

Mennonite Confessions of Faith – Part II

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 by Patty Friesen (Jan. 24/16)

Welcome to Part II in our series on the Mennonite Confession of Faith. People who have gone on hot holidays have been missing this hot series, which we should be streaming to their laptops on the beach while they sip their umbrella drinks. Based on Karl Koop's talk at MC Sask last fall, we talked last week about how Mennonites have had 14 confessions of faith in our history, that we update them every generation for relevance for our time and recommitment to our faith. This doesn't mean that they are not important – they are so important that we wrestle with what is essential in scripture and to our faith in Christ all the time. For example, this 1995 confession determined that the required use of prayer veils for women was not essential to our faith in Christ.

What gives us the right to change that? Isn't the Bible always clear on what it says about the prayer veiling in 1 Corinthians 11 and no women in church leadership based on what we believed Apostle Paul said in 1 Timothy about women being silent in the church. What changed? What changed is that our lived experience changed how we view women. Our lived experience led us to give women the vote at Osler Mennonite church in 1965 and allowed them to be deacons and lead worship and finally allowed them in the pulpit and lo and behold, nothing bad happened when women became pastors! Our lived experience showed us that women may be in tune with the Spirit of God to help lead councils and provide pastoral care and provide theological clarity in sermons. How do we reconcile this with the words of Paul?

We've come to realize that maybe we need to understand Paul better – that Paul himself was writing in a particular historical time in response to crazy things happening

in the early churches and that Paul himself was growing in his understanding of Christ and the church and women's role in it. The Bible didn't create the church. We the church created the bible. Before there was a New Testament, there was a church. The church functioned for centuries without a Bible! There were a few of Paul's letters floating around that in the 4th century the church decided which letters are in and which aren't and the Jewish Old Testament wasn't even assembled until the 1st century. What is discerned for the fourth century church may not exactly fit the 21st century church. We have to trust the Spirit.

Jesus was clear in John 14-16 that the Holy Spirit would continue to teach us if we are open to it. In Acts 10 – the Spirit prompted Peter to visit Cornelius and allow uncircumcised Gentiles into the Jewish Christian faith. Acts 15 was the council in Jerusalem that decided this was God's will despite what Leviticus and Deuteronomy said about uncircumcised Gentiles being outside of God's people. And the disciples at the Jerusalem Conference were not even wrestling with those texts from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. They listened to Peter and Paul's testimony from the frontlines, their lived experience that showed through vision and relationship, Gentiles benefitted the church and should be allowed in. The whole paradigm shift in the early church happened simply because "It seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit to include the Gentiles."

It seemed good to us to change the confession of faith in 1995 to reflect the inclusion of women's gifts in leadership. It seems good to us in 2015 to change our OMC constitution to allow dual memberships so people who remain attached to their home congregations don't have to give them up to join us. It seems good to us in 2015 to expand our community membership to those who are on a faith journey and are seeking

relationship with Christ and us. These are exciting times for the church. Our constitutions and confessions of faith cannot stand in the way of people whom God may be calling into the church. As early Anabaptist Hans Denck said, we hold to the written word but we rely on the Living Word to save us.

But this is dangerous territory of course. Who gets to decide what the Spirit is saying to us? The early Anabaptists in Muenster thought they had the Spirit of God that allowed them to have multiple wives and kill people. Claus Epp in Russia thought he had the Spirit of God when he led 100 people on a wild goose chase all over Russia looking for the second coming of Christ. How do we discern what's the Spirit of God and what's simply our own will?

In 1639, the Mennonites in Holland discerned the Spirit of God merging separate groups under a new confession of faith that they celebrated in the Zinglekirk in Amsterdam – the oldest functioning Mennonite Church in the world. Anyone been there? Anyhow, ten years later in 1649, the Dutch Mennonites split again because some pastors wouldn't sign the confession of faith. They were split for 150 years until 1801 when they came together again under a new confession of faith.

Confessions of Faith can be instruments of unity but also instruments of division sometimes. And our 1995 Confession that brought us together 20 years ago is causing us to split in 2015. Numerous conferences have left the Mennonite Church in the US. Everyone is splitting these days because of Article ____ that marriage is reserved solely for a man and a woman. And if that's what we believe, then we absolutely cannot allow gay marriage. But for some of us, our lived experience with our gay children leads us to see how their love and commitment to their partners is good for them and as Christians, it

is an important thing to make that love and commitment public before God and the church, even if it makes us uncomfortable. If we in the Mennonite Church believe in marriage is a gift of God to help us in our spiritual lives and in our faithfulness to one spouse, then we should be encouraging marriage for all our kids who are living together as well. I'm on a mission to get as many young adults married as possible and get as many young adults to join the church as possible. Marriage and membership will be the theme of next week's sermon on the Mennonite Confession of Faith.

But not everyone has to agree with me. I don't expect my sisters and brothers here in Osler or at Warman, North Battleford, Hague, Eyebrow and Glenbush to agree with me. I don't expect their pastors to perform gay marriages. I don't even expect them to allow gay members but I want anyone them to trust my lived experience of the Spirit of God and I don't want anyone leaving Osler Mennonite or leaving Mennonite Church Saskatchewan over this.

We had such a powerful meeting with Warman Mennonite Church Council this spring. We heard their concerns and they heard that we weren't snubbing our noses at them but responding pastorally to our church families. We had a powerful meeting again with Warman Mennonite and others with our new conference minister Ryan Siemens and conference chair Ken Warkentin over what we can agree on and work together on at conference. There are huge benefits to us being part of a conference as a licensing/ordaining body for our ministers and chaplains, as a resource for our youth and Vacation Bible School, and just as interesting other Mennonites to hang out with at our Annual Delegate Session here March 11-12.

Unity doesn't rely on our confessions of faith or on our human agreements but what we believe in Christ. He is our unity. He is our peace. Menno Simons said, For no one can lay any other foundation than the one already laid which is Jesus Christ. We are family and families don't always agree but we belong, not because of our genetics or even our shared Mennonite culture of sausage and verenike but because of our commitment to Christ as Lord, Saviour and guide for living.

Stay tuned for next week's Mennonite Confessions of Faith – Part III – The benefits of Marriage and Membership! Let us pray...