

While Brethren have always sought to be non-creedal, allowing for the Holy Spirit to continually reveal Himself to us through Scripture and communal discernment, we're often faced with issues not clearly outlined in Scripture. Cultural issues that ebb and flow with the times.

What should our witness be through these issues? How do we maintain a posture of hospitality when the culture changes so quickly? Enclosed are the Brethren Positions on Social Issues, adopted by vote at the 2018 General Conference of The Brethren Church. They are an indication of where we stand on cultural issues of the day. Also included are in-depth discussion guides, to help your church wrestle through scriptural calls and cultural pulls.

# BRETHREN POSITIONS ON SOCIAL ISSUES

NAVIGATING THE "THIRD WAY" IN CULTURE



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BRETHREN  
POSITIONS ON  
SOCIAL ISSUES



THE  
Brethren  
CHURCH

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# Introduction and Statement of Intent

IN 2014, THE EXECUTIVE BOARD of the Brethren Church charged the Social Issues Task Force with the responsibility of revisiting and redrafting the original “Brethren Positions On Social Issues.” That document, which was a compilation of position statements written between 1985 and 1991, had become dated, and it was generally accepted that a revision was needed.

Toward that end, the Task Force set about broadening and redefining those issues that were felt to be of special significance for the life of The Brethren Church in North America. The topics included in this document are those which, in the end, seemed “good to the Spirit and to us” to include. Nearly all of those issues explored in the previous document have also been included in some degree within the present one. The position statements regarding gambling and pornography are explored below in “Addictions,” abortion is discussed in our treatise on “Life and Death,” and homosexuality is considered along with “Human Sexuality” in general. We have chosen not to include an extended discussion on HIV/AIDS, not because this spectrum of disease has no tragic impact on our society, but simply because it does not hold captive society’s attention as it did when the former statement was created.

The Task Force has sought to honor the creators of the former document whose intention was that their efforts “be used as an aid in understanding The Brethren Church, and an encouragement for its membership to act redemptively in the world.” We are grateful for their work and our prayer is that this might also be true of what we have produced!

We recognize that any statement attempting to speak in relevant and contextually appropriate ways to a society that changes as fast as ours will not have an extraordinarily long shelf life. This document, as



the previous one, will need to be revisited and adapted by the next generation. However, we believe that what follows will position The Brethren Church for an edifying engagement with the world in which we live: it is a world that God is deeply invested in and full of people that He loves. We pray that what follows positions us for faithfulness. May the Spirit guide us as we follow Christ, for God's glory and our neighbor's good.

## **How to Use this Document**

This document is an invitation to dialogue and conversation about some of the difficult social issues with which the Brethren must wrestle. Our goal is not merely to inform others, but to prepare us for Spirit-led conversations with our world about what we believe together as a Brethren people. Rather than handing someone a pamphlet on our position on social issues, we encourage leaders to use this document for thoughtful, loving conversation over a meal or cup of coffee with those who have questions about our beliefs—a practice that is more in alignment with our Brethren values. To that end, it is necessarily longer than prior statements or positions. Brief summary statements and teaching tools will be made available based off this document for instruction purposes.

The intention of the Task Force has been to provide a broad treatment of the topics presented in a style that takes seriously the pursuit of theological truth, that is done in a spirit of love, and that is uniquely Brethren. It demands that we take seriously the challenge to consider what we ourselves believe. Those of us who are elders, pastors, teachers, and lay-leaders may find this document helpful to those we teach because it forces us to wrestle with and to clarify what we believe. As the Task Force has produced this document, we have been challenged to clarify our own personal beliefs, and have been blessed with many difficult-but-worthwhile conversations. Our prayer is that this process of discovery, clarification, and consensus continues for each of us on the Task Force, even as it continues for the Brethren.

Submitted with gratitude and humility,  
Brethren Social Issues Task Force  
Summer 2016

The 2017 General Conference accepted this document, with the stipulation that the Executive Board review suggested changes that were not considered by the task force, and report back to the 2018 General Conference the result of that review. The Executive Board did a thorough review of the document, using the following criteria

- Maintain the integrity of quoted material, either by keeping them in their entirety or their removal.
- Review submitted suggestions for change, weighing the suggestions by the number of persons or groups making the suggestion.
- Respect the integrity of the original work of the Task Force.

The Executive Board submits this document as the result of their review, in the hope that this will become a living document, regularly reviewed, updated, and expanded as Brethren continue to seek to be followers of Jesus in a rapidly changing culture.

The Executive Board of the Brethren Church  
Fall 2017



# Addictions (Drugs, Alcohol, Gambling, and Pornography)

## Introduction

THE WORD *ADDICTION* MEANS TO cause one to become physiologically and psychologically dependent on a habit-forming substance, i.e., drugs, alcohol, etc. Understood in the Christian context, addiction can be thought of as a situation in which one becomes over-dependent or over-occupied with anything other than God, who is meant to claim our center of attention.<sup>1</sup> Almost anything can function in this way: sports, work, shopping or acquiring material goods, gambling, food, entertainment, gaming, sexual stimulation, even attentiveness to one's family or children or, occasionally, religious behavior.

## Biblical Foundations

The biblical account speaks against the sin of addiction as a habitual and compulsive exchange of God for something other as a way to satisfy human desires. "Man becomes slave to depravity - for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him." (2 Peter 2:19) While illegal drugs are often the most identified as "wrong," almost anything can become addictive: alcohol, sugar, pornography, gambling, food, work, nicotine, and caffeine, as more obvious examples. Any activity that takes away from the

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1. *Brethren Statement on Social Issues: Gambling*, 1991.

financial, spiritual, physical, or emotional well-being of a person and those who are closest to that person may become a substitute “lord” in place of Christ. Even normal or routine things such as work, play, or rest can become activities that receive more of our “devotion” than that which we give to God. And yet we are to have only one Lord (Matthew 6:24) and we are to be His servants. (John 8:34).

