonites on a classical foundation of Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology and Trinitarian doctrine.¹⁵

In terms of linking Mennonite theology to an assumed standard theology outside of or beyond the Mennonite tradition, the view of Ronald Sider runs parallel to that of Reimer and Belousek. However, rather than building on Nicaea and Chalcedon, Sider links Anabaptist and Mennonite theology to an evangelical version of the standard framework. In his view, if Mennonites were consistently biblical they would be evangelicals in theology, and if evangelicals were consistently biblical they would be Anabaptists in ethics.¹⁶ As stated in its introduction, the *Confession* in general follows this outlook of beginning with the standard framework and then supplementing it with Mennonite emphases.

Thomas Finger also participated in the 1983 gathering at AMBS. His methodology offers a variation on working within the standard framework. Finger generally accepts the terminology of the standard approach but then redefines that terminology using concepts taken from various Anabaptist writers. He understands this approach as satisfying Mennonite emphases while simultaneously embracing the standard outlook.¹⁷ The *Confession* also displays elements of this methodology, such as when it inserts a comment in the article on Jesus Christ that his nonresistance is an example to follow.

2. From the Ground Up

In contrast to starting with some version of an assumed standard theology, another cluster of approaches to theology for Mennonites begins from the ground up, so to speak. Currently, two versions fit within this description. The most radical version assumes a contemporary, scientific and historical worldview and uses contemporary tools and criteria that make sense in the modern world. Within this modern frame of reference, the author then constructs an understanding of God and of Jesus Christ at home in the modern world, while preserving distinct Mennonite principles such as nonviolence, the communal nature of the church, and a commitment to social justice. Practitioners of this methodology are free to observe ways in which the received, standard theolog-

15 Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012).

16 See Sider's argument in Ronald J. Sider, "Evangelicalism and the Mennonite Tradition," in *Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, ed. C. Norman Kraus (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1979), 159–68.

17 For his specific Anabaptist theology, see Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004). My extended critique is J. Denny Weaver, "Parsing Anabaptist Theology: A Review Essay of Thomas N. Finger's *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*," *Direction* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 241–63.

ical tradition is outdated and needs to be revised or abandoned in accord with more modern, contemporary sensibilities. This characterization fits the writings of Gordon Kaufman, who described God as “serendipitous creativity.”¹⁸ For Kaufman, theology is always in process as the world around it changes.

The second so-called ground-up approach begins with and is shaped by focus and reflection on the specific narrative of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. A particular feature of this approach is the interpretative centrality of Jesus’s rejection of the sword as an integral, defining element of theological summarizing. All versions of this approach clearly use the biblical narrative, but some versions of this theology would adhere closely to the biblical text as a whole, while others would employ biblical criticism to critique biblical violence and to abandon aspects of the received tradition, such as standard atonement theories. Theologians in this category would see the New Testament narrative of Jesus as setting a direction or orientation, with the modern writer then extending the narrative of Jesus and its meaning using contemporary images. Since the Gospel narratives differ among themselves on details of Jesus’s life, and since contexts change, writers in this category also consider theology to be contextual and always to some extent in process of development. The most visible current writer in this category is J. Denny Weaver, a third writer from the gathering in 1983.¹⁹ The works of Ted Grimsrud also belong here.²⁰ While the theology of C. Norman Kraus reflected a neo-orthodox outlook, his intent to use the narrative of Jesus also places him in this category.²¹

Since all Christian traditions confess Jesus, when these ground-up theologians identify the narrative of Jesus as the proper beginning point for theo-

18 Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1993); Gordon D. Kaufman, *Jesus and Creativity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

19 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed., greatly rev. and expanded (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011); J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013); J. Denny Weaver, *God without Violence: Following a Nonviolent God in a Violent World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016). A revised version of *God without Violence* with a new subtitle of “A Theology of the God Revealed in Jesus” is forthcoming in 2020. This revision makes explicit the methodology of developing theology as an extension of the narrative of Jesus.

20 Ted Grimsrud, *God’s Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Bible’s Main Themes* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2000); Ted Grimsrud, *Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007); Ted Grimsrud, *Theology As If Jesus Matters: An Introduction to Christianity’s Main Convictions* (Telford, PA: Cascadia; copublished by Herald, 2009).

