



**Between Horizons:  
Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality**

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**Table of Contents**

Preface ..... BFC 5:2

Introduction ..... BFC 5:3

Chapter One: The Link between Sexuality and Spirituality: Covenantal Relationships ..... BFC 5:4  
    Summary points..... BFC 5:4

Chapter Two: Perspectives from the Garden of Delight..... BFC 5:5  
    Summary points..... BFC 5:6

Chapter Three: Broken Links ..... BFC 5:7  
    Summary points..... BFC 5:7

Chapter Four: Redesigning the Garden as We Journey Toward the New City..... BFC 5:8  
    Perspectives from the Old Testament ..... BFC 5:8  
    Perspectives from the New Testament..... BFC 5:9  
        Jesus' views on sexuality and covenant..... BFC 5:9  
        Paul and the image of marriage..... BFC 5:9  
        Nothing is impossible with God ..... BFC 5:10  
    Summary points..... BFC 5:10

Conclusion ..... BFC 5:11

Appendix: The Power of Context ..... BFC 5:12

**Study Guide**

Introduction ..... BFC 5:13

Lesson One: Imperfect Sexuality..... BFC 5:14

Lesson Two: Private Ownership ..... BFC 5:15

Lesson Three: Moving Toward God's Intended Sexuality ..... BFC 5:16

Lesson Four: Asking the Right Question..... BFC 5:17

## Preface

Over the past several years, concern for the ongoing health of our church has prompted us to examine how we can most faithfully use Scripture in our response to the challenges of our time and place. This process, *Being a Faithful Church* (BFC), has undergone several stages:

BFC 1: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment (March, 2009)

BFC 2: "Peace Church" as "Pacifist Church" (July, 2010)

BFC 3: A Plan to Discern Faithfulness on Matters of Sexuality (July, 2011)

BFC 4: Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways (July 2012)

BFC 4.1: Exercising our Interpreting Muscles: Testing our Interpretive Framework (Sept, 2012)<sup>1</sup>

For each step along the way, we invited participation from Mennonite Church Canada congregations through questionnaires and studies. We are deeply grateful for your responses to both. They have guided this process.

In the latest stage, BFC 4.1, we compiled a list of helpful and unhelpful ways to use the Bible. The resulting document, *Exercising our Interpreting Muscles*, has also come to be known as the Paths and Ditches document. The wisdom found within its pages has shaped our exploration of Scripture in generating this resource.<sup>2</sup>

A brief study such as this one cannot do justice to all of the rich and diverse material contained in the Bible. We realize that much more could be said, and these summary pages may miss some important elements. We also acknowledge that others might interpret the material differently. Because of these possibilities, your commitment to further discussion and study is essential. To that end, Willard Metzger, Mennonite Church Canada Executive Director, has developed a series of reflections and questions that follow each chapter and the conclusion.

We invite you to discuss this material within your congregation. Select a format that works for you. Some of you may find Willard Metzger's Study Guide a useful entry point into the material for your congregations and you may wish to begin there. However, we do encourage everyone to

work through all of the material. Your approach might start with small group dialogues and then progress to a larger congregational discussion, or it might involve discussions between several members representing the diversity of your congregation. Whatever format you choose, we ask that you compile your final responses for the BFC Task Force to draw from as they shape the next steps in the process. Please email your responses to [wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca) by February 15, 2014.

When the BFC Task Force receives your responses to the study questions, several more steps are planned. The following schedule is proposed:

1. March, 2014: The BFC Task Force will receive your input and recommend a path to the General Board.
2. July, 2014: The recommendations will be brought to the Assembly for approval.
3. Fall, 2014: A study paper will then be developed and circulated to congregations to assist in the discernment of the approved recommendation(s).
4. February, 2015: The discernment responses will be collected by the BFC Task Force.
5. Spring, 2015: A report will be developed for the General Board.
6. Fall, 2015: Congregations will be asked to respond to the report of our initial discernment.
7. Spring, 2016: These responses will be collected and shared with our congregations.
8. July, 2016: The report, with recommendations, will be processed at the Assembly.

Why such an overview of sexuality in the Bible? Congregational feedback during the last two stages of the BFC process clearly indicated a need to examine sexuality in very broad terms. It told us that our discernment must be guided by an exploration of biblical perspectives on sexuality. The feedback also requested resources that would help to create a focal point within the broad nature of sexuality and the many challenges it presents for us in today's world. These pages comprise one response to those requests.

Sexuality does not stand alone in the Bible. It is entwined with faithfulness as an integral element in God's mission for creation. For that reason, this resource does not focus on any one element of sexuality in the Bible. It does not study specific biblical references to matters such as premarital sex, homosexuality, or other sexual issues. Instead, it attempts to examine the role of sexuality within the larger picture of God's mission. We trust that *Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality* will provide a helpful foundation for ongoing discernment about matters of sexuality.

1 To download the complete package of documents summarizing the process leading to the development of this resource, see

<http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1516>

2 For example, we explore a broad swath of Scripture (Path 5), we see Scripture addressing other parts of Scripture (Path 3, 4), we reference Jesus' use of Scripture (Path 1, 4), we see how Scripture is used for the sake of the vulnerable (Path 12), we see the entire canon of Scripture as instructive for discernment (Path 5, 6), and we have referenced what others have said before us (Path 11). We take seriously being part of God's story (Path 8), and the critical importance both of being and doing (Path 6, 9). We have prayed and delighted in God's word throughout this study (Path 7, 10).

This resource is recommended for study by:

The Being a Faithful Church Task Force of Mennonite Church Canada  
Mennonite Church Canada General Board

November 2013

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## Introduction

Compiling a review of biblical perspectives on human sexuality has been a complex undertaking. Scripture is the fruit of centuries of experience and inspiration, emerging from many viewpoints and addressed by a wide variety of authors and editors. Yet under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, unifying threads become evident in its pages.

This study has reinforced our conviction that Scripture can be trusted to provide wisdom and counsel for the nitty-gritty of our lives—even if that wisdom comes from circumstances, cultures, and historical assumptions that are very different from our own. We present this resource to you with humility, knowing that what it contains should not be considered exhaustive. However, we also trust that it will prove helpful as we strive to grow as a faithfully discerning community of God's people.

In the pages that follow, you will discover the most important thread: *according to biblical perspectives, sexuality does not stand alone.*

Biblical sexuality is intimately connected with God's design for creation. Healthy sexuality and faithful spirituality are so entwined that they both point to the same pillars of faith: committed relationships, interdependent communion, discipleship, and mission—extending God's grace and blessing to the world.

