

BIBLICAL ROOTS, INTERPRETIVE CONNECTIONS

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Introductory Remarks

My thanks to everyone for gathering here, today, to do discernment around some basic matters. I say “discernment,” not “debate,” because the only things I want to “win” today are more clarity and charity. I hope that my questions and contributions this morning add to our process of discernment from a direction that I believe needs to be heard. The same is true for Cynthia Lapp and the hermeneutical case she'll be presenting. My thanks to you, Cynthia, in particular.

For it takes courage on both our parts, and on the part of everyone here, to face the difficult and confusing questions we'll be addressing. I appreciate having had to consider every one of my own words and thoughts and weigh them for the possibility that they might either stem from fear, bigotry and ignorance, or that they might affirm or encourage them in others. I don't believe they do. But if you discern the presence of such in me and my words, then “May the righteous smite me in kindness and correct me; Oil so choice let my head not refuse (Ps. 141:5).”

I'll talk primarily about hermeneutics, but in relation to the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective and the Bible, especially as they both relate to sex. That is because the Bible and the Confession are touchstones, both basic to the accountability and relationship of pastors to the body that credentials them, and to the

mission of the conference. We have to talk about hermeneutics because, if we don't name and claim what we're doing with the Bible, our discussions about any issue will be very frustrating and unfruitful, because we'll be talking past each other, using even the same words sometimes but with unstated and different meanings. I experienced that at the recent MCUSA national conference in Columbus, and came away from some of the Pink Menno meetings and encounters I had less concerned about our differences around the issues, than I was about the widely different ways we approached the Bible, often unspoken and assumed,

I wish though that the matter which had sparked all this discussion had been militarism or nationalism. Or about the unjust and massive disparities of wealth, power and opportunity in the world and among us. Those are foremost on my heart. But sex, and in particular, homosexuality, is the issue that has most recently and most powerfully drawn our attention towards our differences in biblical interpretation, and which has drawn our most heated responses around questions of accountability and connectedness to each other. But I hope its clear that I'm really trying to get at the biblical and hermeneutical matters behind our discussions and differences about sex.

Part of what I also carry with me, this morning, is my love for people in my life who are most personally involved in this discussion because of their own sexual lives and orientations. I can understand how this might feel like a process of discernment about them, and their worth, though its not meant to be. Not from me at least. The worth

of every person here is one of the non-negotiables from which I start my reasoning. But given some of their painful and frightening experiences, I can understand why some have asked me “What's there to discuss or discern?” and even “Isn't discussion itself part of the problem?” When I asked church members if I should participate in this discussion, a few of them said, “If you do, make sure you tell them that you're giving your position, not necessarily ours.” I respect that, and I needed to say it.

So, I don't want anyone here this morning to feel as though *they* are on trial. In all times and places, it is the Bible and the whole Confession of Faith in A Mennonite Perspective, that are on trial. And not just the part that only touches indirectly on sexual orientation. So I'll seek to explain where The Confession of Faith in A Mennonite Perspective is coming from, biblically and hermeneutically, so that we might also know where people who hold and teach its position on anything are coming from. In the course of my words you'll likely pick up on the reasons why the bigger part of me still operates by The Confession, though not without a long history of experience, searching and questions that I recommend for all of us. Every faith claim, and every moral position has a quality of “nevertheless” and “in spite of” to it, because they are exclusive choices among exclusive alternatives, and because they are costly, whatever position we take. By the end of my talk, I hope it will be clear that the biblical hermeneutic that I see behind the statement on marriage, sex and family is part of a consistent, responsibly thought-out and clearly-stated approach to the Bible all throughout the Confession, the

same hermeneutic that gives us what we teach and preach about other things, like peace and justice.

Now, using big, scholarly words like “hermeneutics” can be either a sign of elitism (“I have a seminary degree and my vocabulary is meant to impress you with big words like that”) or laziness. If anything, my use of the word “hermeneutics” might represent more laziness than elitism, because paraphrasing it every time I use it, takes many more syllables: “our method of biblical interpretation.” So when I say, “hermeneutics,” that's a four syllable shorthand for “Our method of.....”

After my attempt to connect the Bible with the Confession, then I'll raise some questions on how we respond pastorally to variances like same sex attraction and relationships. Answering those questions, however, will be the job of the Unity Task Group, and I don't want to step on their toes this morning.

So here's the statement at the heart of our discernment around the interconnection of Christian discipleship and sexuality, and around pastoral practice and conference accountability:

THE CONFESSION—From ARTICLE 19

“We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. Christian marriage is a mutual relationship in Christ, a covenant made in the context of the church. According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship.”

