Toward Christian Theology
From a Diversity of Mennonite Perspectives

A. James Reimer

Introduction

Ever since the appearance of its first issue (Winter 1983) there has been in The Conrad Grebel Review a vigorous and ongoing debate about what a "Mennonite theology" might look like. In this article, I pull together some of the themes of this debate by looking, first, at the diversity of viewpoints in the present Mennonite theological landscape; second, at the confessional-doctrinal approach to theology as I have been articulating it in various contexts; and, finally, at what we as Mennonites do believe and ought to believe as we look to the future.

Before I launch into the substance of what I have to say, I want to comment on the notion of "a Mennonite theology." This phrase does not adequately describe how in my view we ought to think systematically about what we believe. First of all, there is no one homogeneous Mennonite theology. The debate in the Review alone reflects the heterogeneity of the theological thinking within the Mennonite community, a phenomenon which brings with it certain problems for church polity but ought in my view to be welcomed as consistent with our history. Second, our intent ought not to be to develop a "Mennonite" or "believers' church" theology as though this were an enterprise distinct from the ecumenical-Christian theological task. We are first and foremost Christians engaged in Christian theological reflection. Since, however, none of us can do this in abstraction, removed from our particular historical context and tradition, we seek to understand what it means to be Christian from a particular point of view. For us this point of view happens to be a Mennonite one, with certain central theological accents which I want to spell out below. This is why I have chosen the title "Toward Christian Theology from a Diversity of Mennonite Perspectives," a phrase reflecting both the primacy of our common-Christian project, itself characterized by plurality, and the particular and diverse vantage points from which we approach our universal task.1

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1 This is a slightly modified version of a paper presented at a conference on "Beyond Pluralism: What Mennonites Believe Today" at Laurelville Mennonite Church Center, Pa., March 11-13, 1988. The title I had been given to address on that occasion was "Toward a Mennonite Theology."
Noteworthy in this regard is the statement made by Gordon D. Kaufman: "For much too long Mennonites have presented themselves as somehow set apart from the rest of the Christian world in a little self-sufficient enclave of their own." His challenge to us is "to transcend narrow and short-sighted Mennonite provincialisms—and to transcend as well the parochialisms and prejudices of traditional Christian speech and of modern Western culture—as we seek to participate in the emerging community which includes in its circle of conversation partners all of humankind." I basically agree with Kaufman that we need to move beyond our sectarian past and think in larger terms. I believe, however, that we are (and ought to be) perspectively more bound to our own tradition(s) as Mennonites and to the past generally than Kaufman seems to think. The important role the theological formulations of the past play in my own attempt as a Mennonite Christian to think theologically today will become clear as I make my own proposals below.

Post-modernity and the fact of theological diversity

One of the facts of modern theology is the plurality and diversity of theological positions and viewpoints that vie with each other for recognition and prominence in the public arena. The number of recent books with "postmodern," "postliberal," "plurality," or "pluralism" somewhere in their title bears out the importance which contemporary theologians give to the fact that we are entering a new age characterized by fundamental diversity of perspectives. In the so-called "liberalism" of the preceding epoch diversity was also recognized but underneath this plurality there was assumed to be a harmonious unity binding everyone together. Toleration of other viewpoints was possible because of this underlying optimism. The post-modern era recognizes a much more thoroughgoing and conflictual heterogeneity which calls not for harmonious toleration but fair and tough-minded theological and political discourse.

We have in contemporary theology various forms of process theology, political theology, liberation theology (including Latin American liberation theology, black liberation theology, feminist liberation theology, gay liberation theology), dialectical theology, existentialist theology, evangelical theology, narrative theology, and so on. The important American Catholic theologian David Tracy, in his recent book Plurality and Ambiguity, says: "We find ourselves, therefore, with a plurality of interpretations and methods. We find ourselves with diverse religious classics among many religious traditions. We find ourselves glimpsing the plurality within each tradition while also admitting the ambiguity of every religion: liberating possibilities to be retrieved, errors

to be criticized, unconscious distortions to be unmasked."3 This means that the term "orthodoxy" (or neo-orthodoxy for that matter), as though there were behind all this diversity still a commonly accepted core of "right belief," no longer appears to many to have descriptive or prescriptive power.

