Theological Discussions between Mennonites and Baptists Past and Present

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Abstract
The first Baptist congregation (John Smyth's congregation in 1609) did not emerge from the Mennonite community in the Netherlands, but sought out the Mennonites living there as its first dialogue partners outside its own Puritan-Separatist tradition. After describing the Baptist origins in Puritan Separatism, the article presents the documents exchanged between Dutch Mennonites and English Baptists. It also shows the parting of the ways between John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. The article then moves on to the nineteenth century, when new contacts between Baptists and Mennonites were established in Russia and Germany, and finally looks at the theological dialogue in the twentieth century between the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). It concludes with a plea for continued theological dialogue, identifying two themes (historical and theological) that need to be explored in greater depth.

Keywords
Puritan separatism; Early Baptist confessions; Mennonite–Baptist relations; global ecumenical dialogues.

Introduction

Theological dialogue between Mennonites and Baptists began when the first Baptist congregation was formed — at the beginning of the seventeenth century in Amsterdam (the Netherlands). The first Baptist congregation did not emerge from the Mennonite community in the Netherlands, but it did seek out the Mennonites living there as its first dialogue partners outside its own tradition. We will describe this important fact in more detail below. We then skip over 200 years to the nineteenth century, when there were new contacts between Baptists and Mennonites, and finally look at a theological dialogue in the twentieth century. This dialogue emerged as a fruit of the ecumenical movement and was conducted on a global level. But first, let us look at the

theological tradition from which the first Baptist church grew. It was anything but Mennonite.

The Origin of the Baptists in Puritan Separatism, not Anabaptism

The Baptists emerged from the left wing of the Reformation — not of the *Continental* Reformation, however, but the *English* Reformation.[1] Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups known on the continent played no role in the English Reformation,[2] although during Duke Alba's bloody struggle against the Dutch Reformation (1567–1573) many Dutchmen, probably including individual Anabaptists, found asylum in England. The left wing of the English Reformation consisted of radical Puritans, that is Calvinists, and Puritan Separatists, and emerged during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I of England (reigned 1558–1603). The Baptists therefore grew out of the Anglican state church. To understand the differences between Mennonites and Baptists today, we need to be aware of this process.

The Anglican Church was founded by King Henry VIII of the House of Tudor, who broke the Church of England away from the jurisdiction of the Roman Pope and made himself its sole head in 1534.[3] Although the Church of England was thus free from the Pope, it was not yet Protestant. A significant step towards a Protestant Reformation did not take place until the reign of Henry's only son, Edward VI (reigned 1547–1553). As he was not of age, a duke effectively ruled as Lord Protector.[4] Church polity was determined by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury.[5] Under the influence of Protestant Reformed theologians who had come to England from the continent

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[1] Cf. Walter Fleischmann-Bisten, 'Anabaptists, Mennonites, Baptists: How Are They Related?', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 96 (2022), pp. 110–113.

[2] Cf. David Loades, 'Anabaptism and English Sectarianism in the Mid-Sixteenth Century', in *Reform and Reformation: England and the Continent c 1500–c 1750*, ed. by Derek Baker (Blackwell, 1979), pp. 59–70.

[3] Cf. Alec Ryrie, *The Age of Reformation: The Tudor and Stewart Realms 1485–1603*, 3rd edn (Taylor and Francis, 2024).

[4] Cf. Margaret Scard*, Edward Seymour, Lord Protector: Tudor King in all but Name* (The History Press, 2016).

[5] Cf. Susan Wabuda, *Thomas Cranmer* (Routledge, 2017).

(Martin Bucer, Petrus Martyr Vermigli, Johannes a Lasco), Cranmer drew up a new agenda in 1549, the *Book of Common Prayer*. It combined Catholic forms with Protestant content. After the early death of Edward VI, his half-sister Mary (known as 'Bloody Mary'), the wife of the Catholic Spanish King Philip II, was crowned and reversed both the independence of the English Church from the Pope and all Reformation measures. While Catholics loyal to the pope had been persecuted under Henry VIII and in some cases sentenced to death as high traitors, the persecution now hit the followers of the Reformation: over 300 Protestants (including Thomas Cranmer) were executed, and over 800 fled to the continent and formed exile communities in Frankfurt am Main, Strasbourg, Zürich, and Geneva, among other places.

When Mary Tudor died in 1558, her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth (known as 'the Virgin Queen') ascended the throne. During her long reign (45 years), the Church of England became definitively Protestant in doctrine, but remained Catholic in many forms. The Act of Supremacy of 1559 required the clergy to swear an oath of obedience to the Queen as supreme governor of the church, and the Uniformity Act of the same year made attendance at the services of the state church compulsory for all subjects. The Confession of the Thirty-Nine Articles, which Elizabeth declared mandatory for all clergy in 1571, is characterised by both Lutheran and Reformed theology. However, it also lists the royal supremacy over state and church as an article of confession (Art. 37). 'Certain Anabaptists' are mentioned in Article 38 because they wrongly practised the community of goods. The 39th article also distances itself from the content of an Anabaptist conviction, namely that Christians are forbidden to take any oath.

Queen Elizabeth fought all challenges to the Anglican Church she had established — both from Catholics and from those Protestants who wanted to further the reformation of the church. Quite a few theologians who had returned to England after the end of the persecution under Mary Tudor belonged to this Protestant movement. They wanted to complete the English Reformation insofar as they wanted to 'purify' the forms of piety and the church constitution of

everything Catholic and return it to the apostolic model.[6] This is why they were labelled with the derisive name Puritans. The Puritans did not consider that infant baptism or the right and duty of God-fearing governments to carry out a Protestant Reformation should be abolished, but they did consider that the office of bishop and royal supremacy over the church should be abolished. They demanded a presbyterial-synodal church order modelled on that of Geneva. They also wanted to see the strict church discipline customary in Geneva realised. When it turned out that they were unable to achieve their ecclesiastical political goals due to the Queen's resistance, some of them took the path of separation, in that they formed their own congregations independent of the state church.[7] For them, the English state church was a false church, even anti-Christian because of its Catholic traditions, with a worship service contrary to the Scriptures. The first Baptist congregation eventually grew out of this separatist movement.[8]

