

The Brethren in Christ and Views on Jesus Christ and Salvation

Ronald J. Burwell
Messiah College

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One of the central concerns of all Christian communities is the image of Christ and how members understand the concept of salvation. As Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” we can ask of the Brethren in Christ their understandings of the person of Christ and the nature of salvation. This paper reports the views of Brethren in Christ church members gathered through several Church Member Profile surveys. Our primary sources will be data gathered in 2002 from delegates at General Conference as well as surveys completed in 1989 as part of the five denomination Church Member Profile II.¹

Historical Context

In order to understand contemporary views of the Brethren in Christ regarding the person of Jesus and Salvation, it is appropriate to briefly review some of the formative influences that shaped the Brethren in Christ viewpoint. Virtually all of those who have written on the history of the Brethren in Christ have noted the central importance of orthodox views of Jesus Christ and an emphasis on “... a personal, heartfelt experience of the new birth”.² With regard to views of Jesus, Wittlinger notes that the early Brethren in Christ “...had no reservations about doctrines such as the Trinity, the deity and humanity of Christ, the Atonement, and rewards and punishment in an afterlife”.³ Interestingly, as I looked for discussions regarding specific doctrinal views on the person of Christ and theories of atonement, I found relatively little apart from the formal doctrinal statements (e.g., Manual of Government and Discipline). I would suspect that this is because the Brethren in Christ traditionally have accepted an orthodox view of Jesus and theological debates about his nature were not an issue in the history of the denomination. On the

other hand, there is much more written regarding Brethren in Christ views on salvation. No doubt this area was one of significant relevance as the Brethren in Christ distinguished themselves from other groups that they interacted with (Mennonites, Dunkers, Brethren, Old Order Brethren, etc.). In describing the founding of the Brethren in Christ, Wittlinger notes the centrality of a particular view of salvation:

“All present living churches tracing their origins back to the Jacob Engle group – Brethren in Christ, Old Order River Brethren (Yorkers), United Zion, Calvary Holiness – place great emphasis on personal, heartfelt Christian experience. The applicant for membership in any of these churches is expected to testify to being “saved,” that is, to profess an experience of the new birth accompanied by assurance that his sins are forgiven. Such an experience occurs, or at least consummates, as a crisis at a given point in time so that the individual knows when he enters into the Christian life.”⁴

In presenting the “message of the Brethren in Christ,” John Zercher elaborates upon this emphasis on a “great salvation”⁵. He sees at least three elements that are important to the understanding of salvation. First, conversion is more than justification. The Brethren in Christ understanding is that forgiveness is only part of conversion and that true conversion goes beyond forgiveness to the creation of a wholly new life. Second, salvation is radical in nature. There is an emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit to radically change the nature of the person so that the person is filled with the fruit of the spirit and “...they now love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and their neighbors as themselves”⁶. Finally, the goal of salvation is to bring the believer to a maturity that results in a Christ-like character summarized among other places in the fourth chapter of Ephesians.

In general, those who review Brethren in Christ history, see the emphasis on salvation as arising from one of the three important streams forming the Brethren in Christ; namely, pietism. As Owen Alderfer argues, “...Pietistic revivalism in its several

features and ramifications is one fundamental dimension underlying the Brethren in Christ mind and spirit”⁷. More recently, David Weaver-Zercher, while disagreeing somewhat with some of Alderfer’s views, does concur with his view of the influence of pietistic revivalism: “A pietistic understanding of the Christian faith continues to be central to the Brethren in Christ Church”⁸. It is from pietistic revivalism that the Brethren in Christ continue to emphasize the need for conversion and the importance of introducing new people to the good news about Jesus. To the extent possible, we will attempt to draw from survey data a profile of what contemporary Brethren in Christ members believe about Jesus Christ, conversion, the nature of salvation, the role of the Holy Spirit and evangelism.

The Surveys

Over several decades, the Brethren in Christ have compiled several sets of survey data that provide a picture of BIC opinions at certain points in time. The first such survey was conducted in 1972 and was reported in J Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations (1975)*⁹. We will not use data from this survey because we are interested in more recent views regarding salvation and the person of Jesus Christ. Another survey, similar to the one conducted in 1972, was completed in 1989. That survey also resulted in a book length report entitled, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization (J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, 1991)*¹⁰. Using many of the same questions, the researchers were able to track some of the changes in attitudes and opinions that had taken place between 1972 and 1989. In the data presented below, we will use the 1989 results as a comparison to more recent data.¹¹