My problem with much of this current literature about the diversity and plurality of our age is that it does not deal satisfactorily with a countervailing phenomenon not only in our own society but in all societies. Beneath this real diversity there is in my view a more substantial homogeneity: not a beautiful harmonious core in the 19th-century liberal sense but a sameness that arises out of the tyranny of modern technology. Computers, for example, particularly the assumptions behind computers, do not encourage diversity but its very opposite: sameness. These two phenomena combined—the conflicting diversity of theological options which tends to relativize each and the absolutizing technological monolith which tends to make us all the same—have a way of blocking out any faith in and experience of that which is eternal and transcendent.

For the moment, however, let me stay with the fact of diversity. One needs only to look at the theological writings by different Mennonite authors in the various Mennonite periodicals to realize that a significant plurality of theological viewpoints or schools of thought exists right within our own community. Let me briefly allude to a few of them. There is the evolutionary or process theology of a Carl Keener in which truth is viewed not as a "timeless given" but as dynamic and changing. Time is understood historically and as linear. The challenge for Mennonites in this model is to develop a theology in conversation with Darwinian science and Whiteheadian process philosophy. The Anabaptist understanding of freedom, according to Keener, fits nicely with the "modern worldview of cosmic organicism."4 In this view orthodoxy with its notion of "God as omnipotent, timeless, omniscient, complete, immutable, impassable, and simple, is incommensurable with the Anabaptist vision of human freedom of choice within Christ's body." The traditional orthodox view of God cannot be reconciled "with the modern view that chance and freedom are built into the very fabric of a contingent and evolving universe."4

There is the shalom theology of a Perry Yoder which stresses the need for a biblical theology that uses the historical critical method and acknowledges the surface diversities within the biblical materials while at the same time recognizing in the Bible a common core or deep structure. Central to the gospel is shalom or peace, "an element from which the rest makes sense and without

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which the rest is less than the gospel.”5 Shalom in the Hebrew world signified not simply the absence of war but connoted peace and justice in the positive sense. It included justice not only between individuals but within economic and political structures as well. What is called for, according to Yoder, is an explicit Mennonite biblical theology in which this more comprehensive notion of shalom becomes not something added on to other theological doctrines but intrinsic to the whole of theology from creation to consummation.

Those like Arnold Snyder, who urge us to develop a theology in conversation with Latin American liberation theology, make up another school of thought. Snyder thinks there are remarkable similarities between the Peasants’ War of 1525 and the recent Nicaraguan revolution, on the one hand, and 16-century Anabaptism and 20th-century liberation theology, on the other. What Anabaptism and liberation theology have in common is their shift of emphasis from “individual belief to social practice,” from orthodoxy to orthopraxis. “The primary emphasis in post-Constantian Christianity has been orthodoxy, or right teaching and belief.”6 For the Anabaptists and the liberation theologians, however, “it is orthopraxis, or right action, which makes Christianity genuine, rather than mere orthodoxy, or right teaching.”7

J. Denny Weaver represents another theological model, a theological approach that is very much in vogue in contemporary North American theological circles: narrative theology. Here, similar to the theological proposals of Carl Keener, truth depends ultimately on process and “the locus of authority resides more with the ongoing people of God as a whole than in a particular institution or law code or absolutized biblical proposition.”8 Authority is not static but “a dynamic process which maintains and preserves truth through the interaction of God’s people and their perpetual seeking.”9 Taking issue especially with my own theological position Weaver says: “In order to entertain the reality of God in our world, it is not necessary to add a ‘vertical mystical, ontological, sacramental, or a-historical dimension’ to an apparently meaningless horizontal world.”10

According to Weaver, a narrative Christology which stresses the teachings and life of Jesus rather than an orthodox, sacramental, mystical, and ontological Christology is more appropriate to Mennonites. The Hebraic emphasis on “the ultimate significance of time or horizontal movement” is more relevant to

7 Ibid., pp. 130-131.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. 194.
Mennonite theology and the contemporary situation than the Greek vertical-horizontal dichotomy. The transcendent ought not to be conceived of as breaking into the plane of history from the outside in a vertical, ontological, sacramental, or cultic fashion, but rather as a dimension within the historical stream itself. Mennonites ought to develop a theology which begins with a Mennonite agenda—peace, discipleship, community, visible church and so on, not with something that is foreign to Mennonite theology such as the trinity.

