



Resource Centre

From our Churches

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Welcoming the Stranger **Same-sex Marriage from a Canadian Mennonite Perspective**

Summary

1. Including the Stranger: Socio-Cultural Questions and the Church

- The debates over same-sex marriage have split the Mennonite church into those who advocate the inclusion of LGBT people and those who advocate exclusion.
- There is also much evidence of a “third way” between these two poles, which holds the position that both sides can learn from the other and that the dialogue needs to continue.
- This “third way” reflects a distinctive understanding of inclusivity, which is not only about the inclusion of LGBT people, but also about including those with whom one disagrees on same-sex marriage (as a form of love of enemy or stranger).

2. Interpreting the Stranger: Harder and Reimer on Forbearance and Loving Discernment

- A. James Reimer advocates the biblical idea of “forbearance” (“as we judge others, so we will be judged”), which he differentiates from unlimited tolerance and also from indiscriminate exclusion.
- Lydia Neufeld Harder sees a precedent for the present shift in definitions of faithful marriage to include same-sex marriage in the biblical shift from polygamy to monogamy, and highlights the importance of love within theological discernment on marriage.
- Reimer and Harder agree that decisions about same-sex marriage should be left to congregations. The example of Toronto United Mennonite Church shows one way of balancing “sexual diversity and theological diversity” within a congregation.

3. *Welcoming the Stranger: Toward a Radical and Biblical “Third Way”*

- Michael King speaks about a “third way” which maintains an openness to the other or enemy within debates on marriage.
- Similarly, Johanna van Wijk-Bos extends the meaning of the biblical challenge to love the stranger as a call to love and include LGBT people.
- Together, King and van Wijk-Bos highlight the need to love two sets of strangers: LGBT Mennonites *and* those who disagree on marriage within the Mennonite church. Still, it must be remembered that all are not on equal footing in these debates; queer Mennonites face more vulnerability.

4. *Loving the Stranger: The Calling of Marriage and the Church Community*

- Harder and other Mennonite scholars agree that Mennonites have not yet developed an adequate *theological* understanding of marriage, whether heterosexual or same-sex, but sense that at their best, marriage/family and church are mutually-supportive.
- As the church as a covenant community draws strangers together into a new family, so marriage covenants make former strangers into families. This image can be a resource for us as we continue to discern the theological significance of marriage together.

Paper

Questions surrounding same-sex marriage have been the subject of debate in our denomination, Mennonite Church Canada, for the past three decades or so, and we are seemingly no closer to consensus today. It is indeed an explosive issue, one that touches the core of ecclesiology (how we understand church as both inclusive and particular, the relationship of church and state), hermeneutics (how we interpret the Bible for ethics, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments), and socio-cultural questions (including the so-called culture wars of “liberals”/“progressives” versus “conservatives”). It is a truly multi-faceted issue, and therefore deeply divisive. It has resulted in an impasse today, with those supporting same-sex marriage and those against it having duly articulated their biblically-supported positions without much success – that is, without much evidence of changing minds or impending steps toward a unified decision.¹

¹ Briefly put, while those against same-sex marriage cite passages from Leviticus condemning homosexuality (18:22; 20:13) as well as Pauline passages (such as Rom. 1:26-27), those for same-sex marriage argue that Jesus’ interpretation of the Law as love for God and neighbour releases us from obligation to dietary, purity, and other laws, including condemnations of homosexuality, and also that Paul’s references are predominantly to pedophilia, prostitution, or rape, not the modern sense of a consensual, committed same-sex relationship. See Walter Wink, “Homosexuality and the Bible,” in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions for the Churches*, ed. Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 34-36. See also “Same-Sex Unions and MC Canada,” Mennonite Church Canada, accessed May 16, 2012, <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/news/statements/ssm/>.

