

An Opportunity, a Challenge and a Test

Pastoral care and Spiritual Leadership in Matters of Sexual Morality

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The planning team for the study conference asked that John Unger and I provide some pastoral guidance in terms of how pastors /leaders /congregations need to address matters related to sexual morality. I wish to focus on how the church can best extend pastoral care when it comes to human sexuality in a context that emphasizes faithfulness, courage, compassion, and redemption.

I don't know if you have seen the Ad campaign for the 2014 IKEA catalog. This particular bill board reads "boy meets girl, girl moves in... There is a page for that." The Bill Board could as well be an ad for this study conference, for our Confession of Faith (article 11, page 18) and for Scripture. Pastorally we are often called to address the relationship choices and sexual conduct of people in our congregations. And this study conference is an opportunity to get on the same page in our response.

I am not sure how often each year you hear about or teach about sexuality in your congregation. But I have found, that in the local church the silence is deafening. The pastoral silence around matters of human sexuality is often interpreted much like the "don't ask-don't tell" policy of the US military: "you may be doing it, but as long as we don't know, there won't be a problem." We must speak out, our words must convey the love of Christ and the boldness of living Christianly.

As I considered what to specifically address, I identified 13 challenges related to sexuality to which I have responded to as a pastor, sometimes well, sometimes poorly, sometimes thoughtfully, and sometimes not.

1. The challenge of **pornography**
2. The challenge of a **hyper sexuality** in general media and pop culture offerings
3. The challenge of cohabiting / living together in a **common law relationship**
4. The challenge of romantic, sexual and **cohabitation / marriage of a believer and an unbeliever**
5. The challenge of **LGBTQ attraction and orientation** (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgendered-Queer)
6. The challenge of **LGBTQ identity and practice**

7. The challenge of **divorce**
8. The challenge of **remarriage**
9. The lack of teaching and **understanding about covenant** and covenant making
10. The challenge of **healthy marriage**
11. The challenge of **singleness and celibacy**
12. **The conflict between rights based sexuality as affirmed by “The charter of Human Rights” and a Kingdom theology of sexuality as found in scripture.**
13. **The pastoral timidity resulting in a “don’t ask – don’t tell” practice with regards to the sexual conduct of persons in their spiritual care.**

This, of course, is not our first study conference on human sexuality. In preparation I read BFL study papers dating as far back as 1957 and the principle study conference was in 1969 covering divorce, remarriage, and abortion. The findings of that conference led to a conference resolution in 1978 which has shaped pastoral practice among MB churches ever since.

It is in the arena of Divorce and Remarriage that Mennonite Brethren have most developed our practical theology and our pastoral care. This has involved hermeneutical choices along the way, so it is essential that we review the work we have done, and then I will take a few minutes to provide a pastoral reflection on 3 of the challenges on this list.

It is my sense that that for decades, two streams of thought have intermingled to form a Mennonite Brethren practical theology, which has guided pastoral practice. Generally, I would describe these streams as grace and truth. In the first chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus is described as being full of grace and truth, and being the source of grace and truth. This description stood in sharp contrast to the law.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “this is the one I spoke about when I said, He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.”) ¹⁶ **Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.** ¹⁷ **For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**

In the incarnation Jesus expressed fully grace and truth, our pastoral task is to bring grace and truth into every pastoral encounter with human frailty and sinfulness.

A Brief Review Of Mennonite Brethren Pastoral Response To Divorce And Remarriage

Over the decades the MB church addressed Divorce and Remarriage more than any other topic within human sexuality and it is where we made the greatest effort to develop a practical theology of human sexuality. So please forgive this survey of history.

In 1957 Waldo Hiebertⁱ provided the church with a thorough discussion of marriage and sexuality, his paper provided a reliable discussion of the biblical texts as expressed in the life of the church at that time.

The following year, J.B. Toewsⁱⁱ clarified for everyone a common position that all divorce was sin, and that there was no New Testament basis for remarriage, and that Jesus specifically forbade it. Toews and Hiebert further asserted that all remarriage constituted adultery. They clearly defined biblical truth, but left us wanting for guidance in how to navigate the complicated circumstances of people’s lives and sinful choices within the church. Here is a short sample of Toews’ conclusions:

“In all the passages dealing with remarriage ... no mention is made that in such cases, where divorce was effected on the grounds of fornication, a remarriage is permissible. Not even in Matthew 5:31-32, where fornication is given as a legitimate cause for divorce is it stated as a justification for remarriage.”

“In a case where the margin for the application for justification of remarriage is so small...we consider it the only safe position to hold to the interpretation which makes no provision for remarriage.”

Truth has abounded, there is no confusion about the truth, and a fair reading of scripture 55 years later reveals a similar assessment of the text.

