

This We Believe

The most recent edition of *The Mennonite*¹ includes a letter titled “Mennonites undefinable.” The author writes:

“Mennonites have become almost undefinable—one group going one way, others going in various directions. Bottom line, there is no really reliable way to describe Mennonites without confusing whoever you may be trying to explain to who Mennonites are.

“In reading *Christianity Today*, one seldom if ever reads anything by someone identified as Mennonite. As to biblical beliefs held by Mennonites in earlier days, one could count on particular long-held doctrine. The identity wasn’t so difficult; there were Old Order Mennonites, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. It wasn’t too difficult to understand the stance of these three groups. In different parts of the country one could observe some variation of practice, but doctrine was not so different.”

I might disagree with some of the author’s statements, but I understand his confusion and frustration. When asked who Mennonites are and what Mennonites believe, I’m not always sure what to say. My answer usually includes a combination of some basic beliefs or some of the statements in the Mennonite Confession of Faith or a description of what my congregation is like. I almost always mention that the answers might be different if you asked someone from a different Mennonite congregation.

Differences between denominations and similarities within a particular denomination don’t appear to be as obvious as they were 50 years ago. For the most part, I think that’s a good thing because my theory is that many of the Mennonite distinctives that the letter writer is thinking of actually had more to do with tradition than with doctrine, the set of beliefs held and taught by a Church. However, beliefs are important – both what all denominations might hold in common and those that distinguish one from another.

This reminds me of a segment that ran on National Public Radio about ten years ago. In *This I Believe*, people shared a three-minute essay they had written discussing the core values and beliefs that guide their daily lives. Here are just a few of the opening sentences you’ll find if you read the essays on the *This I Believe* website.²

“I believe in being who I am instead of who others want me to be.”

“I believe in friendliness and an open ear.”

“I believe in the power of failure.”

“I believe in taking a daily walk to listen because that is when I am close to God; that is when I find my way.”

Of course, you also find ones that begin with something like “I believe there is no God.”

While none of these essays tells us everything the writer believes, they do give us an idea about what is important to the writer. Perhaps the most practical thing I could do right now is to ask each of us to spend the next 15 minutes writing our own personal *This I Believe* essay. But, I’m not going to do that. Instead, I’m going to give you two examples of *This I Believe* statements that have been used by a large number of people for thousands of years. Then I’m going to begin to talk about some beliefs we as Mennonites, or more accurately, we as Anabaptist Christians share in common.

If Psalm 146 were written as a *This I Believe* essay, it could be summarized in this way: “*I believe we should trust in the Lord and not in mortals.*”

The psalmist frames this psalm, this statement of faith, with words of praise for the Lord, the God of Israel in verses 1 and 2 and again in verse 10. He begins and ends by praising the Lord.

The 3rd and 4th verses warn against placing one’s faith in human beings even if they are extraordinary and exceptional. Ultimately, humans are helpless. They all die, and when they die their planning ceases and

¹ <https://themennonite.org/>

² <https://thisibelieve.org/>

their thinking terminates. Their projects, dreams, and memories go with them. Such mortal creatures are not proper objects of trust.³

On the other hand, as stated in verse 5, the Lord is worthy of trust. God is the one who brings blessedness and happiness.

Next, the psalmist presents a series of four characteristics of God in support of the contention that the person whose help and hope rest on the LORD, the God of Jacob, is truly happy. First, God is the creator of the entire universe. Unlike humans, God is not bound by the structures and limitations of creaturehood. Second, God is constant and faithful. Unlike humans, whose plans and programs die with them, God stays true and remains faithful forever. Third, God guarantees justice for the oppressed. Unlike humans, who are often drawn to power, God takes a special interest in and acts on behalf of the powerless and the despairing – those who are pressed down by the world. And fourth, God is concerned about physical needs. As the maker of heaven and earth, God does not will that humans be oppressed or that they should suffer from hunger.

After listing these four divine characteristics, the psalmist speaks of seven ways in which God acts to alleviate human distress and defend those without rights. Most of those noted as the objects of God's care are persons who lack full authority over their lives. They aren't able or aren't allowed to assume responsibility for and to exercise rights for their own welfare.

Six groups who benefit from God's special attention include: (1) The prisoners – those at the mercy of the legal system or perhaps even in slavery. The Lord frees the prisoners. (2) The blind – those at the mercy of the seeing. The Lord gives sight to the blind. (3) Those who are bowed down or bent low – in debt, in labor, or by oppression. The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down. (4) The righteous – those who do right even if for some reason they find themselves at the mercy of the legal system, the earthly upholders of justice. The Lord loves the righteous. (5) The strangers, sojourners, immigrants – those who aren't members of the surrounding culture. The Lord protects those residing outside their native land. (6) The orphans and the widows – those without the support of a male patriarch in the ancient male-dominated culture. In today's terms, it would be the powerless who are at the mercy of the powerful.

