

GOD, SEX & CHURCH

A THEOLOGY OF HEALTHY SEXUALITY



Study Guide
by the Board of Faith and Life

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¹ After the Human Sexuality Study Conference in 2013, the Board of Faith and Life (BFL) commissioned a writing group, which met together and produced written contributions that have been blended into and/or consulted for this study guide. The BFL thanks these contributors, as well as those who reviewed preliminary versions of this study guide. These people gave the BFL invaluable guidance for shaping this present version.

Introduction

The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (CCMBC) convened a Study Conference on human sexuality in Edmonton in October 2013. This gathering was significant for ongoing conversation on human sexuality, and highlighted the need for Mennonite Brethren (MB) churches to address human sexuality biblically and compassionately.

The Study Conference was not intended to produce a definitive theology on human sexuality or to launch a revision of the MB Confession of Faith on the topic of human sexuality; rather, the Board of Faith and Life (BFL) intended the Study Conference to be an initial step toward greater biblical and theological clarity on the increasingly contentious contemporary issues surrounding human sexuality.

Many questions were raised at the Study Conference. Through the presentations and stories, the issues surrounding human sexuality were framed in practical terms. The tone for the Study Conference was struck when Willy Reimer, CCMBC's Executive Director, shared his story of sexual abuse and healing. He testified that "the transforming power of God in my life was very real," and called the Study Conference participants "to be Christ-focused in what we are doing."

A Christian understanding of human sexuality is shaped by and shapes hermeneutics, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, discipleship, and mission. As well, Christian understandings of human sexuality are expressed in a Canadian context that espouses “sexual freedom” in many different forms. In this context there is a “strong impetus to pronounce all consensual adult sex as right (i.e., normal).”²

Briefly stated, the BFL calls Canadian MB churches to continue to live according to biblical teachings by combining MB convictions about human sexuality (as in the MB Confession of Faith) with a loving, hospitable response to people experiencing sexual brokenness and sexual sin. The Scriptures invite believers to embrace the gift of sexuality and the joy of sexual intimacy within the parameters ordained by God.

² John Stackhouse, CCMBC Study Conference Plenary, “Sex, Freedom & Sexual Freedom: Understanding How We Got to Where We Are,” October 16, 2013.

Purpose of this study guide

This BFL study guide aims to do three things.

1. Provide MB leaders and churches with a starting point for the 2015 Study Conference, building on the outcomes of the 2013 Study Conference. The study guide will focus on pastoral responses to matters of human sexuality and set out a God-honouring expression of human sexuality, as informed by Scripture and the MB Confession of Faith.
2. Offer MB leaders and churches direction and guidance from the BFL on the topic of human sexuality.
3. Help MB leaders and churches think carefully about some of the issues of human sexuality. The study guide is intended to generate good questions and to encourage deep engagement with the biblical vision of human sexuality, so that Jesus' followers will be inspired to embody God's design.

Instead of addressing every relevant situation or field of study, this study guide will seek to identify Christian convictions about human sexuality that are biblically and theologically sound, and will begin to identify ways in which these convictions can help people live godly lives in this day and age. The BFL also hopes that this study guide will provide starting points for further prayer, study, and learning as a denominational family. As an added resource in advance of the 2015 study conference, the BFL will provide a reading list at <http://studyconference.mennonitebrethren.ca>.

Assumptions regarding Bible, Confession of Faith, and Hermeneutics

How Christians handle Scripture affects how they handle human sexuality. The BFL is working with the assumptions that are outlined in the MB Confession of Faith: specifically, what MBs confess about the Bible's authority for faith and practice (including sexual practice), and how MBs appropriate the biblical vision for contemporary application (hermeneutics).

Article 2 of the Confession of Faith sets out MB affirmations regarding the Revelation of God. The following is the full text of the Article, with three sentences highlighted in bold font.

*We believe that God has made himself known to all people. God's power and nature have always been evident in creation. The Old Testament reveals God as one who established a covenant relationship with Israel to make known to all people the eternal plan of salvation. **God revealed himself supremely in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament.** The Holy Spirit continues to make God known to individuals and the church; this revelation is always consistent with the Scriptures.*

*We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. **The same Spirit guides the***

community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture.
*The person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament bears witness to Christ, and Christ is the one whom the New Testament proclaims. We accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice.*³

The bolded sentences set out three interpretation principles that MBs characteristically use to relate biblical teaching to contemporary issues.⁴

MBs confess that the Bible is inspired. Among the various ways that churches have chosen to speak about “inspiration,” MBs have chosen to use the words “infallible” and “authoritative guide.” By infallible, MBs mean that the Bible cannot mislead regarding God’s will. It is reliable. By authoritative guide, the emphasis is not simply on right doctrine but also faithful obedience. The Bible has the authority to call Christians to follow the way of Jesus. The Bible guides the faithful practice of the redeemed community of Christ.

MBs confess that the Holy Spirit guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture. The kind of “community hermeneutic” that is characteristic of MB interpretation involves several assumptions: 1) that the Holy

³ MB Confession, Article 2, Revelation of God.

⁴ Lynn Jost and Connie Faber, *Family Matters: Discovering the Mennonite Brethren* (Kindred, 2002), 30–33.

Spirit is still active within believers to illumine Scriptures with fresh insight; 2) that the role of the community is to test particular insights against the scriptural norm; 3) that differences of opinion are expected and healthy, requiring testing characterised by charity and mutual trust; and 4) that these hermeneutical deliberations are aimed at faithful practice and Christ-empowered discipleship, not simply true doctrine.

MBs confess that God is revealed supremely in Jesus.