Before telling us what marriage is for-- "*sexual intimacy, companionship, and the birth and nurture of children,*" The Confession Of Faith In a Mennonite Perspective gives us a six-fold boundary, or ideal about sexual expression, in which it is reserved for a relationship that is 1) a spiritual covenant like that of God with God's people (Eph. 5: 31-32); 2) it is mutually dignifying and empowering for both partners (Eph. 5: 21); 3) it is fully intended to be a lifelong commitment (I Cor. 7:10-11); 4) it is monogamous and therefore exclusively and mutually faithful—not open to other sexual partners (Ex. 20:14); 5) it is heterosexual, between one man and one woman (Mk. 10: 6-9); 6) last but not least, this covenant is made and sustained "in the context of the church." As for that last ideal, that the covenant is made and sustained "in the context of the church," neither I nor the writers of the Confession seem to be aware of any Bible passages to the effect that, unless the bride and groom stand in front of a pastor and an altar dressed in fancy clothes to publicly say, "I do," they aren't married. But the whole discussion of sex, family and marriage or singleness in the Mennonite Confession begins with the church as our family of faith. So if we expect the church and the Confession to affirm our most intimate and important relationships, which they do, we mustn't be surprised that they also set ideals, guidance and boundaries to them too.

Now where did the writers of the Confession get that six-fold ideal? This is where we start the discussion about hermeneutics, the task of interpreting the Bible. There's enough to say about Bible interpretation that we could pursue advanced degrees

in it. So I won't be able to cover all the bases today. Just the ones that connect the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, and the Bible.

My first point about hermeneutics is that *we can do this*. It is possible to interpret and apply the Bible when we make our way between the extremes of.....

A. Hermeneutical Arrogance and Hermeneutical Despair. The idea that we can understand anything is almost not a given anymore. I once sat in an educational psychology class and heard the lecturer say that no one can really truly understand what someone else is saying because of the preconceptions and personal histories and agendas we bring to a text. Ironically, he expected me to understand that, and he graded me on it for a test. That approach I call “hermeneutical despair,” because it despairs of ever really understanding anyone or anything. Increasingly, I hear this despair applied to reading and interpreting the Bible. If we embrace such despair over matters of sex and marriage, how will it not spill over to matters of peace, justice or the love of God?

It's critical that we beware of our preconceptions and prior commitments, and examine and name them. If we don't do that, if we think we already know all we need to know about ourselves and a text, then we're guilty of hermeneutical arrogance. Not good, either. I'm afraid I've heard much of that in our discussions about sex, too.

In place of hermeneutical arrogance or despair, I would propose a hermeneutical humility, which means that we be very, very wary of our tendencies to read the Bible looking just for ammunition and affirmation of our preconceptions and

our immediate self interest. That could cut both ways in this very process of discernment. It means we must remain open to the possibility that, over time, the Bible will open up to us deeper meanings, or even some new ones, as God leads and experience forces us to see our prejudices and our preconceptions, and to question them. And it encourages us to submit our interpretations to the hermeneutical community, the wider church, current and historical, here and elsewhere. Its what I'm hoping to do now. Not only is this possible, it is worthwhile because of.....

B. The Authority of the Bible for Lives and Communities of Discipleship, such that the Bible interprets us, as well as we interpreting it. The writers of The Confession effectively state that The Bible has a prior right to critique us before we critique it: “We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and training in righteousness. We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life.”(Article 4: Scripture). That doesn't rule out questions, controversies or legitimate differences in interpretation. It simply means that, wherever the Bible challenges our conventional wisdom or our personal desires, we are prepared to consider that it is because “God's ways are not our ways,” and that we are the ones who need conversion, not God. This was Jesus' approach to his Bible, our Old Testament, and the approach of the early, apostolic and Anabaptist churches to Jesus' Bible and to the New Testament. That logically makes.....

C The Bible as the Starting Point of Ongoing Moral and Pastoral Discernment:

This is what biblical interpretation is about: a moral and pastoral question or dilemma causes us to do discernment from the Scriptures. The Confession says, “We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship.” (Article 4: Scripture)

In his talk about Binding and Loosing, Kent has spoken very well about the importance of that task, no, even the centrality of it. But is binding and loosing about applying unchanging faith and values to changing circumstances in changing ways, or are they about changing the faith and the values themselves? In other words, are we talking about applying and contextualizing a basic, core faith, or are we talking about revising it? That is an unstated assumption that we need to make clear. If nothing by way of practice, interpretation or application is to change, then we might as well go home: there's nothing to discern. But if the basic, core tenets of faith and values can be bound *or loosed*, then loosing can become a non-stop moral and theological free-for-all in which nothing is left standing, eventually.