The seventh activity of God is good news for the groups just listed. The psalmist declares that God is committed to the care of all these while at the same time seeing to it that the wicked come to their just reward – frustration and ruin.

Psalm 146 is a teaching psalm. It's one of six psalms (145-150) described as Hallel (hallelujah, praise) hymns used by Jews for thousands of years as part of their daily morning prayers in the synagogue.⁴ We can assume that Jesus and the disciples sang this psalm, perhaps even at the Last Supper. Peter and John may have sung it when they were released from prison. This psalm is a confession of faith, a statement of belief, which Jews and Christians have shared for thousands of years.

Another example of an ancient confession of faith is a prayer called *The Jesus Prayer* or the *Prayer of the Heart*. It was formalized by the Orthodox Churches in the 5th century. The prayer is a brief summation of the Christian faith: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

Contemplate each phrase. *Lord Jesus Christ:* Jesus the man is declared by name to be the Christ, the anointed one of God, as well as being the Lord of our lives. *Son of God:* Jesus is declared to be the Son of God, and therefore divine as well as human. *Have mercy on me, a sinner:* Jesus is declared to be in the position of judgment and mercy. And the one praying it confesses to be a sinner requiring God's grace.

This prayer is one example of a brief confession of faith that helps a person remember the much bigger story contained in the Bible. The prayer can be used as a form of devotion, a short focal point that can be used at any moment, whatever the situation. It's a confession of faith that Christians have shared for a millennium and a half.

Both Psalm 146 and the Jesus Prayer proclaim faith. They provide a foundation to stand on when the world around us is falling apart; when we make mistakes that injure other people or ourselves; when

³ Comments on Psalm 146 adapted from Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. 420.

⁴ James H. Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, ed. Elmer A. Martens and Willard M. Swartley (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006), 697.

circumstances beyond our control change our lives. In times like these a scripture (perhaps Psalm 146) or a prayer (perhaps the Jesus Prayer) remind us to put our trust in God and not in humans. They remind us that God, the creator of the universe, is not bound by human structures, that God is constant and faithful, that God guarantees justice for the oppressed, and that God is concerned about physical needs. These truths don't eliminate the pain we experience as we live in this broken world, but they can give us hope and guide how we live our daily lives.

Psalm 146 is shared by believers in the God of Israel, by both Jews and Christians. The Jesus Prayer is shared by followers of Christ. Now I want to narrow our focus a bit more and mention some other statements of core values and beliefs that are relevant to us a congregation.

We call ourselves the Salina Mennonite Church. I wasn't here when the church was formed so I don't know how much discussion was involved in choosing the name. For some congregations, the choice of name generates a lot of passionate discourse. As you think of our name, Salina Mennonite Church, which word is most important? Which word is most identifying? When thinking about all the churches in Salina, the most identifying word could very well be Mennonite. We are the only Mennonite church in town. We share many of the same values and beliefs with the other churches in Salina, but we also have some that we don't share with them.

The Mennonite Church is not one of the mainline denominations in the US so it's not unusual to get asked questions such as: What is a Mennonite? What do Mennonites believe about this issue or that one? How are Mennonites similar to the Amish?

In those discussions, it's likely that at some point the word *Anabaptist* would be mentioned. That would widen the focus a bit. This could lead to conversations about what Anabaptism looks like when not clothed in Mennonite or Amish traditions.

Recent publications on the subject include: *The Naked Anabaptist* by Stuart Murray,⁵ *What We Believe Together* by Alfred Neufeld,⁶ and *Anabaptist Essentials* by Palmer Becker.⁷ This last book is an expansion of Becker's booklet, *What Is An Anabaptist Christian*,⁸ published by Mennonite Mission Network ten years ago. This booklet has been translated into more than 20 languages with over 25,000 copies in print.

What would a *This We Believe* essay written by an Anabaptist contain? Murray lists 7 core convictions. Neufeld also lists 7 shared convictions. Becker lists 3 key statements and then explains 9 ways in which they are to be applied with the addition of the Holy Spirit to bring the total to ten signs of a unique Christian faith.

Let's look at Becker's summary listing the 3 key statements: "Anabaptists believe that Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our lives, and reconciliation is the center of our work."

I plan to explore these statements during the next six weeks leading up to our visioning retreat on October 26. We will also have three guest speakers during that time. My hope is that our worship will help to guide us as we make plans for the future.

For now, take some time to reread Psalm 146, perhaps from several different translations. Use it as a guide to write your own psalm of praise or *This I Believe* essay.

⁵ Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith, 5th Anniversary Edition*, Herald Press, 2015.

⁶ Alfred Neufeld, *What We Believe Together: Exploring the "Shared Convictions" of Anabaptist-Related Churches, 2nd Edition*, Good Books, 2015.

⁷ Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith*, Herald Press, 2017.

⁸ <https://www.mennonitemission.net/resources/publications/Missio%20Dei/1/What%20is%20an%20Anabaptist%20Christian?>