Among the various ways that churches have chosen to read Scripture, MBs have chosen a Christ-centered interpretive strategy. MBs use Jesus' life, teaching, work on the cross, and resurrection as the lens through which all Scripture is to be interpreted, and the authority by which it is to be obeyed. The biblical text gives witness to Jesus, the one who saves and empowers, the one who calls all to extravagant generosity and hospitality, the one who makes possible transformative relationships throughout all creation, and the one who invites all to be part of God's new humanity that teaches and practices these Christ-embodied values.

These three principles for interpreting Scripture can also shape an understanding of human sexuality and of sexual norms, as these are brought under the light and authority of Scripture. This is what Professor John Stackhouse, who set the stage at the 2013 Study Conference, was addressing when he posed the question, "How ought we to determine sexual norms?" How will Canadian MBs articulate their

understanding of God's design for human sexuality and sexual intimacy within the contemporary Canadian context?

In order to be shaped by God's design for sexuality, the BFL calls the MB churches in Canada to a renewed commitment to be gracious people of the Book, disavowing self-righteousness and judgmental religiosity. With both pastoral sensitivity and prophetic courage, the BFL affirms that Scripture will guide MB churches in faith and practice; that the Spirit will lead in community discernment, and that Jesus' presence will enable the church to live out God's vision for sexual practice.

Distinguishing sex and sexuality

Sex and sexuality are gifts from God, but they are not the same thing. While the various terms related to sexual identity will be defined later in the paper, for the sake of clarity it is important to begin with a careful distinction between sex and sexuality. What is human sexuality and how is it different from sex?⁵ One way to speak of human sexuality is “embodied desire for intimacy.” **Embodied** recognizes that humans are biological beings, male and female; that they are holistic beings; and that sexual intercourse has an important (but not sole, or perhaps even central) place in sexuality. **Desire** locates sexuality as ongoing, as deep from the heart, as distorted by sin and redeemed by Christ, as needing guidance, and as powerful. **Intimacy** refers to knowing and being known at every level of personhood, and not only with other humans but also with God. Sexual intercourse is one expression of the embodied desire for intimacy, which is human sexuality; but human sexuality does not require sexual intercourse to be real or satisfied. The embodied desire for intimacy is intended to be a joyful human experience, is to be embedded in a lifestyle of love, and is ultimately fulfilled in relationship with Christ.

⁵ See the biblical-theological work of Stanley Grenz in *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Approach* (Westminster John Knox, 1997), especially his Introduction and Chapter 1; and Rudy Baergen and Robert J. Suderman, with Study Guide by Willard Metzger, *Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality*, <http://resources.mennonitechurch.ca/FileDownload/18591>.

The Scriptures place great emphasis on human bodies, desires, and intimacy, even though the word “sexuality” is not found in the Bible. In the beginning, God created male and female humans as physical bodies that were “very good.” Bodies are the means by which humans worship God (Romans 12:1); and it is human bodies that God resurrects (1 Corinthians 15). Although human desires were distorted by sin (e.g., Genesis 3:16), God takes joy in fulfilling the deepest and best desires that he has placed within his children (Psalms 20:4, 37:4). Similarly, Jesus honoured human desire by often asking those around him “what do you want?” (e.g., Matthew 20: 21, 32); and by teaching his followers to align their desires with God’s desires in prayer (Matthew 6:10). The intimacy of knowing and being known—an intimacy between people, and between people and God—was part of the goodness God created (Genesis 2:25), was distorted by sin (Genesis 3:8–10), and is being completed through the salvation Jesus brings (Luke 12:7, Matthew 11:27, John 17:25–26, 1 Corinthians 13:12b, 10:16–17, Philippians 3:10). Taken together, embodiment, desire, and intimacy make up the joyful reality of human sexuality. Each of these dimensions of human sexuality is a valuable and beautiful gift from God.

Sex, on the other hand, refers to whether a person is male or female based on a person’s genitalia (whereas gender refers to social and cultural differences between male and female). Sex is also commonly used as an abbreviation to refer to sexual intercourse.

Everyone is a sexual being. Sexuality is a normal, healthy and God-honouring part of being male and female human beings created in God's image, whether single, married or single again. Human sexuality involves an interplay between body image, gender identity, gender role, sexual identity, eroticism, genitals and hormones, intimacy, relationships, love, passion, sensuality, affection, and more. A person's sexuality includes his or her attitudes, values, knowledge, and behaviours. How people express their sexuality is influenced by and influences their family, formation, culture, society, faith community, and personal beliefs.

Identifying cultural challenges as experienced both inside and outside the church

Thankfully, there are people both inside and outside the church who live out a godly sexuality. Still, there are people who look for love in “all the wrong places”—a problem that is as old as human existence, and is one more testimony to the deep relational desire for intimacy that is part of being a sexual human being. Ungodly ways of expressing human sexuality are evident all around—at work, in families, among friends, in the entertainment industry, in popular culture, and among church folk. Three specific popular notions make MB teaching on sexuality especially challenging.

“Friends with benefits.” This notion views sex as purely casual. In this view, sex is freely given between consenting partners. “Make love to whomever you want” is the idea. Guidelines would include these: no one gets hurt, gets a disease, or makes an unwanted baby. And of course, all parties involved would need to feel right about what they are doing; and then it’s basically, “go and have fun!”

The attraction to this notion is that it is fun, exceedingly fun, and without responsibility—so who can fault it? The inevitable problem is that sex is not just purely fun. All humans have a deep inborn yearning to belong—to share life with someone forever. The co-mingling of naked bodies is

the loudest cry of humanity to belong, to “fit in.” To dismiss sex as recreation, as a hollow biological function, as something as common as food or sleep, is to speak a lie to the deepest parts of the human soul.