In 2002, delegates at the BIC General Conference were asked to complete a questionnaire that was very similar to the ones used in 1972 and 1989. The survey was developed by Ron Burwell and John Yeatts, faculty members at Messiah College. Their goal was to update the earlier studies and to answer questions about the nature of BIC beliefs and values at the beginning of a new millennium. Partial results of the 2002 survey have been presented in conference presentations and an article in *Brethren in Christ History & Life*.¹² These results will provide the most current data we have on Brethren in Christ thinking about salvation and the person of Jesus Christ. A significantly revised Church Member Profile 2006 survey is in the process of being completed and will add further information about contemporary Brethren in Christ views. However, these results are not yet ready for publication.¹³

Jesus Christ and Salvation

In presenting BIC views, we will follow the general pattern of beliefs that are outlined in official denominational documents. Currently, the denominational positions on various doctrinal beliefs are presented in several documents. The most detailed statements are found in the *Manual of Doctrine and Government* (1994)¹⁴. In 1986, the denomination adopted a document titled, *Articles of Faith and Doctrine of the Brethren in Christ Church of North America*.¹⁵ This document organizes the BIC beliefs into the following six categories: revelation and scripture, God and Creation, humanity and sin, Jesus Christ and salvation, the Holy Spirit and the Church, and eternal hope and judgment. Following the outline of doctrinal beliefs in the article on Jesus Christ and salvation we will look at BIC beliefs about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the death

and resurrection of Jesus Christ, coming to faith, new life in Christ, life in the Spirit, and hope of life everlasting.

Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ

Under this section, the following doctrinal statement is presented:

**“Jesus Christ, God the Son, is a distinct person of the Trinity... fully God.”
(15)**

Following what has traditionally been a central belief of historic, orthodox Christianity, the Brethren in Christ are committed to a view of Jesus that stresses his fully divine nature. Jesus is both fully God and fully man. In looking at the survey results from both 2002 and 1989 there is a question that gets at this area of belief. Respondents are asked to choose which view of Jesus comes closest to their own view:

[Which statement comes closest to your views of Jesus?]	<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
Jesus was not only human but also divine and I have no doubts in expressing it.	98.3%	92.7% ¹⁶
While I have some doubts, basically I believe that Jesus was both human and divine.	01.7%	6.8%
I feel Jesus was a great man and very holy, but I don't believe he was divine any more than any of us are divine.	00.0%	0.5%
I think Jesus was only a man, although an extraordinary one.	00.0%	0.0%

Clearly the Brethren in Christ embrace a high view of Christ's nature.

In addition to speaking to the issue of Christ's divine nature, BIC beliefs also speak to issues about the virgin birth and the nature of Christ's mission while on earth.

“In the fullness of time God the Son took on human likeness, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. He was God incarnate – God in the flesh...”

“He took on the role of a servant and responded in compassion to those in need....”

“He came to destroy the works of the devil and to redeem the human family from sin.” (15)

Here are two additional survey questions that elaborate on these areas of belief:

	<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
Jesus was born of a virgin.... definitely	96.7%	96.8%
In my church, Jesus is seen more as:		
The suffering servant who calls us to follow his example.	22.0%	15.3%
The personal Savior who died for our sins	77.2%	84.8% ¹⁷

Brethren in Christ are committed to the view that Jesus was born of a virgin. They also tend to see Christ’s work as primarily being the personal savior for our sins although a significant minority sees Jesus as a suffering servant who provides us with an example to follow. (Note: this question forces people to choose between two views; no doubt many would affirm both statements.)

Another doctrinal area with regard to Jesus is how people view the stories of the miracles that Jesus performed as presented in the Gospels. This belief, for the BIC, is stated as:

“He inaugurated the Kingdom of God and demonstrated its presence by healing the sick and casting out demons. His miracles were signs of God’s kingdom....”(15)

Survey respondents were asked their view of the miracles in the Bible (not just those associated with Jesus). Here is how they responded:

The Bible tells of many miracles...	2002	1989
I believe the miracles were supernatural acts of God which actually happened just as the Bible says they did.	97.2%	96.4%
I believe the miracles happened but most of them can be explained by natural causes.	1.7%	2.2%
I am not sure whether these miracles really happened or not.	1.1%	1.5%
I believe miracles are stories about events that never really happened.	0.0%	0.0%

Although belief in miracles may be problematic for many people in the modern world, Brethren in Christ church members strongly affirm the truth of miracles as they are reported in scripture.

Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Another central belief regarding Jesus is whether or not he rose from the dead. Although this has traditionally been a part of Christian doctrine, there are some who cannot embrace the concept of a literal resurrection from the dead. Nevertheless, this belief is part of Brethren in Christ beliefs and is validation of Jesus claim to be the Son of God. Here is how the articles present this doctrine:

“Christ’s work of redemption was accomplished in His death and resurrection.”

“The bodily resurrection of Jesus testified decisively of His deity and His victory over Satan, sin, and death.” (15-16)

In both 2002 and 1989 BIC respondents were asked which view came closest to what they believed. Here are the choices and how they responded:

Responses:	<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
I believe Jesus' physical resurrection was a objective historical fact just as his birth was a historical fact.	98.9%	93.9%
I believe Christ was identified and recognized by his disciples after his death but this does not necessitate a bodily resurrection.	0.0%	2.2%
I understand the resurrection of Jesus only as symbolic of God's sovereignty over both life and death.	0.5%	3.4%
I find it difficult to see much meaning in the resurrection of Christ.	0.5%	0.5%

Another belief associated with the death and resurrection of Christ is that he will literally return to earth at some future point in time. The BIC articles affirm this belief with the following statement:

“At the end of time, all things in heaven and on earth will be brought under His rule. Every person will bow before Him and He will reign forever.”(15-16)

The survey also asks a question about belief in the return of Jesus. Here is the survey data that reports how BIC members respond to the idea of Christ's return:

	<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
Jesus will actually return to earth some day Definitely	95.0%	94.4%

In looking over the how BIC respondents see the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is a high level of commitment to the belief that Jesus really did arise bodily from the grave

and will actually return to the earth at some future moment. There central Christian beliefs are strongly affirmed by the Brethren in Christ.

Coming to Faith

How does a person come to faith in Jesus Christ? Central to this process is a desire for repentance. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to respond to God's invitation of salvation. Here is how this process is described:

**“The response of faith is a personal reliance on God’s grace and a turning from sin to righteousness. Repentance involves an acknowledgement of sin.”
(16)**

Coming to faith involves a conscious decision that involves forsaking of sin and a changed attitude toward God. In the Church Member Profile the following question looks at this step:

	<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
People talk of Christian conversion as an occasion in life when they made a decision to accept Christ as Savior and Lord. Was there an occasion in your life when you had such a conversion experience? ¹⁸	95.1% yes	90.8% yes

New Life in Christ

As noted earlier, John Zercher, in reflecting on the Brethren in Christ view of salvation, emphasized that true conversion goes beyond forgiveness to the creation of a wholly new life.¹⁹ Thus, core values also speak about “new life in Christ” which is described in these terms:

**“All who come to faith in Christ are born again, receive the Holy Spirit, and become children of God.”
“We become new creatures in Christ, regenerated by the Holy Spirit. This change of heart becomes evident in the development of Christlike character**

and a walk of obedience to God. Conversion is expressed in a changed life with new direction, purposes, interests, and values.” (16)

Once a person makes a decision for Christ, there is the expectation that there will be visible changes in how one lives their life.²⁰ BIC respondents were asked in the survey several questions that probed the nature of their life in Christ. In addition to being asked about their present relationship to God, they responded to questions about how they perceived attitudes about career, Kingdom values, discouragement, doubts, evangelism and deeds of mercy. Below are the questions that deal with changes in purposes interests, and values:

	<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
In general, how close do you describe your present relationship to God?	Close & Very Close ²¹ 68.8%	50.5%
Jesus expects Christians today to follow the pattern which he set in his own life and ministry, including such things as putting evangelism above earning a living, and deeds of mercy above family security.	Agree & Strongly Agree 48.3%	36.5%
In my church a member who is clearly guilty of an attitude or act that is sinful by the church’s standards ... is normally confronted and counseled to repent.	Yes 62.2%	60.1%
How often do you feel discouraged in the Christian life?	Often & Very Often 12.8%	14.0%
How often do you have doubts about your salvation?	Never or Seldom 88.4%	74.5%

In my church	<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
having a successful career and earning as much money as possible have priority for most members.	13.9%	11.4%
most members are committed to putting Kingdom of God values ahead of career and earning money.	29.1%	21.0%
most members want both to earn all they can from their career and to give all they can to the work of God's kingdom.	57.0%	67.6%

A majority of the members of Brethren in Christ churches report feeling that they have a close relationship to God and do not have a great deal of doubt or discouragement in their Christian lives. They see work and career as means advance the work of God's kingdom. Finally, they believe that in their church, people who do not evidence true repentance may be called to account and provided with counsel.

