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God, Sex, and Church: Why?

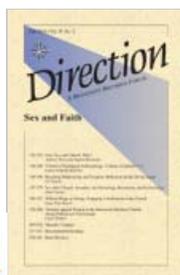
Andrew Dyck and Ingrid Reichard

When I (Andrew) was a pastor, people asked for my advice on matters of sexuality and sex.¹ I want to become a church member, but I struggle with a private sin—what should I do? After what he did to me, when should I move back in with him? How can we help our friend with his sexual addiction? Must we confess our sin in front of the congregation? Although I didn't always have an immediate answer, I am convinced that my role was more than offering people action plans. My role in these conversations consisted of listening well (because that's what God does); praying (because Jesus and the Spirit intercede for us); and joining “with all the saints” in order to learn the extent and nature of God's love (Eph 3:18–19 NRSV), and to respond to that love by “[trying] to find out what is pleasing to the Lord”—in other words, “[understanding] what the will of the Lord is” (Eph 5:10, 17).

Bodies, embodied desires, desires for intimacy, and pursuing the good of others: these...lie at the root of a theology of sexuality.

That is also the role of this theological study conference. We need to listen well to Scripture, to the Spirit, and to each other. We need to pray {123} with words and stillness, as individuals and as community, and with requests, tears, and thanksgivings. We need to try to find out what pleases the Lord. In these ways, we will become grounded in God's purposes (*telos*), which undergird God's ways (*praxis*). We are to follow the pattern of Ephesians. Three chapters are devoted to God's Mount Everest purposes. The subsequent chapters show the saints how to embody those purposes for down-in-the-valley ways of living. God's purposes—also for sex and church—are thereby woven into a beautiful, multicolored tapestry.

In our own lives as God's people, and in the lives of people we're learning to love, we face many challenges having to do with our sexuality. On this side of Christ's return, we will not live out our God-given sexuality perfectly or completely. I pray, however, that all our explorations during this conference will help us grow as children of light who are learning to produce “all that is good and right and true” (Eph 5:9)—also in our sexuality. To launch those explorations, Ingrid and I will first build a bridge to the 2013 Mennonite Brethren study conference on human sexuality, then explain the importance of



Fall 2016
Vol. 45 No. 2

pp. 122–135

Article subject

♦ [Sexuality](#)

beginning with theology, and finally consider sexuality in light of the Bible, the gospel, and the church.²

WHERE WE'VE BEEN

In 2013, Mennonite Brethren and others from across Canada met in Edmonton for a study conference titled “Honouring God with the Body: A Study on Human Sexuality.” John Stackhouse described the Canadian historical and sociological contexts for sexuality. Robert Gagnon spoke about homosexuality, drawing on Scripture, on research into the cultures of Bible times, and on his experiences in twenty-first century America. John Neufeld and John Unger, Mennonite Brethren pastors, spoke about the key sexuality challenges facing churches, and about their own wrestling with being faithful pastors. In addition, that conference’s workshops examined sexuality from perspectives as diverse as Song of Songs, the experiences of millennials, sexual abuse, and sexual wholeness.³

Afterwards, the Board of Faith and Life recognized that Mennonite Brethren churches needed a clearer view of God’s purposes and design for sexuality, and needed to learn more gracious, compassionate ways of responding to people who are struggling with the many aspects of sexuality. In other words, the Board saw the need for a theology of human sexuality, and for clearer connections between that theology and pastoral responses to one another (i.e., weaving together *telos* and *praxis*). {124}

Those of us attending this year’s conference—like many of our friends, colleagues, and neighbors—may have come preoccupied with questions concerning people we know who say that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, questioning, intersex, or asexual (i.e., LGBTQ+). Even though Mennonite Brethren have prayerfully and studiously discerned that God intends marriage and sexual intimacy to be celebrated between one man and one woman,⁴ affirming this conviction does not answer all our questions. These questions concern friendship, baptism, communion, church membership, conversion to Christ, discipleship and sanctification, same-sex union and marriage, whether a believer’s sexual orientation will change, and more. And yes, some of these questions concern our relationships with individuals who are attracted to persons of the same sex.