Jesus and the New Testament give me reason to think about moral and theological discernment, binding and loosing more in terms of contextualizing and applying basic Biblical faith and values, rather than revising them, because their approach to the

Hebrew Bible is also one of unfolding, fulfilling and applying the Hebrew Bible, rather than revising it or discarding it. Again and again, with each new unfolding of the Old Testament mission in the New Testament, we read, “It is written.” And that's what I also see The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective doing: not so much revising the faith and core biblical values, but contextualizing its application for changing times.

D. Related to that is **the Role of Experience**, personal or communal, in hermeneutics. The Confession of Faith is quite explicit about the prior right of the Scriptures to interpret experience, over any right of experience to interpret Scripture, especially in Article 4: “Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture.” If, by contrast, experience is the supreme interpreter of the Bible, then we end up where a letter writer to the Star-Tribune did, when he recently wrote that “the Bible is the Word of God inasmuch as it tells us good news.” So, out goes Jeremiah, Lamentations, Matthew Chapter 23, Hosea, and all the Psalms of Lament, for a start. Out goes any challenge to unjust wealth.

That does not mean that experience has no role in biblical interpretation.

Experience forces us to do hermeneutics. And it informs the way we do it. But The Bible itself gives us some ideas as to how experience informs our Bible interpretation, for example, in the ways in which the Gospels and the New Testament interpret the Old Testament. The experience of the first apostles, from walking with Jesus, illuminated

their understanding of the Bible, so that several times we read, “Then they understood the Scripture that said...(John 2:17).” But they still saw the Bible as the script for what would unfold and how they should participate in that unfolding. In that way, the Bible *interpreted* their experience, but their experience *illuminated* the Bible. And they had to be in the middle of the action, seeking at all costs to obey the Bible, for their experience to illuminate what they read.

But not all experiences are illuminating. Many are confusing. Regarding sexuality, my experience and observations are all over the map. My life has included many people with same sex desires, or in lasting same sex relationships, others who have gone in and out of same sex activity and relationships, some who have even left them, either for lives of chastity, or even for heterosexual relationships and marriages. Sexual fluidity is increasingly an open secret. Nor have science or sociology proven anything conclusive about sexual orientation. I doubt that they ever can. So I'm not sure how experience informs my biblical hermeneutics about sexuality, except to say that we are all both blessed and broken, as in every area of life.

Some experiences even have the power to blind and befuddle us. But more on that later. A better question than, How does experience relate to Bible interpretation? is What kind of experience is best for Biblical interpretation? That's my next point:

E. Obedience, or The Effort to Obey and Apply the Bible, is the most important kind of experience necessary for faithful hermeneutics. This was a staple of ancient Christian

commentary. Athanasius said, “One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life....Similarly, anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints by copying their deeds.” This was also the historic stance of the early Anabaptists, and their stress on “discipleship.” So the Confession says in Article 8, on Salvation: “Our response [to salvation] includes yielding to God's grace, placing full trust in God alone, repenting of sin, turning from evil, joining the fellowship of the redeemed, and *showing forth the obedience of faith in word and deed.* (italics mine).”

Not only are obedience and the desire to obey necessary pre-requisites for interpreting the Bible, they are the very purpose of biblical interpretation. The Bible is not just for our information or our inspiration or our affirmation, but for our transformation. We only learn the true meaning of the Bible in the journey and the struggle of seeking to live it. That puts the burden of proof on any hermeneutic that seems to explain away the plainest meaning and the cost of obeying the Bible, unless we can demonstrate that a higher priority of the Bible is at stake. The highest priority is, of course, love.

F. Love as the Center and End of Biblical Moral Discernment. There's no way I can overstate the importance of love. God is love. Love I define as desiring and doing God's best for anyone, self, other, friend or foe. So we're not discerning whether we are to love

anyone or not. We're discerning what love requires of us, and what is the best way to love. I hope we're not really discerning whether or not love requires any standards, limits, accountability or expectations of each other in the church, either. Love requires limits and accountability against the sins of power-- bigotry, privilege and exclusion-- as much as it does against what we consider the sins of weakness-- license and disordered desires. If we believe that people can be transformed from fear to love, or from license to holiness, we must remember that people are only transformed by a love that does not need to change them in order to love them more. That's one way that Philip Yancey defined grace in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*: "There's nothing we can do to make God love us less, and there's nothing that we can do to make God love us more." As others have put it, "God loves us just as we are; and he loves us too much to leave us that way."