A holistic vision of faithfulness based upon these pillars is key to understanding God's journey with us from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem.

God's people, however, are not in the Garden, nor are we yet in the New City. Most of the Bible reflects life between these horizons—and scriptural perspectives about this between-time are multiple. We attempt to trace some of them and to indicate a few of the evident shifts.

The Bible gives witness to life between the horizons of the Garden and the New City, and invites us to discern our own time. We must look at the values of our culture, the challenges before us, and the spoken and unspoken assumptions that guide our understandings.<sup>3</sup>

A more extensive overview of the link between sexuality and God's design for creation is provided in Chapter One on page 4, and our discoveries are summarized in the conclusion on pages 11.

We offer you this resource to help direct your congregation in reflection, study, and group interaction. We trust that God's wisdom will find ways of encouraging us all, stimulating us to greater faithfulness.

Rudy Baergen  
Robert J. Suderman  
October, 2013

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3 The Appendix on page 12 illustrates one story of assumptions that underlie our understandings.

## Chapter One

### The Link Between Sexuality and Spirituality: Covenantal Relationships

Sex, sexuality and the marriage covenant are not ends in themselves; they are linked to God's profound, loving mission for the world.

From the perspective of Scripture, wholesome sexuality is closely linked to wholesome spirituality, which we understand as our human effort to align ourselves with God's desire for our lives and for creation. Often the same words we associate with healthy "spirituality" also describe healthy "sexuality"—words like wholeness, trust, warmth, reverence, relationship, safety, love, truthfulness, oneness, communion, integrity, spontaneity, vulnerability, gratitude, and the importance of covenant, which binds these ingredients of commitment together.

The close link between spirituality and sexuality in the Bible is illustrated by the way Scripture often entwines two covenantal marriages: the covenant between God and God's people, and the covenant between man and woman. Both are intended to be mutual, reciprocal relationships, but occasionally God is the victimized husband of the unfaithful or adulterous spouse, Israel. In the Book of Revelation, the people of God are the holy and unblemished, adorned bride of Christ.<sup>4</sup> In Ephesians, the relationship between Christ and the church is described as the model relationship for husband and wife.<sup>5</sup>

Why does the Bible use sexuality, and particularly marriage, to illustrate the covenantal commitment between God and God's people?

As strange as it may sound, sex, sexuality and the marriage covenant are not ends in themselves; they are linked to God's profound, loving mission for the world. They are the building blocks used by God to create the world, bless it with goodness, and then re-create and restore it with holiness, reconciliation and *shalom*. They are, in other words, missional.

The close link between spirituality and sexuality shows that healthy sexuality is more than sex. Sexuality is our way of being and relating in the world as male and female. Sexuality is rooted not only in our physical bodies but in our minds, feelings, wills, self-understandings, and our erotic longings. Sexuality embodies our longing to experience wholeness and intimacy. It moves us toward relationship and community, with God and with each other. Fundamentally, sexuality draws us into biblical covenant.

The sexuality metaphor illustrates that the biblical understanding of covenant is far more than a business contract. It is a mutual and intimate relationship between God and God's people. We, and God, yearn for the wholeness and intimacy best expressed through a communal commitment to the purposes of God.

4 Rev 21:2

5 Eph 5:21-33

In this way, God's objectives for covenant are meaningfully expressed through images of sexuality and marriage.

Both covenanted sexuality and covenanted spirituality find their best expression as *agape* love in action. This kind of love—selfless, unconditional, and potentially sacrificial—is offered as a decision rather than pure emotion. Both bind us together with God and with each other through eternal commitment. And both are instruments of God's mission in and for the world.

The story of sexuality/spirituality begins with the Garden of Eden in Genesis, and culminates with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven, adorned for her husband, in Revelation.<sup>6</sup> Both the Garden and the New Jerusalem symbolize harmonious, reciprocal relationships as they are meant to be, with creation, among human beings, and with God. In a sense, they represent the east and the west horizons—the rising and the setting of creation.

However, most Scripture focuses on the realities of life lived between these horizons. While life between is nourished by the ideals of creation, it persistently falls short of them. The biblical image of the city, for example, extends beyond Jerusalem, the new city of peace. It also reaches for the troubled cities of Babel, Sodom, Nineveh, and Babylon. Yet Jerusalem continues to symbolize the city God designed to heal and nourish.<sup>7</sup> As God's people, we are called to be a visible city on the hill.<sup>8</sup> There is a new creation in spite of the old one not living up to its potential.<sup>9</sup>

The delight of healthy sexuality and the pain of spiritual brokenness are experienced and readily understood by all of us. Sexuality offers one of the most profound images we have to contrast these realities with the healthy way God wants all relationships to be.

#### In summary

- *Both sexuality and covenanted spirituality find their best expression as agape love in action.*
- *The story of sexuality/spirituality begins in the Garden of Eden and culminates in the New Jerusalem.*
- *Both the Garden and the New Jerusalem symbolize harmonious, reciprocal relationships as they are meant to be—with creation, among human beings, and with God.*
- *Most Scripture focuses on the realities of broken life between the horizons of the Garden and the New Jerusalem.*

6 Gen 2:8; Rev 21:2, 10

7 Ps 122:6-9

8 Matt 5:14

9 Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17

## Chapter Two

### Perspectives from the Garden of Delight

From the beginning, God focused on relationship, companionship, community, covenantal bonding, and mission.

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind (adam) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."*

*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:26-27).*

What does it mean to say that we are made in God's image? Some scholars point to our rational capacity, others to our moral and spiritual "soul," still others to our stewardship/dominion role, or to the intrinsic value and dignity of human life. However, being created in the image of God also illustrates the significance of relationship. God clearly wants a relationship with us based upon companionship, community, covenant, and mission. Because we are created in God's image, we have been gifted with God's longing and capacity for relationship. God created us to relate—in a human way to God and in a godly way to each other.

Humankind is created in God's image—not alone as individual male or female, but as image bearers together in communion with each other. There is nothing more essential to understanding a biblical perspective on sexuality than this. Sexuality is not necessarily equated with sexual activity but with the goal of community and companionship. Without each other, we incompletely mirror the image of God.