Human sexuality, however, is about more than any person having sex or not. Human sexuality is also about more than being gay or straight. Therefore, this study conference, like the one in 2013, will address more than the relations between LGBTQ+ people and the church. In 2013, Unger and Neufeld urged us to find new and better ways of responding to single people (whether their singleness is chosen, unintended, or the outcome of separation, divorce, or death); to people who are cohabiting (seven out of every ten believing couples live together before marrying); to people viewing pornography; and to people suffering from sexual abuse and violence. I have encountered additional dimensions of human sexuality through which people inside and outside the church experience violation, brokenness, sin, and/or

uncertainty. I think of sexual assault and rape, affairs, prostitution, human trafficking, incest, changes in sexual desire at different ages, lust, masturbation, men dominating women, fertility technologies (also used by people who are single), and women and men endeavoring to work effectively together for the gospel (also when not married to each other).

In addition to these many challenges, sexuality topics keep shifting. During the past two years, for instance, North American evangelicals have become more diverse in their views about same-sex marriage. As well, the divide is growing between what governments identify as legal, and what conservative Christians consider to be right. This divide comes as no surprise to Mennonites, whose forebears were persecuted by the state.

Therefore, because human sexuality concerns much more than our relationships with same-sex attracted people, and because human sexuality touches on topics that are morphing year by year, the Board of Faith and Life has become convinced that we must now explore in more detail our theologies of human sexuality. Since the work of doing {125} theology *is* practical work, we need to sharpen our thinking about God's design for our lives as sexual people.

WHY THEOLOGY FIRST?

Ingrid: First, we need to step back and consider human sexuality neither on the basis of these particular, ever-morphing topics, nor on the basis of pastoral or personal demands, but based on the unchanging principles that form our faith. It is insufficient to develop one particular response to one particular issue. Rather, we must adopt a way of seeing and thinking that will provide us with a way of responding to whatever issues may confront the church in the future. Rather than playing whack-a-mole—hurriedly formulating responses on a case by case basis—we should undergird our thinking so that our responses to current questions and questions yet unknown will not be driven by emotions or social trends of the times.

It is critical to our future as Mennonite Brethren in Canada that we be clear about where our reasoning ought to begin and what our primary considerations ought to be as we respond to the culture in which we live. Good responses depend on good analyses. It is true that the need for analysis and response is usually triggered by difficult issues, challenging experiences, and feelings related to those experiences. If, however, our responses arise solely out of emotional reasoning they will be incomplete and inadequate. “I feel it, therefore it must be true” is not a reliable basis for interpreting reality. Likewise, a response reasoned solely on the basis of anecdotal or personal experience will prove inadequate. To be clear, I am not suggesting that we invalidate what we feel. Feelings are part of what makes us human. Feelings are important guides to self-understanding, spiritual formation, and discernment. However, reasoning that relies overly much on feelings to interpret reality is faulty reasoning.⁵

The Scripture text that shaped this study conference is Romans 12:1–2.

The conference's planning team took seriously the apostle Paul's urging that we worship God by presenting our bodies as living and holy offerings; and that instead of allowing our surrounding cultures to form us, we look to God's word and will to form us. Therefore, in our study and discussion of human sexuality—a topic that stirs deep feelings and strong opinions in all of us—we need to avoid the pitfall of basing our reasoning on emotions, personal biases, cultural pressures, or expediency. Instead we need to come to the topic of human sexuality as Titus 2:14 people: redeemed by our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself to redeem us from every kind of lawlessness, to purify for {126} himself a people who are his own possession, people who are truly his; eager and zealous to do good.

Because we are not our own, but are those who pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10) and “Not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42), our reasoning on any topic—if it is to be sound reasoning—must begin at our center. Our center is the gospel of Christ: his person, words, example, commands, and Spirit. These are our starting point and final authority.⁶ This study conference therefore aims to guide our human sexuality discussions toward centered theological thinking. Humbly recognizing the limitations of what can be accomplished at one study conference, we will nevertheless endeavor to develop a way of thinking about human sexuality by means of thoughtful and honest theological reflection.