Paul makes a specific reference to the misuse of alcohol in New Testament passages. Those who are addicted or “given to much wine” (Titus 1:7; 2:3), “drunkards” (1 Timothy 3:3) or “heavy drinkers” (1 Timothy 3:8) are disqualified from teaching or holding a position of authority in the church. Nevertheless, Scripture is clear that believers must not be dependent upon any other influence outside of those described through Scripture or addicted in any manner. We are to “love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5), which is, according to Jesus, the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-38). We can conclude, then, that an addiction to anything other than God Himself is wrong. To do so with anything else draws us away from Him and displeases Him. He alone is worthy of our complete attention, love, and service. To offer these things to anything or anyone else is a form of idolatry.

## Historical Foundations

Historically Brethren believed “moderation in all things.” Temperance as the controlled use of food and beverages was applauded. Temperate behavior in all areas of life is the expected norm. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Brethren kept with their German heritage and drank beer and wine. Drunkenness has always been a violation of the Brethren understanding of simple living and obedience to Jesus.

With the influence of revivalism and the temperance movement of the nineteenth century, the German Baptist Brethren (which became the Church of the Brethren) adopted a total abstinence from all alcohol. The Progressive Brethren maintained this stance. The Old German Baptist

Brethren still practice moderation in drinking and use of fermented wine at communion.<sup>2</sup>

## Cultural Reflection

The early part of the 21st Century has seen a radical shift in attitudes toward various addictive substances. One example of this relates to marijuana and its use. Once considered culturally “out of bounds” and a highly addictive substance to be avoided, increasingly states are legalizing the use of marijuana for both medical and recreational purposes.

Similarly, the increasing sexualization of society has made pornography readily available, and the advance of technology has made it readily accessible. Anyone can now share these pictures and conversations in mere seconds through their computers and phones. In 1985, while the use and proliferation of pornography of any kind was condemned as “dehumanizing and morally destructive” and an “insidious evil,” there was no consideration of the addictive aspect of this particular behavior. Since the original position on pornography was written, the proliferation of pornography has increased exponentially.

Although the trend of culture is a movement toward acceptance and normalization, society’s response has been more about moderation or privacy rather than abstinence. In reality, like traditionally addictive substances such as alcohol, drugs or gambling, the overuse of pornography and sexual fantasy has severe negative side effects on individuals, families and marriages.

## Conclusions and Application for the Local Church

In keeping with the biblical principle that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, we affirm that the Christian is called to holiness and purity.

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2. *The Brethren Encyclopedia, Vol. 1: A-J*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press), 2.

We also affirm our historical emphasis on temperance and moderation in general. However, our position is that we should abstain from all forms of pornography.

After reviewing all of our previous documents we found that the stance and preventative measures found in the pornography section of the 1985 statement on *Pornography and Obscenity* to be in line with all of our current thinking and practices and, therefore, we affirm those principles written below.

1. We are committed to Jesus Christ who calls us as the “salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” to be involved in the solution of the problem of pornography.
2. We are committed to speak out against pornography and obscenity at every opportunity.
3. We encourage our congregations to observe a Pornography Awareness Sunday or Week.
4. We urge our congregations to become involved in appropriate plans of action in their communities.
5. We commit ourselves to participate as a denomination in the National Coalition Against Pornography.
6. We call upon the president of the United States to declare publicly his support for the enforcement of obscenity laws and to order the Justice Department to enforce the existing obscenity laws.
7. We urge Christians everywhere to seek ways to minister more effectively to both the victims and perpetrators of obscenity and pornography.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, we would add the following suggestions for implementation in the local congregation:

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3. *Brethren Statement on Social Issues: Pornography and Obscenity*, 1991.

1. Provide access to church ministries or community resources that deal with addictions and addictive behaviors.
2. Remember we live in a broken world. Many participate in “legal” addictive behaviors that are just as destructive to us as pornography and illicit drugs including food, internet, or alcohol abuse. In these cases we are to gently hold each other accountable and set an example of mercy tempered with personal responsibility.
3. Create a supportive and loving community that overcomes the temptations of addictions with love and unity.
4. Provide a safe environment for those dealing with such issues to talk without fear of rejection or humiliation.
5. Develop a relationship with individuals, groups, and counseling centers that can continue to help individuals struggling with addictive behaviors. These would include ALANON, AA, xxxchurch.com and private Christian counselors in the local area.



# Discussion Questions: Addictions (Drugs, Alcohol, Gambling, and Pornography)

## General Questions:

- How does a Christian understanding of addiction expand on a medical or psychological understanding?
- What in this Topic do you find easiest to agree with? What do you find most difficult to agree with?

## Biblical Questions:

- Take a moment to look at some of the passages cited in the Biblical Foundations section of this Topic.
  - Are they used appropriately?
  - Do you think the argument made in this section is a strong one?
- Is historical precedent persuasive for you? What did you find compelling, confusing, or even inspiring in the Historical Foundations section?

## Historical And Theological Foundations Questions:

- What is your reaction to the first paragraph of this Section? Why? What surprises you here?

## **Conclusions and Applications Questions:**

- What suggestions in the Conclusions and Applications section seem reasonable? Unreasonable? Why?
- In what ways does our congregation respond well to this Topic? In what ways do we respond poorly?
  - What might be some of our blind spots when it comes to this Topic?
- *Bonus:* How would you improve this statement if you could?



# Consumption and Wealth

## Introduction

BEING RESPONSIBLE CARETAKERS OF THE resources and material possessions that God has entrusted to us is a mark of a mature disciple. All things belong to God and it is His pleasure to give good gifts to His people to fulfill their material needs. We are given the opportunity to respond in love to God's loving-kindness (*hesed*) with a return of these gifts for God's purpose and a just distribution of goods for the flourishing of all human beings.

When we instead choose to consume primarily for increased profit and selfish benefit causing others to go without, we are contributing to a systemic economic imbalance that results in impoverished living conditions for some and exorbitant conditions for others. Selfish consumption perpetuates systemic structural poverty.