The leading theologian of the Puritan Separatists was the preacher Robert Browne (ca. 1550–1633). He had turned away not only from Anglican Episcopalianism but also from Calvinist Presbyterianism and regarded the independent local congregation, which was constituted by a formal covenant of true believers, as the visible form of the true church. For Browne, the leadership of the church lies in the 'gathered church', that is, the general assembly of all members of the local church. Each local congregation has the right and the duty to regulate its own affairs (including the election of pastors) without being subject to higher authorities. These principles of a congregationalist church order were

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[6] See Karin Maag, 'Calvin's Impact in Elizabethan England', in *Calvinus Pastor Ecclesiae: Papers of the Eleventh International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. by Herman J. Selderhuis and Arnold Huijgen (Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 2016), pp. 365–373.

[7] See B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (Oxford University Press, 1971).

[8] See John Briggs, 'Origin and Development of the Baptist Movement in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in *Baptists Worldwide: Origins, Expansions, Emerging Realities*, ed. by Erich Geldbach (Cascade, 2022), pp. 3–12; Michael A. G. Haykin, 'Separatists and Baptists', in *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions, Vol. I: The Post-Reformation Era, c. 1559–c. 1689*, ed. by John Coffey (Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 113–138; Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists: 1603–1649* (Boydell and Brewer, 2006); B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century: A History of the English Baptists, Vol. 1* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996).

adopted by the first Baptist churches and are still generally recognised in the Baptist tradition today.

After Browne founded the first Separatist congregation in Norwich in April 1581, he was immediately imprisoned. To escape further persecution, he emigrated to Middelburg (in the Dutch province of Zeeland) with the majority of his congregation in 1582.[9] There, however, there were (for unclear reasons) violent disputes in the congregation, as a result of which Browne was expelled from it. The exiles were now 'Brownists' without Browne. Other Puritans formed a Separatist underground congregation in London in 1587 under the leadership of John Greenwood and Henry Barrow, both of whom were executed in 1593. The community, which had been given the name 'Barrowists', then went into exile in Amsterdam (in the Dutch province of North Holland). In 1592, they appointed the former Anglican priest Francis Johnson (1562–1618) as pastor, who was soon arrested and tried to serve his overseas congregation from prison until he was released in 1597 and also went to Amsterdam. The congregation prospered there, enabling it to acquire its own meeting house and grow from around 40 to around 300 members. When the Scottish King James VI of the House of Stuart became King of England and Ireland (as James I) after the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, the Separatists pinned their hopes on him because he had been brought up as a Puritan. However, the new king turned a deaf ear to most of the wishes of the church-going Puritans and even wanted to Anglicanise the Scottish Reformed Church.

The founding father of the first Baptist church, John Smyth (ca. 1570–1612), had been a student of Francis Johnson at Cambridge University and then an Anglican priest in Lincoln. In 1607, he renounced Anglicanism and became pastor of a Separatist church in Gainsborough (Lincolnshire), which followed the principles of Francis Johnson's church in Amsterdam.[10] After the state responded with the constant observation and arrests of church members, it was decided to

[9] Cf. Cory Cotter, 'The Dutch Republic: English and Scottish Dissenters in Dutch Exile, c. 1575–1688', in *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions,* ed. by John Coffey, I, pp. 163–181.

[10] See James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, 32 (Herald Press, 1991).

emigrate to Amsterdam in 1608. There, however, the new exiles did not join Johnson's congregation (now known as the Ancient Church), but kept to themselves because the practical organisation of their congregational life differed from that of the older congregation. In contrast to Johnson, Smyth understood the authority of the ministers (pastors or elders) as only temporarily delegated by the congregation. The greatest difference, however, arose from the fact that Smyth and his congregation became convinced that the infant baptism they had received in the Church of England was not a true baptism, because according to the apostolic model, only those who professed their faith could be baptised. Smyth now understood baptism as 'the mutual contract betwixt God & the party baptised expressed visibly in confession'.[11]

Robert Browne had already declared that because the churches of Rome and Canterbury are false churches, their baptisms are also false. However, he had nothing against infant baptism as such as long as it took place in a true, that is Separatist, church. He also did not consider repetitions of Anglican baptisms to be necessary. In this respect, Smyth's congregation thought differently from all other Separatists. For them, infant baptism was wrong in two senses: firstly, as a rite of a false church and secondly as a deviation from the apostolic pattern, which only permitted adult baptism. So it became clear to the church of Smyth that in God's eyes they were unbaptised people and thus obliged to follow the apostolic pattern of baptism. As they did not find anyone who had not received a false baptism or belonged to a false church (not even among the Mennonites), Smyth saw it as necessary at the beginning of 1609 to baptise himself first and then all his church members. These exiles from English Separatists had thus become the first Baptists. However, later Baptists regarded Smyth's self-baptism as unbiblical.

In their exile in Amsterdam, John Smyth and his congregation held theological debates not only with the English Separatists already living there, but also with the Waterland Mennonites. The North Holland region of Waterland lies between Amsterdam and Purmerend.

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[11] *The Works of John Smyth*, vol. II, ed. by W. T. Whitley (Cambridge University Press, 1915), p. 671.

The Mennonites there formed a faction that was less rigorous in matters of church discipline than the other Mennonites; they also had their own congregation in Amsterdam. We will now take a look at Smyth's conversations with these Mennonites.

Early Baptist Confessions and the Conversations with Mennonites

The most important source collection of Baptist confessions was published in 1959 under the title 'Baptist Confessions of Faith' by William L. Lumpkin and reissued in 2011 in a second revised edition by Bill J. Leonard.[12] It begins with a chapter on 'Forerunner Confessions', in which six 'Anabaptist Confessions' and five 'Pioneer English Separatist-Baptist Confessions' are documented, before the 'London Confession' of 1644 appears in a new chapter as the first confession of an association of Baptist churches.