SEXUALITY AND GOD'S WORD

Andrew: A theology of healthy sexuality rightly starts with the Word of God. Yet this raises the first of several challenges: What role will other sources of knowledge play in this theology? Christians examining their theology of sexuality do need to study other sciences (for theology *is* a science). Biology, psychology, and sociology are valuable because God also speaks through the book that is creation (Ps 19:1–6; Rom 1:19–20). We need to learn about sexuality by studying God's handiwork. For instance, what roles do our hormones, genetics, histories, and social contexts play? What dynamics are at play when individuals and churches use and abuse power in our relationships? Although this study conference will focus on Scripture, theology, and experience,⁷ these foci are not intended to discount God's communication through the world he has created, even though that world is fallen.

A second challenge in beginning with the Word of God is that the word “sexuality” is not in the Bible. English Bible translations include only the words “sex,” “sexual,” and “sexually.” In fact, the word “sexuality” has only been in the English language for about two centuries; and its meaning has shifted several times during those years. Therefore, thinking clearly about God's purposes and ways for human sexuality requires more than a simple word study.

According to Scripture, Jesus is our primary Word of God. He is the Word of God with skin on (John 1:1–18). God has spoken to us most clearly through a Son, who is the exact imprint of God's very being (Heb 1:1–4). To

receive the Word of God, we turn to Jesus—of whom all the Scriptures testify (John 5:39). Therefore, to develop a godly theology of human sexuality, we begin with Jesus Christ, our clearest Word of God. {127}

Yet, when I look at Jesus for God's word about sexuality, I face another challenge because in Jesus I see a single, celibate man, who belonged to a visible minority under the Roman Empire, who walked within a patriarchal society, and whose family lived for a time as refugees. What can we learn about sexuality from a man whose life differed vastly from most of ours? To highlight this contrast, many of us are married, sexually active, part of a majority culture, powerful, widely-travelled, and wealthy. And half of us are women. However, instead of despairing at the divide between our experiences and Jesus's, we can discover a theology of faithful human sexuality for the twenty-first century precisely in the nitty-gritty particularity of Jesus's life.

Looking at Jesus through contemporary experiences of sexuality offers several discoveries.

- ◆ Jesus's adult ministry and mission began with experiences of love and desire. At his baptism, Jesus was embraced by the words "This is my beloved son." That loving affirmation was followed immediately by an encounter with Jesus's enemy (and ours), who sought to undermine Jesus's ministry by appealing to Jesus's desires for nourishment, recognition, and influence. Those desires are related to being loved.
- ◆ In John's Gospel, Jesus's first recorded words are an inquiry about human desire: "What do you want?" (1:38 NET).
- ◆ Jesus repeatedly skates much closer to the boundaries of appropriate intimacy than I'm often willing to go—both with women and men. He accepts a woman's tearful wordless love as she lets down her hair in a room full of Middle Eastern men. He develops an especially close bond with three men among his disciples, inviting them to see his glory on the mountain *and* his torment in the garden.
- ◆ Jesus touched and was touched, held and was held, by women and men. He touched leprous men and was touched by a bleeding woman. He embraced children. John rested against Jesus at the Last Supper—and later declared the eternal Word of life that "we have looked at and our hands have touched" (1 John 1:1). Thomas and Mary Magdalene extended similar expressions of physical intimacy after Jesus was raised bodily from the dead.

In light of the centrality of touch, desire, love, and intimacy in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, I conclude that for the author and finisher of our faith sexuality was much more than genital contact. Because Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sinning; and because Jesus was truly and fully human, with all the hormones and dispositions that are part of being a perfect human male, Jesus was surely {128} a sexual person—and he was chaste. I therefore believe that Christians ought not to define sexuality first according to our cultures' dictionaries. Instead, we ought to learn about

sexuality from Jesus the Word of God, who expressed his identity and mission as the beloved Son of God with his body, his desires, and his expressions of loving intimacy.

