

ARTICLE 1

God

We believe in the one, true, living God, Creator of heaven and earth. God is almighty in power, perfect in wisdom, righteous in judgment, overflowing in steadfast love. God is the Sovereign who rules over all things visible and invisible, the Shepherd who rescues the lost and helpless. God is a refuge and fortress for those in need. God is a consuming fire, perfect in holiness, yet slow to anger and abounding in tender mercy. God comforts like a loving mother, trains and disciplines like a caring father, and persists in covenant love like a faithful husband. We confess God as eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God the Father

God the Father is the source of all life. In Him we live and move and have our being. The Father seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth, and hears the prayers of all who call on Him. In the fullness of time, the Father sent the Son for the salvation of the world. Through Jesus Christ, the Father adopts all who respond in faith to the gospel, forgiving those who repent of their sin and entering into a new covenant with them. God gives the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, to all His children. God's creative and redemptive love sustains this world until the end of the age.

God the Son

The Son, through whom all things were created and who holds all things together, is the image of the invisible God. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, Jesus took on human nature to redeem this fallen world. He revealed the fullness of God through his obedient and sinless life. Through word and deed, Jesus proclaimed the reign of God, bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. Christ triumphed over sin through his death and resurrection, and was exalted as Lord of creation and the church. The Saviour of the world invites all to be reconciled to God, offering peace to those far and near, and calling them to follow him in the way of the cross. Until the Lord Jesus returns in glory, he intercedes for believers, acts as their advocate, and calls them to be his witnesses.

God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, the Counsellor, is the creative power, presence, and wisdom of God. The Spirit convicts people of sin, gives them new life, and guides them into all truth. By the Spirit, believers are baptized into one body. The

indwelling Spirit testifies that they are God's children, distributes gifts for ministry, empowers for witness, and produces the fruit of righteousness. As Comforter, the Holy Spirit helps God's children in their weakness, intercedes for them according to God's will, and assures them of eternal life.

Genesis 1; Exodus 15:2-3; 34:6-7; Deuteronomy 6:4-6; Psalm 8; 23; 139; Isaiah 55:8-9; 66:12-13; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hosea 11:1-4; Matthew 1:18-25; 5-7; 28:18-20; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 4:18-19; John 1:1-18; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-15; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4; Romans 8:1-17; 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 13; 15:3-8; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:16-21; 13:14; Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 1:15-2:22; 3:14-21; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 6:15-16; 2 Timothy 2:11-13; Hebrews 12:7-11; 1 Peter 2:21-25; 1 John 2:2; Revelation 5:5-6, 9-10.

ARTICLE 1**God**COMMENTARY

The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith begins with a statement of our belief in God. The opening paragraphs use images—biblical metaphors, similes, and adjectives—to describe God. God is our powerful Sovereign and loving Protector, as these images suggest. The three captioned paragraphs follow New Testament Trinitarian forms. These paragraphs discuss the unique ministry of each person of the one being. While the Mennonite Brethren confession is orthodox, it strategically aims to use biblical and narrative language, rather than systematic or philosophical structures, to describe God.

One True, Living God

Christians confess that God is one being in three persons. The opening paragraphs begin with an emphasis on monotheism and conclude with the Christian confession of Trinitarianism, a concept found in the New Testament and defined by later church councils. The Trinitarian doctrine is the basis for an emphasis on the relational nature of God. God is relational. God is community. God is the community of Father, Son, and Spirit and enjoys fellowship.

Scripture tends to speak of God using images and metaphors rather than philosophical categories. The confession attempts to reflect this preference by avoiding terms such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence in favour of such phrases as “consuming fire” and “perfect in holiness.” Although parts of Scripture use doxological phrases to express awe at God’s person (especially the Psalms, parts of Isaiah and Ezekiel, and Revelation), one can also discover the person of God through the narrative of the salvation story with God as the leading character.

