



CANADIAN CONFERENCE  
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 17 [MB Confession of Faith]

# Christianity and Other Faiths

## COMMENTARY

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As growing cultural and religious diversity continues to change the makeup of many of our communities, it is important to consider questions regarding Christianity and other faiths. Article 17 of the Confession of Faith deals with these issues.

### Jesus is the Only Way

The first section of Article 17 makes three major points. First, it rejects a pluralistic view of religions by declaring that “Jesus is the only means of reconciling humanity with God.” Second, it notes that “salvation is available to all.” Third, it identifies those people who “have the assurance of eternal life.”

#### Rejection of Pluralism:

In North American culture, pluralism has become the dominant way of thinking about religious faith. Pluralism is the view that the major religious faiths (and perhaps all religious faiths) are equally valid paths to God. Scripture is clear in rejecting pluralism.

Jesus’ understanding of himself was that he alone was the path to God. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman Jesus clearly regarded himself as the way of knowing God, rather than going to the mountain in Samaria or the temple in Jerusalem (John 4:8-26). John 14:6 records Jesus saying explicitly, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” It is clear that the early church believed Jesus was the only way to salvation (Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15; Heb. 12:24). Regarding Jesus as the only way to God is consistent with and a fulfillment of the Old Testament recognition that Israel is God’s chosen people. Access to God comes through a particular people—the nation of Israel—in the old covenant, and through a particular person—Jesus Christ—in the new covenant. Finally, the practice of the early church is a clear rejection of pluralism. A variety of religions flourished under Roman rule and culture. The church called both Jews and pagans to turn to Jesus the Messiah and submit to his lordship.

#### Salvation Available to All:

While the gospel came to the Jewish people first, it is not limited to them (John 4:22; Acts 10). God actively desires that all people be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). The vision of the new heaven and the new earth is one in which people from every nation will be present (Isa. 66:18, 22-23).

#### Assurance of Eternal Life:

It is clear from Romans 10:9 and 13 that those who place their faith in Jesus will be saved. Thus they have the assurance of eternal life. However, these verses do not say that *only* those who put their faith in Jesus will be saved, allowing for the possibility that others may be granted eternal life. If others are granted eternal life, they are unaware of it. Thus they do not have the *assurance* of eternal life. This suggests the issue of the fate of those who have not heard the gospel. That will be addressed in a later section of this commentary.

### God’s Universal Witness

The second section of Article 17 treats two issues: the content of other religions and the persons who profess other religions.



### The Content of Other Religions:

God is made known outwardly to all people through creation (Ps. 19:1, Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:18-20) and inwardly to all people through a moral conscience (Rom. 2:15) and a sense of the divine (Eccl. 3:11). Though God makes Himself known, not all people are consciously aware of God. The corruption of sin blinds many to God as revealed in creation and conscience (Rom. 1:18-23). Still, at Athens Paul recognized a searching for God on the part of followers of idols (Acts 17:16, 23) and philosophical systems (Acts 17:18) and allowed that there may have been an elementary knowledge of God even in pagan religions (Acts 17:28).

According to Paul, the knowledge of God that is acquired through creation and conscience is sufficient for people to be “without excuse” for failing to acknowledge God (Rom. 1:20; 2:14-15). It appears that this knowledge of God can, in principle, lead to salvation, if people live according to the law they have (Rom. 2: 6-8, 14-16). Paul is clear, however, that all people have sinned against God and stand guilty before God (Rom. 3:20,23).

### Persons Who Profess Other Religions:

Disciples of Jesus are called to treat others, including enemies, with love (Matt. 5:44; 22:39). The pluralistic culture often interprets love and respect as prohibiting disagreement. The gospel of Jesus Christ, however, is often offensive (1 Cor. 1:23). It demands one’s ultimate loyalty, rejecting all previous loyalties (Mark 10:29-30) and is a “two-edged sword” which may cause internal turmoil for the person hearing the gospel (Heb. 4:12). So love and respect do not demand that we refrain from disagreement or potential offense as we present the gospel. However, as Paul did in Athens, we must try to identify points of contact between what people already believe and the gospel of Jesus (Acts 17:16-34). British theologian Alister McGrath invites Christians to look for these points of contact with nonbelievers. Points of contact are those elements of a person’s world view that coincide with a Christian world view. Don Richardson, in such books as *Peace Child* and *Eternity in Their Hearts*, provides fascinating examples of points of contact with a variety of different cultures. If the believer can identify some points of contact, these can provide a way of inviting a nonbeliever to consider other elements of the gospel.