This notion about sex is ungodly because it does not correspond to reality—this perspective is simply not true. The smoldering wreckage of shattered relationships that litter the landscape of human experience is evidence enough that sex is more than recreation. Even music and movies—the two greatest conduits for the promotion of casual sex—cannot fully abandon themselves to this notion. They protest with stirring appeals for something higher, something truer, for human sexuality.

“Show me the money!” This notion views sex as currency. In this view, sex is given but always at a cost. Marriage partners withhold or give sex to punish or reward. Prostitution, pornography, strip clubs, and even advertising, all give sex but only for payment. Friends barter with sexual favours in order to obtain things they want. People grant sexual favours in the hope of securing companionship. Sexual “payments” are made in the workplace in order to advance careers.

The attractive lure of this view of sexuality is that sex represents power and control. Who wouldn’t want to be powerful and in control? Unfortunately, whenever sex is turned into a commodity, human beings suffer. Sex was never meant to be bought or sold.

This notion about sex is ungodly because it dehumanizes. As the sellers of sex make their sales for money, career advancement, fame, power or companionship they become objectified and their personhood is diminished. As the buyers of sex make their purchases, their personhood begins to disintegrate into an animal instinct, so that these people care little for the person they are consuming. Those who use sex to punish or reward enter into a dehumanizing posture of superiority. Added to this comes an additional side effect: human value becomes based on sexual performance; this is a terrible place to live.

“It’s all about me.” This notion views sex as fundamentally self-gratification. In this view, sex is essentially “for my pleasure.” Whatever gives pleasure is fair game and limitations should be very minimal. Experimentation, new techniques, new partners, new fantasies, new fashions that increase sexual value, are all emphasized in the never-ending pursuit of self-gratifying sexual pleasure.

The appeal of this view is that, of all pursuits, sex is certainly one that easily seduces, turning a person inward, toward himself or herself. Who can fault the natural desire of a human being to be showered with great pleasure?

This notion about sex is ungodly because it creates self-absorption. Anytime a perspective comes to rest on the conviction that “life is about me and my own pleasure,” human flourishing will not result. This is especially true with such a volatile and charged matter as sex. Inevitably, the choice to make the pursuit of sexual pleasure paramount,

regardless of the feelings of others, tramples and dismisses the mutual character of sexual intimacy. Destructive addictions, abuse, deceit, pain, suffering, and brokenness are the result.

“Friends with benefits,” “show me the money,” and “it’s all about me” are sexual perspectives that dominate the secularized western world. Whether single, common-law, or married, many in Canadian culture think in these categories; and the results have proven catastrophic for long-term sexual fulfilment.

For MB churches to give witness to an alternative sexual ideal, a few contemporary definitions of sexual identity are necessary, although these societal definitions continue to morph and evolve. Consider the following example:

When Facebook announced in mid-February that users would be able to display 56 gender options beyond “male” and “female” in their profiles, the response was largely positive ... But as trans or transgender people—umbrella terms encompassing both people who feel at home as members of the opposite sex of their birth, and people who feel their gender can’t be reduced to male or female—have become more prominent and more vocal in America, the language is bending to accommodate more possibilities.⁶

⁶ Britt Peterson, “The Quickly Shifting Language of the Transgender Community,” <http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2014/03/09/the-quickly-shifting-language-transgender-community/J0yimos7SoZmVy8mm1Q9LL/story.html>

Sexual identity is used to describe how people see themselves **physically**: male, female, or in-between. If someone is born female, but wishes to see their body as male in all respects, their sexual identity is male. Sexual identity is also used to refer to the **labeling** that occurs when people designate themselves as gay, straight, or bisexual. Other labels include: curious, queer, bi-curious, and questioning.⁷

Gender identity is used to describe how people see themselves **socially**: man, woman, a combination of both, or none of these.⁸ Gender identity is used to refer to the complex relationship between sex and gender, whereby a person's experience of self-expression in relation to social categories of masculinity or femininity (gender) is the focus. A person's subjectively-felt gender identity may be at variance with their sex or physiological characteristics.⁹

Sexual attraction & orientation: the difference between same-sex attraction and same-sex orientation is the amount, degree, and persistence of attraction over time, with sexual attraction being used to represent lesser intensity than sexual orientation.¹⁰

Transgender is the term used to describe "people who feel at home as members of the opposite sex of their birth,

⁷ Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends* (Bethany House, 2010).

⁸ Nancy Nangeroni, "Sexual Orientation vs. Gender Identity vs. Sexual Identity," <https://christiangays.com/articles/identity.shtml>

⁹ Amnesty International, "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity," <https://www.amnesty.org/en/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity>

¹⁰ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian*.

and people who feel their gender can't be reduced to male or female."¹¹

Increasingly, these societal definitions are softening around the edges. Sexual identity is “the way that people see themselves physically” and gender identity is “the way that people see themselves socially.” Thus, in both cases, **identity becomes tied primarily to self-perception**. The result is that the individual’s primary goal in determining identity is to reduce the tension between what is felt and what exists.

In addition to becoming conversant in the contemporary common definitions of sexual identity, an increasing sensitivity to the changing landscape of sexual practices in Canadian culture is necessary to have a credible conversation.¹²

The comments and observations below result from conversations with youth and younger adults, primarily under the age of thirty, an age bracket often referred to as millennials. These conversations, along with an analysis of the media’s influence on popular understandings of sexuality, can be organised around the language of **rights, identity, and entitlement**.

¹¹ Peterson.