God the Creator

The Bible begins by confessing that God is Creator of heaven and earth. (See Article 3 for more on creation.) Mennonite Brethren have not developed a dogmatic stance on the mechanics of God’s act of creation. With Scripture, we confess that God created all things visible and invisible (Genesis 1:1; Colossians 1:15-16). The Genesis text appears to be written from the standpoint of an ancient worldview. The emphasis of the creation stories in Genesis 1-3 is that God is transcendent from the created order (Genesis 1 says God spoke the

cosmos into existence) and yet relates immanently with creation, especially with humankind (Genesis 2-3 shows God walking in the garden with Adam and Eve).

The doctrine of God as Creator is fundamental for our understanding of God's role in time and space. As Creator, God is also Sovereign (Genesis 1:28-31). God rules over every principality and power and holds dominion over humans as well (Ephesians 1:20-23). God also is the Gardener who preserves and cares for creation (Genesis 2; Colossians 1:17). As Sovereign, God judges all affronts to His rule, especially acts of human rebellion (Genesis 3:11-19). As Redeemer, God persists in seeking to reconcile humans and creation to a restored relationship with Himself.

God of Human History

The story of God's reconciling activity begins with the stories of Genesis 1-11. When Eve and Adam eat of the forbidden fruit, God provides clothing and promise of the Seed (Genesis 3:15, 21). When Cain murders Abel, God provides a preserving mark (Genesis 4:15). When human wickedness caused God to be sorry for the creation of humankind (Genesis 6:5-7), Noah found favour in the sight of the LORD, was saved in the ark, and was offered a covenant relationship (Genesis 9:1-17). When society seeks a name for itself at the tower of Babel, God not only judges (Genesis 11:6-8) but chooses a family through whom to bless the world (Genesis 12:1-3).

God of Israel

The Old Testament salvation story is the narrative of the God who "persists in covenant love like a faithful husband." The ancestral narrative (Genesis 12-50) traces God's dealings with Abraham and Sarah and their offspring. Repeatedly, God preserves the promise despite human faithlessness and invites the ancestors to renewed covenant relationships.

The Exodus is the Old Testament salvation story *par excellence*. God hears the cry of the oppressed Israelites (Exodus 2:23-25), judges Egyptian injustice (Exodus 7-15), and fights as the divine Warrior to deliver Israel (Exodus 15:2-3). God's plan for Israel is summarized in God's speech to Moses in Exodus 6:6-8. God will deliver Israel, take them as His people, make Himself known to them, and give them abundance in the land. This fourfold design becomes the rubric for God's relationship with Israel in the Old Testament.

God of Covenant

God's relationship with Israel is commonly described as a covenant. Scholars have demonstrated that the covenant form of Exodus 20-24 and the book

of Deuteronomy parallel the structure of ancient treaties. Mutual loyalty essentially marks the covenant relationship. God, the stronger party, offers human partners, the weaker party, intimacy in relationship. The legal stipulations of the covenant are offered as the appropriate response to the prior salvation which God has worked. Three distinct covenants are formed in the Old Testament. First, God's covenant with all creation is offered after the flood (Genesis 9:1-17). Second, God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants moves from a simple promise with a patriarch of the family (Genesis 15, 17) to a formal document with the nation (Exodus 20-24, Deuteronomy). Third, God offers David a covenant promise of the kingdom (2 Samuel 7).

Later Jeremiah 31:31-34 promises a new covenant written on the heart.

God is Yahweh

The Old Testament uses many names and metaphors to refer to God. The most common name for God (and most frequently used word in the Bible) is the LORD (Exodus 3:11-15; 6:1-8). Traditionally pronounced Jehovah but better rendered Yahweh, the interpretation of the name is mysterious, perhaps alluding to the transcendence and elusiveness of God. God simply refuses to be restricted to any human agenda. The name may also allude to God's creativity, the one who causes to be, or to God's sufficiency, the one who will be "what I will be." Yahweh is above all Deliverer; that is, the mighty Warrior who rescues, the righteous Judge who offers justice, the powerful King who rules, and the loving Parent who comforts and disciplines.

Although some have found allusions to the Trinity in the Old Testament, it is best to avoid reading into the text a notion that would have been foreign to its human authors. In light of the New Testament, we read of the Spirit's activity and recognize the person who was sent at Pentecost. Though the Messiah is predicted in the Old Testament, writers nowhere suggest that theophanies of Yahweh (e.g., Genesis 18:16-33) are appearances of Jesus.