In a recent issue of The Conrad Grebel Review, Gayle Gerber Koontz develops what might be considered a Mennonite feminist theology. She proposes to take seriously both the traditional Mennonite reverence for the authority of the scriptures, in which the Bible in some sense stands in judgment over us, our assumptions, and our experience, and important insights of secular feminism, particularly equality in legal, social, economic, and familial matters. Her approach is not so much to take specific texts or particular theologies in the biblical materials as authoritative but rather to look for a “movement or a trajectory within scripture which would be consistent with or supportive of feminist conviction and which we might receive as divine intention.” She finds in the Bible a trajectory which calls for “mutual submission” and “reciprocal servanthood,” themes which support equality between men and women but stand in judgment over a feminism which stresses “the autonomy of women without a vision for eventual reciprocity of men and women.” In the same issue there appears an article by Mitchell Brown which strongly urges us to accept an adoptionist Christology, which Brown thinks is much more appropriate to Mennonite theology than traditional trinitarian orthodoxy.

These are some of the major theological points of view that have been represented in The Conrad Grebel Review over the past five years. One could go on to list other approaches to Mennonite theology—the Anabaptist vision theology of Harold S. Bender, existentialist theology of Robert Friedmann, “political theology” of John Howard Yoder, historicist theology of Gordon Kaufman, eschatological theology of Thomas Finger, the so-called “Evangelical-Anabaptist” theology of George R. Brunk II and Ted VanderEnde, therapeutic theology of David Augsburger, and even a kind of ethnic-cultural theology evident in the Winnipeg periodical, MennoniteMirror. Some of these would likely not think of their approaches as theologies, particularly not systematic theologies. Nevertheless, they do in my view represent distinctive emphases, perspectives, or approaches to Mennonite theological thinking. One ought not, of course, to limit the issue of diversity to theological pluralism. We have other

11 Ibid p 207
13 Ibid p 207
14 Ibid p 219
15 Mitchell Brown, Jesus Messiah not God, The Conrad Grebel Review 5(Fall 1987) 233 252
forms of diversity in our Mennonite community which affect our theology, particularly ethnic plurality: Black, Hispanic, Russian, Swiss, Dutch, Chinese ethnicities and so on.

There are a number of inferences one can draw from the above. First of all, there is the fact of diversity itself. I have named 14 distinct theological approaches and there are others. Even if in the past we had semblances of a common theological core we can today no longer assume a united theological position. We, like other Christian communions, reflect the diversity and pluralism of the modern age. In my opinion we ought to embrace genuine diversity. We ought to welcome the opportunity to engage openly in public discourse about differences and commonalities not only among ourselves but also between ourselves and other Christian bodies and religious traditions. In fact, what distinguished the early Anabaptists was precisely their heterogeneity and diversity. The polygenesis theory of Anabaptist-Mennonite origins and the confessional diversity of Mennonites throughout their history would suggest that fidelity to our own tradition entails and calls exactly for the kind of theological pluralism that we have seen above.

A doctrinal-confessional approach to theology

There is, of course, a significant difference between the diversity of our own 20th-century theological landscape and that of our ancestors in the 16th century. The premoderns still always assumed the existence of eternal and transcendent truth. What was believed to be true was for them of ultimate significance and worth dying for. The conflicting Reformation positions, and the call for religious toleration by our premodern forebears, did not presuppose the historical and religious relativism of the post-Enlightenment period but precisely the opposite: an unbending commitment to absolutes though diversely expressed. Sometimes I think we make too much of the differences between the various 16th-century groups: Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, Anabaptists, Anglicans. This suits us as we try to preserve our denominational distinctiveness. But did not all of these have more in common with each other than any of them have with us? They lived in a premodern context in which it was still assumed that historical events were ultimately to be explained theologically and confessionally; that is, the contemporary distinction between sacred and secular (or profane) history did not exist. Behind all historical phenomena there was perceived to be the transcendent reality of God. This is why theological thinking was taken with utmost seriousness. It is this theological presupposition (the reality of God) as the backdrop for all human action and historical action that is in question today.