*God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28).*

Not only are male and female created in the image of God, but they are "earth-creatures"<sup>10</sup> called to participate in God's creative act. While procreation is not the only reason for human intimacy, the biblical view of sex and sexuality emphasizes the importance of procreation, children and family. Thus barrenness is the cause for deep sorrow—as experienced by Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. The Psalmist captures the sentiment:

*Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them (Psalm 127:3-5).*

God wills procreation, and human sexuality yearns for it, because it is integral to the plan of God. However, procreation is not designed simply for the sake of having offspring. It is intended to align the realities of creation with the intentions of God, including humankind's call to walk and talk with the Creator.

10 "Earth-creatures" is a literal translation of "adam."

In Genesis, God tells Abraham and Sarah that from them will "come a great nation"; they will be given the gift of descendants so that they will be a continuing blessing to other families of the earth.<sup>11</sup>

Children are a blessing for the *purposes* of blessing. It is through the continuation of blessing—via families—that God's transformation and liberation for the world will come. Here again we see the very close missional link between sexuality and spirituality.

*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good (Genesis 1:31).*

Sexuality is a good gift from God, too. Genesis views sexuality as an integral part of God's good creation. Unlike the Greek perspective which separates body and soul, the Genesis perspective does not compartmentalize the body or give higher status to one over the other. According to the creation account, the physical, sexual body is good—in fact very good. Male and female stand vulnerable before each other, naked and unashamed, without self-consciousness or fear.

The Old Testament Song of Songs delights in the physical pleasures of love. Sexual language teases readers with the possibility of returning to the Garden, to the human state before disobedience.

In this Song, man and woman relate to one another once again with equality, "head over heels" in their love for each other. The natural world around them rejoices in their mutual love.<sup>12</sup> The lovers' Garden becomes the "the Garden of delight that Eden was meant to be, the place where life may be lived fully in the presence of God."<sup>13</sup>

The fact that there is no overt reference to God in this love poetry has led some to believe it is purely secular. Yet interpretations throughout the centuries view it as a theological metaphor idealizing God's love for Israel, or Christ's love for the church, or even God's intimate connection with the individual human soul.

Human love, "the desire for intimate, harmonious, enduring relationship with the other,"<sup>14</sup> is a metaphor for God's sacred love. Surely, this is why the Song of Songs has found a place in Jewish and Christian Scriptures and tradition.

*Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."*

*So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.*

11 Gen 12:1-3

12 Song of Sol 2:8-17

13 Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion, 2000, p. 232.

14 *ibid.*, p. 235

*Then the man said,*

*This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken.*

*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to  
his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife  
were both naked, and were not ashamed  
(Genesis 2: 18, 21-25).*

The only time that we find the words “it is not good” in the early chapters of Genesis is when God observes that the male is alone. His loneliness cannot be satisfied by God or by any other living creature.

The helper whom God creates is a suitable, bonding companion, not one of subordination but of mutuality.<sup>15</sup> With God’s focus on relationship, companionship, community, and covenantal bonding, the helper God creates is neither inferior nor superior, but someone with whom man can build human community. Until woman is created, he is incomplete and alone. Because they are of the same origin, man does not exercise authority over woman by naming her as he does the other creatures. She is simply referred to as “woman”, and the two become one flesh. Only when they must leave the Garden does he name the woman “Eve.”<sup>16</sup>

The man declares that woman is “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,”<sup>17</sup> describing an undivided relationship, like Israel’s covenant relationship with God. In their devotion to each other, man and woman reflect more of what they already are: *one flesh*.

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15 In Ex 18:4 and Ps 30:10; 54:4 the word “helper” is also used of God, once more illustrating the reciprocity of relationship.

16 Gen 3:20

17 Gen 2:23

The male leaves his family and clings to his wife, a term that is also used to speak of Israel’s faithfulness in her covenant with God.<sup>18</sup> Rabbinic tradition understands *becoming one flesh* in at least three ways:

- Because woman is created from man’s side, man is incomplete without her and she is incomplete without him. They are one flesh.
- Together, man and woman continue to create, and the resulting child becomes the seamless melding of the two into one flesh.
- Through the sexual intimacy that makes offspring possible, man and woman become one flesh.

In each of the interpretations above, the covenantal clinging of man and woman involves participating in God’s creative plan, and mirrors God’s own covenant with humans.

### **In summary**

- *As beings created in the image of God, man and woman were created to relate—in a human way to God and in a godly way to each other.*
- *Procreation is not simply for the sake of having offspring. As in the promise to Abraham and Sarah, descendants are to continue God’s creative purposes in the world and bring God’s blessing to other families of the earth.*
- *Because of God’s focus on relationship, companionship, community, and covenantal bonding, the helper is neither inferior nor superior, but someone with whom man can build human community.*
- *When man declares that woman is “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,” he is describing an undivided, reciprocal relationship, like Israel’s covenant relationship with God.*

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18 Deut 11:22; 30:20; Josh 22:5

## Chapter Three

### Broken Links

Scripture focuses on the realities of life lived between horizons. The brokenness of human relationships with the one and only God also shatters the proper relationship between sexuality and spirituality.

*Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." (Genesis 3:7-10)*

When Eve and Adam disobey God, their eyes open. They realize that they are naked. They grow fearful of walking and talking with their Maker. As a result, they must leave the Garden. Thus begins the long trek toward the other horizon, the New Jerusalem—the City of Peace.

Between horizons, spirituality and sexuality are entwined in their brokenness. Our own experience in church and society substantiates this. What characterizes this broken reality? Discord and blaming. Now, while still good, sexuality will also bear the pain of procreation through childbirth for the female, and inequality between husband and wife. The male struggles in his relationship with the soil. It yields thorns and thistles, and eventually reclaims him.<sup>19</sup>

The artificial separation of what belongs together results in brokenness in human relationships and daily toil.

Sexuality is fraught with new realities between horizons. Dominance and betrayal, control and manipulation, and power and violence appear. Abraham has sex with Sarai's servant. Polygamy becomes common. When the men of Sodom attempt to rape their male guests, Lot offers his two daughters to them instead. King David abuses his power by having sex with Uriah's wife, and then has Uriah killed. David's son, Amnon, rapes his own half-sister, Tamar, and then turns her away, desolate. In revenge, Tamar's brother, Absalom, kills Amnon. And the sordid story goes on.