Several confessional texts are particularly rich with expressions of the person of God. In Exodus 34:6-7, Yahweh pronounces the divine name and claims both steadfast love and visiting iniquity. In Deuteronomy 6:4-8, Israel's confession of faith (the *Shema*) confesses that Yahweh alone is our God, one God. In Isaiah, we read that God is holy and glorious (6:3), tender and comforting (40:1-2), and the untiring Creator (40:30-31).

God is also revealed in the Law and the Wisdom literature. God's holiness leads God's people to be holy (Leviticus 19:1-3). God's wisdom has been active since creation (Proverbs 8). We hold the blessings and curses of the deuteronomic law in tension with such books as Job and Ecclesiastes, which wrestle with the mystery of God's ways.

God the Father

Jesus calls God “*Abba*” (Mark 14:36), reflecting the Son’s intimacy with the Father. God as Father is the source of all life. God the Father is Creator of all life, but especially of the family of the redeemed. The New Testament refers to God’s work as adoption, accepting as daughters and sons those who respond to God’s offer of family relationship.

The Father designed the redemptive plan and sent His beloved Son to reconcile the world to God. God also takes the initiative to nurture the family of faith. As a Father who loves the entire world, God hears and answers prayer (John 16:23-24, 26-28). God the Father is characterized by love and mercy (John 3:16). The emphasis on God as Father calls humans to respond confidently as children and to live in ways that reflect the family resemblance (1 John 3:1-2).

God the Son

The Gospels tell the story of Jesus. The Gospels are not straight biographies but are theologically motivated proclamations of God’s communication through Jesus. Some scholars have recently become active in communicating at a popular level about their skepticism regarding the historicity of the Gospels. As Mennonite Brethren, we accept the historical reliability of the Gospels. Jesus came proclaiming the “kingdom of God.” Although the idea of the kingdom was common to first-century Judaism, Jesus’ interpretation of the kingdom was so radical that it led to his execution. Jesus announced that God was intervening in the person of Jesus to confront the evil powers. Jesus acted to thwart Satan by rejecting the common messianic notions of economic success or elitism, nationalistic violence, and ethnic exclusivism. Jesus rejected the Jewish notions of the centrality of the Jerusalem temple in favour of a call for liberty for the poor, the blind, and the sinner.

As we read the Epistles with the Gospels, we discover that the mission of Jesus involves at least four emphases. First, God is revealed in the person of Christ; Jesus shows us what God is like through his life and ministry (John 1:1-18; 14:9-11). Christ’s teaching tells us about God; his person shows God’s character; his death reveals God’s suffering; and his resurrection declares God’s creative power.

Second, Jesus is the unique Saviour of the world. Two primary metaphors describe Jesus’ act. The first, sacrificial atonement, grows out of the New Testament understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system (Romans 3:21-26 and Hebrews 9:15-28). The second involves liberation by means of Christ’s obedient fulfillment of the law of God. Christ broke the reigning power of sin by subscribing to God’s will in every way (Romans 5:18-21 and Hebrews 4:14-16). Hebrews 2:14-18

seems to pull together the aspects of atonement and obedience.

Third, Jesus is the model for faithful discipleship. When Jesus called the first disciples, he said, “Come, follow me” (Mark 1:16-20). Anabaptists have consistently interpreted this call as more than an invitation to first-century students of a rabbi. The call to follow Christ is the essence of Anabaptism. Following Christ means that Christians learn of Jesus, they take on Christ’s character, and they assume Christ’s counter-cultural stance—*vis-à-vis* the larger world. Christ’s followers are people of the Way, people who take the cross in voluntary, serving, self-giving suffering (Mark 8:24-38). Among the acts and attitudes of disciples of Jesus are the following: disciples love indiscriminately, forgive, give themselves, serve, suffer, give their lives.

Fourth, Jesus is Lord of the church and the cosmos (Acts 2:32-36; Ephesians 1:20-23; Colossians 1:15-20). There is an eschatological dimension to the ministry of Jesus (Philippians 2:6-11). Jesus inaugurated a new age, the age of God’s reign. We confess that the end of the age has begun with Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. We also recognize that we are in an interim period in which evil powers oppose Christ’s lordship.