So, we're not discerning whether men should or can love other men, or women other women. If anything, the Bible critiques us for not loving each other enough. This is especially true in this macho culture for us men. But consider how tender, affectionate and intimate were the love and the relationships between Jesus and his disciples. Yet in the Bible, theirs is the unconditional and self-sacrificial love described in Greek as "agape," and the friendship love described as "phileo." Never is it described as "eros," the erotic love that seeks sexual union. That would have been contrary to their bedrock values as observant, orthodox Hebrew men. The same would have been true for the

deeply committed friends, Jonathan and David, in the Old Testament. The question I see us discerning is not if men and women should love people of the same sex, deeply and with lifelong commitment, but how, and, What is the place of erotic, sexual expressions of our love for another person? Love requires that we affirm all persons. But does love require that we affirm all things about all persons? Or might love include a call to transformation, for all of us?

Our Confession of Faith holds in union the power and nature of God's love to both accept us unconditionally and to transform us radically, when it says, in Article I: **“God's awesome glory and enduring compassion are perfect in holy love. God's sovereign power and unending mercy are perfect in almighty love. God's knowledge of all things and care for creation are perfect in preserving love. God's abounding grace and wrath against sinfulness are perfect in righteous love. God's readiness to forgive and power to transform are perfect in redemptive love. God's unlimited justice and continuing patience with humankind are perfect in suffering love. God's infinite freedom and constant self-giving are perfect in faithful love. To the one holy and ever-loving triune God be glory for ever and ever!”**

Notice how love and holiness, grace and wrath against sinfulness, forgiveness and the power to transform, are kept in union by The Confession. They are not divided against each other, as is so often the case in our discernment. Is our failure to keep holiness and mercy, radical acceptance and transformation together, part of our difficulty in so many of our dialogs about sexuality so far? Is it possible that we are all

on a journey of transformation that will challenge and change any fear and bigotry among us at the same time that it challenges and changes the license and indulgence that are endemic to our culture, and rampant in the church, in *all* areas of life?

I see Jesus living out this symbiosis of a radical holiness of welcome and inclusion that challenges privilege and social boundaries—an important component of the Biblical value of justice-- *AND* a radical holiness, an exclusive personal commitment to the bedrock mission and morality of God's covenant with Israel, which is also a component of the Biblical value of justice. The Bible does not exempt us in either our personal conduct or our participation in socially unjust structures from the call to justice and peace. Jesus, the prophets and the apostles can go from what we call social justice concerns to matters of personal morality in the same breath and sentence. And Jesus includes *everyone* in his call to radical repentance for their personal and structural, social departures from God and his covenant. With this we're already touching on:

G. The Relationship of Love to Faith, Law and Limits. The Confession takes a traditional Anabaptist approach to Love, faith and law by defining saving faith by its behavioral and relational evidence when it says, in Article 17, on Discipleship and the Christian Life: “True faith in Christ means willingness to do the will of God, rather than willful pursuit of individual happiness. True faith means seeking first the reign of God in simplicity, rather than pursuing materialism. True faith means acting in peace and justice, rather than with violence or military means...True

faith means chastity and loving faithfulness to marriage vows, rather than the distortion of sexual relationships, contrary to God's intention. True faith means treating our bodies as God's temples, rather than allowing addictive behaviors to take hold. True faith means performing deeds of compassion and reconciliation, in holiness of life, instead of letting sin rule over us.”

In this traditional Anabaptist statement faith, love, limits and law are not diametrically opposed. To Jesus, the first work of the law is faith (Jn 6: 29) in him. In the Bible law serves as the boundary marker outside of which we know we have passed from love into indulgence. If love is just a feeling, a desire or an attraction, then many things may feel like love. But according to the bedrock moral law of the Bible, killing, adultery, theft or slander, whatever they feel like at the time, are outside the bounds of love. Obeying the bedrock moral law of the Bible is not for earning God's love, but to enjoy, experience and express God's love. Law, in the Bible, was always presented and treated as a gift of God's love.

That's why Mennonite/Anabaptist hermeneutics typically have taken conduct and codes very seriously. Otherwise, our peace position would lack much of its spine. On the down side, there has been among us Mennonites a historic tendency toward legalism and conformity, as though God's immutable moral laws included matters of dress, hair length or head coverings. Especially when imposed upon women. We need an approach to love, law and faith that discerns the difference between the few basic,

unchanging values that reflect the very nature of God, and the many expressions of these values that vary with time and culture.