¹² References for this section are: “Canadian Human Rights Act,” <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/H-6/>; “Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,” <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-15.html>; and “Timeline of Same-Sex Rights,” <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/timeline-same-sex-rights-in-canada-1.1147516>

In Canada, it is illegal – a violation of human rights – to discriminate on the basis of a person’s sexual orientation. The Canadian government decriminalized homosexual practice in 1969. Although not named in the landmark *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982), sexual orientation received legal protection in an amendment to the *Canadian Human Rights Act* in 1996, nearly twenty years after the Act was first passed. Sexual orientation is on par with race, religion, gender, disability, etc., in terms of legal protection from discrimination. Same-sex marriages became law in Canada through Bill C-38 on July 20, 2005. LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) groups, some of which have expanded to LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersexual, and Asexual), have diligently worked to create legal and public awareness and acceptance, and have largely succeeded in all these arenas.

Closely tied to the discussion on “human rights,” **the topic of “identity” has been tightly linked to one’s sexuality and follows an “all or nothing” mentality.** Many LGBT groups hold to the narrative that to accept someone is also to accept/endorse their sexuality and sexual expression, and conversely, to reject someone’s sexual orientation/sexual expression is to reject them as a person.

In addition, human sexuality is now regularly described with the language of “entitlement.” **Humans are sexual beings and as a result are entitled to fulfill their sexual desires and/or to experience sexual pleasure.** Culturally, this is reinforced in several ways. The media’s messaging about

sexual freedom is very casual and confusing. On the one hand, the viewer will hear and see that sex is a minor issue. Frequent images of people engaging in sexual behaviour with multiple partners and outside the covenant of marriage are portrayed as normal and relatively inconsequential. A character from a movie or television show might justify sleeping with another person by declaring, “It was *just* a one night stand.”

On the other hand, media consumers are led to believe that they must have sex. **The idea of a life without sexual activity is considered abnormal, pitiable, or to be mocked.** In movie and television plotlines, discussion of when a character last had sex can lead to a “rescue” attempt.

Despite a broadening of the normalcy of sexual behaviours and orientations, Canadian society still holds that some acts are unacceptable. Notably, these prohibitions flow out of the rights language discussed above; Canadian society takes a stand regarding sexual behaviours when they infringe on the rights and freedoms of another. Sexual assault, rape, pedophilia, discrimination, incest, polygamy, and bullying are illegal and widely condemned.

The discussion of rights, identity, and entitlement creates a unique challenge for the MB church, as it continues to address and promote God-honouring sexuality as outlined in the Bible. The problem is the challenge of culture or worldview. Historically, culture or worldview has shown its enormous power to overtake faith commitments of believers and unconsciously redirect them toward oppression,

domination, and judgmentalism. Numerous examples can be pointed to in this regard: colonialism, doctrine of discovery, settlers displacing first peoples, fascism, divine right of monarchy, nationalism, fighting for God and country, religious wars, genocide, etc.¹³ The challenge remains for the church to be self-critical and name those aspects of its doctrine that are directed more by cultural and traditional commitments, and those that truly testify to the way of Christ, the one who was known to associate with those deemed inappropriate by the religious of his day.

Millennials are particularly aware of the contradictions and mixed messages they receive from the church. For example, when the church encourages millennials not to support same-sex relationships, millennials may see this stance not simply as taking a stand on an issue, but as discriminatory, and as the rejection of a person. Most millennials can identify a friend, family member, or acquaintance participating in homosexual relationships or in other sexual behaviours traditionally seen as inappropriate. When issues become personal, pat answers become increasingly unhelpful.

Peer expectations from both media and society can make Christian teaching on sexual behaviour appear oppressive and judgmental. This need not be the case. The task of the church is to walk the discipleship journey together with one

¹³ See, for example, Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (W.W. Norton, 1997).

another in the presence of Jesus, aware of the current culture's influence on all believers, committed to the way of truth as the Spirit reveals it to each believer, daring to allow the church body to discern what the Spirit is saying to the churches, and leaving the ultimate judgment in God's hands (Romans 14). The compassion that is required for this task is great, as both the love and transforming power of the gospel must be combined with a vibrant expression of God-honouring sexuality.

Theological convictions regarding the power of the gospel and the discipling role of the church on matters of identity and human sexuality

A key aspect in the study of what it means to be human—including human sexuality, and especially human identity as it relates to sexuality—is the role of the gospel. The gospel is the lavish demonstration of the grace of God in **saving, claiming, and transforming** people and all creation. The gospel is the power of God for salvation, gathering people into the redeemed community of the resurrected Lord Jesus and empowering them by God’s Spirit to carry forward God’s mission in the world (Romans 1:16–17; Romans 8:18–25; 2 Corinthians 5:17–21; Colossians 1:15–20).

Saving. The saving power of the gospel is realised in those who repent and believe. Repentance is multi-faceted and ongoing. Repentance is turning from sin and pledging one’s total allegiance to Jesus Christ, instead of to anything or anyone else. This change of allegiance changes a person’s worldview. Jesus’ followers acknowledge God’s supreme ownership and rulership over the universe and all its creatures—that is, Jesus is Lord. Believers also acknowledge that people are blinded by sin and utterly lost apart from the saving grace of Christ. Having repented and believed in this

way, the newly-born Christian surrenders their entire life—including their sexuality—to the will of God.