Three great implications of Christ’s lordship occupy contemporary minds. First, Christ is Judge of creation (Matthew 25:31-46; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:11-15). Second, Christ is Lord of the created order (Genesis 1:28; Romans 8:18-25). Third, Jesus is Lord of all powers. As Christians, we are in a spiritual battle with the principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:12). Demonic powers are at work in every culture. Sometimes they manifest themselves in corporate power structures, but they are also active in the everyday lives of people. It is clear that Christ the cosmic Lord is in fierce conflict against them.

God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit leads people to faith. The Bible speaks of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11). The Spirit is the seal, the firstfruits, the mark of conversion (Ephesians 1:13-14). All believers have the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit also assures children of God of their new relationship (Romans 8:15).

By the Spirit, believers are baptized into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13). The Spirit is the great unifier of the church (1 Corinthians 12; John 17). The Spirit equips believers with gifts to build up the body and to minister in the world (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12, 14; Ephesians 4:12-13; 1 Peter 4:10-11). It appears most likely that the gifts listed in the New Testament are not meant to be exhaustive. No single list contains all of the gifts mentioned.

Gender and God

Humans struggle to express in human language the inexpressible nature of God. The Hebrew language lacks a personal neuter pronoun to describe God and by convention refers to God as “He.” Although male metaphors for God are predominant in the Bible, occasional metaphors depict God as a mother (Isaiah 66:12-13), as one who gives birth (Deuteronomy 32:18), and as a woman (Luke 15:8-10). Contemporary theologians have attempted to “re-image” God with feminine sexual metaphors. How should Mennonite Brethren understand this issue?

First, God is Spirit. God is neither male nor female. Although male pronouns are used for God in the Bible, this most likely reflects limits in language rather than the notion that God has gender. Familiar metaphors that refer to God as King or Father or Husband no more make God a male sexual being than references to feathers make God a bird (Psalm 91:4).

Second, ancient pagan religions routinely referred to the gods as sexual beings. In the Babylonian and Canaanite mythology contemporary with the Hebrew Bible, the sexuality of the gods was the basis for creation. Sexuality in these fertility religions was directly related to sexual eroticism in the cultic practices. Humans engaged in sexual intercourse with the deity by means of temple prostitutes. The Genesis creation account counters such hedonistic notions of the deity. God is neither male nor female but the image of God includes both male and female (Genesis 1:27). Insistence on the maleness of God threatens to return the worshipper to pagan notions.

Third, contemporary thinking warns us that hierarchical notions of gender impact human relationships. As sisters and brothers, we want to speak charitably as we wrestle with these questions. God is sovereign; humans are not.

Bibliography

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ARTICLE 1

God

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Mennonite Brethren believe that God is the source and goal of all things, the unifying centre of our lives. All of our confession of faith, and indeed our whole journey of faith, consists of “applying” God’s claims to our lives. We find several specific items of pastoral application that arise from our understanding of God’s person and activity.

The Existence of God

Seekers coming to the church and believers within the church both ask at times, “Does God exist? How can I know God is real?” How one responds depends on the questioner. For some who are new to the idea of a personal Creator, pointing to the magnificent design of creation (the finely-tuned balance of physical matter, the complexity of life, the miracle of human birth and the human body) is a good place to start. Others need to be shown the historical reliability of the Bible. For these, one could explain the wealth of biblical manuscripts, the care taken in copying these manuscripts, and the historical accuracy of what they record. (Books by Bruce and McDowell, listed in the bibliography, are helpful.)