Within a decade, in 1968, the need for guidance in pastoral practice resulted in theological papers that offered some of the following counsel. Here is a small sample from G.W. Peters' submission to the study conference. ⁱⁱⁱ

“The Bible speaks in no uncertain terms about the sin of all other remarriages. Yet the Scripture does not place them outside of forgiveness if repentance takes place, nor does it demand their dissolution.”

The weight of the discussion among our churches was shifting from truth to grace. Both feet were still firmly planted on the ground, but grace was now bearing much more of the weight. This was also evident in J.H. Quiring's papers where he provided an extended discussion of how to approach divorce and remarriage.

Quiring outlined six foundational principles^{iv} regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage, stating:

“We have had to awaken to the fact that it is easier to proclaim an ideal standard than to deal with the real situations in a sinful society in which the Church lives and serves. It is therefore expedient that we examine our practices again, in the light of the Bible as we understand it today.”

While in 1957 J.B. Toews made the case that scripture made no provision for remarriage, Quiring in 1967 stated:

“We must now face the concrete situation in which two believing partners have not been able to surmount their marriage difficulties. Marriage has gradually deteriorated until it broke down. The divorce has been legally finalized and a second marriage consummated. How are we going to deal with the case? We cannot simply ignore those involved. We must not despise them. As a Church we must face the facts and act according to Scriptural principles. We must deal redemptively with them.”

All of this theological discussion led to a MB conference resolution guiding a restorative response to divorce and remarriage in 1978.^v We must pay attention to this short history lesson as we approach the challenges presented to the church by homosexual believers.

So you ask. Where do you stand on this grace and truth thing? How do you provide spiritual leadership and pastoral care? And with both feet planted firmly, which foot is bearing more of the weight?

Given the emphasis on homosexuality at this Study Conference, let me locate myself and express some of my convictions at the outset of the conversation.

I fully embrace the confession of faith and believe that the Bible is quite clear about sex and the proper place for sexual expression, namely within the context of a marriage between a man and a woman.

I do not believe that there is a hierarchy of sexual sin in Scripture. Sexting is not more or less sinful than having an affair with a coworker, consuming pornography, or making out with your boyfriend under the stars.

I am concerned about how unready the church is to actively engage the LGBTQ community and persons who are homosexual. We are desperately unprepared to be in healthy friendships with our LGBTQ neighbors.

While there is no hierarchy of sin, I do confess to a personal hierarchy of concern. As a pastor the vast majority of pastoral care concerns are related to cohabiting relationships, premarital sex, pornography, sexual addiction, and marriage failure. I am frankly more concerned about the out of control heterosexuality within the church than the emerging homosexuality within the church.

But let's press "pause," and reflect on the account of Jesus in John 8:1-11, Jesus was presented with the case of an adulterous woman, he has held court, he has written in the dirt, he has shamed the Pharisees, and he ends with these words.

¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹ "No one, sir," she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Grace and truth in action: easy for Jesus, he knows his Bible, he knows the human heart, he carries the authority of heaven, he is God’s love incarnate, and he always gets it right every time. Me? I mostly shift my weight uncomfortably from side to side as I try to keep my balance pastorally.

To help me find the best pastoral response when providing care and spiritual leadership I have employed two filters.

Filter #1 is Who Am I Speaking With?

And Filter #2 is Discerning the Balance of Grace and Truth.

Jesus never approached people with a predetermined template that would dictate his course of action and the words he would say.

The crowd, the Pharisees, the disciples and a demon possessed man or an adulterous woman got Jesus’ full attention and the exact word that each of them needed.

When I consider Filter #1, who I’m speaking with, I ask:

1. Is this a missional conversation with a spiritually seeking person?
2. Is it a conversation about biblical truth and confessional faithfulness?
3. Is it a conversation about discipleship and life together as a Christian community?

When we participate in a conversation with someone, it’s critical to respect that person’s individual journey and spiritual commitments, including the labels that they assign to themselves.

As I consider filter #2, I ask myself, how will I balance Grace and Truth?

How will I communicate biblical truths and also offer compassion?

Jesus, of course, struck the perfect balance when choosing his voice and words. Often, it was his questions, rather than his answers, that connected God’s truth with people’s circumstances. Sadly, we often fail to find the best questions or the right balance.

Our best efforts at balancing grace and truth are centered on a deep appreciation of the incarnation. On the other hand, when we are influenced by fear and insecurity we may well over compensate, and our truth may become inflexible and overbearing or our grace may become spineless. When using the filter of grace and truth one must always be aware of whether it is the Spirit of Christ or the spirit of fear that is shaping our pastoral response.

So what are the three challenges related to sexual morality that I have chosen to address?

1. The challenge of singleness
2. The challenge of cohabitation and non-marital sex
3. The challenge of LGBTQ identity and practice

Challenge #1, Singleness

Wow, the absurdity of a guy married 23 years speaking to the challenge of singleness in the church.