## Biblical and Theological Foundations

For the Christian, thoughtful consumerism is an issue of the heart. It is a mark of one's discipleship, an indicator of an allegiance to Jesus and His in-breaking kingdom. Idolatry occurs when one has displaced God from the center of his or her life, or when God is displaced from the center of the faith community, and the desire for material goods becomes of supreme value or worth more than God Himself. That which is at the center of our lives, which we love the most, demands our greatest concern, attention, priority, and effort to protect. We will be tempted to look to that idol for our security, contentment, worth, and even salvation, rather than placing

our trust in the living God. This was the sin of covenantal infidelity for Israel's kings who placed their trust and security in false idols rather than a good and just God:

But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols... My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:11, 13).

But the Lord is the true God; He is the living God, the eternal King (Jeremiah 10:10; see also Hosea 4, 11).

Consumerism is also an issue of justice. Unbridled consumption and accumulation is in direct opposition to God's call to be a people of justice. Our use of the wealth and material riches entrusted to us can be a source of blessing to others or a source of exploitation and oppression. We have a moral responsibility—individually and corporately—to restrain our degree of consumption and to share our surpluses such that we avoid contributing to the social injustices that oppress under-privileged people groups. The economic pyramid created by the inadequate sharing of surplus riches leaves too few resources for others to secure sustainable living conditions. Families who are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder are unable to obtain sufficient amounts of food, clothing and adequate housing; they suffer the most. Sometimes the economic consequences are a result of the rich profiting at the direct expense of the poor. This is a grave concern to God (see Amos 2:6-8; Hosea 12:6-8; Zechariah 7:8-10).

Jesus' teachings on wealth and its accumulation were firm and at times harsh, seen, for example in Luke 18: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:24-25 NIV) In Luke's beatitudes, Jesus turned the value system of the world on its head when He proclaimed new social norms

for those under the reign of God. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God...But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort” (Luke 6:20, 24 NIV). The teaching of Jesus to the rich young ruler is equally an uncomfortable challenge for us. The young ruler, who was understood to be very wealthy, asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered that his obedience to the law was not enough, and replied, “One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” Donald Kraybill, professor at Elizabethtown College and leading scholar and author on Anabaptist groups, offers an interpretation: “Jesus links eternal life to wealth. The rich ruler is sincere and conscientious, not a cunning robber...the grip of mammon is simply too strong. He forfeits eternal life.”<sup>4</sup>

The rich young ruler refused to share his wealth. As people committed to the values of the kingdom of God, our value systems and allegiances are subject to being transformed under the reign of Jesus. How we share our possessions and practice our economics is subject to a kingdom ethic that obligates us to be a people of generosity. We are a people whose reputation is marked by the sharing of possessions and giving away of our money because our God is outrageously generous in showing His loving-kindness (*hesed*) to us. We envision a kingdom that is marked by radical economic, social, and cultural equality, in which pyramids are leveled between the rich and poor, and where sociocultural systems of privileges are forsaken because there is no room for these structural injustices in the kingdom of God.

## Historical Foundations

Brethren have been a people of non-conformity to the world from their beginning. Our *Centennial Statement* notes: “Obedience to Christ is the center of Brethren life. This conviction has led the Brethren historically

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4. Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 113.

to practice non-conformity ... [in which] Brethren have sought to follow the way of Christ in contrast to the way of the world.”<sup>5</sup>

This conviction has aided the Brethren to maintain their distinctiveness and mission amid a hyper-changing world. The contrast with the ways of the world illumines the hope that is ours in Christ. We are a people with the end in mind.

Charles Thompson in his book, *The Old German Baptist Brethren* describes the ways of the Old German Baptist Brethren of Franklin County, Virginia. In his book he enters into conversation with many from our sister movement as they seek to eke out an existence of farming in a world of mega-agricultural farms and food processing centers. He then discusses the cultural good these peculiar people bring to their region by inviting outsiders into conversation with them. Towards that end, he writes:

The key to understanding German Baptists is to learn about their doctrine of nonconformity. To understand their nonconformity one has to understand nonresistance. Nonresistance means the Brethren refuse to fight for a worldly cause, even one that directly affects them, because their allegiance is to a higher calling not of the material world. This has nothing to do with weakness or passivity, however. As their endurance of persecution throughout their history and their belief that martyrdom is an ever-present possibility show, the German Baptist faith requires courage. They seek to live their difference every day regardless of animosity. By standing apart from the world in their ‘uniforms,’ they constantly remind themselves of their commitment to the Ancient Order and their potential for suffering again at the hands of a fickle state. On the other hand, they say their lives are deceptively easy now as luxury

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5. *A Centennial Statement* (Ashland, OH: Brethren Publishing Company, 1984), 8.

can tempt one to become complacent. Experiencing ease today is no guarantee of having it tomorrow. All this affluence and comfort that Americans experience could turn on them quickly. German Baptists believe this condition requires their constant vigilance, but not their active intervention. They must wait upon God rather than take matters into their own hands. Nonresistance, while nonviolent, requires spiritual action amounting to holding faith and strong convictions while never resorting to physical or even legal resistance.<sup>6</sup>

When one looks at the communal life of the Old German Baptist Brethren they step back into the patterns of the early Brethren. The historic “three negatives” of nonconformity, nonresistance, and non-swearing show not a legalistic people but instead a people seeking to live an alternative way of life to the consumerist ways of the surrounding world.

Brethren historically have always been a people that did not identify with the affluent. Instead, Brethren have always stood on the side of those whom history books long overlooked. We were against slavery. We were one of the first Christian movements to ordain women. The rationale for taking such historic stands comes from the three negatives. We do not participate in the world’s violence because life is too precious to lose for worldly conquest. We do not swear because our word is too precious to lose in worldly legalese. Lastly, we do not conform because our witness is too costly to be lost in worldly (and fleeting) pursuits. Had we not been a people who stood against the consumerist trends of the ages and lived counter-culturally to the wealthy and worldly powers, we would never have been the historic movement that stood for the marginalized, downtrodden, and forgotten.

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6. Charles D. Thompson, *The Old German Baptist Brethren: Faith, Farming, and Change in the Virginia Blue Ridge* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 200.