The section on 'Anabaptist Confessions' contains the following documents:

(1) *Eighteen Dissertations Concerning the Entire Christian Life and of What It Consists*, in German 'Achtzehen schlußrede so betreffende eyn gantz Christlich leben, war an es gelegen ist', by Balthasar Hubmaier from Waldshut from 1524, a text from Hubmaier's pre-Anabaptist period;[13] the first baptism of believers in the Anabaptist sense took place on 21 January 1525 in Zürich.

(2) The *Schleitheim Confession*; German: 'Schleitheimer Bekenntnis' or 'Schleitheimer Artikel' from 1527.[14]

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[12] *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. edn, ed. by William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard (Judson Press, 2011).

[13] The original German version in *Balthasar Hubmaier, Schriften*, ed. by Gunnar Westin and Torsten Bergsten, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte, 29 (Bertelsmann, 1962), pp. 69–74.

[14] In German in *Bekenntnisse der Kirche: Bekenntnistexte aus zwanzig Jahrhunderten*, ed. by Hans Steubing (Brockhaus, 1985), pp. 261–267.

(3) The *Discipline of the Church: How a Christian ought to Live*; German: 'Ordnung der Gläubigen, wie ein Christ leben soll', created by Hans Schlaffer in 1527 according to Lumpkin and Leonard.[15]

(4) *Account of Our Religion, Teaching, and Faith*; German: 'Rechenschaft unserer Religion, Lehre und Glaubens' by the Moravian-Hutterite Anabaptist missionary Peter Riedemann from 1540.[16]

(5) *Brief Confession of the Principal Articles of the Christian Faith* (in 40 articles), which Hans de Ries and Lubbert Gerrits published in 1580 on behalf of the Waterland Mennonites.

(6) The *Dordrecht Confession* of 1632, which was intended to serve a union of Flemish and Frisian Mennonites and should not be confused with the Dordrecht Canons of the Dutch Reformed Church from 1619.

This inclusion of Anabaptist texts translated into English in a collection of Baptist confessions is commendable for practical reasons. However, if this gives rise to the idea that one cannot understand the Baptist confessions of faith without considering their 'forerunners' in continental Anabaptism, then the inclusion of these texts is misleading. The first Baptists around John Smyth knew only one of these six texts, namely the Waterland Confession of 1580 (no. 5 in the list above). Smyth had asked the Mennonites in Amsterdam in 1610 for a reprint of this confession in order to become better acquainted with their doctrine. The introduction of believer's baptism in his congregation had already taken place a year earlier.

The only real forerunner of the Baptist Confessions was the first text that Lumpkin and Leonard printed under the new heading 'Pioneer English Separatist-Baptist Confessions'. This is (1) the *True Confession of*

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[15] Original German text in Werner O. Packull, *Die Hutterer in Tirol: Early Anabaptism in Switzerland, Tyrol and Moravia* (Wagner, 2000), pp. 343–351.

[16] The German version was printed several times, e.g. as *Rechenschaft unserer Religion, Lehre und Glaubens: Von den Brüdern, die man die Huterischen nennt* (Berne: Verlag der Huterischen Brüder Gemeine, 1902); cf. Andrea Chudaska and Peter Riedemann, *Konfessionsbildendes Täufertum im 16. Jahrhundert*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte, 76 (Bertelsmann, 2003).

the Faith, which Francis Johnson's Separatist exile congregation (Ancient Church) drew up in Amsterdam in 1596.[17]

Even for the second text in this section, the term 'forerunner' no longer fits. It is (2) the *Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles*, which John Smyth formulated in 1609 after the introduction of believer's baptism in his Separatist church.[18] These twenty articles can justifiably be counted as the oldest Baptist confession. However, it must be remembered that Smyth addressed it to the Mennonite congregation in Amsterdam in order to demonstrate his orthodoxy and thus underpin his application for admission to the Mennonite community. Smyth had come to the conclusion that he should have asked the Mennonites to receive believer's baptism.[19]

Before we continue the enumeration of what Lumpkin and Leonard called the 'Separatist-Baptist Confessions', we must ask two historical questions that are closely related to this confession by Smyth. First, how does Smyth come to the conclusion that infant baptism is reprehensible and that only believer's baptism is scriptural? And secondly, how can it be explained that Smyth, having made the decision to introduce believer's baptism, did not ask the Mennonites to carry it out but later regretted this?

The fact that John Smyth's congregation in their exile in Amsterdam came to the unprecedented conviction among Puritan Separatists that infant baptism should generally be rejected and that baptism should instead be administered to confessors of Christ could be due to the fact that they had their meeting place in rooms behind a

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17 Johnson's congregation also translated this confession into Latin in 1598 and sent it to the most important Reformed theologian at Leiden University at the time, Franciscus Junius the Elder, in the hope of gaining his approval. In his reply, Junius did not address the content of the criticism of the Church of England, but instead criticised the Separatists' belligerence and called for peace. This did not convince the Separatists; see C. de Jonge, 'Franciscus Junius and the English Separatists at Amsterdam', in *Reform and Reformation*, ed. by Baker, pp. 165–173.

18 In the original Latin wording ('*Corde credimus*') in *The Works of John Smyth*, ed. by Whitely, II, pp. 682–684; English translation in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. by Lumpkin and Leonard, pp. 91–95.