Given this current impasse, what is the way forward for us as a Mennonite church? Do Scripture and our tradition point us toward choosing one side of the debate or the other? Interestingly, several Mennonite theologians and scholars have observed and advocated a “third way” which moves the church beyond this impasse as a united body.² This paper explores this “third way,” tracing its roots in our Mennonite peace emphasis which values Jesus’ teaching of *enemy-love*, not merely neighbour-love, as well as looking at the application of this teaching to the same-sex marriage debate. I will focus especially on two Canadian Mennonite voices, Lydia Neufeld Harder and A. James Reimer, who have each proposed ways for Mennonite congregations to move forward without simplistically capitulating to either side of the debate. The poignant biblical challenge of welcoming the stranger, explored by Presbyterian theologian Johanna van Wijk-Bos,³ along with Mennonite scholar Michael King’s reflections, will also contribute to my own proposal for a more radically inclusive, biblically-grounded, yet nonviolent paradigm for addressing same-sex marriage in the Canadian Mennonite church today. In my view, the biblical challenge to welcome the stranger, the one not (yet) understood, has the potential to bring together those who disagree, perhaps even enemies, and thus to provide a resource for reconciliation within both the church as a spiritual family, and the smaller families which comprise it, since marriage too makes those who were once strangers into kin.

Including the Stranger: Socio-Cultural Questions and the Church

In the 1980s, North American Mennonites began to take notice of questions of sexual orientation, with the rise of queer or LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transsexual)⁴ sociopolitical advocacy in Canada and the U.S. As a tradition with a high regard for biblical teachings *and* for social justice or peacemaking, the debate has divided Mennonites who advocate exclusion through upholding the authority of the biblical prohibitions against same-sex relationships (e.g., Leviticus, Paul’s epistles) and those who see Jesus’ call to include the marginalized as more authoritative, and thus understand the inclusion of queer people into the church as a social justice issue (e.g., Jesus’ teaching about “the least” in Matt. 25:31-45, his encounter with the woman at the well in John 4:1-30). Official conference statements from the mid-1980s reflect efforts to find common ground through differentiating between homosexual “orientation” and “practice,” amounting to a “welcoming but not affirming” stance: LGBT people are “welcomed” but required to remain celibate.⁵ While a number of Mennonites, including scholars, remain satisfied with these

² Michael A. King, *Fractured Dance: Gadamer and a Mennonite Conflict over Homosexuality*. C. Henry Smith Series, Vol. 3 (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US/Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 29.

³ Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos, “How to Read What We Read: Discerning Good News about Sexuality in Scripture,” in *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 61-77.

⁴ *Lesbians* are women who are sexually attracted to other women, *gay* men are sexually attracted to other men, *bisexuals* find both men and women sexually attractive, and *transgendered or transsexual* people identify with a different gender than their physical or biological sex. The term *queer*, formerly an insult, is now used positively to identify LGBT people as different from the heterosexual norm.

⁵ See “Resolution on the Issue of Homosexuality,” Mennonite Church Canada, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/news/statements/ssm/resolution98.htm>, and the “Purdue” (1987) and “Saskatoon” (1986) statements on human sexuality in “Basic Documents,” Mennonite Church USA, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-center/resources/statements-and-resolutions/growing-together-as-communities/basicdocuments/>.

thirty-year-old statements,⁶ others believe that such a stance is not in fact welcoming, as evidenced by the two major LGBT advocacy groups, Harmony (Canada) and the Pink Menno Campaign (US), as well as a minority of congregations which are choosing, against the official conference positions, to be openly LGBT inclusive, to appoint queer people as pastors, and to bless same-sex marriages.⁷

However, in most cases, the Mennonite church, including its scholars, maintains what King calls a “third way” between “full affirmation” and “full exclusion”⁸ – that is, an ongoing commitment to continue to discern the way forward on this issue together, while “disagreeing in love.” Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation’s 2008 book, *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality*, provides a striking instance of two Mennonite scholars with opposing viewpoints on the issue working together toward mutual understanding.⁹ King illustrates this same sentiment with a remarkable anecdote. He writes,

Some time ago and far up north, the conversation at a table of Mennonites turned to homosexuality. A farmer bluntly insisted that the church must affirm its traditional stance or forever lose its way.

One woman said to me, “Isn’t homosexuality an issue down your way?”

Someone else said, “Yes, at Germantown, isn’t it?”