Sexuality and spirituality are unmoored from God's purposes. The prophets use graphic sexual imagery to underscore this brokenness.<sup>20</sup> When Israel is enticed away from the one and only God by the idols of Canaan—who often are fertility gods—the prophets describe the idolatrous relationship as prostitution. In fact, Israel's sexuality is so broken that even the prophet's favourable metaphor for God is one of the noble, grieving bridegroom—but in these prophetic passages, that image carries within it the abhorrent dimensions of jealousy, control, spouse starvation, humiliation, violence and a cycle of abuse. Even the prophet's metaphor for God, drawn from the sexuality of the day, reflects Israel's brokenness.<sup>21</sup>

The New Testament further develops the prophetic image of broken sexuality. With the description of the whore in the Book of Revelation,<sup>22</sup> sexuality is completely severed from its intended spiritual purpose. Broken sexuality becomes "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations."<sup>23</sup> This time the utter brokenness of sexuality and spirituality is not used to describe the church, but the state—likely a reference to the persecuting Roman Empire. The whore's deviance goes far beyond her own activity. She is the one "with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk."<sup>24</sup>

The writer of the apocalypse uses sexual imagery to forcefully describe the rupture of God's intentions through the actions of nations.

The misuse and abuse of God's intentions for sexuality are serious matters for the "body" of the individual and the "Body" of God's people. The two cannot—or at least should not—be separated. The Apostle Paul states:

*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Corinthians 6:15-19).*

Paul's expression, "you are not your own," speaks to the unity God intends between sexuality and spirituality, and emphasizes the seriousness of breaking that union.

New Testament writers are aware that human sexuality has broken away from faithful spirituality in this time between horizons. Sexual immorality is often included in their lists of "evil intentions" that come "out of the heart."<sup>25</sup>

#### In summary

- *When Eve and Adam disobey God, they become aware of their nakedness and fearful of their Maker. They are cast out of the Garden, the place where sexuality and spirituality are entwined as God intended. They must live between horizons as they trek toward the New Jerusalem.*
- *Sexuality is fraught with new realities on this journey. Dominance and betrayal, control and manipulation, and power and violence prevail.*
- *The prophetic image of broken sexuality is potently described in the Book of Revelation with the description of the whore. Sexuality is completely severed from its intended spiritual purpose, and unmoored from its identity with God.*

19 Gen 3:19

20 Hos 2; Jer 3:12-15

21 Ezek 16

22 Rev 17:1-16; 19:2

23 Rev 17:5

24 Rev 17:2

25 Matt 15:19. See also Mark 7:21; I Cor 5; Gal 5:19-21; Rom 1:24-32

## Chapter Four

### Redesigning the Garden as We Journey Toward the New City

Scripture does not give up hope for healthy spirituality and sexuality. There are many efforts to re-design and re-fashion an understanding of God's will for creation and God's people, according to the time and circumstances in which they find themselves.

While God's people live between horizons, Scripture focuses on maintaining as much resemblance to God's ideal as possible, and restoring or limiting broken realities wherever practical. These dynamic and diverse efforts are directed toward redesigning and refashioning understandings of God's will for people and creation in the midst of particular circumstances, times, and needs. Between horizons, Scripture deals with pastoral concerns and imperfections of the human condition, including matters that we don't always understand. At the same time, they point toward God's larger ideal and purpose.

God addresses these broken realities with a strategy that highlights both the origin and destiny of creation. God does not want to give up on sexuality at its best, designed for the well-being of creation. Nor does God want to accept practices of sexual abuse that are generated as people live in the broken world.

#### Perspectives from the Old Testament

The Old Testament offers many attempts to control and organize the brokenness of life. It is intended to counter the degradation resulting from a broken sexuality and spirituality, an understanding that is also addressed in the New Testament.<sup>26</sup>

For example, when women became the property of their husbands rather than their helpers, the Law of Moses added protection for women through divorce procedures.<sup>27</sup> While a man is prohibited from having sex with another man's wife—which would rupture the marriage covenant—he is obligated to impregnate the widow of his deceased brother to ensure continuation of the family line as an instrument of blessing for the world.<sup>28</sup> Many sexual expressions violate the yearned-for unity of healthy sexuality and spirituality. As a result, they are disallowed by law and result in severe punishment.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the brokenness of sexuality and spirituality, Old Testament prophets continue to use metaphors of courtship and marriage to describe the covenant that God desires with Israel. God is faithful to Israel and God redeems Israel, the cast-off wife.<sup>30</sup> "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."<sup>31</sup> God's covenant with Israel, says Hosea, is like a loving marriage that reflects both the Garden of Delight full of animals, birds, and creeping things, and the need for a City of Peace—a place of safety where the bow, sword, and war are abolished:

*I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD (Hosea 2:18-19).*

God is portrayed as a lover and husband infatuated with Israel. When Israel is unfaithful, God is heart-broken and eagerly awaits reconciliation.<sup>32</sup> God invites Israel, the bride, back into covenant.

Deuteronomy expressly forbids intermarriage with foreigners and their inclusion in the Assembly of the Lord.<sup>33</sup> But in Isaiah, we find a surprisingly pastoral response to the law of the foreigner:

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 56:3-5).*

With these words, Deuteronomic laws for both the eunuch and the foreigner are inverted. These "outsiders" no longer need to remain separated from God's people. God's original and final intent for all people is restored; "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."<sup>34</sup> This is an understanding that Jesus also demonstrates when he cleanses the temple.<sup>35</sup>

The Book of Ruth offers another picture of redesigning and restoring God's purposes. In an effort to maintain Israel's covenant as a chosen people, the Law clearly prohibits marriage between Israelites and foreigners.<sup>36</sup> Ezra and Nehemiah even call for a mass divorce from foreign wives,<sup>37</sup> but the book of Ruth offers a different response.<sup>38</sup> In order to fulfill the law of the deceased brother,<sup>39</sup> Boaz takes Ruth, the Moabite and foreign daughter-in-law of Naomi, as his wife. The stated purpose is to make sure that "the dead may not be cut off from his kindred."<sup>40</sup> But in doing so, Boaz violates the law of the foreigner that prohibits a Moabite from entering the assembly of the Lord.<sup>41</sup> Ironically, Ruth, the forbidden Moabite, becomes the model Israelite. The offspring of Boaz and Ruth, Obed, becomes the grandfather of King David.<sup>42</sup>

26 1 Tim 1:8-11

27 Deut 22:19, 29

28 Deut 25:5-6

29 Lev 18; 20:10-21; 21:1-9

30 Isa 54:6

31 Isa 62:5

32 Jer 3:12-15

33 Deut 7:1-7; 23:3

34 Isa 56:8

35 Mark 11:17

36 Deut 7:2-6; 23:3

37 Ezra 9-10, Neh. 13

38 Ruth 4:10-15

39 Deut 25:6

40 Ruth 4:10

41 Deut 23:3

42 Ruth 4:17-22



God continues to work through us despite our brokenness.