Claiming. Christ claims supremacy over every aspect of the disciple's life. The call of the gospel is to radical Christocentrism, where Christ is the center and measure of the rightness of all things. The relationship of the Lord to his servants, and the call to die to self are supreme. This claim takes precedence over all other claims. The cultural claim to self-actualization and self-determination flies in the face of Christ's claim that the disciple die to self and continually decrease in self-importance and self-will. Society's current emphasis on sexual identity is one symptom of a much deeper issue: namely, a resistance to God's reign and a rebellion against naming Christ as the defining feature of one's identity. Anything less than surrender to God's rule leads inevitably to cultural accommodations of all varieties, sexual distortion being just one consequence.¹⁴

Transforming. The church from its inception has struggled with the temptation to replace the power of grace with human effort for earning God's favour. Moralism has often replaced grace and the work of the Holy Spirit as the path to transformation and spiritual maturity (i.e., Christlikeness). God invites everyone to trust that Jesus can bring about

¹⁴ Because the primary identity of believers and the church is found in Christ and his kingdom, there will be times when allegiance to Christ's kingdom will take precedence over the demands of society and state, also in matters of human sexuality (see Article 12 "Society and State" in the MB Confession of Faith).

transformation, that prayer will tune them to the ways that God is at work, and that the Holy Spirit does not make people merely good but new. This is the invitation to faith. Those who accept this invitation support each other along the way, even when the discipleship journey is long and convoluted.

Repentance, confession, and forgiveness are essential in the ongoing process of sanctification. However, repentance is only possible if Christ's disciples are taught to listen for the Holy Spirit's prompting and leading, and to invite the Spirit to do the work of transformation as God wills. The Spirit also frees Jesus' followers from those things that bind them. In all of life, including sexuality, God's beloved children are to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

Jesus' followers need to take to heart that sanctification is a personal work of the Holy Spirit within willing individuals. Transformation cannot be turned into a program or a policy response. **The Spirit transforms individuals and communities of believers.** As the Spirit brings victory and works transformation, the believing community is to recognize, nurture, and encourage this transformation in each other. The Lord empowers believers to do the rigorous work of obeying Christ, which is the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5, 16:26).

What, then, is the discipling role of the church in fostering the kind of transformation that is so central to the gospel's power? This was the repeated question from Study

Conference 2013 participants. How shall the church be a relevant transforming community that affirms the gospel, reinforces human identity in Christ, and nurtures God-honouring sexuality?

While the biblical writers agree that human beings are not what they should be, having chosen to go their own way—which means giving allegiance to the way of death, decay, and destruction—Paul and Peter declare that sin does not have the last word (Romans 3:10-27; 5:12-14; 8:22–25; 1 Peter 1:18–23)—“the Lord’s hand is not too short to save” (Isaiah 59:1). After expressing their sober frustration with sin’s capacity to cause destruction, the writers announce that God has not abandoned his creation enterprise (Revelation 21).

The biblical writers ground their anticipation for something more whole, healthier and authentic in the conviction that from the dawn of time God has already created all human beings to be the image of God in the world (Genesis 1:27). **The “image of God” language has multiple layers. It includes humanity’s God-given need, potential, and capacity for relationships; humans are designed to be persons in community who represent God and God’s reign over creation.** Each person, no matter how badly damaged—whether by their own doing, the abuse of others, or some combination of both—carries the image of God, that capacity for loving relationships in God’s service. This capacity tenaciously resists obliteration and testifies to the ongoing character of God’s creation project.

Because Jesus fulfilled the humanity of the first Adam (Romans 5), Jesus is now the primary source and paradigm for the new humanity. He is “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45) and the “firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:15). In Jesus, the image of God is taken up and moved forward from where Adam left off. Jesus brings humanity and the whole creation to shalom, life, wholeness, and relational intimacy—the goals for which God launched creation in the first place. Jesus gives more definition to the image of God; and the new-creation community (i.e., the church) takes shape around Jesus for the transformation of all things everywhere. Thus, God is renewing his ancient creation project.

Based on this work of Jesus, believers have a new identity in Christ. This identity has implications for godly human sexuality. As **beloved children of God**—a whole new creation—believers are able to experience relational intimacy in the body of Christ, the church. Empowered by the Spirit of the risen Lord to become even more of what they were created to be, people can leave behind their false selves and embrace more fully their true selves. There are lots of ways for churches to nurture the relational intimacy so key to human sexuality, ways that do not involve sex—more on this later.

However, as Karla Braun of the *MB Herald* wrote recently, the key to godly human sexuality is keeping Jesus as the focal point of one’s identity (see 1 Peter 3:15). “I’m convinced that the best thing the church can do to encourage holy living is to help us follow Jesus, not a spouse. By teaching us to

respect ourselves and others as beloved of God with a purpose to fulfill, the church can equip its people (married or single) to choose purity—to withstand the temptation to take without giving, exert power instead of grace, and put our desires above God’s calling.”¹⁵

Sexual identity (like national identity and economic identity) is trumped by **identity in Christ**. “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26–29).

God has been calling and shaping a people for himself since he first called Abraham; God continued through the kings and prophets, the wisdom and poetry of the Hebrew Scriptures, and on into the New Testament times when he began a new work. Through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, and through the Spirit’s empowerment, God calls and shapes a people for his own. Their identity as sons and daughters of God—as heirs of God (Ephesians 1:5, 3:6)—is to be the centre of the church’s life together, re-orienting all interactions.¹⁶

¹⁵ Karla Braun, “An Orientation for Single Sexuality: The ‘do’s’ of purity” *MB Herald* (September 2013), 13.

¹⁶ Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (IVP, 2011); and Mark A. Yarhouse, “At the Intersection of Religious and Sexual Identities: A Christian Perspective on Homosexuality,” <https://mft.byu.edu/SiteAssets/Pages/Alumni->

As one specific example, how does the church nourish **godly sexual behaviour for married couples**? The church stands in the long line of the Judaeo-Christian tradition that has limited sex to the **publicly celebrated, exclusive, lifelong covenant that unites a man and a woman in a love** that often produces children to be nurtured in the safety of that love.¹⁷ By taking three of these characteristics in turn, the biblical vision for marital sex emerges more vividly.