19 The numerous changes in Smyth's theology and their continuities are discussed in Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite*, (Mercer University Press, 2003).

bakery owned by the Waterland Mennonite Jan Munter; in other words, that they came to the realisation of the New Testament baptism of believers through Mennonites. However, nowhere in his numerous writings does Smyth suggest that this was the case, even in the writings in which he later commended himself to the Mennonites as part of their community. Moreover, there is clear evidence that Smyth's congregation had come to reject infant baptism through their own Bible study and theological reflection without Mennonite influence. There was a general Separatist conviction that Catholic and Anglican baptisms were 'false' baptisms because they were practised by 'false churches'. From there it was only a relatively small step to the realisation that the practice of infant baptism itself, and not just its ecclesiastical context, was wrong. Accordingly, Smyth wrote to his Separatist brethren, 'The Seperation must either go back to England, or go forward to true baptisme'![20] In other words, he wanted to put an end to a previous half-measure of the Separatists. That he was not motivated to do so by the Mennonites is clear from the fact that he did not think of asking them for believer's baptism. At that time, he counted them among the churches that had fallen away from the Lord Jesus Christ, whose sins he did not want to partake in by accepting their baptism. However, he realised soon after his self-baptism that he was wrong. Until then, he had more prejudices than knowledge about the Mennonites. When he now realised that the Mennonites were to be regarded as a 'true church', he knew that he should have asked them to baptise him. Therefore, together with thirty-two of his church members (the majority of his congregation), he asked the Mennonites in Amsterdam for forgiveness and at the same time for acceptance into the fellowship of their churches.

In order to convince the Mennonite community of the orthodoxy of himself and his followers, Smyth presented them with the above-mentioned 'Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles' in 1609. In it, however, Smyth deals more clearly with intra-Calvinist disputes than with the ethics typical of Mennonites. There is no mention of refusal to take an oath, non-resistance, or renunciation of political office. However, he does advocate the defence of human free will in the

[20] *The Works of John Smyth*, ed. by Whitley, II, p. 567.

acceptance of salvation through Jesus Christ, which had been put forward by the Reformed professor Jacobus Arminius in Leiden since 1604 against the doctrine of double predestination[21] — for which Smyth could certainly count on the approval of the Mennonites.

However, the Mennonites wanted to ensure that the English actually shared the Mennonite faith and therefore asked Hans de Ries, the Mennonite elder from Alkmaar in North Holland, to draw up a short confession of faith that could be presented to the English. He did so and based this 'Short Confession of Faith' (with 38 articles) formulated in 1610[22] on the Waterland Confession (with 40 articles) drawn up by him and Lubbert Gerrits in 1580 (see document 5 in the list of 'Anabaptist Confessions' above).[23] De Ries's 'Short Confession' was soon signed by John Smyth and forty-two other Englishmen.

(3) This Mennonite *Short Confession of Faith* signed by Smyth and his followers was counted by Lumpkin and Leonard as the third among the 'Pioneer English Separatist-Baptist Confessions'. With their signature, Smyth's group formally accepted the Mennonite convictions of refusal to take an oath, non-resistance, and abstention from political office. In response, the majority of the members of the Waterland Mennonite congregation in Amsterdam agreed to recognise Smyth's group as an English-speaking Mennonite congregation. A new, this time Mennonite baptism was not required of the English; it was accepted that they had been baptised within the Reformed Church upon their confession of faith. Consultations also took place with other Mennonite congregations from the Bevredigde Broederschap (United Brotherhood) in the Netherlands, and when no protest came from there, the group around Smyth was accepted into the community of Mennonite congregations on 23 May 1610.[24] In return, Smyth shortly

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[21] See Thomas H. McCall and Keith D. Stanglin, *After Arminius: A Historical Introduction to Arminian Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2021); cf. Uwe Swarat, 'Für wen ist Jesus gestorben – für wenige, für viele, für alle?' (in a forthcoming *Festschrift*, 2026).

[22] Text in English in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. by Lumpkin and Leonard, pp. 96–105.

[23] Text in English in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. by Lumpkin and Leonard, pp. 42–61 (under 'Anabaptist Confessions').

[24] Thus Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation*, 84. White, *English Separatist Tradition*, p. 140, however, understands the sources to mean that the Waterland Mennonites did not react favourably to Smyth's application for admission during his lifetime. The remaining followers of Smyth were

afterwards wrote nineteen 'Arguments against infant baptism'[25] (in Latin) and presented them to the Mennonites.

(4) The confessional text documented by Lumpkin and Leonard in fourth place is skipped here and dealt with below.

(5) When Smyth died in August 1612, the English Mennonite congregation lost its pre-eminent leader. The idea therefore arose of uniting with the Dutch Mennonite congregation to form a single congregation. In order to win over the Dutch, the English wrote a comprehensive confession of faith in English and Dutch, the *Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Christian Religion,* which underwent several revisions in the years 1612–1614. This confession was included by Lumpkin and Leonard as the fifth and last among the 'Pioneer English Separatist-Baptist Confessions'. The desired merger of the two congregations actually took place on 20 January 1615. This meant that John Smyth's Mennonite congregation ceased to exist. The English-language church services were discontinued around 1640, when all the English members of the congregation had assimilated into the Dutch.

A minority from Smyth's Separatist congregation (around ten people under the leadership of Thomas Helwys) did not agree from the outset with the application for admission to the Mennonites. They complained that Smyth assumed an apostolic chain of tradition for true baptism, of which the Mennonites were the youngest link and into whose ranks they should therefore be incorporated. The group around Helwys continued to regard the new beginning of the Separatists as a Baptist congregation alongside the Mennonites as legitimate before God and excluded the group around Smyth from the congregation. They considered apostolic succession in both baptism and ordination to be an invention of the Roman Pope. They accused the Mennonites of supporting Smyth's error and thus establishing a new, man-made law for baptismal succession. Alongside that, the Mennonites seemed to be too lax for them in their treatment of biblical law, especially the Sabbath commandment.

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not accepted into the Mennonite community until January 1615. See also Wright, *Early English Baptists*, pp. 41–43.

[25] In *The Works of John Smyth*, ed. by Whitley, II, pp. 710–732.