To explore a theology of sexuality and sex, I therefore propose the following definition of human sexuality: “embodied desires for intimacy—for the good of others.”⁸ Each phrase of this definition requires elaboration based on reading, studying, and heeding the written word of God, which Mennonite Brethren consider to be their “authoritative guide for faith and practice.”⁹

Our sexuality is rooted in our bodies, and wonderfully so. From the creation accounts of Genesis, through the poetry of Song of Songs, to Paul’s description of our resurrection life in 1 Corinthians 15, we are reminded that our bodies have been created good. Although they presently suffer the ravages of toil and death, our bodies will one day be made new like Jesus’s resurrected body: touchable, loveable, and recognizable.

Our desires too are gifts of God. They are intended for great good, pleasure, and love (Ps 37:4, 73:25, 145:19). Yet they are also twisted by the deadly power of sin (Eph 2:3; 1 John 2:16–17). Through the atonement accomplished by Jesus on the cross our desires are being realigned according to God’s good, acceptable, and perfect will, until that Day when we will have entirely escaped the corruption that is in the world because of lust and will fully participate in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4).

We have been created for intimacy—for knowing and being known (1 Cor 13:12b). That is why, when Adam and Eve sinned, and all those who followed, God consistently and persistently comes to these sinners and offers them a way back into reconciled relationships with God, each other, creation, and their own hearts. Jesus came to accomplish this reconciliation: “having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end (*telos*)” (John 13:1). He wept and rejoiced with them, and died and rose for them—and us.

Finally, through our embodied desires for intimacy, God calls us to participate in his mission to redeem the world. Our bodies, desires, and loving intimacy are to be holy reflections of who God is, so that the world may know him and be reconciled to him (cf. 2 Cor 3:2, 18; 4:1–2; 5:17–21). We are to live out our sexuality in ways that will participate in God’s mission—not only towards our most intimate partners, or our children, but also to everyone around us—including our colleagues, neighbors, and enemies.

Bodies, embodied desires, desires for intimacy, and pursuing the good of others: these, I believe, lie at the root of a theology of {129} sexuality—a theology grounded in Jesus the living Word of God, and in Scripture the written word of God. God has designed us with embodied desires for intimacy for the good of others—a design that is intended to shape also our sexual interactions.

SEXUALITY AND THE GOSPEL

Ingrid: Along with Jesus the incarnate Word of God, and Scripture the

written word of God, we must include one more key factor in our theological framing of human sexuality. That factor is the very nature of the gospel by which Christ-followers live in the sphere of God's kingdom and light (Col 1:13). An intentional connection between human sexuality and the nature of the gospel forms the final piece of the foundation on which to build our theology. Let us consider therefore three aspects of the gospel of Christ as they bear on our topic: the saving, claiming, and transforming nature of the gospel.

First, the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16). The name by which our God and Savior would be known was given by the angel to Joseph: "You are to name him [*Y'shua*], for he will save his people." Save them from what? "He will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). The concept of *sōzō* (to save) is multifaceted; but for our purposes, it is first salvation from the consequence of sin—that is eternal death—and it is salvation into eternal life, which begins the moment we believe. John's Gospel clearly asserts that the person of Jesus is the only way to this salvation, to the Father, and to eternal life (14:6). The saving aspect of the gospel, however, is not only related to the next life.

The gospel is also salvation from the destructive power of sin in this life. The term deliverance is often used to distinguish this kind of salvation from the eternal sense of salvation. According to Acts 3, Peter met a beggar who was born lame, and healed him in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene. Peter was subsequently imprisoned and questioned: "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (4:7). Peter responded by saying that it was in the name of Jesus that the man stood restored and healthy. Peter then added, "There is *sōteria* [salvation, deliverance] in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be *sōthēnai* [saved]" (4:12). In this context Peter is not preaching salvation in the sense of John 14:6. Rather, he is claiming that the power to effect deliverance from the evils and brokenness that afflict the human existence rests exclusively in the name and person of Jesus. The gospel of Christ by which we live has inherent power to deliver us from every kind of enslavement, wrong thinking, destructive conditioning, and destructive choices—including those in our sexuality. Testimonies that attest to this power abound. The gospel is hope, {130} because it is the means to freedom and the abundant life that Jesus offers and urges us to choose on a continual basis. It is therefore essential that in our consideration of human sexuality and the church's redeeming role we do not neglect the saving and delivering power of the gospel.

