

***On the Way***  
**Mark 1:1-3**  
**Sermon by Dan Schrock**  
**February 8, 2015**

<sup>1</sup>*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

<sup>2</sup>*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;*

<sup>3</sup>*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make God’s paths straight.’”*

One Sunday a few years ago when I was on vacation, I visited another congregation here in Goshen. The congregation I visited was in the middle of a summer series on faith stories where each Sunday a different person from the congregation told their own faith history. On the Sunday of my visit, the person who spoke was a thoughtful, articulate forty-something man who bared his soul to us. Among other things, he admitted that even though he had been attending this church for 8 years, he had not yet become a member. In fact, he was not sure what he believed about God or the Bible or the future of the world. However, he wasn’t too worried about these questions of belief because correct belief simply wasn’t important to him. He wasn’t attending church because he believed certain things about God. No, he was attending church because of the good relationships he had with other people sitting there that morning. The people in the church were his friends, and those friendships made him feel a part of the congregation. He wasn’t there for the beliefs because he had lots of questions about belief.

This man was articulating an important shift in what people look for in church life. For centuries, Christians have assumed that what most people cared about were correct beliefs. Indeed, Christians have poured enormous energy into creating confessions of belief. For example, the Lutheran tradition has the

Augsburg Confession from 1530; the Reformed tradition has the Westminster Confession of Faith from 1646; and the Baptists have a confession from 1689. Each of these confessions took a lot of energy to create.

Here in my hands I have a copy of the most recent statement of Mennonite belief. It's called the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* which was adopted in 1995. This 1995 *Confession* is not the one I grew up with. Instead I grew up with the *Mennonite Confession of Faith* from 1963, which said that "man has been given a primary leadership role, while the woman is especially fitted for nurture and service." That 1963 confession went on to declare that the "New Testament symbols of man's headship are to be his short hair and uncovered head . . . , and the symbols of woman's role are her long hair and her veiled head."<sup>1</sup> That confession quickly became dated in the 1970s as the insights of feminism were more widely accepted and as most Mennonite women cut their hair and stopped wearing the prayer covering. By the time I became a pastor in the late 1980s, I knew that if I wanted a job in the Mennonite Church I had to explicitly disagree with that part of the 1963 confession, since it had become so out of step with new understandings the church had developed.

Mennonites have written many confessions of faith over the last 500 years. For us confessions of faith come and go. They are instructional tools which serve us for a limited period of time and eventually are replaced by something more current. Our current *Confession*, for example, openly says in the introduction that "confessions give an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times."<sup>2</sup> That statement implies that in the future we will probably write another confession to address changes in the church and in society. I'm not aware

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Neff, John C. Wenger, Harold S. Bender and Howard John Loewen, "Confessions, Doctrinal." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1989. Web. 23 Jan 2015. [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite\\_Confession\\_of\\_Faith,\\_1963#Article\\_14.\\_Symbols\\_of\\_Christian\\_Order](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Confession_of_Faith,_1963#Article_14._Symbols_of_Christian_Order)

<sup>2</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995), 8.

of any plans to write a new confession, but I won't be surprised if it happens in the next 15-25 years. Someday a new confession will replace this one, just as this *Confession* replaced the older 1963 confession.

Confessions of faith show how much we Christians value our beliefs. We care so much about what we believe that we choose our words carefully. We write many drafts and test those drafts with lots of people. We evaluate and debate the words until we can agree that yes, this is what we believe and this is how we want to say what we believe at this moment in time.

**A**nd yet belief is only one part of Christianity. When sociologists of religion want to understand Christianity—or any other religion—they sometimes ask three basic questions:

1. What do people in this religion *believe*?
2. How do people in this religion *behave*?
3. How do people in this religion *belong*?

These three core questions about believing, behaving, and belonging help us understand the dynamics at work in religion. All three are crucial.