(4) The remaining congregation around Helwys wrote their own confession of faith in 1611, *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland*. This confession was placed in chronological order by Lumpkin and Leonard as the fourth among the 'Pioneer English Separatist-Baptist Confessions'. It served the self-assurance of the small group, among other things by distinguishing it from Mennonite teachings. Above all, however, its purpose was to win over the Separatists who had remained in England to the changes in doctrine and practice that had taken place in the Amsterdam congregation and to prepare for the congregation's return to England. It is the first genuinely Baptist confession in history. In terms of content, it remains largely within the framework of Reformed orthodoxy. However, congregationalism is advocated, namely the conviction that every local congregation is the church in the full sense of the word and is allowed to determine itself. In contrast to the Calvinist-Separatist tradition, it is taught that baptism should take place upon the baptised person's confession of sin and faith and is therefore not intended for children. Also contrary to the Calvinist convictions of the other Separatists, but in agreement with Reformed Arminianism,[26] it is declared that Adam's sin was 'imputed' to all humans, so that all humans became mortal. As a sinner, every human is inclined to all evil and wants nothing good. However, every human can accept or reject God's saving grace. The predestination of God refers to the fact that all who believe in Christ will be saved and all who do not believe will be damned. Once you have received God's grace, you are not guaranteed it forever, but can lose it again. Implicitly directed against Mennonites are the statements that members of the magistracy, who wield the sword in this service according to God's will, can also be members of the congregation of believers and that one may take an oath according to God's law.[27]

[26] See note 21 above.

[27] Cf. Uwe Swarat, 'The Relationship between State and Church: Classical Concepts Examined from a Baptist Perspective', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 20.1 (2020), pp. 9–29; in German: U. Swarat, *Gnade und Glaube*: *Studien zur baptistischen Theologie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlangsanstatt, 2021), pp. 210–231.

The theological dialogue between the first Baptist congregation and its neighbouring Mennonite congregation in Amsterdam was therefore over soon after it had begun in 1609, or basically did not take place at all. When John Smyth began the dialogue, he was already convinced that founding a Baptist congregation alongside a Mennonite congregation was a sin. He and his group of English exiles baptised as believers wanted to be recognised as Mennonites by the Waterland Mennonites and formulated the 'Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles' in 1609 with this intention in mind. The confession is therefore on the one hand the first confession of a Baptist congregation, but on the other hand it also documents a farewell to Baptist thinking. This farewell was finalised by the signatures of the group around Smyth under the Mennonite 'Short Confession of Faith' written by De Ries in 1610.

The much smaller part of John Smyth's congregation under the leadership of Thomas Helwys, which did not seek to join the Mennonites, did not engage in a doctrinal dialogue with the Mennonites, but returned to England soon after the split in Smyth's congregation — not to submit to the English state church, but to spread the newly developed Baptist congregational model in England. Despite fierce suppression, this actually succeeded; the large group of so-called General Baptists in England emerged from this one small congregation.[28] (The so-called Particular Baptists emerged independently of the General Baptists around 1640 from theological discussions in a London Separatist congregation.[29])

When in 1624 conflicts arose in the London Baptist congregation under Helwys's successor John Murton, an expelled group around Elias Tookey wrote to the Waterland elder Hans de Ries and asked to be accepted into the Mennonite community. However, the different attitudes towards taking the oath and assuming political office prevented this. Even the inclusion of other Baptist congregations in England in the dialogue did not result in a theological agreement, so this

[28] See White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 15–58.

[29] See below in the section 'Continuation of the Theological Dialogue' under the discussion of an historical clarification.

discussion by letter between Waterland Mennonites and English Baptists was broken off in 1630.[30]

Baptist–Mennonite Contacts in the Nineteenth Century and the Emergence of the Mennonite Brethren

The relationship between the Baptists, who gradually spread worldwide from England, and the Mennonites, who also live in many countries today, has scarcely been researched to date. It seems that the two free churches barely knew each other and at least showed little interest in each other. Contact between them is only known from the nineteenth century. The correspondence and personal contacts between Johann Gerhard Oncken (1800–1884), the founder of European-Continental Baptist Churches, and Russian-German Mennonites and the visits by the Baptist missionary August Liebig (1836–1914) to German Mennonites in Ukraine were particularly significant.[31] At that time, quite a few Mennonites felt that their congregational life was comparatively rigid and formalistic. Like the Baptists, they wanted to have an evangelistic effect and aim for the conversion of individuals in their sermons. They also adopted baptism by immersion from the Baptists, rather than by sprinkling. At the same time, the original Anabaptist movement was to be revived through a stronger emphasis on church discipline and lay involvement.

Some of the Mennonites with this revivalist and missionary attitude were expelled from their community, while others left of their own accord. From 1860 they formed their own congregations, which they called Mennonite Brethren congregations.[32] The first supra-regional conference of the new Free Church was held in 1872, and a year later they adopted their own confession of faith, based on that of

30 See Wright, *The Early English Baptists*, pp. 61–64.

31 See Albert W. Wardin Jr. and August G. A. Liebig, 'German Baptist Missionary and Friend to the Mennonite Brethren', *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 28 (2010), pp. 167–186.

32 See Abram H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinde in Russland 1860–1945*, 2nd edn (Samenkorn, 2010); Johannes Dyck, 'Mennonite Brethren', in *A Dictionary of European Baptist Life and Thought*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 33, ed. by John H. Y. Briggs (Paternoster, 2009), pp. 320–321; J. H. Lohrenz, 'Mennonite Brethren Church', *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, ed. by Cornelius Krahn (Mennonite Publishing House, 1982), pp. 595–602.

the German Baptists. The Mennonite Brethren's best-known theologian was Jakob Kroeker (1872–1948), who, like three other Mennonite Brethren, had been trained at the German Baptist Seminary in Hamburg-Horn. In the course of the emigration of Mennonites to the United States of America, the 'Konferenz der Vereinigten Mennoniten-Brüder in Nord-Amerika' (Conference of United Mennonite Brethren in North America) was founded in 1889. A seminary was established in Hillsboro, Kansas. Foreign missions (especially in India and China) were also carried out, first under the auspices of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, then under its own responsibility. Since 1990 there has been an International Committee of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB), who published a new confession of faith in 2005.[33] To this day, the Mennonite Brethren congregations stand between the Baptists on the one hand and the so-called 'kirchliche Mennoniten' (English: ecclesiastical Mennonites) on the other.