Second, the gospel claims those who are set free by it. Consider how Paul marries these two concepts in his letter to Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, as we wait for the happy fulfillment of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us *to*

set us free from every kind of lawlessness [i.e., the saving nature of the gospel] and to purify for himself a people who are truly his [i.e., the claiming nature of the gospel], who are eager to do good [i.e., the transforming nature of the gospel]” (Titus 2:11–14 NET).

[10](#)

The gospel gives birth to a new people who are set free to truly align their will with Christ’s, and to be a people of his own possession. Jesus claims absolute ownership and total supremacy over every aspect of the disciple’s life. During his earthy ministry Jesus matter-of-factly said things like the following: Follow me and I will make of you something new (Matt 4:19). Follow me above your family obligations (Luke 14:26). Follow me above your financial aspirations (Matt 19:21–29). Follow me above your social duties (Matt 8:22). Most remarkably: Follow me and die to your personal dreams and to the socially imposed norms for success; follow me without reservation even to martyrdom (Matt 16:24–25). Don’t look back once you put your hand to the plough (Luke 9:62).

The gospel’s claim on the disciple is supreme and absolute. This claim renders all other claims inferior, even irrelevant. The current popular claims to self-actualization and self-determination stand contrary to Christ’s claim on his disciples that they continually decrease in self-importance and self-will. In fact, the current and rather recent emphasis on sexual identity in Western culture—an emphasis that Jenell Williams Paris describes so well in *The End of Sexual Identity*¹¹—is merely a symptom of a much deeper issue, namely, resistance to God’s reign and to naming Christ as the one defining feature of a person’s identity. Anything less than a complete surrender to this claim that the gospel places on us will inevitably lead to cultural accommodations of all varieties, including the adoption of ever-changing sexual identity labels. {131}

Paradoxically, it is in this process of dying to the old self and becoming more and more alive to Christ that we become more fully alive and fully human, and clearer about our identity and purpose in this world. Hence, for the sake of humanity, the gospel of Jesus must be central to Christians’ worldview. The nature of the gospel does not allow Christ to be received as a plug-in or add-on that helps us deal with certain aspects of life, while being irrelevant to others. Jesus is not an app to download to solve a problem. Instead, he encompasses the whole of the person. He is the operating system that sets all parameters and is often quite incompatible with the various add-ons society offers to meet our various needs.

Third, the gospel transforms. The life of the disciple is meant to be a life of constant metamorphosis. The Holy Spirit works purposefully in each Christian’s life to change them, to raise them until they mature in all aspects into the nature of Christ (cf. Eph 4:15). This transformation is neither the work of human will to try harder and do better, nor behavior management; such are the ways of Pharisaism and moralism. The Holy Spirit does not aim to make us merely good, he aims to make us new at our very core. This newness affects

every aspect of our being by dealing with our bondage, our fears and anxieties, our need for approval and achievement, and our bodies and sexuality. God's Spirit aims to replace our patterns of being with Christ's pattern for being human—that is, embodied sexual human beings who have desires, are intimate with others without ever causing pain to themselves or others in the process, and always honor and glorify God with their bodies (1 Cor 6:20). The good news, the immense hope we have, is that we live by a gospel with real power to deliver, and to transform broken, misapplied, sinful efforts at embodied intimacy into healthy, joyful, and pure expressions of embodied desires for intimacy. Therefore, when we discuss a theology of human sexuality, we need to remember that our discussion takes place in the context of a people who have been and are being saved, claimed, who have been and are continually transformed by the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

SEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH

Andrew: As Mennonite Brethren churches across Canada study their theology of human sexuality, Ingrid and I hope to make several discoveries about the church's role in human sexuality.