This brings me to the second inference. The surface diversity of Mennonite theological positions is somewhat deceptive. If one looks at the whole spectrum of theological viewpoints above one notes that there is in fact a common element running through many of them. This common thread has to do with certain prevalent assumptions of the modern period: an emphasis on history, becoming,
process, development, narrative, dynamic truth, and orthopraxis, and a discomfort with the language of ontology (or structures of being), eternal truths, transcendence as the vertical intersection with time as history, and orthodoxy. This discomfort is most clearly illustrated by the general absence of interest in recent Mennonite theology (with a few exceptions) in the whole genre of confession and doctrine. The reasons for this lacuna are not difficult to find. Confessions, doctrines, creeds, and dogma, while different from each other in some ways, are all part of one family or theological genre. They entail a common concern for fidelity to right belief and have in their classical-orthodox model the tendency to pass over ethics and the Christian life.

There is some truth to the claim that Mennonites and the believers' church generally are a noncredal tradition having historically emphasized practice, life, and ethics more than speculative thought and right belief. In this Mennonites simply anticipated and shared in the general modern suspicion of dogma, so prevalent in postscholastic theology which saw dogma as the mark of "dogmatism" and intolerance.

But one can easily overstate the case as C.J. Dyck implicitly acknowledges when he says in his foreword to Howard J. Loewen's book on Mennonite confessions of faith: "It is generally true that the Anabaptists and later Mennonites have been and are non-creedal. . . . It is surprising, therefore, to find that the Anabaptists and especially the Dutch Mennonites wrote many confessions, as this volume demonstrates, probably more than any of the other three Reformation traditions."16 To explain this, as Dyck does, solely by saying that while "Creeds tend to denote timeless, classic, and universal statements," confessions, in contrast "tend to be more particularistic, personal, and occasional, that is, written for a specific purpose at a particular time and place" is not entirely convincing. Confessions, doctrines, creeds, and dogmas have in fact much in common with each other. One of the things they all assume is that right belief is important. And, I would argue, that Mennonites have in the past taken "right belief (orthodoxy)" as being the basis and theological framework for "right action (orthopraxis)."

I have in my writings over the past few years urged us as Mennonites not only to recover our own confessional heritage but also to take a look at classical orthodoxy especially as expressed in the early ecumenical creeds. I am thinking here particularly of the trinitarian formulations of the Apostolic Creed and the Nicene Creed, and the christological formulation of Chalcedon. I have seen this as my particular contribution to the theological discussion within Mennonite circles. If there is a softness in our historical-theological point of view as Mennonites I think it is located here. We have not taken seriously enough the classical or patristic period of the early church. My intent has not been to urge

16 Howard J. Loewen, One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God Mennonite Confessions of Faith (Elkhart Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1983), pp 16 17
us to go back to a previous age and a previous formulation in any absolute sense. That would be to betray the intent even of those who formulated the early confessions and creeds. Nor has it been my desire to reject the other approaches mentioned above, replacing them with a classical confessional-creedal approach, for I believe diversity is here to stay and genuine diversity is in fact to be encouraged.

The reasons why I have suggested that we take a fresh look at these classical symbols of the faith include the following: (a) the dogmatic and creedal approach has unfortunately been largely missing in the believers’ church tradition and especially in recent Mennonite theological reflection; (b) although the so-called “believers’ church” (of which Mennonites are a part) has been historically suspicious of the classical creeds for some legitimate reasons, our tradition has in actual fact until quite recently been theologically and catechetically dependent on doctrinal and confessional statements with classical elements; (c) finally, a doctrinal approach to theological and ethical issues has some distinct advantages over some of the alternate approaches that have replaced the confessional genre. One of these advantages is that the articles of a confession serve as a very general framework for a variety of theological interpretations and approaches including both ontological and historical-developmental ones. These doctrinal categories represent the bare-bones frame of our theological house reflecting what we hold in common while allowing for a considerable amount of diversity in the particular contents. In my view, doctrines provide a larger umbrella or framework for discourse concerning our differences than any one of the different options cited above, which in fact usually assume an implicit doctrinal structure.