Suddenly it hit them. Years ago I was pastor at Germantown Mennonite Church, which was at the time of this anecdote in trouble with the larger church for its gay/lesbian welcoming stance and has since been excommunicated.

“Uh, end of discussion,” the woman said, “no offence.”

“No,” I said. “Let’s work at this.”

So we did. I described my thinking and stressed to the farmer that though we differed, I thought the issue was so complicated the body of Christ needed all our stances, and his could help mine grow.

I cannot explain exactly what happened. I can only say I genuinely believed the farmer had things to teach me. He reciprocated. Eventually, tears in his eyes, he said, “Maybe it really is true that we need each other. It scares me, but that means I need you.” He drew my own tears.¹⁰

So what does this “third way” mean for the Mennonite church in the Canadian context? In my view, it reflects a *distinctive understanding of inclusion* which goes beyond the way the term normally functions within Christian debates on same-sex marriage.¹¹ While it is generally assumed that inclusivity is the domain of “progressives,” in reality, the debate is more

⁶ See Willard Swartley, *Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 121, 125-6, 142.

⁷ See “Pink Menno,” accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.pinkmenno.org/>, and “Harmony: Mennonites for LGBT Inclusion,” accessed March 10, 2014, <http://mennoharmony.org/>.

⁸ King, 29.

⁹ Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation, *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2008). See also C. Norman Kraus, ed., *To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality*, Living Discussions Series, Vol. 1 (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 2001).

¹⁰ King, 146-147.

¹¹ Interestingly, the 2005 *Civil Marriage Act* legalizing same-sex marriage in Canada actually makes provisions for both sides: it preserves “freedom of religion” for religious groups who view same-sex marriage as contrary to their traditions (so religious leaders are not required to marry same-sex couples if they are not comfortable doing so) and affirms the rights of gay and lesbian couples to marry in civil ceremonies. See Pamela Dickey-Young, “Taking Account of Religion in Canada: The Debates over Gay and Lesbian Marriage,” in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 39, no. 3 (2010): 348-351.

complicated. Those who advocate the exclusion of “practicing” gay and lesbian members from the church are overt about their intolerance, but those who advocate LGBT inclusion in fact also risk the exclusion of those with whom they disagree over this issue. Thus, though those supporting same-sex marriage welcome those strangers outside of the heterosexual norm, they neglect other strangers whose voices cannot simply be silenced, especially insofar as these voices intersect with ethnic, generational, educational-economic, or urban-rural differences. In short, there is more than one set of “strangers” in need of welcome here. One of the advantages afforded by the Mennonite peace perspective, then, is the potential to recognize the violence perpetrated by both sides of the same-sex marriage debate, as both sides attempt to silence the other. Within Mennonite debates on the issue, so-called “progressives” and “conservatives” are arguably both guilty of exclusion, and therefore of violence. Recognizing the need for a nonviolent middle way, Canadian Mennonite theologians Harder and Reimer both address the current impasse through appealing to biblical ideas beyond the few, isolated passages which address homosexuality.¹² We now turn to their thoughts.

Interpreting the Stranger: Harder and Reimer on Forbearance and Loving Discernment

Given that the Bible has relatively little to say on homosexuality, Reimer suggests moving beyond particular biblical passages to larger, overarching, biblical-theological themes which can help the church to faithfully navigate the diversity of voices within Scripture.¹³ One such theme, Reimer suggests, is the biblical notion of “forbearance” or patience (i.e., “as we judge others, so we will be judged”), which he differentiates from unlimited tolerance (“let people believe what they want and leave them alone”) and also from indiscriminate “exclusion” (excommunication or shunning). According to Reimer, exclusion has too often been the reaction of Mennonites during their history because of an emphasis on the ethical perfection of the sanctified church. But “In the church,” Reimer writes, “we ought not to love someone because she keeps the law, but because the law is love.”¹⁴ He states,

When both sides with integrity confess . . . Jesus, exclusion is unjustified. It then becomes a church polity issue – finding a way to reconcile differences while continuing to seek theological consensus. Given the church’s current understanding, this would mean: not “blessing” same-sex unions but in certain circumstances “forbearing” them. And it would also mean forbearance from homosexual Christians of the church’s struggle to understand homosexuality in the light of biblical teaching.¹⁵

Reimer recognizes that the middle way of forbearance is long-term and arduous; issues such as same-sex marriage are at once “urgent” yet should not be resolved “prematurely.” Arguing that the church “is not only a redeemed but also a redeeming community,” and that the church does not simply grant rights and privileges (its “priestly-pastoral” task) but also makes demands upon and challenges its members through communal, mutual accountability (its

¹² For an in-depth look at these passages, see Swartley, 25-73, and Grimsrud and Thiessen Nation, 21-45.