Here is what I encounter:

1. Half of the adults in my congregation are single or single again.
2. A few are scared of relationships and marriage commitment, and many long for intimacy and marriage.
3. The larger culture assumes that it is absolutely normal for anyone in a romantic relationship to also be sexually active. What's more, many consider it abnormal to abstain from intimate sexual activity within a romantic relationship. Many within the church share this assumption. In fact, many avoid dates because even a first, second or third date is assumed by more than a few, to end "between the sheets". Chastity and purity are forgotten and scorned values in our culture. Single people often live insecurely, awkwardly, and painfully in this context, while married people are often oblivious to this reality.
4. Our culture has declared that to be fully authentic we must express our sexuality through genital behavior regardless of sexual orientation, marital status, and spiritual beliefs. We are in the ridiculous circumstance where to stay single is to presume that you

are either sexually active or a non-sexual being – how unbiblical is that!

5. It is said that elementary school is run by women for girls, and that boys will just have to live with it. Much the same could be said about the church. It is run by married people, for married people and single persons will just have to live with it. We the church are desperately out of touch with half the population. It is not single people that have made singleness a challenge, it is married people that have made being single a challenge in the church. How are single people welcomed into small groups? Into leadership environments? Into the homes of the Christian community? We have a kind of singleness apartheid that we must repent of and change.
6. If the church has isolated and alienated single people, where will they find healthy experiences of household, family, non-sexual intimacy, meaningful non-romantic relationships with persons of the same gender and of the opposite sex?
7. We counsel young people to “wait” to get married. Why? So they can finish their education, establish themselves in career, set themselves up financially. But many find themselves in committed romantic relationships, standing in a cue that is moving ever so slowly towards a moment when it is socially acceptable to get married. Unfortunately their hormones lack the patience of a cue-up-for-marriage culture. It is the parents and church culture fascinated with success and security that is placing our young people in sexual jeopardy by promoting this unbiblical expectation.

So Grace and Truth... in the realm of human sexuality, the church can address this, the largest challenge, with powerful community that “fully members” single persons within the body of Christ and the community of Jesus. Married people, married church leaders through our passive and active neglect we are “dismembering” single people from Christ’s body and it must stop now. This is TRUTH for church ministry structures. This is TRUTH for married persons and families. This must be GRACE for single persons.

Challenge number 2 – Co-habitation and non-marital sexual intimacy

If you are a pastor here, as a ratio out of 10, how many of the couples who approach you for premarital counselling are sexually active? No let's make it simple, out of 5, 5 fingers, how many Christian couples, approaching marriage, are sexually active? Hold up the number of fingers that represent your guess or your opinion? Look around

We have a crisis on our hands. In my experience, and in the experience of many of my pastoral colleagues, 7 out of 10 Christian couples approaching a pastor to officiate a wedding, are sexually active, and many of these are or have been co-habiting.

Additionally, many believers who actively engaged in the life of the church are choosing to live together. It is as if the voice of the culture has drowned out the call of Christ through the church. They just decided to live together. They may be "kicking the tires," or many have chosen a convenient living arrangement for reasons of financial expediency. An enduring relationship and marriage may not even be part of the equation. Whatever the case we must address this increasingly common practice.

Let me tell you a story and ask how you would respond?

Lisa is a young adult. Her mother is a Christ follower and from the time Lisa was young, she has learned of Jesus and participated in the church. She was baptized in her mid-teens and has served as a leader in children's ministry in a number of different ways, most recently as a small group leader for grade 5 girls. Lisa recently moved in with her boyfriend, a great guy, not a believer, more interested in conversations about spiritual things generally than about Jesus specifically.

We approached Lisa for conversation. She was very upset that we would "stick our nose into her affairs." We asked what will the girls in your small group think when they heard about her moving in with her boyfriend?" and asked how she might respond to their questions as the conversation arose. We were trying to help her recognize a conflict between her biblical commitments and her moral choice. We were trying to help her make a powerful choice she could own, without imposing something on her.

I'll be honest, we didn't handle the conversation as well as we could have, but we really cared about Lisa, her boyfriend and the girls she was leading. Lisa got quite angry and completely disconnected with our congregation,

including friends that really care for her. Lisa's mom was very angry about this whole thing and also left the church. Her last words were, "how dare you"!

So more recently, when addressing couples who have decided to live together outside of marriage, we started actively seeking homes within our congregation where they can move in for a time, and thus gracefully exit the living arrangement they have, attendant with its sexual temptations and choices. We cannot make choices for people, but we can provide options so that they can make choices that not only recalibrate their relationships, but also recalibrate their discipleship.