Other disadvantaged women contribute to this legacy. Consider Rachel, Leah, and their maids, who “together built up the house of Israel.”<sup>43</sup> Each of these women are sexual partners of Jacob, who then becomes the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel. Then there is Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, who marries two of Judah’s sons sequentially, and when they each die she bears twins from Judah, her farther-in-law, through an act of prostitution.<sup>44</sup>

Fast-forward to the New Testament and Matthew’s Gospel, and these colourful ancestors of Jesus, the Messiah, are listed alongside those who would be deemed more “righteous.” Jacob is named as father of Judah. Judah is cited as father to the twins Perez and Zerah by Tamar, who had married two of Judah’s sons. The line is then traced via Perez, whose line directly leads to Boaz. Boaz is listed as the son of Rahab the prostitute and the father of Obed, via Ruth the Moabite foreigner. The blood-line ends with “Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”<sup>45</sup>

In the realities of their circumstances, people who do not reflect God’s ideal are instrumental in the birth of the Messiah. God’s purposes are accomplished in strange and surprising ways.

### Perspectives from the New Testament

Hope for creation’s restoration continues in the New Testament. Throughout its pages, sexuality and spirituality are interrelated. The story of Jesus and his early followers unfolds within the framework of a new creation that comes in Christ:

*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*  
(II Corinthians 5:17).

### Jesus’ views on sexuality and covenant

The Word becomes flesh in the man Jesus, who remains single. We know nothing of Jesus’ relationship to his earthly father, but his relationship with his mother and siblings seems tense at times.<sup>46</sup> He uses the intimate term “Abba”—father—for God, and the Gospels call Jesus God’s Son. Jesus’ innermost circle of disciples is male, but he has close friendships with women. This is against social norms of the time and sometimes of shock to the Pharisees. He has women followers, too.<sup>47</sup> Jesus cares for children and speaks sharply against those who harm them. His perspective of masculinity does not demand violent resistance to the Romans. Instead, he allows himself to be stripped and shamefully crucified.

Jesus rarely speaks directly to issues of sexuality. His parables and teachings focus primarily on the abuse of wealth and power. His greatest priority is his spiritual connection with God and what God wishes to do in the world. Even so, Jesus ties sexual lust to the commandment against adultery. He stands up for a woman caught in the act of adultery. He strengthens the protection of vulnerable women when he speaks out against divorce more emphatically than do some of his contemporary rabbis.

When the Pharisees question Jesus about the Law of Moses, where divorce is permitted under some circumstances, Jesus points beyond that

law and back to the Garden. He reminds the Pharisees of the male-female image as one flesh and about man clinging to his wife.<sup>48</sup> This, for Jesus, is the hope that informs us. He states that a divorced man who takes another woman for his wife becomes an adulterer, yet he makes an exception to that rule in the case of unchastity.<sup>49</sup> This is clearly an acknowledgment that we live between horizons.

Jesus carefully upholds God’s ideal while recognizing the context in which people find themselves. He allows for an exception and redesigns the Garden in a way that leads us toward the New City. Jesus indicates that becoming eunuchs for the kingdom is preferable to insisting that we need to be fruitful and multiply. He weighs what appear to be contrasting values, and decides to emphasize one value over the other. And he adds: “Let anyone accept this who can.”<sup>50</sup>

The biological family and traditional assumptions of sexuality take second place to the proclamation of the coming kingdom where a new family is being created. In this family, God is parent, Jesus is Son, and those who follow him are brothers and sisters in Christ.

When a woman from the crowd shouts out to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” Jesus replies, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”<sup>51</sup> Sexuality must be in service of spirituality. It is not because of biological organs, motherhood, marriage, procreation, or family heritage that one gains the blessing of God, but through obedience to God.

By placing everything under the scrutiny of godly obedience, Jesus challenges the fabric of family in his society:

*Let the dead bury the dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God* (Luke 9:60).

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple* (Luke 14:26).

The New Testament proclaims that God becomes flesh and dwells among humanity. And just as we find God creating human sexuality at the beginning of the story in the Garden, so we find Jesus’ sexuality remains embodied at his resurrection. His disciples touch him, eat with him, and converse with him. The risen Jesus remains recognizable as the sexual being that they knew.

Why did Jesus remain embodied as male? This is an important mystery to ponder. While we tend to de-sexualize any post-resurrection life—suggesting that sexuality is not good and belongs in the impure realm—the risen Christ is embodied as a sexual being. This underscores the importance of holding body and spirit—sexuality and spirituality—in unity. It is a clear reminder that God created sexuality for good.

### Paul and the image of marriage

Like Jesus, the Apostle Paul lives as a single male. Paul discourages marriage because “the appointed time has grown short,”<sup>52</sup> but deems it necessary in the face of uncontrollable passions.<sup>53</sup> For the married

43 Ruth 4:11

44 Gen 38:24

45 Matt 1:1-16

46 Mark 3:31-35

47 Luke 8:2-3

48 Matt 19:1-12

49 From the Greek word “porneia”

50 Matt 19:12

51 Luke 11: 27-28

52 I Cor 7:29

53 I Cor 7:36

couple, Paul encourages the mutuality in conjugal relations.<sup>54</sup> His views regarding the role of women in the community and the ministry of the church seem diverse. At times he admonishes women to be silent in church, yet women are key leaders in his ministry. However, Paul goes beyond Jesus and allows for separation, particularly when an unbeliever does not wish to remain married.<sup>55</sup> Still, he seems to attribute saving value to the marriage union, even when it is with an unbeliever. The overriding concern is that “God has called us to peace.”<sup>56</sup> Paul understands that in some mysterious way, an unbelieving spouse is made holy through the believing one.<sup>57</sup>

The Letter to the Ephesians uses Christ’s relationship with the Church as a model for how husband and wife should relate to each other.<sup>58</sup> Sexuality and spirituality come together once more to help us visualize God’s intention, just as they did through the prophets in the Old Testament. The relationship of husband and wife is one of mutual subordination, respect, love, and sacrifice, even to the point of death. It also carries a deeper covenantal significance—we are all of one body as the church. The capacity of the husband to love his wife as Christ loved the church, and the wife to respect her husband, is ultimately described as a “great mystery.”<sup>59</sup> It symbolizes the relationship between Christ and the church,<sup>60</sup> but in the process the church is encouraged to reflect on *her* relationship to *her* “husband.”