This doctrinal interest is not an idiosyncratic concern of mine for there appears to be a renaissance of interest in doctrinal questions in theology in unexpected circles. The number of books dealing with the meaning of the trinity in the context of modern pluralism is really quite remarkable. Jürgen Moltmann’s trilogy is one example. George Lindbeck’s book The Nature of Doctrine is another having received an amazingly sympathetic hearing even among biblical scholars who have in the past been rather sceptical of the doctrinal approach.17 Yale University Press has just published a work by William A. Christian, Sr., Doctrines of Religious Communities.18 What I am proposing is that we join others in re-examining a confessional and credal way of thinking that takes doctrinal language seriously as a way not of moving beyond pluralism but as moving toward a unity which allows for substantial diversity within itself.

18 William A. Christian, Sr., Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987)
What do we and ought we to believe? Some specific proposals

How ought we to go about doing this? I think we might begin by looking at the confessions that have played an important role in our past. Here Howard J. Loewen’s recent book, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, And One God* is a helpful guide. Let me summarize what I think are some of the central insights about our own confessional tradition as Mennonites in North America that Loewen arrives at. According to Loewen, Dordrecht is the mother of all the later confessions. There is a great variety of emphases in the many subsequent confessions, often reflecting the larger social and religious context in which they were drawn up. For example, the 1921 Mennonite Church confession, “The Christian Fundamentals,” clearly mirrors the concerns of fundamentalism in its debate with modernism. Despite this variety Loewen identifies a common fourfold axis around which most of them are ordered: Theology (doctrine of God), Christology (doctrine of Christ), Ecclesiology (doctrine of the church), and Eschatology (doctrine of the future). This order interestingly bears a remarkable resemblance to the classical orthodox model. Further, Loewen finds seven major accents: Triune God and Creation, Word of God and Revelation, Jesus Christ and Redemption, Holy Spirit and Transformation, Human Nature and Salvation, Church of Christ and Mission, and Eternal Hope and Resurrection.\(^{19}\) What I think Loewen’s study demonstrates is that there is in fact in our tradition a basis for broad agreement on some very general doctrinal categories not only among ourselves but also between us and other Christian churches.

There are, however, also some distinctive elements in these confessions which have distinguished us from the mainline Christian traditions; these have largely to do with our view of the church and ethics, giving our whole theology a unique flavor. What Loewen has found in comparing the confessions is that there is a consistently high view of scripture and a common theological center—ecclesiology and mission—confirmed by the prominence of references to Matthew, Acts, and Ephesians. Of these three Matthew is the most important, within which Matthew chapter five (Sermon on the Mount) is by far the most popular and the passage on loving one’s enemies (vv. 38-48) receives the most attention.

One further observation is of interest. What distinguishes the Mennonite confessions from classical models are specific emphases and articles not usually found in other confessional statements: “free will, conversion, footwashing, church discipline, Christian life and nonconformity, integrity and oaths, nonresistance and revenge, the Christian and the state.”\(^{20}\) This latter list is highly significant for any systematic theological thinking we want to do today and

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19 Loewen, p. 269.

in the future as Mennonites, for it defines who we are. These items are not simply a litany of additions to the other doctrines but shape the very way we think about God, Christ, church, and consummation. Free will, for instance, is a highly significant doctrine for early Anabaptists and for later Mennonites.

With this doctrine our 16th-century ancestors clearly rejected Luther's and Calvin's doctrine of predestination and the particular view of grace and the sovereignty of God that gave rise to it. These distinctives reflect a concern for moral and ethical perfection premised on a rather optimistic view of the possibility of human transformation within the context of the church. It may be that we will want to modify some of these accents in the context of the modern world in which free will has come to mean unlimited and unrestrained human autonomy to shape and dominate the world of nature and values. The first step, however, is to recover the language of doctrine itself.