Chris and Katie's story

Now just let me say, the greater our commitment to living on mission, the more complicated this will be. Chris and Katie's story illustrates some of the challenges. Katie, and Chris started coming to TMP because of Katie's spiritual interest. They each had children, and were living together. Katie responded to Jesus, Chris wasn't that interested; he had an old and not so good history with the church. As a growing believer, Katie wanted to be baptized. This was the first major discipleship step and she was in a common-law relationship with a nonbeliever. What would you do? Baptize her though she was living in a common-law relationship with a non-believer? Suggest marriage to a non-believer?

Katie and Chris got engaged and began premarital counseling. What would you do? Ask them to 'unblend' their family, moving their children from a stable situation into separate homes? Or encourage them to maintain their home and stop their sexual intimacy? Or say nothing of the matter? Or maybe, because Chris was not a believer, you would refuse to do premarital counseling and wedding planning?

Through the counseling Chris committed his life to Christ. Now, would any of your counsel change? This my friends, is an UNCOMPLICATED circumstance with 2 very functional people with lots of support. Many similar stories are played out in the spiritual care and leadership contexts of our churches where people have neither the personal maturity, nor the social support that were true for Chris and Katie.

Challenge # 3: LGBTQ attraction, orientation and identity, and behavior

On a recent Q&A Sunday at our church I received this question, “Can I be a Christian and be gay?” It was the first question of the morning and things suddenly got very quiet. I will spare you the preamble I provided but I answered with an unequivocal, YES. I also followed up with the comment that Scripture and Jesus “set a very high bar for sexual conduct.” So how would you respond to the question? And how would you explain your answer?^{vi}

As a pastor, I frequently have pastoral care conversations related to the challenge of LGBTQ attraction, orientation, identity and behavior.^{vii} I have been asked to officiate same sex weddings, a gay couple and their surrogate mother have asked to participate in our parent/child dedication, a lesbian couple wants to have children and want to know if they can still worship here, and just a couple of weeks ago a transgendered woman asked if she was “welcome at our church and would she be accepted.” When I was in university in the 80’s one of my best friends came out of the closet, a rare circumstance at the time. It is no longer uncommon. I have had these conversations in my church office, while going for a walk, and around the corner at the Starbucks. And as “coming out” has become more common, there has also been an increasing need for pastoral care for parents with an LGBTQ child. These parents often experience a change in how their community interacts with them and they struggle with parental guilt and shame because of the choices of their children. And as their children get married they encounter distress as they seek to love and support their children while also trying to understand what values and convictions are communicated by participating or not participating in a wedding.

The journey ahead of us is complicated and there are many questions about the intersection of truth and grace that we must actively engage. If we are at all missional, if our commitment to evangelism has any urgency about it, it is only a matter of time that we will face opportunities to practice our pastoral theology in ways that we would not have considered possible in 1968 at our last BFL Study conference focusing on questions of human sexuality.

So please consider this. The gay couple across the street is legally married in Canada, with 2 children; one from a previous marriage aged 8, and one they adopted, who is age 2. In time, through building a friendship you have had the opportunity to share the good news of Jesus and one or both of your friends decide to follow Jesus.

1. Will they experience welcome and acceptance in your congregation?
2. When they ask to participate in the parent child dedication, how will you respond?
3. When they ask to be baptized what will you say?
4. When they want to sing on the worship team or serve as a youth leader, what service opportunities are available to them?

So, will the church find itself in the curious position of asking a gay or lesbian couple to divorce and break up a family in order to participate in the disciplined life of the Christian community?

When I have posed this question, many people have responded, "It wouldn't really be a divorce because it was never a real marriage in the first place." Really?

When the Mennonite Brethren church asked the question "Should people divorced and remarried be accepted into the Church as members? Our answer was an unequivocal "yes" and we then provided four reasons.^{viii}

The last in the list stated:

"My fourth reason is the scriptural principle laid down in 1 Cor. 7:16ff. Here the converts are exhorted to remain in the civil human relationships in which the grace of God has found them. Certainly nothing would be gained in disrupting further human, relationships by demanding separation of remarried people. The instruction of Paul in this whole chapter is a drive to avoid any and all disruptions of human, relationships if at all possible. If God forgives without disrupting, who is the church to demand, disruption? , Let us be careful in our demands. Let us practice the mind of Christ and follow the example of Paul."

If we are at all serious about mission, and if the Holy Spirit is moving in the lives of our friends and neighbors, we must address these and other questions. They are relevant, unavoidable, and exceedingly complex.

I do not want to suggest that the path we chose for the discipleship, service and leadership of persons divorced and remarried is the path for those who are LGBTQ. But I want to say that I deeply respect faithful leaders before me who provided a map for pastors and congregations to navigate strange seas in these matters, and the time has come, we must do the same.

They understood that Scripture called divorce sin. They understood Jesus to leave no room for remarriage as it constituted adultery. They understood 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 to indicate that the church was a restorative and redemptive community. They had clarity both on truth and on grace and provided a practical theology that called for a restorative response to the occasion of remarriage.