¹³ A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press/Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2001), 516.

¹⁴ A. James Reimer, *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 84-86, 47, and *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 519.

¹⁵ Reimer, *Dogmatic Imagination*, 87-88.

“prophetic-ethical” task), Reimer nevertheless concludes that “Charity for those who suffer, *particularly the stranger*, takes precedence over ‘correct moral positions.’”¹⁶

Against the view that context and difference are impediments to the application of pure biblical law, Harder proposes that the multiple perspectives both in the Bible and the church enrich the church’s discernment of God’s leading. The biblical accounts of God’s people are not timeless and pristine, but contextual, ambiguous mixtures of faithfulness, failure, and learning; thus, Harder argues, they function like “‘recipes’ for living faithfully.” Among her most salient points, in my view, is the observation that drastic changes in the understanding of faithful marriage have occurred before in the history of God’s people: namely, in the shift from polygamous marriages being acceptable, even faithful, among the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, to monogamy being understood as the only faithful form of marriage covenant by the time of Jesus’ ministry.¹⁷ Harder here implies that in light of this implicit shift, it is not unthinkable that today, the church is experiencing and discerning a similar redefinition of faithful marriage in the incorporation of monogamous, same-sex unions into the church.¹⁸ In arguing this way and calling for “compassion and solidarity” with LGBT people, she takes steps beyond Reimer’s notion of forbearance, which is closer to the “welcoming but not affirming” stance of the Mennonite conferences. Still, echoing Reimer, Harder highlights several dangers facing congregations caught in the current impasse. She states, “we know that people are often drawn to one aspect of knowledge to the relative neglect of others,” and that our “discernment” can easily become self-interested rhetoric as we assume “that the society around us has contaminated the voices of those with whom we do not agree.” Our decisions are then made in our own image, reflecting our preconceptions instead of challenging us to face and wrestle with the unnerving unknown. We can forget the call to be peacemakers, and to remember that “love, rather than knowledge, is the necessary. . . relational element of the theological conversation.”¹⁹

Despite their slightly different emphases, Harder and Reimer agree that within the Mennonite church, decision-making should be left to congregations, since Mennonites do not function with the sort of centralized or hierarchical leadership models of other Christian traditions. Insofar as denominational leaders provide guidance, Reimer argues, they “should be limited to affirming more general, universal, confessional principles and leaving detailed application to the local congregation,” which allows for “freedom within certain agreed upon limits.”²⁰ Harder similarly locates the discernment process primarily in congregations, citing her experience pastoring at Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC) as it underwent a discernment process regarding sexuality in 2003-2004.²¹ TUMC, for its part, reflects a concerted effort to allow multiple voices to be heard. In the bulletin each Sunday, the

¹⁶ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 516. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Harder, “Same-sex Marriage,” 46-48, 53-54. This shift casts doubt on appeals to a monolithic “biblical family,” but also highlights a second major shift: the 20th-century shift from patriarchal (male-headed) marriage to gender-equal marriage being understood as more faithful to Jesus’ and Paul’s teachings.

¹⁸ David Schroeder rightly highlights that promiscuity is not being advocated for either heterosexual or homosexual persons, but rather “a same-sex covenant parallel with heterosexual marriage.” See Schroeder, “Homosexuality: Biblical, Theological, and Polity Issues,” in *To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality*, ed. C. Norman Kraus, Living Issues Discussion Series (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2001), 67.

¹⁹ Harder, “Same-sex Marriage,” 47, 61, 57, 60, 51.

²⁰ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 514-515, and Harry J. Huebner, *Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005), 111. See also Schroeder, 69, 72.