21 C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple’s Perspective*, rev. ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990); C. Norman Kraus, *God Our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1991).

gizing, they can be said to propose theology for all Christians. But the reference point of a Jesus who rejected the sword is a Mennonite interpretative perspective, and these theologians hope that Mennonites will recognize it as speaking for them as well—thus, theology for Mennonites.

Given the development of identifiable schools of thought in Mennonite theologizing since the *Confession* was first conceived, we should not treat Mennonite theology as one undifferentiated entity. We should also, therefore, not presume that the *Confession* reflects *the one* Mennonite perspective on theology. Of the approaches sketched here, the first cluster depends primarily on agreement with some version of Christendom's standard theology, while the latter group reflects Mennonite issues—most particularly, a commitment to nonviolence—in a more integral way. In any case, seeing these options today makes clear that the *Confession* does not reflect a universal consensus of theology or even of Mennonite theology. It reflects several specific choices of methodology and interpretation—namely, to orient theology for Mennonites around an outline taken from the wider Christian tradition, with an intent to display that agreement. None of these choices or options were clearly articulated when the *Confession* was conceived.

As noted above, when considered from a universal perspective, a central problem with methodologies in the first category, and any variants and revision thereof, is that they appear to relegate peace and nonviolence to a secondary position. This location is a problem if MC USA takes seriously its identity as a peace church. But not all Mennonites would agree that this is problematic. Letters-to-the-editor in church publications have apologized for making an idol of the peace stance, or expressed fears that focus on peace will hinder church planting or evangelism. Such comments imply that rejection of violence is not—or ought not to be—intrinsic to the story of Jesus Christ.²² The *Confession* comes close to this seeming marginalization, not merely because it numbers the article on peace as the 22nd of 24 articles but also because its methodology of focusing its first section on agreements with the wider Christian church renders the rejection of violence barely visible in its discussion of Jesus Christ.

The importance of a clear and distinct peace witness was recently brought home to me in the worship service at Madison Mennonite church. One Sunday we had a guest preacher, the long-time pastor of the United Church of Christ (UCC) congregation from which our Mennonite congregation rents space. This minister singled out our identity as a peace church; do not take it for granted, he said. Cherish and nourish this peace stance. It is a unique gift to the Christian church, not found elsewhere, and we all need it.

22 Other Mennonite writers have argued that posing alternatives to the classic creedal formulas, as the “ground up” authors suggest, will harm ecumenical relations between Mennonites and other denominations.

The *Confession* clearly has missional implications for MC USA as a peace church. But there is more to say. In fact, I suggest that a development in the contemporary context has greater importance than these observations about the seeming marginalization of nonviolence when the focus is agreement with the standard framework. The next section below points beyond methodology to issues within the language itself of the material taken from the wider Christian tradition.

Postmodernity and (Other) Contextual Theologies

Another development since the early formation of the *Confession* is the emergence of what philosophers called “postmodernity.”²³ While it was previously assumed possible to identify a universally recognized foundation as the beginning of all truth, within the condition called postmodernity it is now recognized that every claimed universal foundation still represents a particular standpoint. That is to say, every theology and theological formula emerges from and reflects a particular context, agenda, and worldview. For example, it is clearer now than it was some decades ago that the standard creeds of the “wider Christian church”—what the introduction in the *Confession* calls the “historic creeds of the early Christian church”—emerged from and reflect a particular historical context. They are, in fact, human constructs using available concepts expressed in local languages and indicating contextual decisions particular to that historical time and cultural place. Their time and place differ from that of the New Testament. As previously noted, the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon used the terms “essence” or “substance” or “nature” to characterize Jesus. Various forms of the language of “threeness” emerged, and the three Cappadocian Fathers used “Person” to say what there were three of in God. Between the New Testament and the use of these terms in the fourth and fifth centuries, there was an obvious shift of category from narrative to these ontological or being categories to identify Jesus Christ and his relationship to God.

To be sure, except for using “triune” to describe God, the text of the *Confession* does not use this creedal language. A note in the commentary simply states: “This confession assumes basic agreement with traditional confessions of faith, though it remains with biblical terminology for the most part.”²⁴ That said, although the *Confession* does not make use of the creedal language, contemporary peace church Christians should acknowledge what is at stake—or at least implied—by explicitly aligning (as in the commentary) with the historic creeds.

