

Baptist confessions

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This essay will consider the English Baptist-Separatist Confession of 1609 and the Mennonite-Dordrecht Confession of 1633. (M) and (B) are used to distinguish the two documents. These two confessions, or statements of belief, are separated by only 24 years in time, and a relatively short distance geographically, one in Holland and one in England, yet there are a number of differences. It was John Smyth, a former Anglican minister, who drew up the Separatist confession. He later sought to align his church more with the Mennonites and after his death many of his congregation did become Mennonites.

Despite this he is considered to be a founding father of the Baptist denomination. During the reign of Elizabeth I death was the penalty in England for those holding Anabaptist beliefs according to the Reformed Reader web site. The other document tells us in its heading that it came out of the Dutch Mennonite conference held at Dordrecht . The Mennonites were Anabaptist followers of Menno Simons, a Dutch religious reformer and former Catholic priest who had died some 72 years earlier in 1561. Between 1530 and the 1590's some 2, 000 believers died for their faith in Holland according to the Continental European Protestantism web page.

They were officially tolerated from then on, but many refused to fight in wars on Holland's part, and preferred to flee elsewhere, some to Poland and the Ukraine and other to America. So both these confessions came at a time when official persecution was lessening. First of all one is much briefer than the other. Although it has some 20 sections the Separatist confession has only short discourses under each heading and runs to less than 2 pages of

foolscap, whereas the Mennonite document, although it has only 19 sections is very much longer and more detailed.

It is one of many Mennonite statements of faith. A much shorter version can be found on modern day Mennonite web sites. The first 6 of its articles are concerned with things generally believed. Then come articles concerned with the life of the church and includes the sacraments of baptism and communion. Articles 13 (M) onwards are concerned more with legal matters such as the relationship between believers and the secular authorities. The final section consists of a declaration of 1659 made by London based Anabaptists and is a refutation of accusations that had been made against them.

Rather than a statement of belief it emphasises what they don't believe e. g. that though they do not themselves practise infant baptism they believe that others should be allowed to follow their own consciences as they would wish to. They state very strongly that they are opposed to the Quakers, but at the same time wish to be tolerant and allow them to practice freely as they believe. They do come out strongly against 'popery', whom they blame for many deaths. Although concerned with freedom of conscience they are anxious to let it be known that they will not support miscarriages of justice.

This is in response to the fact that at the time of writing it Mennonites could be imprisoned simply for belonging to the group according to Cornelius Dyck in 'An Introduction to Mennonite History', pages 133 and 134. The Mennonites, although sticking to what they believe, are anxious to get on with rest of society. They have a section (13) (M) stating that God has allowed secular people to be in authority. In practice this means that though

Mennonites will not go to war they will work under secular authorities in such areas as disaster relief and issues of social justice.

Baptists too are concerned with such matters as in such organisations as the Baptist Missionary Society. The English Baptist statement spends a larger proportion of its text upon matters of faith and these are given priority. Only three articles, numbers 16-18, (B) are concerned with church business, i. e. who may dispense the word and the sacraments, how to deal with persistent sinners and how to interact with them in civil matters. The Mennonites also make statements of faith of course, but these are intermixed to some extent with such matters as the election of officers and dealing with sinners.

On the latter subject the Mennonites are quite strict, referring to the separation from and the total shunning of reprobates, though they do put this in a positive light as being a way of making the person make amends and not in order to cause their destruction (articles 16 and 17 (M)). The Baptists are more pragmatic in their approach. They describe in article 17 (B) how to deal with those who persevere in their sins, but go on to say in the next article that such people are not to be avoided in worldly business.

Regarding church practices an obvious difference is the inclusion of foot washing by the Mennonites, article 11, (M) which they felt was commanded by Christ in John 13 v 1- 15. They are one of several Christian groups throughout history who have practised this symbolic act, although it seems unlikely that it was included among the practices of the early church. The Baptists make no mention of marriage, despite the fact that many branches of the church consider it to be a sacrament. The Mennonites on the other

hand state that it is God ordained and that St Paul allowed it within the church.

(Article 12 (M)) They do state though that it should be between Christians who share common doctrine. In practice this means of course fellow Mennonites. Regarding Baptism the English Baptists make it very clear that it cannot be given to infants (Article 14 (B)). The Mennonites in their confession (Article 7 (M)) do not directly mention infants, but make it clear that it is for those who understand what they are doing and confess to faith, whereas this Baptist confession merely says that it is an external sign of the remission of sins, but makes no mention of public confession of faith.

The Baptist confession describes its ministers as bishops and also mentions deacons and widows. (Article 16 (B)) It describes the church simply as ‘ a company of the faithful’,(Article 12(B)) and gives the whole body authority to make decisions. (article 13 (B)). The Mennonites refer to the church in much more elaborate language as the bride of Christ and the inhabitation of God in the Spirit. The Mennonites refer to the church leaders in slightly different terms as teachers, deacons and deaconesses, though they do make it clear further on that the latter term refers to widows.

They refer to Jesus as the Bishop (Article 9 (M)) and it is men who will do the teaching. There are of course many areas in which the two documents are in agreement. E. g. both refer to God as a trinity and as creator and that good works come out of faith rather than the other way round. In Article 5 (B) the Separatist states that there is ‘ no original sin’ i. e. one is not a sinner by descent. This is in total contrast to Article 2 (M) of the Mennonite confession which states that because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve sin came

into the world and has descended to all mankind, though both agree that man can be redeemed through Christ.

The Mennonites are very concerned that faith is up to the individual, which explains their tolerance to the state and willingness to pay taxes etc. (Article 13 (M)) Regarding communion, Menno left the Catholic church in part because of his lack of belief in the actual presence of Christ in the elements. The Mennonite document speaks rather of a holy supper,(Article 10 (M)), as commanded by Christ and in memory of what he had done.

Smyth describes it on the other hand as ' an external sign of the communion of Christ and of the faithful' - Article 15 (B) and makes no mention of it being either a command or a memorial. Mennonites do not take oaths and quote scripture to back this up. They ask that others will understand and just take them at their word. Another area mentioned by the Mennonites and not by the Baptists is what they refer to as revenge, but which perhaps their fellow countrymen saw as justified war fare. The Mennonite statement in article 14 (M) explains their scriptural reasoning for this stand.

Baptists would agree with them, but for some reason it is not mentioned. Many of the differences in these two documents are simply due to the type of authorship - one man as against a committee, the later being careful to check with each other before committing themselves to final wording, not omitting any point considered valid, hence the more complex language and greater length. Ye both groups would agree about many things - the need for faith and understanding before baptism, the greatness of God and the unique nature of Christ and his redeeming action.

Both share a belief in the resurrection and in life eternal, even though they express this in slightly different ways, the Mennonites backing up their statements with scripture and the Baptists seemingly taking this as understood. These two groups came into being because of the Reformation and new ideas that were around at that time, especially with regard to the onus on an individual to come to faith, rather than being automatically part of the church, because he had been baptised as an infant, without either faith or understanding on his part.

The biggest difference between the two seems to be with regard to man's sinful nature and how he acquired it.. Baptists and Mennonites continue to worship and live according to their conscience. Not every Christian would agree with every word written in these confessions, but it is to be hoped, that like the writers and followers they would be tolerant in Christian love.

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