²¹ Harder, “Same-sex Marriage,” 62, 47 n.8.

congregation now includes this statement: “We welcome people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, faith backgrounds, physical capacities and gifts. Although we don’t always agree with one another, we share a belief in Christ and a desire to be his followers.”²² There is no pretence of perfect unity in the matter, since the discussion is ongoing; what is particularly striking is the commitment to maintaining both “sexual diversity and theological diversity,” as one church member put it. This is certainly not an easy task, but it does indicate a laudable attempt to put a “third way” into practice and to welcome more than one set of strangers. Keeping in mind the dangers and possibilities identified by Reimer and Harder, I propose that as people of peace, Mennonites are called not only to love and live in community with those who are like us, whom we understand, but also with those who are unlike us, whom we may consider enemies or strangers, such as those with whom we fundamentally disagree on same-sex marriage.²³

Welcoming the Stranger: Toward a Radical and Biblical “Third Way”

Harder and Reimer provide valuable insights for overcoming the current impasse on same-sex marriage in the Mennonite church, insights which complement what King calls a “third way” beyond the black-and-white alternatives of either complete LGBT exclusion or complete inclusion. He challenges Mennonites to adopt a stance of radical openness to the perspective of the other, asking, “What learnings might then emerge if, for instance, those who in relation to homosexuality have come to see each other as enemies were reconciled? What fresh understandings might be gained if together they contributed to a view of homosexuality . . . larger than either alone is finding?”²⁴ King examines the possibilities of putting such ideas into action in the discussions surrounding Germantown Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania: he notices a shift from “questions of whether or in what ways homosexuality is sinful to *how different stances should be dealt with*,” revealing some sense of acceptance of diversity and the prioritization of relationship; he also observes some instances of “*risking prejudices [preconceptions or assumptions] in relationship*,” made possible by the willingness of opponents to be in one another’s presence, which is already a form of openness for King.²⁵ Interestingly, despite few overt references to their tradition’s peacemaking stance, King observes an openness to the other in these discussions among ordinary church members, and, approving of their “third way” in dealing with this conflict, concludes that “our call is to be advocates for the dialogue itself.”²⁶

King’s study of the “third way” of openness to the other within Mennonite debates has much in common with Presbyterian theologian Johanna van Wijk-Bos’s exploration of the biblical theme of welcoming the stranger. In its biblical manifestations, the love of the “stranger” (Lev. 19:34; see also Exod. 22:21, Deut. 10:19, 24:17-18, Matt. 25:34-45, Rom., 12:13, Heb. 13:2)²⁷ connotes the love of the outsider, sojourner, or foreigner, one who was not at home and was thus vulnerable and in need of hospitality; in today’s terms, refugees, homeless, or displaced people are closest to the literal ancient meaning of “stranger” (e.g., the Old

²² It is on the church website as well. See: “About Us,” Toronto United Mennonite Church, accessed May 18, 2012, http://tumc.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8&Itemid=3.

²³ Reimer highlights the Mennonite application of love of enemies to social and political contexts as a strength, but we have often neglected to apply it rigorously at the interpersonal level. *Dogmatic Imagination*, 66.

²⁴ King, 40, 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42, 77, 108-110. Emphasis his.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 149, 29.

²⁷ For more details about this idea in the Bible, see the appendix below.

Testament figure of Ruth). While not negating this crucial “plain sense” of the biblical terminology, I nevertheless follow what Reimer hints at²⁸ and van Wijk-Bos fleshes out: the extension of the meaning of “stranger” to include LGBT people within our current context. This extension addresses one of the shortcomings of King’s study, from which LGBT people’s voices are glaringly absent, since he focuses on Mennonite debates *about* homosexuality, one step removed from actual interaction and engagement with LGBT Mennonites.