We need to take a fresh look at these older confessions, to study them, to preach about them, to use them for catechisis, to write theological commentaries on them, to translate them into contemporary idioms, to modify them as we learn from other traditions and adapt them to the contemporary situation. Before we too quickly write new confessions, ought we not to acquaint ourselves with our own classics, to engage ourselves with them, to reinterpret them for our day? We need to develop doctrinal categories that stand in substantial continuity with the classical past and our own Mennonite past and at the same time deal creatively with the present. As a bare minimum we need to recover the four basic traditional theological foci for our creative theological thinking as a Mennonite community.

For a comprehensive theology we need, first of all, to have a doctrine of God and creation. I would argue very strongly, against Mitchell Brown, that we need a trinitarian view of God if we are to remain nonreductionist in our theology and faithful not only to the early Christian tradition but also to our own tradition(s). I agree wholeheartedly with Krister Stendahl when he says: "Perhaps that same suspicion of mine explains why I am so fond of the Trinity, a most daring attempt at not sacrificing richness and diversity on the altars of theoretical monisms of various kinds." 21

I see trinitarian language not as foreign to the New Testament but as growing directly out of it. Trinitarian language needs of course itself to be translated into meaningful contemporary terms. While historically this doctrine may not have played as significant a role in our theological thinking as it might have, it nevertheless was on the whole taken with great seriousness. The 12 affirmations, including the three primary articles, of the Apostles' Creed are intrinsic to Hubmaier's 1527 catechism. Menno repeatedly affirmed a faith in the triune God, most directly in his 1550 "A Solemn Confession of the Triune,

Eternal, and True God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." The first half of Peter Riedeman's 1545 Confession of Faith follows closely the articles of the Apostles' Creed with a careful defense of the doctrines of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

As the high church traditions are tempted by a one-sided emphasis on God's transcendence, and the low churches, particularly the holiness and charismatic movements, by a one-sided preoccupation with the immanence of God, so Mennonites tend in my view to reduce God to the lordship of the historical Christ. The doctrine of the trinity is an expression of the one God having three modes of being: God as wholly other, transcendent mystery, of whom no finite images can be made; God as historically revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, including his birth, life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension; God as immanently present to us and in us as individuals, the church, the world, and the cosmos.

This doctrine has specific implications for our ethics. Take our position on peace and nonviolence. Basing our peace position too exclusively in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, frequently referred to as the "lordship of Christ," without a profound trinitarian Christology, threatens to weaken not only our stance on nonviolence but our attitude toward sin and evil generally. The simple fact is that the problem of innocent suffering, death, evil, including violence, cannot be rationally understood and adequately addressed exclusively with reference to human action and the Sermon on the Mount. Ultimately, we need a doctrine of God in which God himself is allowed to be radically free from our systems of morality and our vision of what God ought to be. In other words, there are dimensions of reality which are not covered by our particular understanding of the nonviolent Jesus even though we are called to be faithful to that christocentric ethic.

We need, further, a doctrine of Christ and redemption. This, of course, gets us to the heart of the Mennonite theological ethos. We as Mennonites have always tended either toward Docetism or Arianism. With the one we fail to recognize the humanness of Christ resulting also in a failure to acknowledge the humanness of the redeemed community (the visible church). With the other we tend to lose the mystical and divine element of Christ with the consequence that we also lose the mystical and sacramental nature of the church. Christ becomes little more than an historical figure that we struggle to imitate and the ordinances formal signs lacking in mystical and gracious substance. I would defend with many (although not all) of our ancestors that the two-natures formula of Chalcedon, despite its inadequacies, still remains an essential guide for developing a contemporary Christology with profound implications for our ethics both inside and outside the church. Our view of salvation, regeneration, and atonement ought in my view to be interpreted and reinterpreted in conversation with the Chalcedonian formula. There is in that two-natures Christology a carefully considered and balanced anthropology (having to do with the relation of the divine and the human in all those who participate in the nature of Christ) which we ought to ponder deeply before deviating from it.
We need a more developed *doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the church* in which mission, service, and social action are taken seriously and the spirit is truly seen as capable of transforming and empowering us. But too often we as Mennonites have limited the reality and work of the Holy Spirit to the church as the visible body of Christ and not recognized the Spirit when it is working outside the church, in other Christian traditions, in other religions, in the world of politics and economics, in the realm of culture and the fine arts. Further, it seems to me that it is in the light of this third way of speaking of God’s reality that many of the recent Mennonite theological emphases on process, development, dynamic truth, narrative and so on, ought to be evaluated. The dynamic, immanent, developmental way of talking about divine reality is a legitimate way of speaking about God but not to the exclusion of God’s radical transcendence and God’s historical particularity.