For some seekers, the presence of miracles could be an obstacle. A good starting point for conversation here is the resurrection of Jesus. If the plausibility and reality of the resurrection are accepted, the rest can fall into place (1 Corinthians 15:17-20; Morrison’s *Who Moved the Stone?*). The problem of miracles, however, takes us to a larger issue, usually framed as “faith” versus “reason.” To address this issue, we’ll want to reflect on the importance of one’s worldview. Our understanding is that “faith” is not opposed to “reason,” but is really one form of reason. It is reasoning based on the assumption that God exists (Hebrews 11:6). Or, we might say that faith is “living in a way that would not make sense if God did not exist.” Faith in God is a reasonable worldview, but with a different starting point than either rationalism (which shuts out the supernatural) or pantheism (which muddles the natural and supernatural). Faith in God is nurtured through the life of the church. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, learning from Scripture, and fellowship with other believers align us with God and reinforce a God-centred worldview. (Books by C.S. Lewis, Zacharias, and Newbigin could be helpful in answering questions of miracles, faith, and reason.)

In all these conversations, we should remember that we are ultimately

dealing not with issues of information, but issues of choice. We can't prove that God exists in order to force seekers to concede and convert. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can persuade. We can show that belief in God is reasonable. Above all, we must show that it is fruitful: faith in God results in changed lives. In the end, it is God alone who draws individuals to faith in Him (John 6:44).

Responding to God

Once we understand that God exists and choose to view the world from this perspective, we realize that we have to respond to God. We respond to God through Jesus (John 14:6). Our response begins when we turn from our sin and self-centred lives to the free gift of eternal, Christ-centred life (see Article 5: Salvation); and it develops as we follow Jesus through life (see Article 10: Discipleship).

Responding to God involves worship. This is a key biblical term and a current issue in the life of the church. We are living in a time when many churches are experiencing a renewal in their corporate worship. God's blessing is present, and yet sometimes there is also confusion and division. As Mennonite Brethren, we want to be clear about how we interpret and practice the Bible's teaching on worship.

We begin by considering three valid levels of meaning to the biblical concept of worship. First, it means the physical act of prostrating oneself or bowing down in front of someone (Genesis 24:26; Job 1:20; Philippians 2:10). This posture has symbolic value and leads to the second level of meaning, namely ritual worship, involving personal and corporate acts and rituals which bring us in touch with God. This is the common, popular understanding of worship. The third level of meaning is that of "ethical worship"; worship as a lifestyle of sacrificial service. The interplay between ritual and ethical worship is a critical pastoral issue for Mennonite Brethren churches today, and we'll come back to that concern.

We want to plan our worship services with care so that they reflect God's intention for the church. The earliest believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). We notice that the first three of these activities are basically "horizontal" (person-to-person), while the fourth is directed Godward. The Bible teaches that we gather to encourage and build up one another (Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:24-25). In other words, the New Testament emphasis for church gatherings is for people to connect with each other, to speak to one another, and in this way encounter the God of salvation. The horizontal, person-to-person dimension should be evident in our gatherings to avoid an individualistic, disconnected, "Jesus and me" religion. We can

enhance this by means of public sharing, by having times of “open worship” (song suggestions and prayers coming from the congregation, unplanned but prompted by the Spirit), by allowing for times of discussion and response after the sermon, or by concluding the service with opportunities for prayer or counselling in smaller groups. We yearn for the kind of positive impact that Paul held up: the seeker and unbeliever say, “God is really among you!” (1 Corinthians 14:25).

We also spend time in prayer and song. We sing and pray not because God somehow needs to be told repeatedly how great He is (Jesus said the Father seeks worshippers more than worship—John 4:23), but because prayer and praise shape us as obedient children of God. We believe that worship services ought to be centred on the Word, that is, on Jesus Christ and the biblical story of salvation. Worship services ought to include the public reading (1 Timothy 4:13) and explanation (Nehemiah 8:8) of Scripture. But the proclamation of the Word isn’t limited to the sermon. It can include public prayers, songs, and testimonies. It’s helpful to think of the whole worship service, and not just the sermon, as “the message.”

Worship and Music

Congregational worship is almost unthinkable apart from music. Sadly, cultural and generational differences have resulted in some tensions in this area. We find at least three different groups in our churches: the “traditionalists,” the “reformers” (who want some continuity with the past), and the “revolutionaries” (who want to form their own tradition). In a uniform church, where one view predominates, there is little cause for tension. But in a church with more than one group represented (as the New Testament church exemplified with its broad cultural and generational mix), the tension can be severe. Leaders must take great care in how they lead the congregation in worship to ensure that the whole congregation, not just one part, is given a voice. The “blended worship” approach can be helpful for congregations dealing with this. In divisive situations, it is imperative that worship leaders place the spiritual needs of the congregation above their own musical or devotional preferences. An effective leader will respect the various “dialects” spoken in the congregation, and will help the differing groups in the church to find their own voice before God.