## **Cultural Engagement**

A pervasive culture of consumerism in western society is insidious to our spiritual and physical well-being. We have bought into the belief that happiness is derived from possessing. We are continually exposed to advertising that has the powerful and persuasive message that we cannot live contently until we have the latest, the biggest, or the fastest products. The result is that we accumulate beyond our needs, feel inadequate because we are driven to obtain what we “deserve,” and experience anxiety because we have exceeded our capacity to protect and secure our many possessions. We find ourselves in bondage to the message of consumer marketing, too often targeting the younger generations who unconsciously succumb to the lure of technology upgrades and a throwaway mentality.

The unchecked cycle of “possess, consume, and throwaway” has come to the forefront of our minds as a question of responsible ethics. All things are a gift from God, yet rather than an economics of generosity and just distribution of goods, the adoption of society’s values of materialism, consumerism, and individualism results in missed opportunities to use the gifts entrusted to us for blessing others.

## **Conclusion and Application for the Local Church**

While we can easily be caught up in the trappings of wealth and consumption, there are steps that our congregations can consider in the effort to resist the cultural tug to accumulate and consume. It is most important that churches engage in the practices of resistance, restraint, and generosity as a community. There is a greater chance to stand counter to the lure of the culture of consumerism if we resist together. Leaders can help their churches develop these spiritual practices of resistance, restraint, and generosity by:

1. Committing themselves to consume less as a practice of

restraint that dismisses the persistent messages of a culture of consumerism. Put on the mentality of contentment by resisting to upgrade or to replace items that are in working condition. Couple this with the practice of generosity. Give away unused material possessions rather than putting them into storage.

2. Developing a regular habit of buying basic needs of food, clothing, and housing for others. Consider providing beyond their needs by giving others a generous, non-essential gift that they perhaps could not afford to buy for themselves or for their children. As a congregational practice of generosity, develop regular opportunities for your congregation to directly interact with individuals and/or families that are destitute, homeless, or experience impoverished living conditions in an ongoing way.
3. Considering organizing activities that expose the congregation to the futility of consumption and accumulation in our American culture. Plan a mission trip in which the culture you are visiting stands in obvious contrast to the western cultural conditions to which we are accustomed.

# Discussion Questions: Consumption & Wealth

## General Questions:

- What we believe about how we spend or gather our money is often a) hard to articulate and b) hard to change...
  - Why?
- What in this Topic do you find easiest to agree with? What do you find most difficult to agree with?

## Biblical & Historical Foundations Questions:

- Take a moment to look at some of the passages cited in the Biblical Foundations section of this Topic.
  - Are they used appropriately?
  - Do you think the argument made in this section is a strong one?
- What did you find compelling, confusing, or even inspiring in the Historical Foundations section?
- What current realities around this Topic might lead us to abandon or adapt our historical treatment of it?

## Conclusions and Applications Questions:

- What suggestions in the Conclusions and Applications section seem reasonable? Unreasonable? Why?
- In what ways does our congregation respond well to this Topic? In what ways do we respond poorly?

- What might be some of our blind spots when it comes to this Topic?
- How can we agree to disagree about this topic well, if that's what we need to do? What common ground can we find here?
- *Bonus:* How would you improve this statement if you could?



# Issues of Life and Death

## Introduction

THE BRETHREN CONSIDER EVERY HUMAN life a gift, one in which God has great hope and personal investment. Because each human life is a unique and prized creation of God, we must treat our own lives and others' with love and respect (Mark 12:31). This foundational belief guides us as we form convictions about many aspects of life and death in our world.

There are few issues as divisive or as basic to our commitment to Christ as those related to beginning or ending another person's life. We recognize that any discussion of these topics is best done in a way that depends upon the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's "fruits" in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22, 23). Although there are other areas into which we could speak, it makes sense in the given moment to talk about abortion and reproductive rights, slavery and human trafficking, murder, suicide, euthanasia, and the death penalty.

## Biblical and Theological Foundations

A fundamental Brethren belief is that God, revealed in Scripture, is "the maker of heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them" (Psalms 146:6). God creates, preserves, and governs life. The pinnacle of God's life-giving work is seen in humanity, who uniquely presents God's image to the rest of creation (Genesis 1:26-27).

Scripture speaks to the truth that God continues to give, actively sustain, and govern human life (cf. Psalms 139; Colossians 1:17; Acts 17:24-28). Human beings are "knit together in the womb" by God (Psalms 139:13), meant to live for God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31), and

it is God's hope for humanity that we live this life in light of the truth that we have already "died" to death, and look forward to resurrection (Romans 6:2-13). God considers every person priceless (Psalms 49:8).

Jesus, who is "the image of the invisible God," is our standard of behavior when it comes to interacting with others around issues of life and death (Colossians 1:15; Philippians 2:5ff.). Jesus has also promised that those who follow Him will find great purpose and joy in this life (John 10:10; 1 Peter 1:8-9).

Further, we believe that God's concern with human life extends beyond death. In Jesus' bodily resurrection we see a pattern for ourselves (cf. Romans 6:2-11; 1 Corinthians 15; 1 John 3:2). We who trust in Jesus will also be, on the other side of death, raised back to life in bodies free from "decay" (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:35-56). It is this promise that encourages our faithfulness until Jesus' return, and also empowers us to form convictions about life and death matters and how to live in light of them. As Paul reminds us, speaking with our resurrection in mind, "...stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58) This promise also reminds us that while we live now, we are to care for our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19; Romans 12:1).

## Historical Foundations

These biblical and theological foundations have guided Brethren throughout their history. As is noted in a relevant passage in *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, Brethren are unanimous in their belief that "human life is a sacred creation of God, reflecting the image of God."<sup>7</sup> This commitment has influenced various choices throughout our history. Perhaps the most significant is the expectation among Brethren that one cannot own slaves and confess Christ as savior; slaveholders, if desiring to join the Brethren, were required to not only free their slaves but reimburse them

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7. Donald E. Miller, "Abortion" in *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1: A-J, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press), 2.

for their labor as well.<sup>8</sup> It was stated, “under no circumstances can slavery be permitted in the church.”<sup>9</sup> Such a counter-cultural commitment, still standing today, is directly energized by the belief in the basic preciousness of life that the Bible reveals.