Initially, I am anticipating discoveries about singleness. The most compelling reading I've done about sexuality in preparation for this study conference has been written by and about single people.¹² Therefore, I'm looking forward to what we will learn about the church's role {132} in embracing and incorporating people who are single. People are single for many different reasons. Some welcome singleness. Most probably do not. I think that the church's actual theology of sexuality is revealed by how the church relates to and thinks about single people. They too care about their embodied desires for intimacy for the good of others. They too have questions and decisions to make about friendship, vulnerability, sex, and sexual desires, and expressing intimacy—whether they are attracted to people of the opposite gender or the same gender. Single people remain sexual people no matter the reason for their singleness.

Jesus and Paul demonstrate that singleness is a much-needed gift to the church and the world. Single people reflect the image of God in unique and essential ways. Stanley Grenz points out that whereas married couples reflect the *exclusive* love of God, single people reflect the *inclusive* love of God. For example, "The single life can express the divine reality as characterized by a love that seeks relationship (community) nonexclusively,"¹³ whereas those who are married show that God's love is based on exclusive love and fidelity to covenant, those who are single "represent the expansive nature of [God's love] that seeks to encompass all of humanity in the relationship of community."¹⁴ Thus, the church on mission needs both single *and* married people to truly image God.

I therefore want to discover how we as Mennonite Brethren will imitate Jesus by developing intimate, God-honoring friendships beyond marriages and biological families. What will fellowshiping communities do with each

single and married person's aching desires, relational wounds, and longings to "know fully" and be "fully known" (cf. 1 Cor 13:12)? What will we do with our tendencies either to barricade ourselves or to flaunt ourselves? Because our hungers and desires will never be completely fulfilled or transformed until we see Jesus face to face, how can our unfulfilled desires, and our sufferings in the pursuit of righteous living become thresholds that open onto the grace of God? The church's work of refusing to objectify people, understanding and valuing the suffering of unfulfilled sexual desires, and refusing to tolerate abuse can all be seen in the church's interactions with single people.

Second, during this conference I hope to discover models of how women and men in the church speak, pray, and care together as people who live out their sexuality in godly ways. I want examples of men and women trusting each other, listening and being honest with each other, assuming the best of each other, praying together, and leading together as partners for the gospel (as Paul did). I expect that in this room we are at different stages in our healing from sexual brokenness, bring many different emotions to this topic, and vary in being attracted to people of {133} the opposite sex or of the same sex. Given that diversity, I pray that this conference will be a training ground or rehearsal that prepares us to live out our God-given human sexuality in our churches and communities.

Ingrid: My first hope for the church is that it will be a powerfully transforming force for good as it ministers in a world where God's ideal for human sexuality is grossly distorted. Rodney Stark in *The Rise of Christianity* paints a compelling picture of the radical and lasting impact that the early church made on Western society.¹⁵ The initially obscure and marginal Jesus movement cared for outcasts, related to women in a counter-cultural way, bound up wounded enemy soldiers, and fed and housed orphans. This group of disadvantaged, misunderstood, often mocked and persecuted people started schools that became universities. Through obedience to the gospel and compassion for humanity, the church transformed society and became the dominant religious force in the West in just a few centuries. The church is called to be precisely such a presence in the world today. My hope for this conference is that we would be inspired to new possibilities for Christ's body and bride to be a force for good in our sexually broken world.

Second, I look forward to working through this topic in community. I did not grow up with the benefit of Christian community. It was in a Mennonite Brethren context that I grew to value the often awkward and at times confusing process of communal wrestling with issues of faith. I have witnessed and continue to be blessed by the power of a faith community openly expressing its love for God and for one another, its deep desire to honor God, and its honest struggle of not always knowing exactly what honoring God will look like. I look forward to this time of hearing from each other as we hear from God's Spirit on the theology of human sexuality. My hope is that we take these skills of discussing sexuality openly and graciously as a community, and model them in our churches.