According to van Wijk-Bos, one of the central mandates of being God’s people is the call to not only refrain from oppressing the stranger, but in fact to protect and love the stranger. She defines strangers as those who are vulnerable because they are “different from the dominant group” or the “heterosexist paradigm of sexuality” – i.e., women and non-heterosexuals. She concludes, “In the practice of justice, as covenant partners with the God of justice, we are required to love the stranger as we love ourselves (Lev. 19:34).”²⁹ For a biblically-centred tradition such as the Mennonite church, the call to love the stranger provides a powerful incentive to welcome LGBT people *a priori* (before the fact), even without yet understanding them, even while questions about same-sex marriage remain unresolved. The stranger, after all, is to be loved *as a stranger*, not only once he or she has been deemed “like” those who belong. This call places the onus on those who tend toward exclusion to be in the presence of queer people, and thus, in King’s sense, to be open to be in relationship with them and to learn from them as fellow people of God. In my view, this call is incompatible with requirements of celibacy for gay and lesbian people, which force them to choose between their spiritual family and marriage. As Harder and others argue, more work remains to be done in developing an adequate Mennonite theology of marriage in general,³⁰ but same-sex couples who feel called to marry should arguably not be required to wait until the church has resolved these profound questions, a process which is likely long-term.

But as already mentioned, van Wijk-Bos’s use of the image of welcoming the stranger does not take into account the “strangeness” of those who disagree on same-sex marriage; she does not recognize that there is more than one set of strangers in need of welcome. In my view, the Mennonite impulse to apply the term to opponents within the same-sex marriage debate provides a measure of equality, as it prevents LGBT people from being the only ones labelled “strangers” or from being deemed permanent outsiders. In Reimer’s sense, it also safeguards the ethical agency of LGBT people in likewise calling *them* to be open to the presence and voices of those with whom they disagree; queer Mennonites are also peacemakers, after all! But it must not be forgotten that *all are not starting on equal footing in the process of discernment*; the vulnerability of queer people in discussing something which is part of their personal identities means that their welcome by those who “belong” in the Mennonite church is a priority, even as it is understood that they are welcomed into a community whose search for agreement on this very issue is far from finished, a community which is bound together, but only across deep differences.

²⁸ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 516.

²⁹ van Wijk-Bos, 72-73.

³⁰ Harder, 54, Schroeder, 67-68, and Waldemar Janzen, “A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation,” in *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Mennonite Bible College Publications, 1990), 98-99.

Loving the Stranger: The Calling of Marriage and the Church Community

Mennonite biblical scholar David Schroeder argues that much more *theological* work remains to be done when it comes to same-sex marriage, since, as he puts it, no one in the Mennonite church has yet “developed a satisfactory theology of same-sex covenants.”³¹ As mentioned above, Harder makes the case that we have not sufficiently accounted for the place of *heterosexual* marriage in the life of faith, either, since we have not addressed key questions, such as, “What does the marriage ceremony mean? [...] What purpose do these covenants have in the larger mission of God? What is the sin from which faithfulness to these covenants saves us? And perhaps most important, How does our covenant-making shape us as a covenantal people, saved from sin and formed in holiness in order to bless all peoples?”³² These are indeed crucial and profoundly difficult questions – questions that arguably require all of our collective experience and wisdom to discern, whether straight, queer, single or married.³³

Harder is certainly not alone in posing such questions. Mennonite biblical scholar Waldemar Janzen argues that our rather thin theology of marriage and family has come “either from other Christians or from the secular world around us,” not the biblical narrative. Key to this problem, in his view, is an unfounded preference for the New Testament and an assumption that it has superseded the Old (a deeply problematic stance in relation to Judaism as well), resulting in the vast wisdom of the Old Testament on the matter remaining untapped,³⁴ including, I would add, the call to love the stranger. Reimer agrees, asking whether the arguments against same-sex marriage on the basis of a lack of biological offspring in fact fit with the Genesis portrayal of marriage as a matter of “procreation and companionship,” not solely the former. He also emphasizes the fallen nature of *all* human sexual relationships, meaning “that to identify homosexual activity as the one supreme example of the Fall, sexually speaking, is hypocritical.” It seems that Mennonites, somewhat unexpectedly, tend to appeal to biology or “nature” when it comes to heterosexual marriage, when elsewhere, sanctified (Spirit-led) ethical decision-making is imperative.³⁵ Along similar lines, Mennonite theologian Harry Huebner warns against the assumption that our cultural differences (whether we belong to “progressive” or “conservative” sub-cultures) straightforwardly translate into theological differences.³⁶