## **Abortion and Reproductive Rights**

We exist in a society in which personal civil rights afforded the unborn are often in tension with personal civil rights afforded pregnant women (as well as their partners). We seek to create space for conversation where this tension exists and create dialogue about what it means to bear and give life well in a world as broken by sin as ours. Our convictions regarding abortion today remain similar to those stated by an earlier generation of Brethren:

The moral issue of abortion [is a question of] the circumstances under which a human being may be permitted to take the life of another. We believe that all human life has value, is a creative act of God and begins at conception. We oppose the use of abortion for personal or sociological purposes. We recognize therapeutic abortions may be necessary where the pregnancy endangers the life of the mother.

Personal and sociological issues often so deeply influence the issue of reproduction in our society that biblical concerns can be neglected. In a cultural mix as broad as ours, both couples and individuals have a range of responses to this topic. The question of whether or not to have a child is considered from various perspectives with various principles guiding our actions: stewardship, legacy, obedience, family, peer or economic pressures and worries, and the like. Consequently, we desire to position

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8. Wayne J. Eberly, “Slavery” in *The Brethren Encyclopedia, Vol. 2: K-Z*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press), 1190.

9. *Ibid.*



one another to think deeply about the consequences of decisions regarding reproductive rights. Just a few questions we might ask ourselves and each other include:

- How should one view in vitro fertilization? For example, if one sees life as beginning at conception, then any form of IVF that destroys “left over” fertilized eggs is a process that includes the killing of another person. Given the physical and financial costs of IVF, when should adoption be considered as an alternative?
- In what situations ought one consider abortion a reasonable course of action? What strategies are most Christ-like when it comes to informing individuals about the realities of the abortion process? What is the relationship between providing abortion after-care and providing abortion-alternatives or organizing action for abortion’s legal end? Knowing that abortions will be sought and undertaken regardless of safety or legality, what is a Christian’s responsibility? We consider it a given that we ought to care for those who have had abortions in a way that matches the truth of God’s unconditional love for them.
- When is birth control of any method appropriate? What most informs our decisions about birth control? Is birth control a privilege, a responsibility, or both, and why?
- How does adoption relate to issues of reproduction? We who have been adopted into God’s family (Romans 8:14-15; Ephesians 1:5) acknowledge that to adopt a child into our own families is a powerful act of grace and self-giving, inclusive love. How can we support safe and healthy adoptive services where we live?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and there are certainly others that could be asked. However, in a society in which we often resort to slogans or received wisdom rather than biblically informed, deeply

explored conviction, we must take the time to consider our answers to these questions well.

## **Suicide and Euthanasia**

No individual has the right to take their life or the life of another; this is particularly true of those who claim Jesus as “author of life” and Lord over creation (Acts 3:15, Philippians 2:9-11). However, we recognize that both these things happen every day throughout our world.

In most circumstances, death by one’s own hand, whether suicide or accidental overdose, is a final symptom of terrible heartache, sadness, and loss. There are typically psychological, spiritual, and emotional problems the individual has faced for some time; the only Christian response to such tragedy is a posture of mercy. In such a situation, the most immediate support we must give is to care for those who are grieving over the death of this person they may feel they have failed.

We further recognize that self-harming of any sort is not only its own tragedy, but also can often be a precursor to suicide. Rather than condemn when we are faced with those who engage in self-harm, such as cutting, we should seek to provide healing communities, judgment-free opportunities for help and counsel, and quality referrals and treatment when our support is no longer helpful.

The topic of euthanasia is a charged one. The word means “good death,” and we acknowledge that death, when contrasted with persistent suffering, can seem to be good, and may objectively be the best among many distressing outcomes. We are people who believe in the promise of resurrection, whose hope extends beyond this life (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:19 and surrounding); for that reason, we are not driven by fear of death to prolong the life of someone facing suffering despite their wishes.

We recognize that it is a privilege of modern Western society to even consider prolonging the life of a terminally ill person beyond his or her biological capacity to survive. However, because this is often an option that we do have, we seek to navigate treatment in a way that takes into account the conscience and wishes of an individual and God’s orientation to preserving life when possible. We respect “Do Not Resuscitate” (DNR)

wishes of those whose care we are charged with even when these contrast with our own choices (cf. James 4:17, Romans 14:23), and acknowledge the responsibility that comes with acting as someone's Medical Power of Attorney in our society.

When, by available methods of observation, we see God is preserving the life of an individual who is near death, we generally believe that available treatments should be used to help an individual survive. We also recognize that individuals, facing only brief extensions of life or terminal illness, will be led by their consciences, Christian counselors, and God to reject expensive, uncertain treatments. Such a decision should not be judged harshly, and we caution one another to be careful not to project our own fears, convictions, or emotions onto the life of a sick loved one.

## **Killing and the Death Penalty**

There is no consensus among us regarding whether or not it is allowable for a government to kill on behalf of its citizens, whether as punishment for a crime (e.g., the death penalty) or in its citizenry's defense, as in war or policing. The New Testament clearly states that those who are to follow Jesus are not to "repay evil for evil" (Romans 12:17, 1 Peter 3:9). Retaliatory murder of any sort is condemned (Romans 12:21). Jesus demands that His followers extend grace and hospitality to those they might consider their "enemies" (cf. Matthew 5:38-48) and models this for us (Luke 23:34).

Despite these admonitions, some of us say that in a world as broken and stained by sin and death as ours, to take life is inevitable, and doing it within certain bounds is admissible.

In Romans 13, Paul envisions the State as "appointed by God" and "not a terror to good conduct but to bad." Paul, who writes this, suggests that those who reject the State's right to kill on behalf of its citizenry or in the course of maintaining legal order must do so knowing that there will be personal consequences for their decisions (Romans 13:2).

## **Modern-Day Slavery and Human Trafficking**

Slavery has existed almost since the beginning of the human race. The authors of the Bible never seem to envision a society in which slavery does not exist. There are, however, key passages in the Old and New Testaments that undermine the social and economic systems that depend on slavery (see, for example, the way Leviticus 25 limits slavery in the life of Israel—those who are meant as a model society for the nations around them). The most important of these is Paul’s letter to Philemon, which functionally positions Onesimus, the slave, to be treated as family. In a shame and honor culture such as Paul’s, to treat a sibling as a slave would have been unthinkable. Further, for those who have been “baptized into Christ,” who are “God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus,” the distinctions between “slave and free” have been undone, for we “are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Ultimately, Christians are to consider themselves “slaves to Christ,” and Paul suggests that if those “owned” by others as slaves “are actually able to be free, take advantage of the opportunity” (1 Corinthians 7:21-23, CEV). Taken together, we believe that while the Bible never explicitly condemns slavery in general, the trajectory of biblical exhortation is toward equality between all people, and that Christian faith demands a rejection of this practice in all its forms.