23 For brief descriptions of the condition called “postmodernity,” see Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology*, 17–30; or essays throughout Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast, eds., *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, foreword by J. Denny Weaver, The C. Henry Smith Series, vol. 1 (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., copublished with Herald, 2000).

24 *Confession of Faith*, 12–13, quote 13.

In particular, this acknowledgment should begin with the characteristics of the church and the social circumstances in which the post-New Testament language emerged. These circumstances included Emperor Constantine's edict that made Christianity a legal religion and—perhaps more importantly—the church accepting imperial intervention in church affairs. Church officials on both sides of theological disputes appealed to the emperor for support and opposed such support when it favored the other side.²⁵ In these ways, the church had made peace with the emperor's sword, in contrast to the nonviolent way of Jesus narrated in the New Testament.

This at least implicit acquiescence to violence takes on even greater importance when theological formulations then add that Jesus is “one substance with the Father” (Nicaea) and that Jesus is “truly God and truly human” (Chalcedon). When these formulations—whatever their independent merit—were put forward as the foundation of belief in Jesus but separated from the nonviolent life and teaching of Jesus, it became possible for Christians to profess Jesus Christ while carrying the sword (doing violence) for the emperor (an alternative allegiance). Such would not have been the case if Jesus were still identified by focusing on his story. That narrative explicitly includes his rejection of the sword, showing that nonviolent service, in loyalty to God alone, is intrinsic to who he was.²⁶

From a missional perspective—that is, a perspective that looks outside the Mennonite fold—it is important to add that those concerned about the violence of the sword are not the only Christians to point to problems with the generic categories of the classic formulas. Parallel to the observation that these formulas accommodated the sword, James H. Cone, the primary founder of the Black Theology movement, wrote that these categories accommodated racism and slavery and the corresponding violence required. He also pointed to absence of the narrative of Jesus as the cause.

Most recently, writings of Willie James Jennings and particularly J. Kameron Carter have continued the line of James Cone in raising questions about the classic creedal formulas. They identify the early church fathers' separation of

25 For one extended example, see Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

26 The observation that the creedal categories can accommodate the sword (and later, racism) is not limited to peace church writers. In a book in which Joerg Rieger hoped to rehabilitate the standard theology for ethics, he wrote that the life of Jesus needs to be included in the Jesus that Nicaea called one in being with the Father. “It is hardly an accident that the life of Christ is not mentioned in the creeds. . . . The challenge to empire posed by the life of Christ would have just been too great.” Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 96.

Jesus from his Jewishness and the covenant with Abraham as the beginning of the accommodation of racism and the development of the idea of white supremacy within Western Christendom. Again, that separation is clear in the classic formulas that identify Jesus only in terms of “deity” in general and “humanity” in general, not the God of Abraham and Sarah, and the Jewish community of faith within humanity.

With Jesus separated from his Jewishness and the covenant with Israel, European theologians could then develop a supposed universal Jesus, who was apparently elevated above race but actually represented humanity of European ancestry both symbolically and conceptually. In short, they could picture Jesus in their own image, with European whiteness becoming the essence and the norm of what it meant to be human,²⁷ and people of color along with their communities and governments were treated as varying degrees of lesser or inferior. In the same way, with God’s covenant separated from the people and history of Israel, Europeans could appropriate the ideas of being God’s people and chosenness for their own agenda.

This race-based, theological outlook was well established by 1493, when a papal bull proclaimed the Doctrine of Discovery. In this doctrine, any land not governed by Christian rulers could be “discovered.” That is, it could be claimed, with local governments overthrown and European rule established, resources exploited, and indigenous people dominated, expelled, or killed. Appeal to this race-based doctrine was used to justify the slave trade and the entire edifice of European colonial domination and exploitation of peoples of color around the world. This exploitation included all European claims to the Americas, as well as the foundation of manifest destiny and westward expansion in the United States. For those who know this history, what kind of missional message does the *Confession* communicate when it leads with this theology from the wider church that did not deal with either the sword or race and ethnicity?

And one more, very contemporary, point: with the election in 2016 of a president who has given permission for the racism and belief in white supremacy that lies under the surface of United States society to assert itself more publicly, it suddenly becomes obvious that the *Confession* says nothing about race or racism. In our current context, statements on racism or lack thereof in the church’s defining document surely have implications for mission.