Hope of Life Everlasting

The final consummation of our salvation is the hope that the believer, in the life to come, will receive a glorified body as part of the resurrection. The kingdom of God will be fully realized and all the saints will worship God in the new heaven and new earth.

This belief is summarized as follows:

“The salvation provided by our Lord Jesus Christ will be consummated for the believer in the joy of heaven and the full realization of the kingdom of God. In our glorified bodies we will be free from all the effects of sin. Restored in the likeness of Christ, we will worship God and reign with Christ throughout eternity.” (17)

BIC members were asked about their view of the future for those who are believers and those who have not accepted Christ and their savior. Note the following survey items:

	<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
There is life beyond death.....definitely	91.1%	93.2%
All persons who have reached the age of accountability and who die not having accepted Christ as savior will spend eternity in a place of punishment and misery.	68.2%	74.9%

As a group, the Brethren in Christ take seriously the idea of life beyond death. They also believe that those not accepting Christ may spend eternity in place characterized by punishment and misery. Thus, the idea of salvation carries both great hope and grave consequences.

The Brethren in Christ and Evangelism

Although views on evangelism are not necessarily part of beliefs about salvation, it seems appropriate to ask what the survey results reveal about BIC beliefs regarding evangelism. Given the strong commitment to orthodox views on Jesus and Salvation, it is appropriate to ask if the BIC have a concomitant emphasis on encouraging people to find salvation in Jesus Christ. We have just noted about that a majority of BIC respondents believe that people who do not accept Jesus may suffer punishment and misery. If so, it would seem to be important that people are at least given an opportunity to hear the good news about salvation. Below are some survey items that indicate that there is indeed a strong emphasis on evangelism among the BIC.

	<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
The members of my church believe it is more important to:		
- to work for a more just and equitable world	8.4%	13.9%
- to help individuals find a personal saving faith	91.6 %	86.1%

		<u>2002</u>	<u>1989</u>
How frequently do you take the opportunity to Witness orally about the Christian faith to persons at work, in the neighborhood, or elsewhere?	Often + Very Often	34.5%	26.6%
Have you personally ever tried to lead someone to faith in Christ?	Yes	93.3%	81.0%
How frequently have you invited non-Christians to attend your church and/or Sunday School services?	Regularly	10.7%	50.7% ²²
	Occasionally	50.0%	39.0%

Concluding Observations

In general, it is encouraging to look at the survey results from the Church Member Profile. The most recently gathered data suggest a strong commitment to the core values as expressed in the doctrinal statements under the heading Jesus Christ and Salvation. In virtually all the places where comparison is possible, the Brethren in Christ members are committed to the ideas historically espoused by the denomination. The historic commitment to the new birth and personal, heartfelt Christian experience continues to the present. Whatever other changes may be occurring in the denomination, current members continue to call people to repentance and a new life in Christ.

In all of the survey results presented, we have included the 1989 Church Member Profile data alongside more recent data (2002/2006). A word about possible comparisons between 1989 and the present is in order. One must be careful about making strong statements about similarities and differences between 1989 and the present. Although in all cases, the data compares the responses of *laypeople* with *laypeople*, the two samples may not be exactly comparable. In 1989 data was gathered from church members from

various churches that had been selected as part of a national sample. Those selected to complete the survey completed the forms in meetings convened at the various churches. They, thus, “represent” the Brethren in Christ at that point in time. However, the 2002 data was gathered from *lay delegates* at the 2002 general conference. To the extent that General Conference delegates may represent a more mature, committed member of the Brethren in Christ, they may be different from the 1989 sample. Those completing the form in 2002 may have had even stronger commitment to BIC core values than the average church member.

As one looks at the similarities and differences between 1989 and 2002, it appears that consistently the 2002 response are stronger, and even more committed to BIC core beliefs and values than the 1989 sample. Thus, one should be cautious in interpreting this as a change between 1989 and 2002. Instead, it may be a difference in samples. Nevertheless, it is still encouraging that in 2002 the commitment to BIC beliefs regarding Jesus Christ and Salvation are stronger than 1989.

Finally, I suspect that if Brethren in Christ leaders from past generations were to look at these findings, they could find some satisfaction in that those who share their legacy are still strongly committed to important beliefs about the Christian life. If pietistic revivalism was once a fundamental dimension of the Brethren in Christ, it continues to be the case today.

Notes

¹ See J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization*, (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1991). Also, see John R. Yeatts and Ronald J. Burwell, “The Brethren in Christ at A.D. 2000,” *Brethren in Christ History & Life*, April 1996, pp. 67-115; Ronald J. Burwell, “Brethren in Christ Attitudes Towards Peacemaking,” *Brethren in Christ History & Life*, August 2005, pp. 302-319.

² Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ*, (Nappanee, IN.: Evangel Press, 1978), p 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵ John Zercher, "The Message of the Brethren in Christ," in E. Morris Sider, ed., *Windows to the Church: Selections from Twenty Five Years of Brethren in Christ History and Life*, (Grantham, PA.: The Brethren in Christ Historical Society, 2003), p. 60.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷ Owen H. Alderfer, "Anabaptism as a 'Burden' for the Brethren in Christ," in E. Morris Sider, ed., *Reflections on a Heritage: Defining the Brethren in Christ*, (Grantham, PA.: The Brethren in Christ Historical Society and Evangel Publishing House, 1999), p.102.

⁸ David L. Zercher, "Is There a 'Brethren Mindset'?: Reflections on the Alderfer Thesis," in Sider, *Reflections on a Heritage*, p. 163.

⁹ J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations*, (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1975). This book reports the survey data results for the five denominations: the Mennonite Church, the General Conference Mennonite Church, the Mennonite Brethren Church, the Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Mennonite Church. Data was gathered from some 619 BIC members drawn from churches in the United States and Canada.

¹⁰ Kauffman and Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic*. The same five denominations were surveyed as in 1972. The BIC sample included 455 completed surveys.

¹¹ In order to compare the 1989 data with that gathered in 2002, we will compare responses from *laypersons* in 1989 with *laypersons* in 2002. The reason is that in the 2002 sample there were significantly higher numbers of clergy in the sample. This was because the 2002 sample was drawn from delegates at General Conference.

¹² Ronald Burwell, "Brethren in Christ Attitudes Towards Peacemaking," pp.302-319. The sample that we are using for these data included 293 completed surveys.

¹³ Although the Church Member Profile 2006 data are currently being analyzed, we are able to include some of this data in several endnotes.

¹⁴ *Manual of Doctrine and Government of the Brethren in Christ Church: Constitution, Articles of Faith and Doctrine, Bylaws*. (Nappanee, IN.: Evangel Press, 1994).

¹⁵ The "Articles of Faith and Doctrine of the Brethren in Christ Church of North America" may be found on pages 10 to 23 in the *Manual of Doctrine and Government of the Brethren in Christ Church*. In this article, quotations from the Articles are cited with reference to the appropriate pages in the *Manual*.

¹⁶ CMP 2006 has a similar question:

Which statement best expresses your view of Jesus' divinity?
- Jesus is fully divine and fully God (93.1%)

¹⁷ CMP 2006 asks respondents about their views of Jesus in somewhat different language:

Which statement best expresses your view of why Jesus died on the cross?
- Jesus had to die to complete God's plan of salvation (91.7%)

-
- Jesus died as a sacrifice to satisfy God's anger against sin (6.1%)
 - Jesus willingly died to show the power of nonviolent love (2.0%)
 - Jesus dies because he condemned social and economic injustice (0.2%)

¹⁸ The CMP2006 asked these related questions:

Was there ever a time in your life when you accepted Christ as Savior and Lord?

- Yes, it was a specific moment (66.7%)
- Yes, but it happened gradually (31.9%)
- No, I don't think of myself as having "accepted Christ" (1.4%)

Would you describe yourself as a born-again Christian?

- Yes (89.3%)
- Not sure (6.3%)
- No (4.4%)

If someone were to ask, "Are you saved?" which statement best reflects how you would respond?

- Yes, I know I am saved (90.8%)
- I can't say for sure; only God knows if I am saved (6.9%)
- The people who know me best can answer that better than I (1.4%)
- Being saved is not part of my faith (0.9%)

¹⁹ John Zercher, "The Message of the Brethren in Christ," p. 60.

²⁰ CMP 2006 ask respondents a question that tests the relationship between what one believes and how one acts:

In your view, does salvation depend more on what a person believes or on how a person lives?

- Salvation depends equally on one's beliefs and how one lives (62.7%)
- Salvation depends more on what a person believes (34.3%)
- Salvation depends more on how a person lives (2.9%)

²¹ CMP 2006 item:

Would you say that you have a close personal relationship to Christ?

- Yes, that is the centerpiece of my faith (77.4%)
- Yes, that is one part of my faith story (21.9%)
- No, that is not part of my faith story (0.7%)

²² Note that the contrast between 2002 and 1989 on this question is the largest change in any of the items reported in this paper. It might be interesting to reflect on why, in 2002, BIC members reported lower frequency of inviting non-Christians to attend church and/or Sunday School services.