## Sovereignty of God

The third section of Article 17 addresses two issues: the fate of those who reject the gospel and the fate of those who have never heard the gospel.

### Those Who Reject the Gospel:

The Bible is clear that those who reject the gospel of Jesus are condemned by God (John 3:18; 1 John 2:23). Condemnation by God is eternal separation from God (2 Thess. 1:9) and is a “second death” (Rev. 2:11; Rev. 20:6).

### Those Who Have Never Heard:

This topic involves a very difficult question. Is it possible for those who have never heard the gospel to be saved? As noted earlier, it is in principle possible to be saved by works of righteousness, but no one will in fact be saved that way since all have sinned. If salvation is possible for those who have never heard the gospel, it will be salvation by faith. As noted earlier, knowledge of God from creation or conscience is sufficient for accountability to God. Is having faith in God as known only through response to creation or conscience sufficient for a saving faith?

To bring some order to our thinking about this issue, let us consider two statements:

(A) The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus provides the only possibility of salvation for human beings.

(B) A person must have explicit knowledge of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and must explicitly put his or her faith in Jesus in order to be saved.



These statements may seem to be two ways of saying the same thing, but there is a significant difference between them. Statement (A) describes the event that makes salvation possible. Statement (B) tells what a person must believe in order to receive salvation.

Consider three views on the fate of the unevangelized. Pluralism holds that both (A) and (B) are false. Inclusivism holds that (A) is true but (B) is false. Exclusivism holds that both (A) and (B) are true.

Pluralism holds that there are many ways to God, all equally valid. As noted earlier, Mennonite Brethren reject pluralism.

The inclusivist holds that (A) is true but (B) is false. That is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the source of the salvation for anyone who is saved. However, it is possible for someone to be saved by Jesus without realizing it is Jesus who is saving them.

Inclusivism reminds us of the distinction between general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is the information about God that is available to all through observation of creation. Special revelation is the direct revelation of God through Jesus and through the words of Scripture. Everyone receives general revelation. Some people do not receive special revelation. According to the inclusivist, people who have never heard of Jesus may be saved if they respond appropriately to the knowledge of God that they have gained through general revelation. Nonetheless, if they are saved, they are saved because of what Jesus did on the cross.

The exclusivist says that both (A) and (B) are true. That is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the source of salvation, and in order to be saved a person must explicitly acknowledge that Jesus is the Savior. If a people have never heard of Jesus, they cannot be saved because they cannot explicitly put their trust in Jesus. General revelation alone cannot be sufficient for salvation. Special revelation is necessary.

Since inclusivism and exclusivism agree that (A) is true, that salvation is only possible through Jesus, the question is whether or not (B) is true, that only confessed faith in Jesus can save. Some texts seem to support exclusivism by suggesting that explicit knowledge of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is necessary for salvation. John 3:18, for instance, says, "...those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (NRSV). Similarly, 1 John 5:12 says, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (NRSV).

Some texts, such as Romans 10:9 and Acts 4:12, are often used to uphold exclusivism but do not really support it. As noted earlier, Romans 10:9 and Acts 4:12 say that all who believe in Jesus will be saved; they do not say that only those who explicitly believe in Jesus will be saved.

On the other hand, some texts seem inconsistent with exclusivism. First Timothy 4:10 says, "For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe" (NRSV). This suggests that some might be saved without explicitly believing in Jesus. Furthermore, the Old Testament patriarchs and others mentioned in Hebrews 11 did not have explicit knowledge of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Similarly, people who have never heard the gospel are for all practical purposes in the same position as the people prior to the advent of Christ. It was possible for them to put their faith in God through the revelation given them. Some such believers, such as Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17-20) and Jethro (Exod. 3:1), were outside of the line of Abraham. In the same way, some who have not heard the gospel of Jesus may nonetheless have faith in God. We are not privileged to know all of the ways that God makes His saving grace available to human beings (Isa. 55:8-9).

Article 17 wisely does not endorse either inclusivism or exclusivism since there is not a conclusive answer to the question of the fate of the unevangelized. As recorded in Abraham's conversation with God regarding the fate of Sodom, God will judge justly (Gen. 18:25).