This hermeneutic toward law and love makes us question the contemporary cultural assumption that love is essentially lawless, and that law is essentially loveless. It is also consonant with the way Jesus interpreted the Bible to his disciples. Most rabbis before and after Jesus have distinguished between three categories of biblical law: moral, civil, and ritual/ceremonial codes. Civil codes were the ones that laid out, for example, how much restitution your neighbor got if your ox gored his. Ritual and ceremonial codes were about things like sacrifices, food restrictions, and purity regulations. The moral codes are those bedrock things that can apply universally, with or without the civil and ceremonial laws, like the Ten Commandments or the two greatest commands: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” They are directly rooted in the nature of God, and in the way God created us. I'm not saying its always easy and automatic to distinguish between the three categories, however. Often, the civil and ceremonial laws reflect an enduring moral law.

Unlike many rabbis of the time, Jesus seemed to relax the civil and ritual/ceremonial codes for the sake of love, maybe also for the sake of mission to the nations. But as Kent points out, Jesus also intensified the moral code of the law for his disciples. For example, it wasn't enough for Jesus that, technically speaking, we don't kill anyone.

We are to bless and help our enemies. Another striking example is when Jesus said that it isn't what goes into us by way of food that defiles us, but what comes out of our hearts by way of adultery, slander, murder and theft (Mk. 7:14-23). When Mark records that saying, he comments on it to say that Jesus thus declared all foods clean. And yet in the same breath Jesus issued a strenuous rebuke of moral evil and a serious call to cleanse our hearts of illicit passions, like adultery or greed.

In the notes of The Confession of Faith, you'll see they reflect this same weight toward the moral law, while nearly neglecting the civil and ritual/sacrificial law. I fail to find any reference in The Confession to laws about the ceremonial cleansing of houses with mildew. But you will find plenty of references to the Ten Commandments, the Great Commandment, and the great redemptive visions of the Prophets.

Now, when it comes to sexuality, we have to discern whether or not Biblical laws related to sex are part of the civil, ceremonial and ritual law, which seem to have been discarded with the mission to the Gentiles, and whether or not they are part of the bedrock moral law, rooted in Creation, and reflecting it. A clue would be if and how the apostles applied them to their Gentile converts. One example is the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, in Acts 8. According to ritual or civil law, he was unclean, with no chance of ever being an insider in God's household. That changes with the coming kingdom of God, in which Isaiah foresaw (56:3) eunuchs and gentiles having a share and an eternal name. Once the eunuch was baptized by Phillip, he was embraced and

included in God's kingdom, *in fulfillment of the Scriptures*. But there's nothing to suggest that he was free to act in any way contrary to the moral law about sex or anything else that Jesus and his disciples taught out of the Hebrew Bible.

A clearer example is in Acts 15, the outcome of Peter's vision of the sheets in Acts 10, with all sorts of formerly unclean animals that are suddenly declared clean. By extension, so are the Gentiles clean. It's a great example of Kent's analysis of "binding and loosing." The result of the Jerusalem Conference, in Acts 15, is that the apostles loosed the Gentile believers from the ceremonial or ritual laws around food (with a few exceptions for the sake of eating together). But they bound them to the laws around sexual conduct. Therefore, I conclude that apostolic, New Testament injunctions about sex, such as regarding adultery, fornication and same sex behavior reflect the moral law of the Old Testament, more so than the civil or ceremonial/ritual laws.

H. CHRIST AS THE HERMENEUTICAL KEY I just appealed to Jesus' way of relating law and love, which assumes something else about Anabaptist/Mennonite tendencies in biblical interpretation, which Kent rightly point out: that Christ is the final authority, and the interpretive key to the whole Bible. Article 4 of The Confession states, "Because Jesus Christ is the Word become flesh, Scripture as a whole has its center and fulfillment in him." That means that his way of interpreting the Bible must be key as well. Therefore, the Confession does not set Jesus up against the Old Testament. Even when Jesus says, "Moses said...but I tell you..." he supersedes

Moses for the sake a more central, crucial, Old Testament concern, deeper than what the civil or ceremonial law could touch. Nor does the Confession set Jesus anywhere, on any issue, against the apostles and the rest of the New Testament, because we perceive Jesus through the Apostles and the rest of the New Testament.

This hermeneutical approach runs counter to another modern tendency, to equate “new” with “improved,” and to put the latest theology or ethical system on a par with Jesus as our interpretive key. The newness of a belief or a moral commitment does not automatically recommend it any more than does its age. That's why many are reluctant to embrace what appear to be new beliefs, revelations or “new light,” should they seem contradictory to any harmony between the Jesus of the Gospels, his Bible, and the rest of the New Testament. Neither traditional Anabaptist hermeneutics, nor the Confession, give us reason to expect that God's will shall make a complete U-turn in either faith or values from what seems clear in the Scriptures. We expect, instead, deepening and unfolding of our understanding. If, in this and future processes of discernment, I come to see that a more inclusive stance around sexual ethics is in line with that long, historic unfolding, then I'd change my teaching and challenge the Confession of Faith. But that would require a radical change in another issue of interpretation:

I. A Biblical Anthropology. One matter for discernment is whether or not the varieties of our sexual desires and behaviors are signs of our God-given identities. The

Confession sees in the Scriptures that we are made as sexual beings, and that that is part of what it means for us to reflect the image of God. “Because both Adam and Eve were equally and wonderfully made in the divine image, God's will from the beginning has been for women and men to live in loving and mutually helpful relationships with each other.” (Article 6: The Creation and Calling of Human Beings). But are all our varying sexual desires and behaviors expressions of God's will and creation, as is being born with dark skin or light skin, or being born in Mexico rather than Sweden? If so, then God has created “sexual minorities” in the same way that God created people of racial and ethnic minorities. Including same sex marriages in the church would be only a peace and justice matter, a matter of simple inclusivity no different from including Gentiles in the early church.

The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective also calls us to inclusivity: “God calls the church to direct its mission to people from all nations and ethnic backgrounds.... The church today is also called to witness to people of every culture, ethnicity, or nationality.” That's from Section 10, about mission, though, not beliefs or behavior. And it reflects a basic biblical anthropology: as Paul told the Athenians in Acts 17, that God has a role in Creation for different nations, tribes and cultures. So God is a God of diversity and inclusivity. But in the kingdom of God, God is calling all these diverse persons, cultures and communities toward an exclusive faith and obedience to one Lord and to his teachings.

As for Christian ethics around both peace and sexuality, Jesus, the Bible and the Confession present some strenuous and exclusive ideals. Ideals are, by their nature exclusive things. They exclude opposing ideals. Our love is to be inclusive of everyone. Our fellowship in the church is to be inclusive of everyone who embraces the gospel. But we are not called to be inclusive of every *thing*, by way of desire, belief or behavior. In effect, the Confession reflects the very inclusive invitation of Jesus to some very exclusive commitments of belief and behavior.

Another feature of Biblical anthropology that matters is: **J. SIN AS A SUBTLE, BUT POWERFUL FORCE.** This is the kind of experience that can blind and befuddle us and our biblical interpretation, to which I referred earlier: the power of sin to entice, to entrap, to enslave and to intoxicate us, to the point where our moral reasoning becomes dimmed, either by fear or by license. “Because of sin and its consequences, the efforts of human beings on their own to do the good and to know the truth are constantly corrupted.” (Article 7: Sin) I see this most regularly in relation to wealth and violence.

Notice how the Confession treats sin not just as individual actions. Its a condition of estrangement from God, ourselves, each other and Creation, and of enslavement to that condition of estrangement. Our various temptations and misconduct are symptoms of that condition. According to the Confession and the Bible, we should expect our faith and values to differ from a sin-broken, sin-dominated world, and to cost

us something, perhaps even our lives. The subtlety and power of sin are such that we rarely get to choose the nature of our temptations. But the Scriptures do hold us responsible for whether we choose to fight or flee or to love them.

I see us discerning whether our loyalty to the confessional statement on sexuality is a symptom of sin binding and blinding us to bigotry and fear, or whether sin is blinding and binding us against God's ideal for sexuality. Or both. If sin affects us in the sexual realm as well as in others, then we must discern if the many varieties of sexual desires and behaviors represent expressions of God's will in Creation, or departures from it. And which ones are, or are not.

It also means that we begin our Bible interpretation knowing ourselves as “the chief of sinners,” looking for the log in our own eyes before we get around to looking for the speck in someone else's. I hear it said that the Bible is a tool, not a weapon. But it is described as a sword in Hebrews 4, one which cuts open and lays bare the *reader's* motives and errors, and not one which we readily point at each other. Yes, we have to discern ideas and values and behavior, but with a sober awareness and search of our own sin, rather than a gleeful hunt for everyone else's. That could cut both ways on this process of discernment.

I hope its clear that I hold the Conference position not because I think myself morally superior to anyone, but precisely because of my own struggles with temptation, sin and broken-ness in all areas of life. That's another reason why hermeneutics is too

dangerous to be done alone. Which leads me to the next point, the role of the hermeneutical community, otherwise called, “the church.”

K. The Role of the Community-- The original Anabaptists elevated and celebrated the dignity of the individual and his or her conscience. But they were not rugged individualists. They stressed also a level of submission to a community of accountability with whom we test our perceptions. “We participate in the church's task of interpreting the Bible and of discerning what God is saying in our time by examining all things in the light of Scripture. Insights and understandings which we bring to the interpretation of the Scripture are to be tested in the faith community.” (Article 4: Scripture).

