

**First Mennonite Church, Kitchener Ontario**  
**Adult Sunday School Class Thoughts in response to**  
**Being a Faithful Church 5, Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality**

This conversation took place during an adult Sunday School class over the course of four Sunday mornings in February and March, 2014. Approximate attendance included about 25 adults out of a congregation of about 160 people in attendance at Sunday morning worship. The class consisted of a strong preponderance of older adults and a sprinkling of younger adults. These thoughts do not represent consensus among us, but a summary of the ideas that were discussed. The last page of questions for the next stage of this conversation was circulated as part of class discussion for the last 2 meetings, but no one picked up on those questions, and with time constraints we did not directly discuss them.

1. Definition of sexuality

- We found unclear and shifting definitions of sexuality in the materials, especially between the study guide and the content. Some dictionary and on-line definitions focused solely on the physicality of sexuality, although we identified sexuality as having an emotional component as well.
- Sometimes the materials seemed to equate sexuality with human-ness, and we do not see them as identical, although sexuality is part of the essence of being human.
- Sometimes the materials used a lot of concepts to describe healthy sexuality that de-emphasized the physicality of sexuality, and sexuality seemed to become platonic.
- We understand sexuality as an important part of our identity and our human-ness, and that sexuality includes both physical and emotional components.
- We note that the material tends toward the use of binaries, of either/or concepts, such as “married/not married” or “covenantal relationship/not covenantal relationship.” We think it important to think about ranges of activity with two ends and a lot of possibilities in between, instead of just the two ends.
- While we agree that procreation is linked to sexuality, we recognize that in biblical times the emphasis on procreation was linked to the preservation of the male name into eternity, it was a means of assuring eternal life. That same emphasis or rationale for procreation is not part of our context today.

2. Sexuality is good

- Sexuality is beautiful; we are impressed with the beauty of the physical body.
- Sexuality is a core part of our identity and relationships.
- There is an energizing quality of complementarity in male/female relationships; God’s created diversity enriches life, our relationships and our communities.
- Sexuality is part of God’s creation and is good.

3. Sexuality is broken

- Violence, including physical violence and emotional manipulation
- Pornography
- Shame and modesty are culturally defined, but are linked to sexuality.
- All societies/cultures put some boundaries on how sexuality is expressed, although these boundaries change over time and from place to place.

- Sexuality can feel like a curse and a burden to single people in our churches.
  - Procreation is an expectation for those who are married and so sexuality can also feel like a burden to those who decide against having children or are unable to have children.
4. Sexuality and spirituality
- God created people male and female in God's image.
  - We have a yearning for intimacy, for relationships that are deeply profound and meaningful, and this is similar in our sexual desires and in our spiritual longings.
  - The linking of healthy sexuality and healthy spirituality felt somewhat contrived in the materials and we were somewhat skeptical as to how much they can be linked.
5. Biblical stories that interested us
- The 2 creation stories
  - The images of lovers and bride/groom used to describe God and Israel/church
  - The Old Testament laws regarding infidelity, a dead brother's widow, and marrying foreigners as attempts to put boundaries on sexuality that fit their time and place, and were often broken.
  - Paul put surprisingly strong emphasis on remaining single, and we tried to understand the cultural context for this emphasis. The reports of Jesus' words in the Gospels are experienced by some as similarly negative regarding marriage and sexuality.
6. Our hopes and fears and questions about sexuality, including homosexuality
- Any statements we make must be made with humility and reservation.
  - We aren't sure we can presume to tell the rest of the world what it is doing wrong. We are setting boundaries for ourselves and not for the world. On the other hand we need to say something to the world about abusive forms of sexuality.
  - The biblical text is shaped by culture even while challenging its own culture. We also need to be shaped by our own cultural context, even while challenging it. We need to discern the appropriate sexual boundaries for our time and place, recognizing they change over time and location.
  - We appreciate the strong focus on linking covenantal relationships with sexuality.
  - A strong focus on covenant means that it is hard for people whose lives don't reflect that to become part of us. We are seen as judgmental. We need to be gracious and welcoming, and be clear that the church is a house of sinners.
  - Sexuality is not binary—there is a wide range of physical activities and emotions such that it can be hard to establish what we mean when we say that sexuality is connected to covenanted relationships.
  - There is a significant absence of single people in the church. Sexuality is a part of everyone's identity and relationships, including single people. The linkage of sexuality with covenant relationships ignores the lives of single people.
  - We used the example of AA, a community that has a clear standard of sobriety as well as a complete absence of judgment when people fail to live the standard. Can the church become such a community without judgment? Does the AA model create a basis from which we can be witnesses regarding an approach to sexuality that is helpful and healing?

- If the church says anything about sexuality it must at the same time provide support to those excluded by what we say.
- We used the image of the Old Testament law as a set of fences within which we can live freely. Do we need to agree with each other as to what the fences are? We hope that we can live together in communion even while disagreeing on the fences or boundaries.
- We wondered whether the starting place for being in communion is “belief”, or do we start with belonging together and then move toward belief?
- We need to recognize that we are speaking to our own cultural context, and perhaps we don’t need to worry about whether our approach to sexuality meets favour in the eyes of our brothers and sisters outside of our cultural context, although we need to be in relationship and conversation with them.
- We wondered why such a strong emphasis on the question of sexuality. We seem to expect vulnerability in this conversation when we expect nothing similar in other areas of our lives, such as our finances (as one example).

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