It is often falsely believed that slavery no longer exists. This is simply not true; in fact, there are, as of the time of this document’s writing, more individuals enslaved than at any point in human history. From the forced prostitution of minors, to the dehumanizing manipulation of domestic and agricultural workers who have little or no legal rights, people are often treated as commodities to be profited from rather than God’s unique creations. We believe any practice that dehumanizes people in such a way actively works against God’s desire to see human lives flourish. It is impossible to “love our neighbor as ourselves,” as Jesus commands, and to enslave them in any way for any purpose (cf. Matthew 22:39).

The church must be aware of the practices of human trafficking and modern-day slavery in other countries and in ours. More than this, all

members of the body of Christ must speak out against enslavement for any purpose, as well as actively support its end. To do less is to neglect fulfilling the “law of love” that Jesus has called us to (James 2:8, Matthew 22:36-40).

## Conclusion and Application for the Local Church

A wide spectrum of conviction about these life and death issues is present in The Brethren Church. Despite this, our shared commitment to love each other as Christ has loved each one of us keeps us from division, indifference, and antagonism toward one another (cf. John 15:12, Ephesians 4:2-6). We are encouraged by the commitment to love each other in spite of any difference of opinion or conviction expressed earlier in our history, which we still hold to be true:

In trying to apply Scripture, the Brethren have had many discussions about the relationship between scriptural principles and the forms in which they are expressed.... We have not always come to the same conclusions. But we have tried to live out with one another the adage used by the [Progressive Brethren]: “in essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”<sup>10</sup>

There are a number of ways in which we, as individuals and congregations, might engage with issues of life and death. In all of these, we seek to act with the grace and compassion that Jesus embodied. We encourage congregations to consider the following suggestions:

1. Consider forming a discussion group around these issues. Create a charter for the group that includes expectations about confidentiality and best communication practices. Use the questions in this essay as a starting point for authentic

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10. “How Brethren Understand God’s Word,” 1993.

moderated discussion.

2. Befriend someone who loves Jesus, yet has different convictions than you on these topics. Commit to discuss your differences in a spirit of sibling-affection and love.
3. Consider a preaching series or Christian Education curriculum on these topics. Engage with resources that challenge your starting assumptions, while affirming the centrality of Jesus on these issues.
4. Support organizations that work against human trafficking and modern day slavery, such as [freetheslaves.net](http://freetheslaves.net), [notforsalecampaign.org](http://notforsalecampaign.org), [ungift.org](http://ungift.org), etc.
5. Partner with a local organization that provides substance abuse or suicide-survivor care. Invite a hospice care provider to a Sunday school class to discuss end-of-life care and concerns. Partner with a local adoption and foster care agency to provide mentoring or agency support. Foster or adopt a child, especially older children who stay longer in the foster care system.
6. Create congregational guidelines for how to talk about psychological or emotional problems in a healing, constructive way, and hold each other accountable to these.
7. Plan intergenerational discussion groups or panels, where people can ask questions about reproductive-rights, sexual practices, and the like, and receive feedback, without fear of judgment.
8. Ask more questions, together with other Christians who love you, guided by the Holy Spirit.
9. Consider developing personal belief statements on the topics above. Argue them to your satisfaction, and see if others can find gaps in your argument. Commit the process to God as you go.
10. We invite one another to reflect on the tension inherent in using law to both protect life and to take it. Tension is present when

we seek to ensure the State prohibits abortions of all sorts even as we uphold the death penalty. We must always remember God's ultimate judgment over human behavior (Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:19, John. 5:22).

# Discussion Questions: Issues of Life & Death

## General Questions:

- What immediately comes to mind when you think of Christians talking about Life & Death Issues? Why?
- What in this Topic do you find easiest to agree with? What do you find most difficult to agree with?

## Biblical & Historical Foundations Questions:

- Take a moment to look at some of the passages cited in the Biblical Foundations section of this Topic.
  - Are they used appropriately?
  - Do you think the argument made here is a strong one?
- How does the theological concept of Resurrection inform our Christian relationship with life and death issues?
- What in our lives isn't informed by a belief that human life is sacred?

## Cultural Engagement Questions:

- Abortion & Reproductive Rights section: What surprised you about this section? What did you find challenging or troubling?
- Suicide & Euthanasia: How do your personal experiences with these topics shape your understanding of these issues?



- Killing & the Death Penalty: How do we navigate disagreement on these issues? Is the “tension” mentioned here real or imagined?
- Modern Day Slavery: What are your experiences working against, learning about, or facilitating Human Trafficking and Modern Day Slavery?
- What do you feel as you consider trying to engage with all these areas well?

### **Conclusions and Applications Questions:**

- What suggestions in the Conclusions and Applications section seem reasonable? Unreasonable? Why?
- In what ways does our congregation respond well to this Topic? In what ways do we respond poorly?
  - What might be some of our blind spots when it comes to this Topic?
- *Bonus:* How would you improve this statement if you could?

# Immigration

## Introduction

ALTHOUGH THE BRETHREN CHURCH HAS never created a statement on immigration, it has been part of our story since our relocation from Germany and Holland to America in the early 1700s. A former Executive Director of the Brethren Church, signed a National Association of Evangelicals document advocating for Comprehensive Immigration Reform. (Visit <http://evangelicalimmigrationtable.com/influential-signatories/> to view this.) What follows seeks to clarify our reflection on this deeply personal topic.