As I said, some of us have experienced this kind of submission to community as a kind of tyranny of cultural conformity, over matters of dress and oppressive gender roles. I think we need to acknowledge that history as a kind of trauma that colors our discussion today. But as our denomination grows among people without this historical experience, we meet many who come limping to the church from an opposite experience of moral chaos, who are now looking for moral guidance and security. Each group may see the questions of sexuality in terms of those very different experiences of chaos or control. That may be another reason why we have sometimes talked past each other.

Both experiences lend valuable contributions to this discussion. But not our experiences alone. Looking back over the history of the church and of Judaism, at The

Confession, and at the Bible itself, I see that the hermeneutical community includes the dead as well as the living, that thousands of years of wisdom should also count for something. Furthermore, recent changes in technology make it possible to include disciples all around the world, in all cultures and countries, in our hermeneutical circle. So let's not limit the hermeneutical circle just to our local selves or our contemporaries.

L. The last point about hermeneutics I want to address is what I call **A Sense for A Biblical Trajectory**. Ours is a big Bible. It includes a warrior Joshua, and a second, peaceful, Joshua, Jesus (same name for each person). We could then do like so many Christians and give our citizenship over to the first Joshua, and our private faith lives to the second. But the Confession's statements about war and violence make sense when you see a Biblical trajectory, going from Genesis to the New Jerusalem (Creation and the New Creation), with Jesus the hermeneutical center, buttressed, like the steeple of a cathedral, by the prophets on one side and the apostles on the other. Everything else, like the wars of Joshua, is supporting narrative and cautionary tale. Article 22, on Peace, Reconciliation and Nonresistance begins: “We believe that peace is the will of God. God created the world in peace, and God's peace is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ...” It ends with “We give our ultimate loyalty to the God of grace and peace.... who sustains us in the glorious hope of the peaceable reign of God.

When I look for a similar trajectory on matters of slavery, patriarchy and women in leadership, I think it also leads to where Anabaptist faith and our Confession

of Faith lead. I see a similar biblical trajectory when it comes to sex and sexuality. It begins with the Genesis account of creation, of humanity as both male and female, in the image of God. I take that to mean that both men and maleness, and women and femaleness, are necessary to displaying the image of God. That, by the way, was a shocking, prophetic and challenging thing to say for its ancient time and place. The second part of the story goes on to say that “for this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” I take it then that sexual union is about more than pleasure and desire; that its about re-uniting the complimentary male and female parts of God's image in such a way as to reflect God and God's covenant faithfulness. That's true in all matters of discipleship.

This harmony and mutuality between maleness and femaleness was broken by the condition of sin, as was indicated by Adam and Eve covering their bodies for shame, and when Adam said to God, “That woman, which you gave me, she gave me the fruit and I ate (Gen. 3: 12).” Since then, sin has caused a rift between male and female, both within ourselves and among ourselves, in all areas of life, including sex. In subsequent passages of the Old Testament, yes, there were fornication, patriarchy and polygamy, but they're almost always disasters, standing as cautionary tales.

The Biblical use of the terms “male and female” in Creation do not simply constitute an offhand observation about biology; they are reflective of bigger things than themselves. Throughout the prophets there is always the theme of Israel as God's one

bride, and God as her one lover. Jesus, the bridegroom comes for his bride, the church, and they are wedded forever in the descent of the New Jerusalem. Jesus applied the Creation-based, God-reflective “male-female” duality and mutuality to the issue of divorce, and Paul even applied it to the relationship of Christ with the church (Eph. 5: 31-32). I've read authors who deconstruct any or all of these verses and ideas in isolation to suggest that they say nothing normative about marriage. But taken together I see a thrust, a trajectory throughout the Bible which I believe the Confession of Faith has caught and reflects. Again: sex and marriage are about nothing less than reflecting God, and God in relationship with us.

The biblical trajectory leads to the New Creation, where Jesus tells us “we will neither marry, nor be given in marriage, but shall be like the angels (Mk. 12:25).” Then we shall be part of the Bride, the fully redeemed and recreated new humanity, wedded to Christ the Bridegroom. I really don't know what all that means. Experience will have to illuminate that passage. But it suggests that we have an identity that is more important and enduring than what our sexual relationships and desires would currently say about us. Its an eternal identity based on who we are and where we stand in relation to our Creator and the New Creation. Our identities are rooted in a kingdom in which we will know God and each other in ways more intimate than even the intimacy of sexual union. And soon. This more enduring destiny and identity is another reason why, in the Bible and The Confession, faith, discipleship and spirituality interpret and guide sexuality, and

not vice versa.