Covenant (security). A marriage covenant is a deep-heart promise before God and witnesses that the marriage partners will be faithful to each other alone as long as they both live. The covenant is the soil in which God-honouring sex can grow. A covenant creates a well-demarcated zone within which the couple can rest and thrive. Within the covenant, the couple can be naked, exposed, vulnerable, and yet be unashamed and anxiety-free, because within the marriage covenant they are committed to one another, no matter what. Those who limit their sexual activity to a loving covenant partner have what the human heart has always longed for, a true sense of belonging, a home, a togetherness, and a mutual “oneness.” The Bible refers to

[Summer-Series/Yarhouse \(2010\) At the Intersection of Religious and Sexual Identities -- A Christian Perspective.pdf](#). According to Paris, sexual identity and orientation are recent human inventions. They become idols when they take the place of having one’s primary identity as a beloved adopted child of God who follows Jesus as Lord.

¹⁷ For an exploration of the biblical definition of marriage see “A More Excellent Way: Christian Marriage in the World,” Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches Board of Faith and Life Pamphlet Series, 2006.

this as “one flesh.” In the beginning God made two humans out of one; then he brought the two back together and sealed them as one through a covenant relationship.

In addition, it is important to note that according to Scripture, the marital covenant that God created is to be a reflection of the nature of God—especially his unconditional love—and of Christ’s covenant relationship to the church. “So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Jesus echoed these words when addressing a question of divorce. “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:6–9). Paul develops this teaching further: “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:32).

Love (unselfishness). Love pours itself out for the good of another. Love does not care what it receives; it only gives. Love in the sexual realm looks like patience, gentleness, self-control, helpfulness, communication, unselfishness, encouragement, and blessing. The goal of a true lover is not to get love, but to give love. A true lover is committed to helping his or her partner enjoy sexual satisfaction. The more both partners commit to each other’s pleasure instead of their own, the more the whole endeavour becomes mutually

gratifying. “The less self, the more sexual health” can be a good way of thinking about sexual intimacy.

Celebration (fun). Somehow, married sex got a bad rap. Fun sex supposedly happens in reckless and careless sex, although in reality the fun never seems to last. By contrast, married sex supposedly is what couples do quietly in the dark, if they want to have a baby; and if this sex is successful, it is sure to ruin any chance for wild passionate lovemaking in the future. The biblical understanding of marital sex is much more joyful than this. Just as weddings are joyfully celebrated in the Old and New Testaments, so marital sex was created to be a private celebration of covenant love. Understanding sex in this way can free married couples to discover together what God has created for their sexual pleasure and enjoyment.

Pastoral Concerns, Questions, & Commitments

Concerns

It would be fair to say that the landscape inhabited by MB churches in Canada is changing rapidly on numerous fronts. In general, there is a crisis of clarity.

- About discipleship and what it means (i.e., How do churches respond constructively to the ongoing seductive allure of sin's power in the disciple's life?);
- with respect to sexuality and sex, given the current cultural and social sensibilities;
- about authority (e.g., what business does the church or Scripture have in the bedrooms of the nation?);
- about holiness and tolerance, exclusivity and inclusivity; and
- about the role of the Body of Christ and transformation (i.e., how do churches function as salt and light? Can believers truth-tell in love and also affirm all people as beloved of God?).

There is also a crisis of credibility.

- The church is often seen as hypocritical when it condemns homosexual sin but not other sexual sin.

- The church is too often seen as predisposed on the one hand to legalism (working hard to earn God's favour) and judgmentalism, instead of surrendering to the work of the Holy Spirit and trusting in the power of the gospel; and on the other hand to licentiousness, in an overemphasis on cheap grace masquerading as freedom in Christ.

Questions: Equipping churches for the sexuality conversation.

With regard to human sexuality, here are some particular areas in which MB churches are asking for guidance.

- What does “welcoming, but not affirming” mean? What does it not mean?
- What is the difference between acceptance and approval? Does acceptance imply approval? Can acceptance mean agreeing to disagree?
- What is the difference between biblical sexuality and the sexualization of culture?
- What are the consequences to children and youth who experience increased exposure to sex and to the power of sex before they reach the emotional, spiritual, and physical developments of adulthood?
- What about fertility issues? Are the various artificial means to childbearing biblically ethical?
- How can the church navigate conflicts between science and traditional church doctrine? Are doctrines always biblical? What criteria are helpful for discerning?

- How can the church better affirm the gift and call to singleness and celibacy?
- What about baptism and church membership? What is the relationship between believers' baptism and the discipleship process? And, what is the relationship between believers' baptism and the MB Confession of Faith? Might new categories prove helpful for the long road of discipleship that may be required; and what might those categories be (e.g., for people who are cohabiting, or using pornography, or living in a same-sex union)?

Commitments:

So what can be done? As people experience the brokenness of failed relationships that were built upon ungodly views of sexuality, there might be a window of opportunity to communicate a better way. The BFL commends to MB churches and leaders the following six suggestions, as beginning steps.

Set the right example. Nothing is more valuable than this. Joyful singles can live in close friendship relationships with other women and men; and married couples can live in beautiful covenantal relationships that embody love in the safety of that commitment. When both singles and couples live with genuine joy and celebration, their lifestyles will be infinitely more valuable than any paper or speech on the subject of sexuality. When someone says, "I want what you have," Jesus' followers will have a lot less difficulty convincing him or her of the validity of Christ's message.

Accept all fellow travellers on the discipleship journey, leaving finalizing judgments with God. Jesus was constantly welcoming people into his network of friends. Some of these people had messy lives and Jesus was right in the middle of life with them, loving them. The religious leaders were appalled by Jesus' stance. In response, Jesus simply said that he had not come for the healthy, but for the sick. This must also be the perspective of Jesus' body, the church. The call to repentance will come, the sick must not stay sick; but this call to health is received best within the connectedness of friendship that is infused with a spirit of humility. As the body of Christ learns to follow the lead of its head, the church will find itself in the middle of many messes that will be confusing and hard to discern. Things will not be cut and dried, because life never is. One thing is sure, however: like Jesus, the body of Christ must be in the middle of the mess.