As Harder and Reimer remind us, hermeneutics, the interpretation of the Bible and its application to the life of faith, is communal for Mennonites, yet questions remain as to the place of family in those communities. Theologically, if not always in practice, Mennonites have tended to subordinate marriage and family ties to the ties of baptism, which draw people into the spiritual family of the church.³⁷ A form of this notion is evident in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, which affirms both family life and singleness, stating that “God intends human life to be blessed through families, especially through the family of faith. All Christians are to take their place within the household of God, where

³¹ Schroeder, 67-68.

³² Harder, 54.

³³ Harder suggests that we need to first figure out what marriage means and only then talk about sexual orientation, but I think we need to figure out what marriage means together, as people of different sexual orientations.

³⁴ Janzen, 98-99.

³⁵ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 517-519. Schroeder comes close to this. See Schroeder, 68

³⁶ Huebner, 74.

³⁷ Janzen, 97.

members treat each other as brothers and sisters.”³⁸ This recalls the drastic redefinition of family Jesus makes during his ministry, particularly when he refuses to talk to his mother and siblings, saying, “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:50, see also Matt. 10:37-38).³⁹ Still, as Janzen reminds us, “We proclaim the spiritual family but feel instinctively that it cannot and should not displace the bonds of blood altogether.”⁴⁰ Jesus, after all, also affirms key aspects of family: he affirms the goodness of faithful marriage (Matt. 5:27-32, John 2:1-11), welcomes the children and blesses them (Matt. 19:14, Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16), and even while being crucified, makes sure his mother has someone (an adoptive son) to care for her in her old age (John 19:26-27). This is why forcing lesbian and gay people to choose between their spiritual family and marriage is, in a sense, out of step with the implicit or instinctual Mennonite theology of family: at their best, spiritual and relational families are mutually-supportive.⁴¹

As we work out the theological significance of marriage together, I want to suggest that the image of loving the stranger can again be a resource for the covenant community, as Harder speaks of it, as well as for the parallel covenants of marriage within that community. The church, as I have been suggesting, draws strangers – those different, not understood, unknown – together. Through the Spirit, they cease to be strangers, becoming not only friends but a new *family*, one bound not primarily by blood, but by faith and the call of discipleship.⁴² Arguably, though, marriage is also an instance of loving the stranger, since two people who were once strangers, through a covenant, become a new family; spouses, after all, are not bound by blood!⁴³ Mennonites, however, are not of one mind as to which body has the authority to bind strangers into kin. As the same-sex marriage debate has highlighted, some Mennonites value the *legal* sanction of marriages as crucial to their validity,⁴⁴ while others stress the recognition of the *church* community above all.⁴⁵ Here I must side with the latter, and emphasize with Janzen that the church should not first turn to the state for guidance here. In fact, as Harder suggests, it is up to the church to critique familial and kinship systems in light of faith, and thereby be a *witness*, perhaps even a blessing, to wider society regarding sexuality and the family.⁴⁶ Part of that witness can be, as some argue, upholding faithfulness to marriage covenants over against sexual casualness, but, I would stipulate, only insofar as these covenants are understood in tandem with faithfulness to covenants binding spiritual families in community across deep differences. Surely it is faithfulness to the strangers in each other, that is, an orientation toward healing our deep estrangement, that provides our most poignant witness to a polarized, fragmented, and violent world. It is through the embodiment of the love of the stranger, in this way, that marriage and family become small glimpses of the larger body of the church, instances of

³⁸ General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 72.

³⁹ See also Julie Nash, “The Gift and Singleness,” in *Sexuality: God’s Gift*, 2nd ed., ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2010), 110-111.

⁴⁰ Janzen, 100.

⁴¹ The latter point is made by Gerald W. Schlabach, “Continuity and Sacrament, or Not: Hauerwas, Yoder, and Their Deep Difference,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 2 (September 1, 2007): 190. Reimer proposes that abstinence by same-sex-oriented persons can remind the church of the value of celibacy, but its involuntary/compulsory nature renders it problematic, as I see it. See *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 521.