The previous section observed that starting with agreement with the wider Christian church tends to push distinct Mennonite issues to the periphery. This

²⁷ For these developments in black theology, see James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010).

section adds that the implications of the condition of postmodernity point to issues within the classic language itself taken from the historic or classic creeds. This leaves us with a key question: What is authoritative for MC USA—the decisions about terminology made by men in the fourth and fifth centuries, restatements of this terminology in biblical terms, modern restatements taken from a creed written in the “wider Christian church,” or the Jesus Christ identified in the biblical narrative and the implications and learnings we can derive from that narrative?

Sixteenth-Century Anabaptist Theology

A third development since the early 1980s concerns potential changes in the way that sixteenth-century Anabaptist theology is understood. The *Confession*'s introduction called the historic creeds “foundational for Mennonite confessions from the beginning.”²⁸ Early Anabaptists did, in fact, refer to the historic creeds and formulas. Thus, until rather recently, it was assumed that Anabaptists did little, if any, original theologizing but rather carried over the classic creedal statements from the church they had rejected. In earlier generations, John Horsch,²⁹ Harold S. Bender,³⁰ Cornelius Krahn,³¹ and John C. Wenger³² all asserted, with varying levels of intensity, that sixteenth-century Anabaptists accepted the historic creeds of Christendom. More recently, historians Walter Klaassen and C. Arnold Snyder assert that Anabaptists' use of the historic creeds demonstrates their clear orientation in historically orthodox and Trinitarian doctrine. The major exception is the celestial flesh Christology of Menno Simons and other Dutch Anabaptists.³³

Awareness of postmodernity's outlook brings a new question to the interpretation of sixteenth-century Anabaptist theologizing. With postmodernity's

²⁸ *Confession of Faith*, 7.

²⁹ John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1942), 379–80.

³⁰ Harold S. Bender, “Walking in the Resurrection?: The Anabaptist Doctrine of Regeneration and Discipleship,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35, no. 2 (April 1961): 102.

³¹ Cornelius Krahn, “Prolegomena to an Anabaptist Theology,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24, no. 1 (January 1950): 6.

³² John C[hristian] Wenger, *Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine*, 4th printing, rev. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1959), 145–46.

³³ Walter Klaassen, “Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism: A Vision Valid for the Twentieth Century?,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 245–46; C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1995), 84; C. Arnold Snyder, “Beyond Polygenesis: Recovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology,” in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin, Text Reader Series (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 11.

emphasis on particular perspectives in mind, one can ask whether the location of Anabaptists in an ecclesiological trajectory outside of the official church of the masses might be reflected in their theologizing. Even though they rejected the inherited ecclesiology of the mass church, did these Anabaptists simply accept that church's theology? Or might their new ecclesiological stance have stimulated new thinking in theology as well? When examined with these questions in mind, their theological statements clearly were not merely repetitions of the inherited theology. Thus, we find that the early Anabaptists added missing elements to the received formulas, sometimes altering them greatly, which suggests a rather adaptive posture toward the received formulas. In other instances, there were efforts to develop new formulas that reflected their new church, which focused on the story of Jesus, an emphasis that made rejection of the sword an integral component of their church. Writings of Pilgram Marpeck, Menno Simons, and Peter Riedeman in the *Ausbund* and in the *Martyrs Mirror*, among others, can be cited in this regard.³⁴

With regard to violence and peace, although the original Anabaptist movements were not uniform, and sword-bearers were certainly a part of the story, rejection of the sword was a central issue for most of Anabaptism in a way that was not true for other reforming movements. Indeed, the Anabaptism that endured became identified as a nonviolent movement and is a forerunner of today's peace church. These observations suggest that early Anabaptist ventures into theology that went beyond the historic creeds can serve as a precedent for the contemporary Mennonite Church USA.

An Earlier Confession

Another element of change over time appears when the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* is compared with the *Mennonite Confession of Faith* that was adopted in 1963 by the Mennonite Church, one of the two conferences that joined to form Mennonite Church USA.³⁵ Among a number of differences, a

³⁴ For discussions, see comments throughout Gerald Biesecker-Mast, *Separation and the Sword in Anabaptist Persuasion: Radical Confessional Rhetoric from Schleithheim to Dordrecht*, The C. Henry Smith Series, vol. 6 (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2006); Gerald J. Mast, "Jesus' Flesh and the Faithful Church in the Theological Rhetoric of Menno Simons," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia; Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2008), 173–90; and the chapters on the *Ausbund*, Pilgram Marpeck, and Menno Simons, and the appendix on the Trinity in *Martyrs Mirror* in J. Denny Weaver and Gerald J. Mast, *Nonviolent Word: Anabaptism, the Bible, and the Grain of the Universe* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020).