According to Loewen it is this doctrine (ecclesiology and mission) where we find the “most consistent uniformity” among Mennonite confessions in North America. It is here that the truly distinctive elements of Mennonite theology are situated: its view of the marks of the church, membership, offices, ordinances, marriage, discipline, nonconformity, discipleship, integrity and oaths, nonresistance, the Christian and the state, and the Lord’s day and work. It is here in the context of the church where our Christian life and ethics are most fully expressed. This doctrine needs, therefore, special attention. The urgent issues we have been recently facing concerning leadership and authority, ordination of women, sexuality, marriage-divorce-remarriage, and so on need to be developed quite consciously and deliberately in the context of our doctrine of the church.

It is not a matter of slavishly following what we have said in the past but of framing the question theologically and doctrinally. Essential to doctrinal thinking as it was first employed in the early church was its developmental character. Doctrines were meant to help the church mediate between the biblical teachings and new situations to which the Bible did not speak directly. Thus doctrines in effect helped the early Christians to move beyond the Bible. It is when doctrines become static and ossified that they lose their value. In regard to the above issues we may well need to move beyond what we have said before. Particularly we may need to modify our historical tendency towards a Docetic or overly perfectionist view of the church which ignores the reality of sin and therefore also of forgiveness and acceptance among its members.

Finally, we need a *doctrine of eschatology and consummation* which speaks both to the personal-existential aspects of death, judgment, and the resurrection and to the corporate-social vision of a new heaven and a new earth. With the political and liberation theologians among us there is always the temptation to identify the eschatological future (frequently described in terms of the kingdom of God) with the historical ideal of social justice, freedom, and equality. With the more evangelically-oriented among us there is the temptation to identify the kingdom of God with a totally nonhistorical, nonpolitical and
inward realm (sometimes referred to as eternal life). We need an eschatology which includes both dimensions and reserves perfection and consummation truly for the end of time. Neither individuals nor the church can reach perfection until that day when the whole context will be perfected by God himself.

In conclusion, I would say that the most important and the most problematic doctrine for modern theology generally, and also for us as Mennonites today, is the doctrine of God. All the other doctrines hinge on this starting point. It is a well-recognized historical fact that what characterizes the modern age is its anthropocentric turn. That is, with the Enlightenment there was quite understandably a turn from a theocentric worldview to an anthropocentric or human-centered one. I have posited in a number of my articles that the Anabaptists, and we Mennonites as their progeny, in some indirect ways anticipated (possibly even helped to create the mood for) this important turn to the human subject as the focal point for historical action. In particular our emphasis on free will and preoccupation with ethics and practical Christianity held within it the seeds of modernity. What saved us theologically in the past was, I have argued, the confessional and doctrinal framework within which we couched our anthropological and ethical concerns. God remained the alpha and omega of our human striving for perfection.

As we partake ever more in the assumptions of the modern age, especially the assumptions behind modern technology, and the eclipse of the eternal and the transcendent, our ethics and our social and political programs often become little more than temporary human ideologies of the right, center, or left. Personal morality, human perfection, social and political action, while intrinsic to our whole theology, dare not become the starting point, the hermeneutical key for our whole theology. God as wholly transcendent creator, God as historically incarnated in human flesh, and God as powerfully present in us as individuals, in the church, and in the course of history must be the beginning and end of our theology even as Mennonites. The challenge of working on a theocentric theology for today—one that takes human agency seriously—calls for clear-thinking public discourse. All theocentric claims must themselves be recognized as finite and subject to human fallibility. This is the positive insight of modern anthropocentric theology: that all our language about God is ultimately human language pointing to transcendent mystery.
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