My effort so far has been only to explain the hermeneutical case behind the Confession of Faith In A Mennonite Perspective, and what it says sex and sexuality are for. Notice that I haven't tried to build a verse-by-verse case against homosexuality. Yes, there are isolated verses throughout the Bible that speak ill about homosexual actions, at least in passing, usually while dealing with other issues. And I have read and heard many ways in which they also can each be deconstructed, one by one. The Confession doesn't really refer to those verses either. That's because anything they say about sex must be understood in light of the more important over-arching trajectory of Creation and New Creation that reunites the image of God as male and female, among us, within us and with Christ and the Church. We have to discern whether or not same sex marriages and sexual activity fits within that trajectory of Creation to New Creation or not. If we have trouble seeing how it fits, it may not be just because of bigotry or fear. If it is, then we have to repent of that.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The six-fold ideal raises several serious issues. One is that, before an ideal like that, all of us fall short. We are all at variance on one of those counts, or more. Or am I the only one? So a pertinent pastoral question is not just, What is our sexual orientation? but How are we oriented toward the complete biblical and confessional sexual ideal? Are we moving toward it, or are we indifferent to it, or are we moving away from it?

And no one is in a position to say to anyone else, “You are farther away from the ideal than I am.” Those of us in heterosexual marriages cannot assume that that alone makes us in compliance, not if there is an imbalance or inequality of power and dignity among the partners, or if we're engaging in pornography or adultery, or if we're not doing what it takes to make our marriages last “until death us do part.” The variance that is most disastrous to marriage, church and society is what I call “mainstream masculine culture,” something too common to too many human cultures, what I call “the unholy trinity” of machismo, misogyny and militarism. Patriarchy, polygamy and pornography fit within that unholy trinity. But that's for another conference.

Currently, the heterosexual part of the six-fold ideal is most under contention. But in other times and cultures, we might be having discussions over why marriage has to be monogamous, or mutually submissive and empowering. In response to this year's high profile affairs (a governor, a golfer and other celebrities) I am hearing and reading more people than ever claiming that the real hypocrisy lies in their exclusive wedding vows, not in the behaviors involved.

This constellation of ideals has gotten the Jewish and Christian communities in hot water in many cultures. From the very start, it has always been the minority, dissenting, and prophetic voice in every time and place it has been proclaimed. The apostles first taught it to Gentile converts who often came into the faith with the Greco-Roman belief that bisexuality is the human default mode. Maybe there's some truth to

that. If so, that still doesn't tell us much about discipleship.

So what do we do? One approach would be to say, since we all fall short on one or more parts of the ideal, what's the big deal? Why choose just the heterosexual part to get worked up about? Good question. But we don't take that approach in cases of physical or verbal abuse, adultery or bigamy, thank God.

If one were to ask me, Can't a same sex relationship exhibit all the other five ideals of the Confession above? I am in no position to say, No, they can't. Or if one should ask, "Don't some same sex couples exhibit more of those traits than do some straight couples?" if anything, I would have to say, Yes, some of them do.

I don't even dare to question whether or not GLBT persons can be Christians or not, or gifted by the Holy Spirit, since that is not within my power nor responsibility to judge about anyone. God sits on the Great White Throne of divine judgment, not me.

What about including and affirming monogamous same sex marriages in the church? Before we weigh in on that, we'll have to discern why we can choose any one of those six criteria to pitch, or to relax, and if we can, which one? Why not the others as well? And can we shed one and not have the others come sliding down with it?

In the case of polygamous persons, churches in Africa have often sought to include polygamous households while maintaining and proclaiming the monogamous ideal. They expect that subsequent generations of believers will embrace the monogamous ideal. Does binding and loosing mean we can make similar case-by-case

exceptions for same sex marriages within our membership, even while we uphold or promote the full biblical and Confessional ideal? Or is the very teaching of the Confession itself an incitement to exclusion, bigotry, second-class citizenship, or worse, violence, as I have sometimes been told it is?

Since love is the substance and supreme goal of discipleship, then the failure to love is the worst heresy of all. So, is adhering to the Confessional ideal of sexuality a worse variance from the supreme biblical and Confessional value of love, than is the acceptance or affirmation of same sex relationships? Or is it more loving to hold forth, firmly, the six-fold Biblical and Confessional ideal about sex, with all of us helping each other grow toward it, whatever the nature of our struggle? That's what I'm hoping that future steps of this process will eventually help us all discern, with the help of a rigorous, responsible and consistent biblical hermeneutic. Speaking personally, knowing what my struggles, failures and departures are, I need my brothers and sisters to do the first with me: to hold me to the ideal and to help me toward it.