³⁵ J. C. Wenger is thought to be the primary author of this confession. See "Mennonite Confession of Faith, 1963," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online,

reader immediately notices the male language of the earlier document. It uses “man” to refer to all people and calls the church a “brotherhood.” Along with stating that “to the Lord men and women are equal,” the 1963 statement also describes an “order of creation” in which men and woman are fitted for “differing functions”—“man” has the primary leadership role, and “the woman is especially fitted for nurture and service.” The prayer covering or “veiling” is prescribed for women as one of the ordinances of the church, and both this veiling and long, uncut hair are mentioned as “symbols” of women’s nurturing and service role.

This male language, the identification of distinct gender roles, and the practice of the head veiling and uncut hair for women have all disappeared with the writing of the 1995 *Confession*. A significant parallel remains, however; following the standard framework, the 1963 statement locates the article on “Love and Nonresistance” near the end—number 18 of 20 articles.

Awareness of the disappearance of male language, the abandonment of the veiling practice that was once considered mandatory, and the developments in the period since the 1995 confession was first conceived makes clear that the way Mennonites (and any Christian tradition, for that matter) understand the Bible and construct theology does change over time. Any confession or theological summary is a snapshot of beliefs at a moment in time. This awareness and knowledge of change over time is one reason that statements from nearly four decades ago should not be treated as absolutes with the power to expel those who have questions about an individual issue—such as inclusion of people who are LGBTQ—particularly since at the time the *Confession* was adopted, many promises were made that it would not be used to exclude anyone.

A Suggestion

A previous section in this article indicated that the new ecclesiological stance in which early Anabaptists positioned themselves also opened the way to theological approaches that did not simply follow the inherited standard framework. Mennonites today are heirs to that ecclesiastical tradition. I suggest that Mennonites can and should develop theology that reflects that particular historical tradition and way of understanding Jesus. It differed from the mass church of Christendom in the sixteenth century, and as the UCC pastor said who spoke to Madison Mennonite, this is a distinct heritage today, and we should nurture and continue to develop it.

I hope that Mennonites would not tell the writers of black theology that they should stop doing theology that reflected first of all their experience of suf-

fering from slavery and racism, and to focus instead on fitting into the inherited standard (white) theology. I also hope that Mennonites would not tell women to shift away from feminist theology and concerns about abuse and instead to focus more on the standard (patriarchal) framework. By the same token, I suggest that Mennonite theologians—particularly white males who do not experience the discrimination that African Americans do in one way and women in another—should recall their location in the historical Anabaptist, peace church tradition and its challenge to the mass church of Christendom. Embracing and standing in that tradition can give Mennonite theologians, particularly white males, a view of the problems with violence, racism, and patriarchy in the inherited theology parallel to the concerns of women and African Americans.

A way to understand the particular perspective a theology might have is to ask what it is specific to. My suggestion is that a theology for the peace church should be specific to the work and witness of the Jesus who rejected the sword. Generally speaking, Christian theology from a Mennonite perspective should be understood first of all as thoughts and words, images and ideas that are used to draw meaning from the story of Jesus as narrated in the New Testament. In other words, rather than an effort to find agreement with the standard views of the wider Christian church, the first question for Mennonite theologizing and a Mennonite confession of faith should be on who Jesus is, as he is identified through the telling of his story in the New Testament. More specifically, theology for Mennonites, as the reflection of the peace church, should make central and prominent the peace-making and nonviolent practice and teachings of Jesus. Following this narrative focus, the confession would then show how various beliefs, themes, ethical commitments, and other aspects of our faith reflect or are drawn from the story of Jesus.

To be sure, such a theology for Mennonites would discuss the character of God, the way that we should understand Jesus and his relationship to God, and much more—points that are also found in the standard program. There would be possible intersections and overlap with these points, but finding agreements with them should not be our first concern. Focusing on agreement with other Christian faith traditions has the effect of decentering our own peace witness and its focus on the peace practice of Jesus narrated in the New Testament.