If you have read the reading list for this study conference you will no doubt note that the biblical data has clearly lined up against homosexual practice. And in fact most biblical scholars, regardless of their “liberal” or “conservative” bias agree that Scripture uniformly condemns homosexual practice. I also agree that homosexual genital behavior is sin. Similarly, I believe that divorce and remarriage is sin. So, how will we now provide spiritual leadership for the church?

Will we provide a map? Or will we simply shift our weight awkwardly from foot to foot, not finding a solid stance that provides “GRACE and TRUTH” leadership for our congregations. What “GRACE and TRUTH” pastoral care guidance do we provide or do we avoid providing for our pastors? And as a people on mission, how will we live out “GRACE and TRUTH” relationships with our neighbours?

Conclusion

In the last 30 minutes I have chosen to identify common pastoral challenges with regard to human sexuality, and have explored only three of them. You may note that I have anchored pastoral care in the life and ministry of Jesus while much teaching and writing on pastoral leadership and pastoral care is heavily shaped by the Epistles. So I want to end with seven encouragements to the pastoral task that I draw from Jesus.

1. Jesus was incredibly compassionate to those on the margins and those not welcomed by the religious. He was the friend of sinners.
2. Jesus had no problem calling sin “sin.”
3. Jesus freely forgave, even before forgiveness was asked and repentance was evident.
4. Jesus often used questions and stories to expose sin and reveal truth when he was in conversation with the spiritually curious person.
5. Jesus had no problem speaking truth, withholding judgment and in the same breath saying “go and sin no more.”
6. Jesus reserved his harshest words, often of judgment and condemnation, for the pious and religiously self-assured.
7. Jesus spoke about sexuality freely, and when speaking with those on the treadmill of sexual sin, Jesus was never accusatory, and he moved beyond guilt and shame and extended mercy, grace and relationship.

Similarly I want to highlight five challenges to spiritual leadership in the arena of human sexuality.

1. I believe that the church must celebrate the value and benefits of moral living for disciples of Jesus. I also believe that we must guard against a church culture that employs shame and exclusion in our engagement with people struggling with their sexuality.
2. I believe that any serious effort at evangelism in our culture must include a path for healing from sexual brokenness so that new believers can experience Holy Spirit empowered victory.
3. I believe that our discipling processes must assume sexual struggle and provide a path for the renewal of the mind and the reformation of character and conduct. If we are missional, much of this will follow baptism and will be concurrent with people’s service and ministry within the church. The MB church has generally set a high bar for baptism. While this may help avoid the messy situations caused by immature believers, it also deters new and immature believers from taking biblically directed steps of obedience in baptism.
4. I believe our teaching must, more boldly, declare that sexuality is spiritual, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and that sexual expression comes under the Lordship of Christ, not under the category of “rights.”

5. I believe that we must soon provide clarity for our churches about what steps of discipleship, and what options for service and leadership are available to persons who are growing spiritually and who are struggling with their sexuality. A church ill prepared to respond to the varied landscape of human sexuality will be incapable of fulfilling the mission Jesus entrusted to us. His Gospel is a whole gospel for the whole person, body and soul.

And finally, it is my deep conviction that in the domain of human sexuality, our greatest opportunity is the full inclusion of the many single persons in a powerful expression of Christian community. Our greatest challenge is the out of control hyper heterosexuality within our churches. And the greatest test of the churches in our generation will be our balancing of truth and grace in the spiritual care and discipleship of those with LGBTQ attraction, orientation, identity or practice. May God guide us in vigorous discussion of culture, human sexuality and biblical interpretation^{ix}, so we can soon echo the words of James in Acts 15 and say, “it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”

End Notes

ⁱ Waldo Hiebert – 1959 Christian ideals in marriage and sex (study conference)
<http://www.mbconf.ca/resource/File/1959%20-%20July%2010-13%20-%20Christian%20Ideals%20in%20Marriage%20and%20Sex%20-%20Waldo%20D.%20HiebertReduced.pdf>

ⁱⁱ JB Toes – 1958 Divorce and Remarriage
<http://www.mbconf.ca/resource/File/1958 - Jul. 12-16 - Divorce and Remarriage - J.B. Toews.PDF>

“In all the passages dealing with remarriage (1 Corinthians 7:10-11; Luke 16:18; Mark 10:11-12; Matthew 5:32, and Matthew 5:31-32) no mention is made that in such cases, where divorce was effected on the grounds of fornication, a remarriage is permissible. Not even in Matthew 5:31-32, where fornication is given as a legitimate cause for divorce is it stated as a justification for remarriage.”

If now five passages of Scripture make no provision for a possibility of remarriage, (except when one party of the marriage covenant dies, Matthew 19: 5-7; 1 Corinthians 6:15-18, Romans 7:2-3, 1 Corinthians 7:39) and one passage contains, a setting which possibly could mean that it does permit remarriage, there fornication was the cause for separation - shall we in such a case accept the latter as the point of doctrine?