The image of marriage is clearly tied to the description of creation’s final reconciliation. The church, portrayed as the holy city—the New Jerusalem—is like a “bride adorned for her husband.”<sup>61</sup> The church is the “bride of the Lamb,”<sup>62</sup> getting ready for the “marriage of the Lamb.”<sup>63</sup> There seems to be no better image than marriage to describe God’s desire for the future of the church and the world.

### ***Nothing is impossible with God***

We do not know anything about the marital status of the twelve apostles, other than for Peter, but Jesus and Paul both remained single. As key figures of the New Testament, their example of singleness needs further comment.

The emphasis on exercising maleness in a way that does not require a man to “cling to his wife” or to be “fruitful and multiply” is noteworthy. This seems to be one of the ways in which the New Testament actually redesigns rather than restores the Garden. It draws attention to elements such as singleness and celibacy that are missing in the Genesis accounts. It replaces the importance of procreation with the need for faithfulness and commitment to God’s mission in the world. This is a startling shift in understanding the role of sexuality in God’s plan.

While the Garden tips the scales toward offspring, the New Testament tips the scales toward focused commitment to God’s Kingdom. In

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54 1 Cor 7:1-5  
55 1 Cor 7:10-16  
56 1 Cor 7:15  
57 1 Cor 7:14  
58 Eph 5:21-33  
59 Eph 5:32  
60 Eph 5:32  
61 Rev 21:2  
62 Rev 21:9  
63 Rev 19:7

either case, male and female sexuality remain. But the option of singleness and celibacy is assumed to be acceptable, even preferred and necessary at times.

With his special birth, Jesus joins a long list of significant biblical characters born through God’s intervention in the normal processes of human procreation—Isaac from elderly, barren Sarah; Jacob and Esau from barren Rebekah; Reuben and his brothers from Leah because she is not loved; Joseph to barren Rachel, to take away her reproach; Samuel to miserable Hannah whose womb had been mysteriously closed by God;<sup>64</sup> and John the Baptist to elderly, barren Elizabeth “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”<sup>65</sup> The Psalmist celebrates this surprising power of God: “He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!”<sup>66</sup>

After the angel Gabriel announces the news of pending miraculous births to Elizabeth and Mary, he concludes by stating that “nothing will be impossible with God.”<sup>67</sup> The birth of the Messiah to the virgin, single Mary is the culmination of God’s special blessing on marginalized women of the biblical story in order to bring about God’s purposes. In each case, God reaches out to a vulnerable woman and gives to her a significant place in the story of God’s people.

Jesus’ virgin birth brings continuity to the earlier biblical story of special births, but it also brings discontinuity. This special birth takes place apart from the human sexual act and apart from the male. Thus in the end, God’s salvation plan does not depend on the human procreation initiated in the Garden. The virgin birth is one more example of how God can use—or not use—human sexuality to fulfill God’s mission for humanity on earth.

From the virginal womb of unmarried Mary, God begins the new creation in Christ.

### **In summary**

- *The Old Testament offers many attempts to control and organize the brokenness of life between horizons.*
- *Even when the law is broken, God finds ways to use offenders for good purpose. This is apparent through the human lineage of Jesus, which contains murderers and adulterers.*
- *While the Garden tips the scales toward offspring, the New Testament tips the scales toward focused commitment to God’s Kingdom.*
- *The virgin birth is one more example of how God can use—or not use—human sexuality to fulfill God’s mission for humanity on earth.*
- *Christ’s relationship with the Church serves as a model for how husband and wife should relate to each other.*
- *There seems to be no better image than marriage to describe God’s desire for the future of the church and the world.*

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64 1 Sam 1:5  
65 Luke 1:17  
66 Psalm 113:9  
67 Luke 1:37

## Conclusion

Although it is clear that we cannot fully do justice to biblical perspectives on sexuality in a short study, it is time to take stock of the rich discoveries we have made.

We have seen a somewhat bewildering array of stories, experiences, and perspectives in terms of the relationship between sexuality and faithfulness. We have witnessed soaring hopes in the Garden, and the multiple and miserable ways those hopes were betrayed. We have also witnessed God's tenacious patience to move God's mission forward and through the imperfect world between the horizons of the Garden and the New Jerusalem.

God has not been foiled by rape, prostitution, adultery, and fornication. God has not been paralysed by patriarchal abuse, the slavery of women, or the injustice and violence of social systems. Instead, God used a surprising menu of initiatives such as:

- transforming barrenness and old age into fertility;
- incorporating foreigners and maids as key contributors to the lineage of God's people;
- encouraging singleness and eunuchs in the development of the Kingdom; and
- engaging celibacy and virginity.

All of these events occurred to advance God's mission of reconciling creation. This underscores the key affirmation: when all is said and done, the primary focus of sexuality is not simply ethical, it is theological. God is good. God is faithful. God's covenant with humanity will not be thwarted. God, and only God, is God.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul summarizes this best by indicating that previous critical categories, including maleness and femaleness, are reshaped through Christ Jesus in favour of the overarching hope of God's promise:

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.* (Galatians 3:28-29).

### **Some observations as we go forward**

We conclude by drawing attention to some things in Scripture that are especially striking from our perspectives today. Consider:

- the entwining of sexuality with spiritual faithfulness;

- the understanding of sexuality in covenantal terms as a foundation for a covenantal people;
- the close tie between sexuality and God's missional purpose in the world;
- the New Testament's shift away from procreation to bring about God's purposes;
- the shifting interpretation and practice of "law" in terms of the inclusion and exclusion of foreigners in the people of covenant;
- the option of singleness and virginity as legitimate and even necessary parts of sexuality;
- the equality of male and female "in Christ," just as Jews and Gentiles are equal "in Christ";
- the persistent effort to use marriage, sexuality, and sex as images to understand God's covenantal purposes for people-hood; and
- the inclusion of inappropriate sexual behaviours such as prostitution and rape in the Messiah's ancestry.