## Biblical Foundations

The story of God's people is a story of a sojourning people. The Hebrew word linked to immigrant, *ger*, is used 92 times in the Old Testament, and immigration stories fill its pages. Abraham, then called Abram, is called to leave his land, and even offers deception at a border crossing. Joseph is the first recorded victim of human trafficking, foreshadowing the Hebrew people's demonization and exploitation in the foreign land of Egypt. Moses, Ruth, David, and Daniel are all immigrants. Even Jesus is an immigrant on multiple levels: He migrates to Earth in the Incarnation, He is a refugee in the flight to Egypt, and He self-identifies as the "stranger" in need of hospitality in Matthew 25. Thus, the Bible is a narrative of migration.

Because of the nature of migration, immigrants are inherently a vulnerable people. Immigrants are repeatedly mentioned along with the poor, orphans, and widows as a group most needing the attentive

protection of God's people. In every place where these groups are mentioned, the Bible calls for compassion and justice.

Throughout the Bible, God's efforts to draw people to Himself depend on an outward movement of people. This is particularly evident in Isaiah 56:8 and Paul's address to the people of Athens in Acts 17:26-27. Jesus specifically directed His disciples to go out to all people groups in Acts 1:8. Thus, the Bible depicts themes of diaspora missiology.

The constant theme throughout Scripture is God's desire to create a people for Himself. Some have referred to this as the covenant formula; Dale Stoffer has articulated this as the Bible's "Peoplehood Formula."<sup>11</sup> Among the formation of this people is their call to practice hospitality as they are gathered together.

God created out of an immigrant community a people for Himself who have been consistently called to act with compassion, justice, hospitality, and mission to the vulnerable of this world. This is just as true of Christians, whose example is Christ, as it was true of the Israelites. Moreover, the vulnerable people of the world includes immigrants.

Three passages in particular ultimately inform us about how we should treat all people, including immigrants. First, in Matthew 25:35, Jesus declares that any action done towards the hungry, thirsty, and strangers, which includes immigrants or those from foreign countries, are actions done toward Himself. Secondly, Mark 11:12-19 relates the familiar passage about Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers. While doing so, Jesus quotes Isaiah and Jeremiah to declare God's intention that His house be "a house of prayer for all nations" had been perverted as it was made a "a den of robbers." Jesus does all this in the only area of the Temple that the non-Jewish worshippers of God were allowed to enter. The passage functions as a condemnation of the way in which the economic practices of some had co-opted the space God had made for foreign people to worship Him. It also reminds Jesus followers of His great concern for "the nations." Lastly, Acts 17:26-27 reminds us that all nations trace back to one person and are delineated

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11. Dale Stoffer, "Peoplehood," in *A Brethren Witness for the 21st Century*, eds. Jason Barnhart and Bill Ludwig (Sun Graphics, 2014), 73.

by God rather than people. Paul states, “From one man He made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us.” One realizes that every “any one of us” shares not only the same ancestor, but also the invitation of God to seek and find Him, no matter the country of origin.

## Theological and Historical Foundations

The foundational efforts of the early church were based around the Christocentric practice of hospitality. From infancy in the Roman Empire, the early followers of Jesus displayed radical hospitality in “welcoming the stranger,” which led to the formation of hospitality houses, hospitals, and even entities that would later become restaurants. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation, many groups migrated seeking refuge from persecution, particularly the Anabaptists, including our own Brethren Church. Sigrun Haude has noted in *The Reformation World* how these groups sought sanctuary in German communities such as Strasbourg, Augsburg, Esslingen, as well as Moravia and Eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup> The Reformation was spread through immigration. There currently exists an ecumenical movement among Catholic, Mainline, Evangelical, and Anabaptist Christian groups advocating for comprehensive immigration reform.

The Brethren have historically been a Kingdom community people; that is, there is a sense that the Kingdom of God becomes tangible among the community of faith. In such a community the values and postures of God’s reign become a reality—values such as justice, compassion, and hospitality. Yet, this Kingdom community of the church often stands in stark contrast to the State. The current immigration debate is one that reveals this collision of two worlds, as partisanship, policy, and pundits often direct the church’s response, rather than Christ’s mandates.

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12. Sigrun Haude, “Anabaptism,” in *The Reformation World*, ed. Andrew Pettegree (London: Routledge, 2000), 251.

## Cultural Reflection

Many policies within the current American immigration landscape are contrary to the multiple teachings within Scripture mentioned above, particularly those passages within the Gospels. In seeking to make sense of the tension he faced between the State and Jesus' commands, Peter Nead, a 19th century Brethren leader, held that the "Christian is fundamentally a citizen of God's kingdom and *it is to this kingdom that he owes his primary allegiance...*the Christian is to obey the state in all things *not contrary to Gospel precepts* [italics added]."<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that both the life and teaching of Jesus and the witness of the church have informed how the Brethren have approached issues similar to immigration. The Brethren have been quite conversant with forced migration and crisis-based migration throughout our history. Furthermore, the Brethren were active in their opposition to slavery in the American South during the 19th century. Both these examples of historical engagement are transparent corollaries to the current immigration issue in the United States.

We recognize that the present immigration crisis is complex for varied reasons:

- Existing immigration laws have not been consistently enforced.
- Current immigration quotas and policies were adopted well before the current humanitarian crises in the Middle East. Note that many of these vulnerable people are our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Not only has terrorism in the Middle East led to mass emigration to the West, but U.S. foreign policy and trade agreements

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13. Dale R. Stoffer, *Background and Development of Brethren Doctrines, 1650-1987* (Philadelphia, PA: Brethren Encyclopedia, 1989), 129.

have also played a part in the political and economic unrest in Central America, which has led many to seek sanctuary in the U.S. both legally and illegally.

- Many immigrants who entered the U.S. illegally have become contributing members of American society with spouses and children who are American citizens.
- Whatever position we may have on childhood immigration, the Christian principles of compassion and love for our neighbor should be a central part of the conversation.
- The political partisanship in Washington has left the status of the estimated 11.8 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. in 2017 in a state of limbo. Even if Congress is able to reach a bipartisan agreement soon, it may take years to resolve the individual cases of these undocumented immigrants. This political partisanship has only exacerbated the ongoing uncertainty experienced by these immigrants.