In Germany, two Baptist pastors in particular sought contact with the Mennonites in the nineteenth century. They were Carl-Christian Tauchnitz from Saxony (1798–1884) and the Englishman William Henry Angas (1781–1832).[34] Both promoted among Mennonites the then still unfamiliar idea of world mission, specifically financial support for the English Baptist Missionary Society. Tauchnitz also supported the Mennonite Schulverein (School Society) and was instrumental in settling the internal Mennonite dispute over a new hymnal in the Palatinate.[35] Angas also worked for a short time with the Mennonites in the Palatinate and was crucial in helping them to see themselves as part of the whole of evangelical Christianity. The activities of these two Baptists did not lead to the founding of Mennonite Brethren congregations, but they indirectly gave the impetus for the

[33] 'What We Believe', International Community of Mennonite Brethren <https://www.icomb.org/what-we-believe/> [accessed 7 April 2025].

[34] See Astrid von Schlachta, '"Ach, daß wir doch alle dahin gelangen möchten": Der Einfluss des Baptismus auf die Mennoniten', in *Entgrenzungen: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Andrea Strübind*, ed. by Sabine Hübner and Kim Strübind (Duncker & Humbolot, 2023), pp. 41–51; John D. Roth, 'William Henry Angas Encounters the Mennonites: How Nineteenth-Century Palatine Mennonites Became Protestant', in *Crossing Baptist Boundaries: A Festschrift to Honor William Brackney*, ed. by Erich Geldbach (Mercer University Press, 2019), pp. 242–262.

[35] For this German historical and geographical region, see 'Palatinate', Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palatinate> [accessed 19 May 2025].

emergence of Mennonite world mission organisations such as the Dutch Doopsgezinde Zendingsvereeniging (Mission Association of Baptism-minded People), founded in 1847. Overall, it can be said that the Baptists had a much greater influence on the Mennonites than the Mennonites on the Baptists.

Theological Dialogue Between Baptists and Mennonites in the Twentieth Century

There was no official theological dialogue in the nineteenth century, neither between Baptists and (ecclesiastical) Mennonites nor between Baptists and Mennonite Brethren. This situation changed with the progress of the ecumenical movement in the second half of the twentieth century. In the years from 1989 to 1992, official theological dialogues were held between the two free churches for the first time, at world level. The dialogue partners were the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and the Mennonite World Conference (MWC), in which the so-called 'kirchliche' (ecclesiastical) Mennonites were united.

This was not the first ecumenical dialogue for either world communion. The Baptist World Alliance, founded in London in July 1905, had already held theological discussions with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1973–1977), the Roman Catholic Church (1984–1988), and the Lutheran World Federation (1986–1989) before the dialogue with the Mennonites began. The Mennonite World Conference met for the first time in Basel in 1925, that is 400 years after the first believer's baptism in the Reformation in Zürich. The conference, which initially took place at irregular intervals, gradually developed into a worldwide institution. Before the dialogue with the Baptist World Alliance began, the Mennonite World Conference had already held ecumenical talks with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches between 1984 and 1989.

The final report of the Mennonite–Baptist dialogue is very formally entitled 'Theological Conversations'.[36] However, the text itself explains that the dialogue focused on 'matters related to our identity as believers' churches' (12).[37] It names three such matters, namely the 'authority in the Christian life', the 'nature of the Church', and the 'relationships between the Church and the world' (12.29). These three topics are discussed in more detail and each is concluded with overviews of 'convergences and divergences'. The entire report concludes with 'recommendations' to the commissioning world communions. The delegations were led on the Baptist side by William H. Brackney from Canada and on the Mennonite side by Ross T. Bender from the USA.[38]

On the nature and role of authority in the Christian life, the Mennonites explain in the dialogue report that they confess with the reformers of the sixteenth century the authority of Holy Scripture instead of church tradition (*sola scriptura*) and instead of the authority of the Pope the authority of the congregation (priesthood of all believers). Some Mennonites, however, understood the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century as neither Catholic nor Protestant, but as a 'third way' (15). Like the early Anabaptists, the Mennonites placed more importance on following Christ than on true faith. The 'true test of faith' is ethical 'obedience to the written word of Scripture' (13). Within the Holy Scriptures, the New Testament has 'the priority' over the Old, and within the New Testament, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is particularly authoritative (13). The person of Jesus is especially important to Mennonites because they regard his human life as a 'model for Christians' (13). According to Jesus's rule in Matthew 18:15–17, the leadership of the church takes place through 'mutual admonition' (14).

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36 Original English version in Baptist World Alliance, *Baptists and Mennonites in Dialogue: Report on Conversations Between the Baptist World Alliance and the Mennonite World Conference 1989–1992* (Baptist World Alliance, 2013).

37 The numbers in parentheses refer to the page numbers of the English version and are used for ease of reference throughout this section.

38 In addition to the chairman from Canada, the Baptist delegation included Richard Coffin (Canada), Beverly Dunstan Scott, Daniel B. McGee, and David M. Scholer (all from the USA) and G. Noel Vose (Australia). It is incomprehensible that no one from Europe was involved. In addition to the chairman from the USA, the Mennonite delegation also included Buelah Hostetler, Anna Juhnke, and Daniel Schipani (all from the USA), Abe Dueck (Canada) and Ed van Straten (Netherlands).

In the present, many Mennonites proclaim Jesus as 'the model and the power for a transformed world order' (15), thus seeing Jesus's life as a model not only for the church, but also for the world at large.

The Baptists define their understanding of authority as 'the right and power to command obedience in the context of responsible freedom' (15). Jesus Christ, 'our God and Saviour' (16), is named as the 'the sole and absolute authority' in this sense. Because Jesus is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, for Baptists the Holy Scriptures are also 'an important source of authority' (16). 'Scripture is viewed as having the last word' (16). In this sense, Baptists also profess the Reformation formula *sola scriptura*. From Hebrews 1:1–2 they conclude that within the Bible 'more attention' is given to the New Testament (16), and on the basis of 2 Timothy 3:16–17 they also acknowledge the authority of the Old Testament. Because Jesus Christ is not only revealed in Scripture, but is also present in the church, Baptists accept the authority of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the church is also a 'vehicle of authority' (17). When the church seeks the will of Christ through prayer in Scripture, individuals submit to the church. This submission is not always easy for Baptists because freedom is particularly important to them.