Paul, too, when working with believers who disagreed profoundly about what was morally right, urged them to imitate Christ, to not condemn those holding an opposing view, and to await God's final judgments at the end of time when all must give account to the Master of the universe (Philippians 3:15-17, Ephesians 4:15, 1 Corinthians 4:1-5). Discipleship is a journey—often a long journey. On that journey, MB Churches seek to be both biblical and compassionate. MBs are committed to helping people take one step at a time, recognizing that godly sexuality often comes about gradually. The BFL therefore urges a spirit of

humility, because every believer is in the struggle to live out God's vision.

Speak the truth. Love never comes at the expense of truth; it comes right alongside it. The view that sex is a celebration of covenant love is not the easiest path; in fact, it's probably the hardest. Canadian culture has worked very hard to cause people to think that whatever is natural, easy, or comfortable is right. However, some careful reflection reveals this to be incorrect thinking. To lose weight and get in shape is a good thing, but it is not natural, easy, or comfortable. To express a sexuality that honours God is a good thing, but to get there will not be natural, easy, or comfortable.

When sex is limited to a covenant love celebration between a man and a woman there are a number of objections that immediately arise. What about single people? What about broken promises? What about natural urges? If the Christian community has no loving response to at least these three questions, there is little chance it will be found hopeful or helpful.

Speaking the truth also includes repenting for those occasions when the church has been judgmental instead of loving towards those who have sinned in matters of sexuality. The church should also repent when it has ostracized those who have been the victims of others' sexual sins, and when it has created a church culture that honours marriage in a way that neglects and devalues people who are single.

Celebrate and affirm celibacy. Can a person be a complete sexual being without having sex? In a sex-crazed world this not only seems unfair, but impossible! It's not impossible; it may be difficult, certainly, but not impossible. For the sake of ultimate joy, the followers of Jesus regularly take the more difficult, the more unnatural path, as Jesus did. Since godliness as a celibate person is rarely possible if attempted alone, Christians must band together with Jesus as the head of a body that works together with the faith community to accomplish the sexuality that God envisions for all. Churches can do much to nurture the relational intimacy that is part of sexuality by inviting single people into all aspects of the leadership, worship, service, and social life of the church community.

When Jesus' followers know and love each other, and when they work together, the teachings of Scripture will become clearer in their hearts. Jesus' followers will learn to follow Jesus' strategies, learning to run away from sexual sin together, and learning the "unforced grace rhythms" (Matthew 11:29, *The Message*) of honouring God together as sexual beings.

All single people and married people live with sexually limiting situations. No one should ever feel cast out from the community of Christ because of their sexuality. All God's people belong. All Jesus' disciples are called to a covenant relationship with other Christ followers, regardless of whether they have a spouse or not. All belong because of the church's primary covenant relationship to Jesus.

Completeness and belonging are ultimately found in relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, within Christ's body the church. If this is so, it is more than possible to thrive as a sexual human being, with or without sex.

Keep promises. In Canada, there are people who believe that the covenant faithfulness of marriage is a good idea only so long as faithfulness feels right. But when it ceases to feel right, then promises may be broken. If this perspective increases in popularity, some people may stop making promises altogether, thinking, "Why get caught up making promises when, if things don't feel right, you are likely going to break them?"

However, the covenant promise of marriage is communicated both by witnessed words and by actions. When a husband exposes his body in vulnerability for his wife, and when the wife does the same for her husband, they give themselves over to their spouse; those moments enact the promises they spoke publicly on their wedding day: "I am with you and no other." In other words, their physical sexual intimacy confirms their promise to be "faithful to you alone, as long as we both shall live."

Partners who have not spoken wedding vows, yet who are physically sexually intimate, are communicating the deep hope of a promise to be with the other and no one else, but lack the spoken witnessed vows that would create a covenant. Under all the calluses that grow from "friends with benefits" and "show me the money" thinking, people desire a lasting oneness with another person.

Couples who make and keep their covenant vows are demonstrating what God is like: faithful and true. Yes, some married couples, who made their wedding vows sincerely, later experience a rupture of those vows. Whether a promise is spoken and then betrayed, or hoped without being spoken and then betrayed, the net effect of the rupture is the same: hearts get shattered, people are crushed, and families are torn apart. Therefore, even though some covenants break, it remains godly to promote, nurture, and keep promises.¹⁸

Practice Christlike self-discipline. It is very much in vogue today to remove the role of choice in conversations about sexuality. Pop culture contends that sexual identity is not something individuals choose.¹⁹ Canadians are hearing that human beings have the right to sexual behaviours outside of biblical patterns because certain people aren't wired for monogamy, were born gay, have a pre-disposition for sex with minors, or are a different sex than their biology indicates.

Sexuality and identity are being rolled into one, so that sex is no longer what a person does; sex is said to be who a person is. Therefore, people cannot change who they are

¹⁸ Moses, Jesus, and Paul did acknowledge that some covenant promises come to an end (e.g., through unfaithfulness or abandonment); however, the heart of biblical teaching remains expressed in promise-keeping, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

¹⁹ See the lyrics of the Macklemore & Ryan Lewis song, "Same Love"; and Joe Dallas, *The Gay Gospel? How Pro-Gay Advocates Misread the Bible* (Harvest House, 2007).

sexually; and it's unhealthy to try. "Just be whoever you think you are." Case closed.