Several specific issues have arisen out of the “worship renewal” movement in recent years. The first is that “worship” implies a certain style of music. We find no biblical basis for this. Paul encourages diversity in music (Ephesians 5:19). Heaven will welcome a multitude of cultural expressions (Revelation 5:9). The healthy worshipping church will prepare for this in the present!

A second issue is the feeling of some that only songs addressing God as

You/Thou (that is, second person) should be considered as worship. We want to encourage the desire for intimacy this approach brings. But we shouldn't try to be more biblical than the Bible. The Psalms move seamlessly back and forth between second and third person in their "God-talk" (Psalm 23, for example). We understand that talking to God and talking about God are equally valid and necessary for corporate worship. The one is prayer; the other is testimony. If we view believers as the Temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16), then our conversations with each other are also communication with God.

In the planning of worship services, whether traditional or contemporary, a useful tool is the Christian calendar. Worship leaders ought to be familiar with the seasons of the Christian year (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and so on). How the themes are used depends on the creative preferences of the congregation. The Christian calendar helps the church to walk the journey of Jesus each year. A further aid, used by some churches, is the Common Lectionary, a cycle of weekly Scripture readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, and Epistles that ensures that the church hears from the whole Bible every three years.

In the New Testament sense, the worship service is not an end in itself. It exists for the purpose of enhancing lifestyle worship. We gather in order to be strengthened for ministry. Our day-by-day worship of God is shown in a life of sacrificial service (Romans 12:1-2), in which we endeavour "to look after widows and orphans" (James 1:27) and "to do good and to share with others" (Hebrews 13:16). The worship that God invites and enjoys is a lifestyle of placing other's needs before our own, living generously with what God has entrusted us, and reflecting the life of Jesus in all our relationships and commitments.

Prayer and "God-talk"

The biblical teaching on the Trinity has its most immediate application in the life of prayer. The act of prayer places us within the heart of the mystery of the Trinity. We pray to God the Father (Matthew 6:9). We pray in the name (that is, with the authority) of Jesus the Son (John 14:13-14). And we are empowered by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:15, 26). We don't think that it is wrong to offer prayers addressed to Jesus or the Holy Spirit, of course, since it is the One God to whom we pray. But New Testament prayers are consistently directed to the Father. The practice of saying "in Jesus' name, Amen" to conclude our prayers is likewise not wrong, even though it does not necessarily reflect Jesus' intent. Rather than reciting a set formula, Jesus wants us to remember and act on the authority he has given through the Spirit every time we pray.

Many models for prayer have been developed over the years. Some follow

the ACTS model, which encourages well-rounded prayers of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (requests). We suggest that to be biblically-shaped people, the Psalms should be an important guide. Privately and publicly, the Psalms work wonderfully to guide our prayers and give expression to our deepest needs and highest praises. Jesus also left us with a model prayer, which we know as The Lord's Prayer. This is a unifying prayer, used by countless past and present believers, which still works well in personal and corporate prayer. Along with reciting the words of The Lord's Prayer, we can use its outline to shape our prayer life according to the Master's plan. (See bibliography for Dodd's great guide for this.) Jesus teaches us to begin by focusing on God's holiness, God's authority, God's purposefulness. After we place ourselves humbly before our Father in heaven, we then confidently bring to Him our present needs: physical (daily bread), social (restored relationships), and spiritual (safety from temptation and the evil one). We conclude by turning our gaze from our present needs, to once again face God's awesome glory and power.