In a case where the margin for the application for justification of remarriage is so small...we consider it the only safe position to hold to the interpretation which makes no provision for remarriage.

ⁱⁱⁱ G. W. Peters, 1968, Remarriage of Divorced in Light of Scripture

“The Bible speaks in no uncertain terms about the sin of all other remarriages. Yet the Scripture does not place them outside of forgiveness if repentance takes place, nor does it demand their dissolution.” (page 18)

^{iv} Jacob Quiring – Dealing redemptively with the divorced and remarried, 1967

<http://www.mbconf.ca/resource/File/.pd1967%20Nov%2023-24.%20-%20Dealing%20Redemptively%20with%20the%20Divorced%20and%20Remarried%20-%20Jacob%20Quiring%20Reduced.pdf>

1) That marriage, as ordained of God, must continue to be monogamous and indissoluble. God creates one man and one woman who in marriage become one flesh (Gen. 2:24). One cannot relate in this way to more than one person at a time, nor with a reserve as to the length of time (Mal. 2:15,16; Matth. 19:5; Eph. 5:23-32).

“(2) That polygamy and divorce as practiced in Bible times and recorded in Scripture were temporarily tolerated in a sinful society, but have never received the stamp of divine approval. Moses accommodated himself to the need of the hour because of the hardness of men's hearts. Christ, when challenged on this point, emphasized the sanctity of marriage and, ignoring Hillel and Shammai and by passing Moses, went back to the foundation of an abiding principle.

"Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one?' So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Mtt. 19:4-6)." (page 3)

“(3) That divorce in case of marital infidelity (adultery or unchastity) is legitimate and permissible according to the word of the Lord (Mtt. 5:32; 19:9).” (page 3)

(4) That divorce and remarriage for other reasons than fornication are sin, however sin which can be repented of and forgiven. Neither divorce nor remarriage constitute the unpardonable sin (John 8: 3-11). However, they violate the biblical ideal and place the individuals concerned on a sub-scriptural ethical level.

(5) That the early church accepted divorced and remarried people into the fellowship after their conversion, apparently without requiring that they give up their present state (I Cor. 6:9-11).

(6) That the Church is primarily a redemptive body keeping the door of fellowship open to all who repent and believe. Surely, there must always be a way back into the fellowship of the Church for those who do truly repent. “(page 3)

^v DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE.

1978 Mennonite Brethren Conference Resolution on Divorce and Remarriage.

"We believe and teach that marriage unites two people for life. However, we also realize that under the circumstances of life and the influences of contemporary society, some marriages are broken. We believe that such a disruption is always the result of sin and disobedience. However, when the person, or persons, involved recognize their failure and repent of their sin, they receive forgiveness and are accepted by the Lord as members of His body. Should such a person seek to become a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church, the church is willing to receive that person as a member and provide nurture and fellowship. Such nurture and fellowship would include encouragement and support in seeking to achieve a reconciliation with the estranged partner.

Where reconciliation is not possible (e.g. the estranged partner has remarried) and the person who is a member of the church wishes to remarry, such a person should seek the counsel of the local church. Where there is not the grace to live alone or as a single parent, and where there is general agreement in the local church, a remarriage may take place. It is expected that the church will provide guidance and support and may minister in the marriage of the persons involved. We believe the above procedure should apply whether the persons concerned were, at the time of their marriage break-up, professing believers or not. (Matthew 5:32; Matthew 19:1-9; I Corinthians 7:10-11)."

^{vi} *Mennonite Brethren Church. "Resolution on Homosexuality (MB, 1981)." Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. 1981. Web. 13 October 2013. <http://old.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/R48628.html>.*

Resolution on Homosexuality (MB, 1981)

The view that the [Bible](#) condemns homosexuality, which includes lesbianism, as sinful is being re-evaluated in many quarters today. Interpretations are being put upon biblical texts so that they no longer prohibit homosexuality.

In light of these new interpretations, it is incumbent upon us to articulate what we believe the Bible teaches regarding homosexuality. Thus we affirm:

1. That both the Old Testament and the New Testament clearly condemn homosexuality as sinful.
 - a. Sodom's sin ([Genesis 19:4-11](#), cf. Jude 7 among others) was homosexuality and not primarily inhospitality. The prohibition and condemnation of [Leviticus 18:20](#) ("And you shall not have intercourse
- October 18, 2013

with your neighbor's wife, to be defiled with her.") and [Leviticus 20:13](#) ("If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them.") is directed toward the sin of homosexuality and not idolatry; The evil of homosexuality is also illustrated in the intention of the Gibeonites (Judges 19:22-30);

b. [Romans 1:26-27](#) ("For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire towards one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.") condemns homosexuality and lesbianism as dishonorable and unnatural. Interpretations which state Paul is only condemning lust and promiscuity (and not engaging in homosexuality per se) or that Paul is only condemning heterosexually oriented people for engaging in homosexual acts (which for them are unnatural) are foreign to this text.

c. [1 Corinthians 6:9-10](#) ("Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, not effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.") and [1 Timothy 1:10](#) ("and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching.") list vices which exclude people from the kingdom of God, vices which are against both the Old Testament law and the gospel. These lists clearly condemn homosexual acts.

