

Psalm 103

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless God's holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.
God made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
God will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
God does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
As a parent has compassion for their children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear God.
For God knows how we were made;
God remembers that we are dust.
As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to
everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.
The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.
Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,

obedient to his spoken word.
Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers that do his will.
Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Acts 15:12-14, 28-29

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name...

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

Mennonite Confessions of Faith

This past summer we had a guest. It was a 1st cousin once removed on the Friesen side of the family. Patty’s father was a part of a large family which migrated from the Ural region in Russia nearly 100 years ago to the plains of Canada. This cousin is a young shoot from this immigration. Smart kid that she is, she got a scholarship for the cross-country train event celebrating the 100th anniversary of this particular Mennonite migration out of Russia. Not able to afford the train fare, I was curious about what she was learning, so we went for a walk and talk. She learned that...

Steinbach is the center of the world. I was unaware of this geographic oddity, but in their tour of southern Manitoba the Steinbachers confirmed that the fulcrum upon which the world moves, and particularly the Mennonite world, is indeed Steinbach. At least this is the impression left with our young cousin. It was a bit off putting to her. A bit arrogant, she thought. And a lot of genealogy on the train in which she could not participate. She grew up attending a Mennonite Church in a different part of North America a descendent of the only Friesen of that family to get out. Past Confessions of Faith and cookbooks, picking up a theme from last week, are different in the place she was raised than the Canadian plains. She is a by-product of that migration of the 1920s and yet so different from it.

Who gets to define what it means to be Mennonite? What is our Confessional history? Creeds and Doctrines tend to be longer lasting than a

Confession which is adapted through the decades. And Mennonites have generated a lot of Confessions. Every tribe of Mennonite, it seems, wants to have a say what it means to be a Mennonite so they write a Confession.

I have a book here authored by Howard John Loewen which details more Mennonite Confessions of Faith than you would care to read.¹ Our Confessions of Faith are important and contribute to the greater worldwide Mennonite mosaic of which Susanne spoke of last week. I will begin with a bit of Confessional history that will lead to modern day applications. Much of this historical part of the sermon comes from Karl Koop of Canadian Mennonite University which he presented at a MC Sask continuing education seminar several years back.²

It so happens that we are nearing the 30th anniversary of The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective and it may be time to write another one. CJ Dyck, Saskatchewan Mennonite historian theologian and relative to some of this congregation, has said that Mennonites have had more confessions of faith than anyone else in the Reformation: more than the Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, Presbyterians, anyone. Within the Dutch—Prussian—Russian Mennonite tradition, which are the origins of this congregation, there have been 14 Confessions of Faith written in our 500 years of history. This averages out to one every 35 years or so – which is about one every new generation. It is actually quite meaningful that each generation is invited to consider our discipleship for relevance to our time.

In this respect Confessions of Faith reflect an evolutionary theology which seeks to meet the demands of a changing world. While our North American context here and now shares a great deal with the early 1990s, there are significant differences which beg our theological attention. For example, a word about the place of Christ and Christ's people in an increasingly ecumenical and interfaith world would be helpful to inspiring us to seek out and collaborate with peace builders across denominations and inter-faith lines. "Seeking peace and pursuing it" is hardly the domain of Mennonites. This idea appears in Psalm 34 (v.14) which places it within the holy books of both Judaism and Islam, and a peace tradition is present in other faith traditions as well. Such a confession might sensitize us to living well in a pluralistic world. How different the Holy Land might look if the

¹ Howard John Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, And One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985).

² Karl Koop, *Equipping Day Presentation* on "Confessions of Faith" (October 24, 2015 MC Saskatchewan Equipping Day held in Eigenheim Church); an audio recorded can be checked out from Patrick.

peacemakers could hold the center of public opinion rather than allowing the violent and radical elements within their populations to polarize the land.

Or take, for example, one item which arose during the Adult Ed series and sexuality. Rather than stigmatizing non-binary persons who feel drawn to domestic partnerships, we would do well with reflections on sexual ethics regardless of how one identifies with the genderbread person³. Particularly in the sexualized world we experience in print and on screen, considerations of support and mutuality are good topics of reflection for the church.

Or consider the Sabbath. What does Sabbath observance mean in a technological world where the internet runs 24 hours a day? In this respect, things have changed a great deal since 1995. Observing the Sabbath and keeping it holy has been a concern of God's people since the directive came down Mt. Horeb, into the Rabbinic debates, through the New Testament, and to our very generation. There is merit in helping God's people reclaim holy time in our specific time and place. And to do so in a way that invites application rather than condemnation.

And yes, a contemporary confession of faith need say something about climate change. We need words that invite us into sustainable living across our industries, neighbourhoods, Province and country.

Each of these topics I have mentioned, and undoubtedly others, are important contemporary questions with which we are living. The point of any new Confession would be, as always, to shape lives patterned on Christ for this world. Because the world is every changing, our theology must be evolutionary as well. God invites us into formation of a people relevant to the demands of the day and yet rooted in the eternal Christ. And there are important biblical stories which give us permission to enter these waters. There are two New Testament stories to which I will refer that may seem to be in tension with each other but actually build on a similar theme.