⁴² Reimer, *Dogmatic Imagination*, 49.

⁴³ For a discussion of the symbolics of difference in both heterosexual and same-sex marriages, see John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (New York: Routledge, 2003), 206-209.

⁴⁴ Willard S. Krabill, “The Gift and Marriage,” in *Sexuality: God’s Gift*, 2nd ed., ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2010), 117.

⁴⁵ *Confession of Faith*, 72.

⁴⁶ Harder, 56-57, 45.

two or three gathering in the name of Christ, creating homes where peace is taught and lived, and bread is broken and shared around the table.

The challenge to individual Mennonite congregations is thus clear: to be attentive to one another in love, to welcome the unknown in one another, and to consider our baptism covenants with as much seriousness as marriage covenants. Some congregations have already taken steps into the unknown, toward welcoming same-sex couples and blessing their marriages and their sincere willingness to remain part of or join the family of faith; others have not, and their voices rightly call for a much more robust Mennonite theology of marriage and family. In the meantime, we are called to continue to dialogue in love, to continue the careful, slow work of reconciliation through discerning together the voice of the Spirit, that ultimate stranger, for the church today.

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Appendix – The Biblical Idea of Loving the Stranger

The Bible is full of references to the idea of welcoming or loving or including the stranger, as well as refraining from oppressing the stranger. Here I list the biblical passages that mention this idea in the two most well-known English translations of the Bible.⁴⁷ The word “stranger” appears 40 times in the New International Version of the Bible, and about 11 of these passages convey the idea of loving the stranger: Lev. 25:23, 35; Job 29:16, 31:32; Matt. 25:35, 38, 43-44; Eph. 2:19; Heb. 13:2; 3 John 1:5. The idea takes the form of either God extending love to the people of God, who are strangers, the people of God showing love to strangers, or the people of God showing love to strangers who represent or are the face of Christ among them.

The word “stranger” appears 63 times in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, including the Apocrypha (books included in the Bible by Roman Catholics but not Protestants). 17 of these passages convey the idea of loving the stranger: Deut. 10:18-19; Job 29:16, 31:32; Ps. 146:9; Matt. 25:35, 38, 43-44; Rom. 12:13; Eph. 2:12, 19; Sirach 11:34, 29:26; Wisdom 19:13-15. The NRSV also uses the word “alien” or “resident alien” to mean foreigner or stranger. The word “alien” appears 134 times in the NRSV, including the Apocrypha. 30 of these passages speak about loving or welcoming the alien: Gen. 17:8, 21:23, 26:3; Exod. 6:4, 22:21, 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34, 23:22, 25:23, 35; Num. 15:14; Deut. 24:17-21, 26:11-13, 27:19; Jer. 7:6, 22:3; Ezek. 22:7, 29, 47:22-23; Zech. 7:10, Mal. 3:5, Eph. 2:12, 19. The book of Ruth also explores this theme. Again, these verses speak of God loving the people of God as strangers, the people of God loving or providing hospitality to the stranger, refraining from oppressing the stranger, or seeing the face of Christ or of angels in the stranger.

⁴⁷ See Bible Gateway (www.biblegateway.com) for a helpful way to do searches of a number of different translations of the Bible.

In my view, the most important passages about this idea are from the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch or the Torah (books of the law) in the Jewish tradition). The direct command from God to not oppress or to love the stranger appears in Exod. 22:21, Lev. 19:33-34, and Deut. 10:19, 24:17-21. Its appearance in three of the five books of the law highlights its importance, as does its linking to the memory of the Israelites being strangers in Egypt. Since the Israelites have experienced being mistreated strangers, they should never do likewise to the strangers among them. As Christians, it is important for us that Jesus reaffirmed and reinterpreted this idea in his ministry, as Matthew, the most Jewish of the gospels, describes in 25:35-44, where the "least" represent Christ. Also, we can see from Rom. 12:13, Eph. 2:12, 19, and Heb. 13:2, that the early church valued this idea. Therefore, it continues to be an important challenge for us to pay attention to and reinterpret this idea and practice for the church today.