A final issue of "God-talk" has to do with gender and God. We realize that this is a potentially explosive and political issue. As Mennonite Brethren, we acknowledge that God is revealed in the Bible through predominantly (though not exclusively) masculine language. We use masculine pronouns regularly to refer to God. But, being fallen people, we often forget that the masculinity of language is only grammar, a habit of limited human speech. We confuse masculinity (having to do with grammar and words) with maleness (having to do with sexuality and identity). We affirm that God is not male, but includes and transcends both male and female. We do not want to burden our God-talk with the power imbalance that afflicted male-female relationships after the fall (Genesis 3:16). This imbalance has been healed through Jesus (Galatians 3:28). Thus we should take care to avoid giving the impression that God speaks only through male voices. We can do much to enrich our congregations by encouraging women to express their voices in public readings, prayers, preaching, worship leading, and so on. It is men and women together who reflect the image of God.

Idolatry

The Lord forbids all idolatry, as expressed from the First Commandment (Exodus 20:3) to the closing line of one of the last letters of the New Testament (1 John 5:21). Idolatry in the form of offering worship to an image or statue is not a huge threat for most North Americans, though we realize it can be an issue in other cultural contexts and in popular New Age practices. But in a larger sense, idolatry is a grave temptation for us. We always live with the temptation to make anything but God a priority in our

lives. Our jobs, our recreation, our wealth, our desire for material things, our families, our political party, our nation—all these and more can become rival gods. Whatever competes with God for our allegiance and trust is as much a rival god for us as Baal was for the Hebrews in the Old Testament. The church's ongoing task is to call believers away from idolatry of every kind, and into the freedom of serving God alone.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit brings unity to the Christian church (1 Corinthians 12:13). Unfortunately, the work of the Spirit has sometimes become the subject of division and distrust. The New Testament records several occasions in which the Spirit performed a mighty work, but afterward the devil moved in quickly to tempt, deceive, and try to destroy the work of God (Matthew 3:13-4:11; Acts 2; 5:1-11; 8:14-24).

The Bible tells us to earnestly desire the spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1), but only as they are used for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7) and tested by wise discernment (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). Current questions about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, being filled with the Spirit, and the function of charismatic gifts have created confusion for some believers. Following is a brief overview of Mennonite Brethren interpretation in these matters.

The language of the New Testament in regard to the Spirit involves both “baptism” and “filling.” Baptism by the Spirit is the experience of every believer at conversion and is symbolized by water baptism. It is a one-time experience. Romans 8:9-11 teaches that if one does not have the Spirit of Christ one does not belong to Christ. According to Mennonite Brethren interpretation, the Scriptures do not instruct that a dramatic, emotional, post-conversion experience is needed to live a full Christian life. In Acts 2, Peter declares conversion, water baptism, and Spirit baptism as concurring events (v. 38). Scripture does teach, however, that Christians need to grow in surrender to the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26). We are commanded to be continuously filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). It is not a one-time event, but an ongoing surrender to the will of the Lord. Filling is obedience to the Spirit of God. Filling produces the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Spiritual gifts are listed in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4. None of the lists is complete and it appears that the New Testament is not exhaustive in listing the gifts. The gifts themselves include gifts that involve human talents that can be developed through study and practice, and supernatural phenomena often called sign gifts that defy categorization and explanation. The teaching makes clear that differences in giftedness should never become a source of division or result in feelings

of superiority or inferiority.

Many believers have discovered great freedom in the sign gifts. Paul in Corinthians, for instance, commends speaking in tongues, both as a private prayer language and as an element in worship when accompanied by interpretations. Healing is encouraged via prayer by the elders (James 5:14-15) but also may be experienced as a special gift. Other phenomena such as spiritual laughter and being slain in the Spirit do not have scriptural basis or authority.

Paul encourages believers to grow in the gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:1-5). Although prophecy may have an element of prediction, predictive prophecy should be carefully tested. False prophets are detected not only by predicting things that do not come to pass but also by failure to submit to the body and by making contradictory statements. Prophecy may address concerns of the church, but differs from teaching in that it tends to be a special word for a congregation or individual for a strategic moment. The congregation should test all prophecies. Prophets should submit to the congregational leadership (1 John 4:1-6; 1 Corinthians 12:29-32).

Gifts are given by the Spirit to the body and for the body. Individualistic use of the gifts is not in keeping with the Spirit's intent. Gifts are given to equip and build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:7-16).

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