In the compilation of convergences and divergences on authority, the report counts the statement 'Baptists and Mennonites are non-creedal' among the convergences, and among the divergences it says, among other things, 'Baptists are concerned about "soul freedom" and individual accountability before God whereas Mennonites are concerned about accountability to God through community' (18, 19).

With regard to the church, Mennonites and Baptists, like all free churches, agree that the church is by nature a believers' church and should be visible as such. In the more detailed description, however, they emphasise different things.

Mennonites, the report says, draw their description of the nature of the church from 'two major sources', the New Testament and sixteenth-century Anabaptism (20); that is, not from Scripture alone but from Scripture and tradition. This results in five 'particular emphases' (20). Firstly, membership of the church is based on a voluntary confession of faith, followed by believer's baptism. Most Mennonite

congregations expect a believers' baptism for prospective members from other denominations if this has not yet taken place. Secondly, the church order is congregationalist. It was not until the nineteenth century that Mennonite congregations began to appoint trained, salaried, and mobile pastors. Before that, only lay people preached and only lay people were in charge. Thirdly, church discipline according to Matthew 18:15–22 used to be important. Today, the emphasis is on congregational fellowship and mutual support. Fourthly, the nature of the church of Jesus also includes suffering for the sake of Christ and non-resistance. Fifthly, Mennonite worship services are generally neither liturgical nor charismatic, but Christocentric; the mood is characterised by the earnestness of following Christ. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are described as 'ordinances' of Jesus and are not understood as 'sacramental channels or re-enactments of that grace', but as 'signs and symbols of the grace of God' (23, 24).

According to the dialogue report, Baptist views of the church are characterised by the local church, in which all the means to salvation are available and which is endowed with all needful power and authority, as well as by the concept of a voluntary church, which comes about through a written covenant of the church members and through jointly recognised confessions of faith in the sense of theological statements of consensus. Baptists emphasise the autonomy of local congregations in dynamic tension with their interdependence in the form of congregational associations and unions. Baptist church services are partly centred on the sermon, partly on songs and prayers, and often also on the evangelistic invitation to follow Jesus. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are also described by many Baptists as 'ordinances' of Jesus; however, they are often ascribed a 'sacramental' nature (26). Immersion at baptism not only portrays obedience to Christ, but also death and resurrection with Christ according to Romans 6:1–4. For most Baptists, the Lord's Supper is a '"memorial feast" open to all true believers' (27).

Among the convergences between Baptists and Mennonites, in addition to the free-church and congregationalist understanding of the church and the simple style of worship and the Lord's Supper, is, of course, baptism. The report states the following:

> Baptists and Mennonites practice believer's baptism which is regarded as the sign and symbol [two terms also used in relation to the Lord's Supper] of a person's response in faith and obedience to God's free offer of grace and forgiveness in Christ. Baptism is expected of believers and is generally viewed as entry into church membership and a commitment to follow Christ. (28)

But baptism is also mentioned in the divergences, namely with the sentence 'Baptists view immersion as the proper mode of baptism to represent the believers' identification with the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Mennonites practice several modes of baptism' (28).

The Mennonite side of the dialogue summarises the relationship between the church and the world in three terms: Mission, Peace, Politics. The mission of the church includes 'both the commission to make disciples […] and ministries of compassion and service' (29). Mennonites see it as their mission in the world to make peace in the sense of non-resistance and love of enemies. However, there were and are Mennonites who did not refuse military service. As far as holding political office is concerned, Swiss Mennonites are still against it, while Dutch Mennonites are open to it.

The Baptist side regards evangelism and missions as a primary task of the church. There are differences among Baptists not only in the motives for mission, but also in mission styles, for example in the distinction between churches that send missionaries and churches that receive missionaries. In terms of the substance of the mission effort, some Baptists respond primarily to people's 'spiritual' needs, while others also respond to their 'social, economic and physical' needs (36). Regarding Christian involvement in politics, the report lists several different Baptist positions, ranging from withdrawal from the world to a 'theocratic view' in which Christians seek to enforce God's will on earth through politics (38). When it comes to war and peace, most Baptists hold to the just war tradition, while some only accept non-violence.

Among the convergences between Mennonites and Baptists about the mission of the church in the world, the report affirms the conviction that 'neither the church nor the state is to dominate the other (separation of church and state)' (39). Among the divergences, the

following is mentioned in first place: 'Baptist identity is shaped more by concern for proclamation, whereas Mennonite identity is shaped more by service' (39).

The entire dialogue report concludes with eleven 'recommendations'; for example, 'that the leaders and staff of the BWA and MWC regularly seek each other's advice and support on matters of mutual concern' (40). It is also recommended that Baptist–Mennonite 'consultations' be convened on the topics of mission and the church's peace witness as well as just war and biblical pacifism. It also encourages 'continued research into the 1608–1640 period of Baptist-Mennonite intersection' (40).

Continuation of the Theological Dialogue?

I am unable to say whether any of the recommendations of the Mennonite-Baptist dialogue have been implemented to date. However, I am certain that it would be useful for both sides if the dialogue could be continued either at the world level or at the European level. This would be useful because the 1992 dialogue report contains some historical and theological statements that are not as clear and precise as they should and could be. Further joint historical and theological work would hopefully enable progress to be made on both sides. Two examples of this will be briefly presented here.

Firstly, a necessary *historical* clarification. In two places in the report (8.27), the Baptist side of the dialogue wrote that the so-called Particular Baptists, who (without influence from the first Baptist congregation led by Thomas Helwys) had emerged from internal discussions in a London Separatist congregation around 1640, had come to the insight of believer's baptism by immersion on the basis of consultations with the Rhynsburg Collegiants in the Netherlands. It is explicitly mentioned that the Rhynsburgers also included Mennonites, so the impression is created that at least the Particular Baptists came to baptismal insight under Mennonite influence. However, this impression is misleading. Richard Blunt, a Dutch-speaking member of the London Separatists, did indeed travel to Rhynsburg (near Leiden) between 1640 and 1642 to learn about the practice of immersion baptism there.