2. Homosexuality is a violation of the creation order ([Genesis 1:27](#), "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."; [Genesis 1:31](#), "And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day."; cf. [Matthew 19:4](#), "And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female."). Adam's masculinity and Eve's femininity was not a result of chance but was a part of the Creator's divine plan. Sexual differentiation is the basis for man and woman becoming "one flesh." Not merely heterosexuality but monogamous marriage is the divine norm for mankind. Homosexual activity cannot be viewed simply as an alternate lifestyle.
3. Homosexuality, however, is not an unpardonable sin. Paul explains that some of his Corinthian converts, who had been homosexuals, were washed, sanctified and justified "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#), "And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God."). To receive forgiveness, however, the homosexual must repent, leaving behind any justification or practice of his sin.

Homosexuals who have repented should be welcomed as members of the church. Sinners saved by grace have no option but to receive forgiven sinners into fellowship without distinction and without contempt. The new convert will need special help and care to be established in holiness and fortified for times of temptation. Failure to live up to the biblical norms of morality will call for the discipline of the church which expects the converted homosexual to live a chaste life, just as it expects people with strong heterosexual drives to live chastely, whether they are married or not.

^{vii} Mark A. Yarhouse, "Homosexuality and the Christian" of provides a helpful three tier distinction when thinking of and speaking of homosexuality

^{viii} G.W. Peters, 1968, Remarriage of Divorced in Light of Scripture, page 20
"Remarriage and the Church

Should people divorced and remarried be accepted into the Church as members? Our answer is an unequivocal yes to the above question and this for several reasons:

My first reason is based upon the biblical Principle that people who have repented of this sin and have appropriated divine forgiveness are actually forgiven without remarriage having been disrupted. As forgiven sinners they are biblically entitled to church membership and fellowship. Surely it is not in keeping with the N. T. ideal to keep forgiven people outside of the church. They are members of God's household and members of His royal priesthood.

Second the, silence of the Bible is sufficient reason to admit them to church membership. The Bible does not legislate against it. In the light of the prevailing conditions in the times of apostolic churches it is difficult to doubt that numerous cases of irregularity from the first marriage existed' among the converts. Yet no specific regulations are covering their entrance into the church. Therefore, believing that they are at least tolerated church members we may proceed. Spirit filled enlightened prudence may direct us to the contrary in specific cases and under specific circumstances.

Thirdly my next reason is based upon the' practice of Paul. Consider the church membership as it developed in Corinth and in Ephesus (I Cor. 6: 9-11; Eph. 2:11f; 5:11ff). It' was a rather humiliating company. But the life in times past, if forgiven, must never stand in the way of church membership. While the church is a church militant, it may also need to become a salvation army, a home, a nursery, a hospital, a mending institution yes, many things except a graveyard. Let us make room in our churches for every repentant and forgiven sinner regardless of his past. There was room in the church of Paul.

Four, my fourth reason is the scriptural principle laid down in 1 Cor. 7:16ff. Here the converts are exhorted to remain in the civil human relationships in which the grace of God has found them. Certainly nothing would be gained in disrupting further human, relationships by demanding separation of remarried people. The instruction of Paul in this whole chapter is a drive to avoid any and all disruptions of human, relationships if at all possible. If God forgives without disrupting, who is the church to demand, disruption? , Let us be careful in our demands. Let us practice the mind of Christ and follow the example of Paul. (page 20)

^{ix} **Interpretation of Scriptures (Mennonite Brethren Church, 1978)**
Yearbook, 54th session, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, August 3-6, 1978.
Winnipeg? : Kindred Press?, 1978: 12-15.

Preface

1. [The interpreter must seek to understand the original author's intent](#)
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Our interest in the crucial contemporary issue of Biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) is to permit God through His Spirit to speak clearly and powerfully to us in our present situation. Our concern is to grasp the message of the Bible so that we might grasp the living God to the fullness of His self-revelation. Biblical authority, therefore, is fundamental to our understanding of God, His redemptive purpose in

Christ and our task and mission in the world. Because our God is a speaking God, His revelation is both propositional and personal.

We regard the Bible's affirmations about itself as determinative for our understanding of the origin and nature of the Scriptures (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). To accept Christ as Lord is to accept the Old Testament Scriptures as God's word as He did, and to acknowledge the New Testament as His word. As the inspired Word of God the [Bible](#) is the infallible and inerrant rule of faith and life for us and for all mankind. This principle of Biblical authority (*Sola Scriptura*) is to control our hermeneutics! We commit ourselves to, the following principles of interpretation.