Lastly, my hope for our Mennonite Brethren churches is that we will not disconnect our focus on the theology of human sexuality from the larger topic of discipleship. Human sexuality is just one of many expressions of our life in Christ in this world. Ultimately, every aspect of life and every interaction with culture is shaped by how we follow Jesus, and by the degree to which Christ holds the role of sovereign in our lives. Our denominational DNA evolved first from the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, and later from the Pietists, Baptists, evangelicals, and charismatics who have shaped Mennonite Brethren. The identity of both Anabaptists and Mennonite Brethren was forged through a radical following of the gospel of truth, love, and grace. My hope for Mennonite Brethren across Canada is that we seize anew the vision for such {134} discipleship. As we radically follow Jesus, we will become leaders with clarity and hope not only for wholeness in our sexuality, but for wholeness in all that makes us human.

Andrew and I, along with the other members of the Board of Faith and Life, encourage you to study the theology of human sexuality with courage, trusting in God's presence among us. Although this topic is challenging and immensely personal—it touches the very basis of some people's identity—it is a topic that affects every human being and all our churches. I am confident that as we consider human sexuality through the lens of love (1 Cor 13), we will find that better way—the way that honors and loves God with all of our being, and that loves our neighbor at the same time. There is a Jesus-way to respond to the trends of the times, and to the needs of the people to whom we minister. This is a way that courageously holds up truth and honors God's holiness and will while undauntedly extending grace to our neighbors. Therefore, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all as we study human sexuality together.

NOTES

1. This paper is a revision of the opening plenary address given by Andrew Dyck and Ingrid Reichard at the Canadian Mennonite Brethren study conference "God, Sex & Church: A Theology of Healthy Sexuality," October 21–23, 2015, in Winnipeg. To preserve the tone of their address, their use of first-person is maintained and their respective sections are indicated by name.
2. For this conference, the Board of Faith and Life prepared a study guide that elaborates on many of the themes presented by Ingrid and Andrew. *God, Sex & Church: A Theology of Healthy Sexuality—Study Guide* (Winnipeg, MB: Board of Faith and Life of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 2015), <http://www.mennonitebrethren.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Study-Guide-2015-letter-sized.pdf>.
3. *Mennonite Brethren Study Conference 2013: Plenary Sessions*, <http://studyconference.mennonitebrethren.ca/2013/category/plenary-sessions/> (accessed August 2, 2016); *Mennonite Brethren Study Conference 2013: Workshops*, <http://studyconference.mennonitebrethren.ca/2013/category/workshops/> (accessed August 2, 2016). Videos of the plenary addresses are available at <http://www.globalmissionmedia.tv/en> and <https://vimeo.com/cdnmbconf/videos/page:4/sort:date>.
4. *Confession of Faith of the U.S. and Canadian Conferences of the Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Winnipeg: Board of Faith and Life and Board of

- Resource Ministries, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1999), 18; *God, Sex & Church—Study Guide*, 2, 16, 23. {135}
5. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *The Atlantic* (Sept. 2015), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>.
 6. *Confession of Faith*, 9.
 7. Experience, that is, as shared in testimonies, open mic times, and conversations.
 8. The phrase “for the good of others” has been added to this definition in light of teaching and discussion at the study conference (esp. Gil Dueck’s response to Laura Schmidt Robert’s plenary address [included in this issue—Ed.], and Rod Schellenberg’s comments from the floor). The shorter definition was originally proposed and elaborated in *God, Sex & Church—Study Guide*, 6.
 9. *Confession of Faith*, 9.
 10. Italics added.
 11. Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011).
 12. Cf. Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010); Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).
 13. Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 194–96.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

Andrew Dyck is Professor of Ministry Studies for Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary at Canadian Mennonite University. He was a Mennonite Brethren pastor from 1996–2012 and is currently completing a PhD dissertation in Christian spirituality, including a historical overview of Mennonite Brethren spiritual life. Ingrid Reichard is currently serving as Pastor of Development at Glencairn Mennonite Brethren Church in Kitchener, Ontario. She is completing her DMin in spiritual formation at Tyndale Seminary and is actively involved in various discipleship projects.

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