However, Blunt had already concluded that immersion was the true, biblically based form of baptism before this journey and had put it up for discussion in the Separatist church.[39] Moreover, although some Mennonites belonged to the Rhynsburg Collegiants, the group itself had been founded by Remonstrant church elders (i.e. Reformed Arminians). Because the group did not want to be a church, it admitted members of all denominations. It rejected church confessions and ordained ministries. It had adopted believer's baptism by immersion from Polish Socinians, not from Mennonites.[40] Puritan Separatists could therefore only have a practical interest in this Dutch group. Mennonite baptismal practice was definitely not learnt in Rhynsburg, as the Mennonites baptised by pouring over and not by immersion. It is therefore likely that both the General Baptists (who emerged from the Helwys congregation) and the Particular Baptists arrived at their practice of believer's baptism without Mennonite influence. Both streams also attached great importance to not being confused with the Anabaptists. They did not share typical Anabaptist convictions such as non-resistance, refusal to take an oath, and the community of goods. If the recommendation of the dialogue report to 'continued research into the 1608–1640 period of Baptist-Mennonite intersection' (40) is implemented, this fact should be taken into account.

And now for a necessary *theological* clarification. The report recommends further discussion between Baptists and Mennonites on the topics of mission and the church's peace witness as well as just war and biblical pacifism. This is certainly worthwhile. However, statements that the report recognises as points of agreement also require further clarification. This includes, for example, the claim that Mennonites and Baptists are 'non-creedal' — a statement that we might see and hear elsewhere. What does this formula mean?

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[39] See White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 60–61; Wright, *The Early English Baptists*, pp. 81–89.

[40] Hans Schneider, 'Rijnsburger Kollegianten', *Religion in Geschichter und Gegenwart* (RGG), vol. 7, ed. by Hans Dieter Betz, Don Browning, Bernd Janowski, and Eberhard Jüngel, 4th edn. (Brill, 2004), p. 519; translated in *Religion Past and Present Online* (Brill, 2011) <https://referenceworks.brill.com/display/entries/RPPO/SIM-024988.xml.> [accessed 20 May 2025].

The English word 'creed' means 'religious belief' and 'profession of faith'. 'Non-creedal' would therefore be churches that have no religious beliefs or do not expect a profession of faith from their members. For churches such as the Mennonites and the Baptists, who baptise people 'upon the confession of their faith', this is a surprising assertion. The personal confession of Christian faith is even fundamental for them. But perhaps 'non-creedal' is only meant to express that these churches recognise personal oral confessions of faith, but not written ones that are supposed to apply to the whole church. Though we find such a fundamental rejection of denominational creeds among the Quakers and the Rhynsburg Collegiants, we do not among Mennonites and Baptists. As we have seen above, the first contacts between Mennonites and Baptists in Amsterdam consisted, among other things, in the exchange of written confessions of faith. The Waterland Mennonites demanded that John Smyth's congregation sign a Mennonite confession of faith so that they could be recognised as Mennonites. Numerous Baptist confessions have survived, fourteen in total from the century of their origin. In North America, ten confessional texts have been produced since the eighteenth century.[41] In Europe, there are only a few Baptist unions that do not have their own confession of faith.[42] It is therefore not true that the Baptists are without written denominational confessions. This is not a bad thing either, because unwritten traditions are generally even stronger and more resistant to criticism than written texts, and therefore often have greater *de facto* authority than written texts. Anyone who is concerned that written confessions could be placed alongside or even above Holy Scripture in terms of their authority must be even more worried about confessions that have only been handed down orally. But whether oral or written, there is no being a Christian and no being a church without confession.

So, what does the description of Mennonites and Baptists as 'non-creedal' mean? In what sense could it apply? Does the formula mean that these free churches indeed value their own confessions but do not recognise the confessions of the early church (such as the Nicene

[41] See *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. by Lumpkin and Leonard.
[42] See G. Keith Parker, *Baptists in Europe: History & Confessions of Faith* (Broadman Press, 1982).

Creed, the so-called Athanasianum, the Christological dogma of Chalcedon, and the Apostles' Creed)? For the Baptist side, this assertion would be wrong in any case.[43] Baptists recognise the early church confessions just as much as their own. Or is the formula 'non-creedal' intended to say that Mennonites and Baptists have formulated and accepted confessions, but that these confessions are not understood as divine revelations or as propositions that must be confessed if one wants to be saved? That would be a demarcation against the Catholic understanding of church dogmas and as such would be completely correct. However, Mennonites and Baptists share this demarcation with all Protestant churches. For all churches that emerged from the Reformation, confessions are not infallible texts of revelation but formulate the faith that the Christian community has professed in response to God's revelation. Protestant confessions of faith are therefore capable of error and, if necessary, can also be changed. In this sense, all Protestant churches are 'non-creedal'.

In the dialogue report with the Mennonites, the Baptists profess the Reformation's *sola scriptura* (i.e. an ecclesiastical confessional formula) and explain this formula with the words, 'Baptists do not accord any official authority to creeds' (16). But what does 'official' authority mean? An authority that is equivalent to Holy Scripture? In fact, it is precisely this idea that the Reformation formula *sola scriptura* is intended to ward off. When the Baptist side in the dialogue report summarises its understanding of authority in the sentence, 'Scripture is viewed as having the last word' (16), then it agrees with Lutherans and Reformed. So, are Lutherans and Reformed also 'non-creedal churches'? If not, what is meant by the fact that Mennonites and Baptists see themselves emphatically as 'non-creedal'? Greater clarity is needed here in the terminology and in the definition of the relationship between Scripture, confession, and creed. It would be pleasant if Baptists and Mennonites could create this clarity together.

[43] For more details, see Uwe Swarat, 'Schrift und Bekenntnis nach baptistischem Verständnis', in *Gnade und Glaube*, pp. 29–41.