1. The interpreter must seek to understand the original author's intent.

Because God revealed Himself in history to men with varied personalities rooted in different cultures, a proper interpretation of the Scriptures requires a thorough going grammatical-historical exegesis. Our understanding of the cultural context there fore, is helpful--the language and concepts of the day, the literature and literary forms. Biblical writers did not abstract themselves from their culture. Paul quotes pagan authors (eg. Acts 17:28); Jude refers to contemporary religious writings. One must not presuppose that they merely echo these writings; they use or transform them for their own purposes. Therefore, a study of extra-Biblical writings may throw some light on certain Biblical words, expressions, or references.

However, while we want to discover all we can of the Biblical background to help us understand the Biblical author's intention, we assert the primacy of the Biblical text. The Bible is its own best interpreter. We believe in the clarity (perspicuity) of the Scriptures and that every believer can understand and respond to its message. Therefore, painstaking Biblical studies and meditation should go together.

This means, for example, that we ought not to bring to the Bible a preunderstanding of man's need based on current philosophical, psychological or sociological perspectives--as a hermeneutical principle--in order to understand the Gospel message in that perspective. Our understanding of man, for example, and his need before God is to be derived from the Scriptures and be under the Scriptures' control, and in that light we understand the wonderful redemption wrought by God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The Old and the New Testament need to be seen as an organic unity.

Because all Scriptures are inspired of God, we look for and expect harmony in all of its parts. There is rich diversity and a complementarity, without contradictions.

However, Biblical harmony must not be confused with mechanical or wooden conformity. We need to recognize and search for the distinctive emphases of the various Biblical writers. For example, the Gospel authors organized similar events in different chronological order or selected aspects of the same events for different purposes. All agree on the central aspects of the accounts, but each at times approaches the event with a different interest.

Because of the rich diversity in the Scriptures, it is understandable that in interpreting Biblical teaching on some doctrines, such as eschatology, we may arrive at variant conclusions on details. This arises out of our own imperfect understanding of the Scriptures, as well as out of the fact that "the perfect" has not yet come: "Now we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, that which is in part will pass away" (1 Corinthians 13:9). Nevertheless, we should diligently pursue our Biblical studies guided by the principle that the more evident and plain assertions of Scriptures help us understand the more difficult, more symbolic and problematic portions.

3. The interpretation of the Scriptures needs to take account of revelation as progressive.

God's redemptive acts are a chain of events spanning thousands of years culminating in the incarnation, death and resurrection of our Lord and the accompanying interpretations of the New Testament. From the Old Testament to the New there is evident an expansion of God's self-revelation, a development of His redemptive plans, and an increasing clarity of His purposes. Within the Old Testament the prophets and psalms provide a further understanding of God's will than the Pentateuch; the New Testament goes beyond the Old. There are promises and fulfillment; types and anti-types; shadows and reality. Both Testaments find a central focus and finality in Christ. This Christo-centricity is to guide our interpretation of the whole Scriptures, even as our Lord taught us (Luke 24:44 ff). Old Testament texts or events are referred to in the New Testament in continuity with their significance in the Old, but also with an expanded meaning not readily apparent in the earlier context.

4. Interpretation of the Scriptures and response to them requires the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit through whom the Scriptures come gives illumination to the mind and heart of man enabling him to understand them; "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things fully given us by God . . . but a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them (1 Corinthians 2:12-14). It is the Spirit of God who authenticates the Word in our hearts, "for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Of particular significance is the need to seek the help of the Spirit in order to apply rightly the Word of God to the life situation we are in: ". . . that you may be filled with the Knowledge of His will in all *spiritual* wisdom and understanding so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord" (Colossians 1:9-10).

5. Interpretation of the Scriptures needs to be done with a right attitude within the believing community.

The Bible encourages us to hunger intensively after the Word (1 Peter 2). Seeking the face of God, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, meditating on the Word of God, seeking Him in prayer, responding in obedience to His voice--all are basic attitudes we need to cultivate in our personal and corporate lives. Insights into God's Word and the right application of it to our lives are not apart from spiritual struggle in His presence (Psalm 1; 1 Peter 2; Psalm 27; 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

The [Bible](#) also underscores the interdependence of the members of the body of Christ. We are to contribute to each others' growth to maturity (Ephesians 4), This calls for an interest in the understanding of Scriptures God has given to other members of the body of Christ--those who in past history have served Him faithfully, and those who today love Him and seek to bring every thought captive to Christ. Within the Priesthood of believers we acknowledge the words of the Scriptures: "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets and some as evangelists and some as pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints . . ." (Ephesians 4:11, 12) We may, therefore, speak of the validity of a "congregational hermeneutics."