The BFL contends that the role of choice must not be detached from the human experience, including sexual behaviours. In fact, to be convinced that one doesn't have any choices is still an exercise of choice. People will not be sexually whole as disciples of Christ, if they simply shrug their shoulders and conclude, "I guess this is who I am."

Yes, MB churches need to acknowledge that there are indeed complicated stories in their world that seem to push in the direction of pre-determined sexual identity; and that the pluralistic air of contemporary culture promotes a position of sexual freedom in all its forms. However, the BFL remains unconvinced that continued movement in this direction will lead to sexual godliness for MB churches.

Conclusion

There is more work to be done in helping MB churches develop a pastoral theology of human sexuality. However, what is clear to the BFL is the call to MB churches to live according to their tradition—as a “people of the Book”—by combining their convictions about human sexuality (as in the MB Confession of Faith) with a loving, hospitable response to people experiencing sexual brokenness and sexual sin; and with an embrace of the gift of sexuality and the joy of sexual intimacy within the divinely ordained parameters revealed in Scripture. And so, the BFL calls MB churches to courage and compassion, as they serve, reach, and disciple in a hyper-sexualized culture.

APPENDIX: Questions for further study

1. The Study Guide (section #3) chooses to ground its assumptions on human sexuality in Article 2 from the MB Confession of Faith, drawing out three interpretive principles. What are the three? Do you feel this is an adequate foundation for the conversation? Would you add something to the mix? If so, what would it be? Explain.

2. Human sexuality in the Study Guide (section #4) is defined as “embodied desire for intimacy.” What do each of these three terms contribute to an understanding of sexuality? Why is it important to distinguish between sexuality and sex?

3. Look up the following Scripture texts and put in your own words what you feel these texts have to say about sex and/or sexuality. What seems to be emerging as God’s design for sex and/or sexuality?

- Proverbs 5:18–19; Matthew 19:5; 1 Corinthians 7:2–3; Hebrews 13:4.
- Genesis 1:28; Genesis 2:23; Proverbs 5:18–19; Song of Solomon 4:10–13; Hebrews 13:4.
- 1 Samuel 18:1–4; Proverbs 13:20; Ecclesiastes 4:9–12; Matthew 19:10–12; Luke 8:1–3; John 4:3–42; 1 Corinthians 7:5, 25–40.

4. Historically, MBs began as a renewal movement that blended Baptist practices (organizational patterns, baptismal mode, and mission passion) and Pietistic – almost

Charismatic – experiential faith (personal encounter with the Spirit, personal assurance of salvation, and personal testimony of conversion) with the Anabaptist core convictions of believers baptism, peacemaking witness, community discernment, and prioritization of the way of Jesus over nation or empire. Usually these three emphases can coexist, especially when MBs agree to let the Bible be the final arbiter. However, theological differences do exist among those MBs. The Study Guide (section #5) wades into the theology of this blended family and outlines three characteristics of the gospel. What are the three? Do you feel this is an adequate summary of the gospel? Would you add something to the mix? If so, what would it be? Explain.

5. The Study Guide (section #5) draws on the experiences of several MB writers to sketch pointers for godly sexual behaviour for married couples and singles. In particular, four key features are explored and developed. What are they? What is your experience as a single person, a married person, or a single again person? If you had been asked to write this section, would you have added any features? If so, which ones? Explain.

6. Look up the following Scripture texts and put in your own words what you feel these texts have to say about appropriate and inappropriate sexual activity. What seems to be emerging as God’s design for dealing with sex when it becomes a destructive power?

- Exodus 20:14; Proverbs 5:20; John 4:17; Romans 1:24–27; 1 Corinthians 6:12–13; Revelation 2:14.

- 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; 1 Corinthians 6:18–20; 1 Corinthians 10:7–8; Galatians 5: 19–21; Ephesians 5: 3–6; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Revelation 21:8.
- Genesis 39: 6–12; Matthew 5:27–28; 1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Corinthians 7:2–3; Colossians 3:5; 1 Timothy 2:22.
- 2 Corinthians 12:21; 1 John 1:9; James 4:6–10; James 5:19.

7. The Study Guide (section #6) carefully outlines three popular notions about sexuality that are trending in contemporary Canadian society, a society that—for better or worse—also shapes the experience of people associated with MB churches. What are these three? Have you encountered these views? If so, where? Did you also find them to be problematic? Explain. Are there any other popular notions you could add to the list?

8. The Study Guide (section #6) presents a glossary of terms related to sex and sexuality. Take a moment to define in your own words each of the following along with their status in Canadian law: sexual identity, gender identity, sexual attraction, sexual orientation, transgender, human rights, LGBT, and LGBTQIA.

9. In the section on Pastoral Concerns, Commitments, and Opportunities, the Study Guide (section #7) lists seven areas where the sexual landscape has shifted, bringing MB churches into what amounts to a contentious debate for some. From where you sit, which of these concerns do you

experience? Are some more pressing than others? If so, which are these? Do you have a story to share? If so, what is it? What counsel could you offer to churches facing such a situation? Elaborate.

10. In that same section #7, the Study Guide offers another list of seven. This time it is seven areas where the BFL has discerned MB churches are asking for specific guidance on matters of sexuality. Again, from where you sit, which of these are most pressing for you? Why?

11. Finally, in the Study Guide (section #7), the BFL offers six concrete suggestions for MB churches and their leaders to consider as they engage any number of discipleship challenges regarding sexual practice in our contemporary Canadian context. What are the six? Do you find these suggestions helpful? Can you think of cases where one particular suggestion might have been especially constructive? Are there cases where you are convinced that one or another of these suggestions would not work? Do you have additional suggestions? Would you like to reword or change any of these six? If so, how would you frame the counsel? What direction do you have for the MB church? For the BFL? What do you hear the Spirit saying?