Take *behaving*. From the beginning of our history, we Mennonites have known that behaving is an important part of Christianity. You might even say we have paid more attention to behaving than to believing. We've written a huge number of books on ethics, especially on war and peace. We talk a lot about discipleship. These are behavioral issues, and in our tradition they are at least as important as beliefs, maybe even more important than beliefs. Our emphasis on behaving in just and peaceful ways following the example of Jesus makes us highly attractive to other people.

But *belonging* is important too, right? The social and relational aspects of Christianity are precious to many people. That's why the church has small groups

and Sunday school classes and corporate worship. That's why we eat meals together and grow gardens together and work on committees together. We are a social species, so the belonging aspects of religion are essential to us. This is essentially what the man in my opening story was trying to tell others in his congregation.

One Sunday morning about 20 years ago, a woman in the congregation I was then serving met me in the narthex after the worship service. We chatted about the usual topics people talk about on Sunday mornings, and then she surprised me by saying, "Dan, I'm not sure what I believe about Christianity or God. Some days I'm not even sure that I believe in God at all." I was surprised because this dear woman was one of the pillars of the church. She had been there for decades and had done almost everything there was to do in church life. I thought of her as a rock-solid Christian. Yet there she was, openly admitting that belief in God troubled her, even though she had no intention whatsoever of leaving the church. She stayed in the church largely because of her relationships.

Be honest with yourself and ask two questions. First question: *What attracted you to Berkey?* Was it our beliefs? Did you carefully examine the 1995 confession and on that basis decide to land here? It could also be that you landed here because in general you wanted to identify with Mennonite belief, even though you don't know much about the specifics of theology and perhaps don't even care much about the specifics of theology.

Alternatively, did you come to Berkey because of our behavior? Did you examine differing ethical systems and decide we had the best morality around?

Or did you come to Berkey because of the sense of belonging that you eventually felt here?

Second question: *What keeps you at Berkey?* Again, is it beliefs, behavior, or belonging? Are you still here mostly because of our theology, our ethics, or our

relationships? Maybe they're all important to some degree, but which of the three is most precious to you?

**R**egardless of how you personally answer those questions, many people in our time are downplaying belief when they look for a church and instead are highlighting belonging and behaving. Based on recent surveys, Diana Butler Bass, a historian and sociologist of religion in America, says that “Christian belief has entered a critical stage in Western society. Masses of people now reject belief.”<sup>3</sup> When people look for a church, they often don't look for a certain set of beliefs. Instead they look for a church that focuses more on “how” questions. Butler Bass says these how questions are at the forefront of people's minds. How can I experience the presence of God? How can I find the power of God at work in the world? How can I live a life of integrity before God? How can I trust God?

These are behaving and belonging questions. People are looking for communities of people where they can struggle together, learn together, and work together. As I said in last week's sermon, people are seeking spiritual communities where they can express Christianity in practical ways. Spiritual practices, service, peacemaking, ministries of justice, and above all, relationships are important parts of this mix. People want a third option beyond intelligence on ice and ignorance on fire. They do not want to park their minds at the door before they enter church. Nor do they want pure emotion. They want communities where their fully embodied selves are valued: mind, body, spirit, actions, and relationships. They want places where the right questions might be more important than the right answers.

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<sup>3</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 107-108.

I think this is in line with the work of Jesus. According to the gospel of Mark, Jesus came to inaugurate the way (Gk. *hodos*). Listen again to the opening 3 verses of Mark:

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.  
<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;  
<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make God’s paths straight.’”

For Mark, as well as for Matthew and Luke, Jesus is a person on “the way,” who journeys from place to place engaging people and helping them to understand God’s own ways (e.g., Mark 10.17, 32). The followers of Jesus are also said to be on the way. The book of Acts pushes this language one step further and says early Christians were simply called people of “the Way” (Acts 9.2).

As we continue together on this Way with each other, I hope we will continue to welcome others who want to journey with us—whether or not they choose to become members, and whether or not belief is their main reason for walking with us.