This review helps us to realize that as a church and as a society, we live between the horizons of the Garden of Delight and the City of Peace. Even at their best, our present realities rarely reflect biblical preferences. This is as true about sexuality within our marriages as it is about sexuality beyond them. Paul's insight that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"<sup>68</sup> certainly rings true when we try to measure our own expressions of sexuality in light of God's design.

It is helpful to note how much of the Bible is dedicated to pastoral concerns raised by living between horizons, always with the hope of moving toward the New City. Laws, lessons, images, and actions struggle to maintain some resemblance to the Garden in the realities of the time between. Different voices and diverse strategies unite in the struggle for faithfulness.

Biblical sexuality is intimately entwined with spirituality and God's design for creation, as we witnessed in the Garden and yearn for in the New City. Restoration and redesign are clearly evident in biblical understandings and practices. As we live between horizons, we can be assured that God will continue to work in unexpected ways, transforming apparent impossibilities into key possibilities for mission and ultimately, restoration.

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68 Rom 3:23

## Appendix

### The Power of Context

My wife, Irene, and I (Robert J. Suderman) visited an Anabaptist pastor and his wife in east-central India. We met their recently-married son, in his late twenties, and his young wife, who shared their home.

The young couple's marriage had been arranged by their respective parents, especially by the fathers. We talked about how their system works, and how they feel about it.

The son spoke enthusiastically. "There is no one else in the world that knows me as well as my father, so when it came time to look for a wife, I fully trusted that he would choose one who would match who I am. I had no doubt about his judgment."

The young woman expressed similar thoughts, indicating how good and secure she felt knowing that her parents were looking out for her welfare, and that they would never agree to a marriage unless they felt it was the very best for her.

We delicately approached the issue of "love" and the role it plays in choosing a marriage partner. They all agreed that the most important priorities for both parties are commitment to each other, family support, and the union's financial sustainability.

"Now that we are married," they said, "we are learning to love each other, a little more each day. It's a process." And they looked at each other with admiration and genuine trust.

They went on to describe the courting process. After being informed of the choice made, they were introduced and had several months to get to know each other. They also had the opportunity to say "no" to the choice if it seemed to be a mismatch. The well-regulated pre-marriage process lasted about six months and then the marriage was celebrated.

Our western/Canadian values were profoundly challenged—even shaken—by this table conversation. Although we are brothers and sisters in Christ, our assumptions vary dramatically:

- We assume that marriage is between two people; they assume it is between two families.
- We assume individual discernment is best in choosing a partner; they assume that marriage is too important to leave to the fleeting desires of the young. Older, wiser, broader discernment is needed.
- We assume that love is the foundation of marriage; they assume that communal commitment and covenant is the foundation. Love will follow later.
- We assume that attraction, including sexual attraction, is a prerequisite; they assume that attraction will be earned and will grow slowly with time.
- We assume that choosing marriage is a right of the individual; they assume that choosing marriage is a communal responsibility. The community can say "no" even though the individual says "yes."
- We assume that procreation is a free choice of the couple; they assume that bearing children in marriage is a responsibility for the survival of the family.

Between the Garden and the New City, biblical cultures do not measure up to God's design. They are not uniform in their understandings of sexuality or in their approaches to faithfulness. We find this same discord in today's cultures as we continue to live between horizons. Legal, political, medical and social perspectives, and attitudes toward sexuality, marriage, and gender, are in dramatic flux.

It takes a concerted effort for us to understand and appreciate each other. It is difficult to accept the assumed values of another culture and context.

This experience is instructive for the task before us. As we explore sexuality between the horizons, we should not be surprised if we encounter other perspectives that challenge our deeply held preferences. Nor should we be surprised by the variations we see in the diverse landscape of Scripture itself.

## Study Guide

**Willard Metzger, Executive Director**  
**Mennonite Church Canada**

### **Introduction**

On behalf of the Being a Faithful Church (BFC) Task Force, I want to thank you for participating in the BFC process, an important time of discernment for Mennonite Church Canada. We are delighted to know that many congregations have found this process helpful for stimulating new and fresh discussions. We are grateful for the Holy Spirit at work among us as we tackle challenging topics.

There are four lessons in this study. Each one provides a few insights to provoke further thought, refers to specific pages within this document that you may wish to review, and offers questions to generate discussion. The conversations you have about this material are essential to the BFC process. The summary comments you provide about your discussions will shape the next steps.

For your discussions, select a format that works for your congregation. You may wish to begin with several small groups and then gather as a larger group to share what you have learned. Alternatively, you might want to take this study to a specific group of people chosen to represent the diversity of your congregation. Whatever format you select, we ask that you compile all of your responses to the questions in this study and send them to the BFC Task Force.

Please email your responses to [wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca) by February 15, 2014.

Thank you for your thoughtful, faith-filled commitment to this important season of discernment.

### **Notes**

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# Lesson One

## Imperfect Sexuality

The first chapter of *Between Horizons*<sup>69</sup> explores how sexuality and spirituality are linked. Both are a manifestation of God’s image. They reflect God’s intimate love, which is most fully expressed through covenanted relationships.

In Chapter Two,<sup>70</sup> we look at what it means to be created in God’s image. God longs for relationship. Because we are made in God’s image, humanity also longs for relationship. We function best in relationship and we reflect God most thoroughly in relationship.

The Bible refers repeatedly to two covenantal relationships or marriages. We read of the physical marriage between man and woman, and the spiritual one between God and Israel, or Christ and the Church. Humankind and God come together as one in covenantal relationships. Spirituality and sexuality are entwined in a singular reflection and expression of God’s creative intent. That intent, or mission, is based upon relationships. God created the world *in* goodness and *for* goodness. We are to be a blessing to God, to each other, and to the entire created world.

Sexuality is not often thought about in this way. It is usually viewed from an individual perspective. It is considered to be personal and private. But *Between Horizons* suggests that the Bible considers both spirituality and sexuality to be “instruments of God’s mission in and for the world.”<sup>71</sup>

How can this be?

Sexuality was designed in part for procreation to extend God’s mission and grace across generations, but it represents much more. The ultimate goal of sexuality is to solidify community and companionship, and the sense of belonging to one another. Man was created from the earth by God, and woman was created of man by God, for an equal and reciprocal relationship.

- 1. Sexuality is one way to understand God’s intention for covenant. What other characteristics of God can we understand through our sexuality?