The blending of a Jewish and Gentile population in the fledgling church was fraught with tension. The setting of Acts 15 is an area wide conference on the question of circumcision for male Gentile converts. The gathered assembly, in Jerusalem, would have been weighted to comparatively large Jewish presence in relation to the Gentiles. Note, again, the topic sparking the debate is circumcision (15:1). The decision at which they arrive doesn't mention circumcision at all. The "Gentiles were required to observe the minimum moral law, or to keep the food laws of Judaism out of respect for

³ The Genderbread Person: Breaking through the binary: Gender explained using continuums.

the feelings of the Jews who might be associated with them”.⁴ With “kosher Jewish butchers and markets in most cities of the Graeco-Roman world, this would not likely cause serious hardship”.⁵ With 613 total precepts in the Torah, many of them pertaining to food laws, the Gentiles got off pretty easy. In this respect, the Gentiles at this time of the Christian convention in the epicenter of Jewish Christianity are not asked too much. These changes reflect a massive confession shift. Let us head to Rome.

The blended Jewish and Gentile churches in Rome were having problems at potlucks (Rm 14:15ff). Apparently when the churches got together some of the households brought less than kosher meat, and this created hard feelings. Some well-meaning Gentiles were bringing their sausage on bun to share with the religious community and the Torah abiding Jewish people boycotted such potluck offerings. It was like a conspiracy. Considerable time and money had been spent to assemble the hot dish, and it was being neglected. Suffice it to say that these well-meaning Gentiles were getting fed up, so to speak, with Jewish pickiness. Or consider it from the other side: you are Jewish with sensitivity not just to pork, but also meat offered to an idol. Any God fearing Jewish Christian would never dare tucking into the meat tray not knowing the source of the food, its species, or how it was butchered. Everyone knows that. Why, being aware of the Jewish food allergies, would those Gentiles bring such a dish to potluck? Is it mockery? Is it spite? You can see how the frustration would mount. The advice Paul gives—if the choice of food causes injury, don’t bring it to potluck. This after declaring his take that no food is unclean (Romans 14:14). Elsewhere Paul writes that he would “even be willing to eat vegetarian to avoid offense (1st Cor. 8:13). What has changed? Location, location, location.

Paul’s letter to the Romans is generally dated around the year 57 CE. With two Jewish expulsions by Roman Emperors prior to the year 57 (19 CE and under Claudius sometime between 41-54 CE), the Gentile population would have outnumbered the Jewish population dramatically. Paul amended the articles of confession relating to food laws again. In both cases the most vulnerable population is given protection by leaders of the early church. Context does matter when church guidelines, Confessions of Faith we might say, are crafted within the Biblical narrative.

⁴ G.H.C. Macgregor and Theodore P. Ferris, “The Acts of the Apostles” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*—volume 9 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), pp.204-206.

⁵ Chalmer E. Faw, “Acts” in the *Believers Church Bible Commentary* series (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press: 1993), p. 171.

I wish such has been the case in the shaping and use of Creeds, doctrines, Confessions of Faith through history. They have provided a type of identity, but at what cost? They have been used to promote clear boundaries of the faith community which have led some to feelings of guilt or shame. For some, it has made them feel as if they do not have a place in the community. The ever allusive pursuit to be a church without spot or blemish (1st Tim 6:14; 2nd Peter 3:14) has led to accusations and counter-accusations and excommunications and church splits. One of the reasons there are so many Mennonite Confessions is due, in large part, to clusters of Mennonites all striving towards a more perfect reflection of Christ. It has made us a highly schismatic people. The departure of Laird Mennonite from Mennonite Church Saskatchewan this fall, and other congregations through the decades, is reflection of this tendency. Is it really worth it all?

Maybe what we need in these days is a simplified Confession of Faith. I thought about this and I came up with a few things from the biblical texts and church history which seem confessional for me:

1. I trust in a God of creator of heaven and earth who dearly loves me, us, creatures and creation.
2. I trust in a Christ who has shone me how to live and die well in ministry to wayward disciples and ignorant masses. Sometimes I am the wayward disciple, the ignorant, and sometimes the crucified. The whole idea of being people of God's peace is rooted in Christ Jesus.
3. I trust in Christ's Spirit guiding me in unseen ways through an unknown future.
4. I think God is love and wants us to be loving to ourselves, our neighbours down the hall, across the street, and in distant lands.
5. The fruits of the spirit seem a tremendous tool in evaluating the consequences of our actions. When our actions produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness or self-control we are on a good path. When actions do not produce this fruits, we have something to learn and grow from.

I know, this is not a confession of faith, per-se. It is the basis, however, for making discernment on a range of ethical considerations which evolve with the decades and contexts in which we find ourselves.

Many years ago, way back in Minneapolis, the brother of someone attending our church there invited me out for conversation. He and his sister had grown up Catholic and he wanted to know more about Mennonite beliefs. I was somewhat stumped by the question. I talked about Mennonite history and some of the Mennonite distinctives. It was more of a response

from my head than my heart. I came away from that conversation less satisfied than more satisfied. I don't think my historical and theological reflection was compelling in any way. At the end of the day our Confessions of Faith ought to point us to deeper virtues that bring healing and hope to our world. So the question for us each to answer is this: what is your Confession of Faith and why does it matter? Amen.

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