If this procedure of starting with the story of Jesus were followed, an article on God would emphasize that what is (or can be) known about God throughout the scriptures would be discovered through the interpretive lens of the peace story of Jesus. For example, it would thus be clear, from this perspective, that the God made visible in the story of Jesus could not be a God who sanctioned violence and that the power of the reign of God does not come through violence. Likewise, it would be clear that serving the God of this story would mean living in the story of Jesus as the basis for ethics. Thus, in a society with a military-based economy and a status of perpetual war, there would be emphasis

on Jesus's rejection of violence, including stories such as healing on the Sabbath that display active nonviolence witness against injustice.

Similarly, in a social context in which the presidency of Donald Trump has given permission for the racist underbelly of American society to show itself, a Mennonite theological summary should point to Jesus's dealing with Samaritans and non-Jews to emphasize the church's stance of anti-racism and its welcome to people of color whether born in the United States or recent immigrants. In a time of heightened awareness of the objectification of and abuse of women, a summary of faith from a Mennonite perspective should emphasize the ways in which Jesus lifted up the status of women. In a world in which the reckless consumption of fossil fuels threatens life on the planet, a Mennonite faith summary centered on Jesus should emphasize the goodness of creation and the divine charge for human beings to care for it. In a society focused on consumerism and the search for happiness through accumulation of money and possessions, a Mennonite narrative of Jesus should point to his comments on wealth or the story of Zacchaeus as an example of restorative justice.

Building on this ethical centrality of the peace practice of Jesus displayed in the New Testament narrative, an article on the church would then emphasize that the church consists of the structures and the people that God and the Holy Spirit fashion together into the earthly witness to the continuing presence in the world of the nonviolent, peace-making Jesus Christ. An article on salvation would point to how God draws people together and shapes them into the continuing presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Further articles on the meaning of salvation would explain that it is about the good news that in the reign of God one does not fear a judgmental deity, one is freed from the need to fight and seek revenge, one is freed from following a rulebook to earn salvation. Such statements of the meaning of the story of Jesus Christ could be expanded greatly. Of course, these statements are merely the outline and orientation of a more comprehensive theology. The point here is to show that all of these statements emerge or are developed as extensions of the meaning of the story of Jesus, focused on his life and teaching of peace.

This suggestion to start a confession with the story of Jesus and then derive all subsequent issues from that story does not solve all problems with writing a confession. We would still have to debate, for example, which items to put near the beginning and which farther down in the outline. But this approach would at least give a different feel to the whole. No article would be a self-contained statement of a theme; each article would take its meaning from the first article—namely, the story of Jesus. Thus, even an item that was 22 of 24 articles, which might appear to have lesser import because of its location, would at least draw its meaning from the head, Jesus Christ. Or, in a radical departure from traditional format, one might visualize the confession as a wheel with Jesus Christ at the center and each article a spoke emanating from that center.

The approach of starting with and then drawing implications from the story of Jesus changes the purpose of the confession. It remains a statement that defines the church's identity, but rather than being a description of current agreements, it sets a direction and becomes a vision for the future or a goal toward which to strive. This approach obviously speaks to the question raised by my student.

Further, posing the confession as a vision for the future would make it less liable to serve as a document that excludes. That factor would appeal to Mennonite young people who are increasingly frustrated with the church's practice of exclusion and who have long come to accept, without qualification, people who are LGBTQ. It may also speak to young people who are tempted to see the church as unnecessary or irrelevant.

Along with speaking to issues within the church, starting with Jesus in a confession of faith would be an *ecumenical* standpoint. After all, every Christian tradition has Jesus in common. Posing the confession with a distinctly peace church orientation might even appeal to Christians in other traditions who are frustrated with the bland stances of their churches.

But our question here is the missional impact of rethinking a Mennonite confession of faith along the lines just proposed. Displaying the issues of social justice as intrinsic to the story of Jesus is a matter of the witness of MC USA in the world. A confession of faith organized according to this outline would constitute a significant missional witness to the meaning of faith in Jesus Christ in a world that is increasingly indifferent to Christian faith. In the face of that indifference from "nones," Christian faith as proposed here demonstrates its relevance in our world.