In Chapter Three, *Broken Links*, we find that the disobedience of Adam and Eve shattered the link between sexuality and spirituality.<sup>72</sup> Sexuality—along with the rest of life—no longer fully reflects the original intent of God. This is a sobering concept worth repeating: *no sexual relationship fully reflects the will of God.*

- 2. *Between Horizons* provides Biblical examples of how sin has influenced sexuality with “dominance and betrayal, control and manipulation, and power and violence.”<sup>73</sup> As Christians, we may be more aware of these realities than some people are. We can then more easily reject them. However, other subtle aspects of imperfection may still remain in our experience of sexuality. Selfishness instead of mutual satisfaction, fear and insecurity may be some examples. What other imperfections can you think of?
- 3. Sexuality within the original created order was very good. It was experienced without self-consciousness and without fear.<sup>74</sup> Adam and Eve were not aware of their nakedness and they did not experience shame until the regrettable act of disobedience in the Garden. How can we still see evidence of that shame and self-consciousness in the world today?
- 4. The example of Jesus’ ancestry and teaching in Chapter Four<sup>75</sup> shows us the unexpected ways that God is able to work with humanity’s imperfect sexuality to further God’s mission in the world. What do we learn about God’s character in this?
- 5. As a national church family, what ideas are important to consider about our understanding the imperfections of sexuality?

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69 See page 4  
70 See page 5.  
71 See page 4.

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72 See page 7.  
73 See page 7.  
74 See page 5.  
75 See page 9

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## Lesson Two

### Private Ownership

The paper provides an interesting case study in the Appendix.<sup>76</sup> It compares typical Canadian perspectives of marriage and family to those of another culture in east-central India. While we assume that marriage is between two people, they assume it is between two families. While we take for granted that it is the decision of the couple to marry and have children, they assume it is important for wider discernment about marriage, and that children are essential for the survival of the family.

1. What characteristics of this story are difficult to embrace and celebrate?

Both Paul and Jesus point to the potential negative consequences associated with the idea of private ownership. Paul considers the individual to belong to God and the Body of Christ. He states: “you are not your own.”<sup>77</sup> Because our bodies are God’s temple, he implies that impure sexual behaviour is an affront to God and impacts the larger community as a whole. We must consider more than our own self-interests.

The authors of *Between Horizons* state that “Jesus rarely speaks directly to issues of sexuality. His parables and teachings focus primarily on the abuse of wealth and power.”<sup>78</sup> This observation has profound implications about the way we look at ownership and sexuality. Wealth and power are not intended for the benefit of the individual. They are

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76 See page 12.

77 See page 7; 1 Cor 6:19

78 See page 9; Mark 11:17.

intended to benefit the whole of society including the disadvantaged and downtrodden. However, those who possess the advantage sometimes experience a distorted understanding of what rightfully belongs to them. Power and abuse were prominent players in the Old Testament in many ways, including issues of sexuality.

Both Jesus and Paul tell us that there is a greater opportunity to disregard God when people assume a distorted view of ownership.

Without being drawn into deviant examples of group sex and abuse, these concepts invite us to think about how we might view sexuality from a more wholesome and natural perspective.

2. Consider the story you read in the Appendix, and the cautionary messages of Jesus and Paul. How might sexuality be expressed differently between two world views—one dominated by the concept of private ownership, and the other governed by the concept of corporate benefit?
3. What prevents us from applying corporate benefit to our understanding of sexuality as we find in the views expressed in the Appendix?
4. Is it necessary to have a sense of private claim or ownership regarding sexuality in order to find enjoyment and/or fulfillment?
5. As a national church family, what ideas are important to consider about private ownership and our understanding of sexuality?

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## Lesson Four

### Asking the Right Question

This paper gathers biblical perspectives on sexuality from Genesis through Revelation. It examines the role of sexuality within the bigger picture of God's mission. We see that most biblical attention is given to life between the horizons of the Garden and the New City. Life between horizons does not measure up to God's ideal. Biblical cultures express many different understandings of sexuality. Culturally based attempts to respond faithfully to questions of sexuality also vary.

In the same way, today's society does not necessarily align with God's intentions for faithfulness. We have a wide range of ideas about what faithfulness means. Legal, political, medical and social perspectives and attitudes on sexuality, marriage and gender are in dramatic flux.

To shape our responses to this range of thought and experience, we have several factors to consider. How important is it that our church:

1. foster a close relationship between sexuality and spirituality;
2. connect sexuality, sex, and marriage to a biblical view of covenant;
3. connect sex with marriage and procreation, and procreation with marriage;
4. understand sexuality and procreation through a sense of mission and blessing to others;
5. understand singleness and celibacy as spiritual gifts for ministry; and
6. understand marriage to reflect the pillars of relationship, community, covenant, and mission?

When the Bible describes God's redemptive activity among broken humans, it reflects God's infinite capacity for grace. It is important to remember this as we move forward. God does not give up on the original intentions for creation, humanity and sexuality. God finds ways to speak to us within our wounded condition, and to lead us toward complete restoration in the New Jerusalem.

Now that we have explored biblical perspectives of sexuality in broader terms, it is time to narrow the scope. Your feedback has told us that it is time to consider how we can faithfully respond to same-sex attraction and relationships. This question stirs a variety of powerful, deeply-held responses. Therefore, it is a delicate one. We must carefully identify the most effective question to be discerned. Your responses to our previous

papers have provided a range of potential questions.

- Does our sexual orientation determine our faith in God?
- Is God's gift of sexuality granted to heterosexual couples only?
- Must our understanding of same-sex marriage determine whether or not we accept Christians in committed same-sex relationships as members of our churches?
- Should we bless same-sex marriages?
- What is the approach the church should take that would make Jesus happy?
- Are same-sex relations sin?

We invite you to also consider:

- Which of these questions do you think articulate the next step of discernment?
- Would you suggest different or additional questions?
- Are there any additional comments you would like to feed into the process?

### Moving forward

Thank you for grappling with *Between Horizons* and for considering the questions within this study guide. The BFC Task Force understands that your discussions may not be easy. Divergent views will appear. But we want to hear from all of you. We depend upon your responses to shape the way forward.

Again, we remind you to share your responses to all four lessons of this study guide with the BFC Task Force. Please email them to [wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca) by February 15, 2014.

May God continue to bless this process. May God's wisdom guide us and give us hope as we attempt to find our way to the wholesome, covenantal relationships God desires for us and with us.

*See page 2 of BFC 5 for a proposed schedule for moving forward with the BFC Process.*

### Notes

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