The Brethren Church has desired to educate an uninformed culture and leadership. We are for engaging civic and government leaders to advocate for policy that mirrors the posture and mandates found within Scripture, particularly the life and teachings of Jesus. We are for our leaders making research and fact-based decisions in guiding the nation in our immigration policy. We are for a consistent and compassionate immigration policy. We are for updated VISA quotas and current policy that have not changed since 1965 such that they accommodate the needs and economic realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are for family unification.

While many people hold an anti-immigrant mentality, the Brethren should strive to be counter-cultural by displaying compassion in both our actions and our speech. Regardless of our level of agreement on issues of immigration, our response to this crisis must be counter-cultural, aligning with Jesus' compassionate, justice-oriented character.

## Conclusion and Application for the Local Church

The Brethren desire to be a kingdom community, to be a people of pilgrimage, and to have a social witness in regard to treatment of immigrants. Some of our congregations are comprised of immigrants. Thus, our churches ought to engage immigration issues because it personally affects them. Beyond this, engaging with the issue of immigration gives churches the opportunity to fulfill the Great Commission of going to the “nations” in a way that also fulfills Jesus’ command to “love our neighbor as ourselves:” many of us do not have to cross continents and oceans to act as missionaries, but simply cross our streets and meet those who have come from far away to live near us.

Furthermore, many immigrants come to our communities with a vibrant and robust faith, breathing new life and vitality into many stagnant congregations. Finally, the issue of immigration is relevant to Brethren congregations because it allows congregations to live into the vision of the world to come found in Revelation 7, in which “every nation and every tongue” worship God together.

There are countless ways in which our churches can engage the issue of immigration in both broad and local ways. Some of these are below.

1. The simplest and most important thing our congregations can do is have on-going intentional times of prayer for many groups impacted by this issue: immigrants, leaders who craft policy, our own hearts of compassion, etc.
2. Our churches can write, call, and visit legislators to discuss potential policies that honor Scripture in our treatment of the immigrant.
3. As Brethren we should become more aware of the ways in which national and international political and economic policies have contributed to the immigration crisis. We would encourage every Brethren congregation to invite recent im-

migrants to share their stories and the reasons for their seeking a new home in the U.S. At General Conference we might also have Brethren who are immigrants from Central America share the hopes and dreams as well as the hardships that led them to decide to immigrate.

4. Innumerable volunteer opportunities exist that directly enable Christians to serve the immigrant community in a Christ-like way. Churches can volunteer at local civic agencies that offer ESL classes. Individuals can volunteer at local homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, and soup kitchens that frequently see immigrants in crisis. Many local jails allow for Spanish-language Bible studies. Churches can encourage their members to support locally owned immigrant businesses. Congregations might consider launching “transportation ministries” that offer transportation to immigrants who have no access to obtaining a driver’s license, or to partner with local congregations to do so.
5. Hosting a town hall meeting, either for the congregation only or for the community, is great for creating space for dialogue and ideas. A focused sermon series or small group study can give great opportunities to shape a congregation’s culture so that care for immigrants, and a commitment to realize Jesus’ concern for these “strangers” among us, can be owned by our churches.
6. Gather to study and discuss some passages such as Exodus 12:49; Exodus 22:21; Exodus 23:9; Exodus 23:12; Leviticus 19:9-10; Leviticus 19:33-34; Leviticus 23:22; Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 15:15-16; Deuteronomy 10:18-19; Deuteronomy 24:14; Deuteronomy 24:17-19; Deuteronomy 27:19; Psalms 94:3-7; Psalms 146:9; Isaiah 56:3-8; Jeremiah 7:5-7; Jeremiah 22:3; Ezekiel 22:29; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5; Matthew 2:13-14; Matthew 25:35; Mark 11:17; Luke 10:25-37; Acts 17:26-27; Romans 12:13; Ephesians 2:14-18; Philippians. 3:20; Hebrews 13:2; Revelation 7:9-10.
7. There are individuals and organizations with extensive experience in ministry to immigrants. Two books providing great



ideas and resources are *Christians at the Border* by Danny Carol Rodas of Denver Theological Seminary; *Welcoming the Stranger* by Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang of World Relief. The World Relief organization with its global experience in immigration concerns is highly recommended.

Ultimately, the immigration issue is a justice issue interwoven with other justice issues such as poverty, violence, exploitation, and human trafficking. Insofar as we Brethren are called to become like Jesus for the world, we cannot neglect this great area of compassion, and opportunity to embody the love that defines us.

# Discussion Questions: Immigration

## General Questions:

- Have you ever had a difficult conversation on the topic of immigration? (Or have you avoided one?) When this topic comes up, what is your primary source for arguments you make or find most compelling?
- Do you find the references to the National Association of Evangelicals in this Topic persuasive or not?

## Biblical & Historical Foundations Questions:

- The Biblical Foundations section of this Topic makes a broad case about immigrants and migration before focusing on a few specific passages.
  - What do you think of the way this section is structured?
  - What argument is being made here? Is it a strong one?
- What argument is being made in the Theological & Historical Foundations section of this Topic?
- How might our Brethren history influence our engagement on this issue?

## Cultural Reflection Questions:

- Do you agree with the statement, “Immigration reform is the civil rights movement of our generation.” Why or why not?

- A tension between what's biblical and what's legal is revealed in this section. How do you personally resolve this tension?
  - Did you know? “Only 12% of white evangelical Christians and 20% of all Protestant Christians say that they think about immigration issues primarily from the perspective of their Christian faith.” (Source: Pew Research Center, 2010)
- Very specific stances are made in this section. What do you believe about them?

### **Conclusions and Applications Questions:**

- What suggestions in the Conclusions and Applications section seem reasonable? Unreasonable? Why?
- Do you agree with the final paragraph in this Topic? Why or why not?
- In what ways does our congregation respond well to this Topic? In what ways do we respond poorly?
  - What might be some of our blind spots when it comes to this Topic?
- *Bonus:* How would you improve this statement if you could?

# Poverty and Racial Inequality

## Introduction

ONE CANNOT DISCUSS POVERTY WITHOUT first considering the systemic inequalities that are often the root of the issue. Indeed, the need to have open, honest, and ongoing discussion that leads to responsive action is underscored by the recent string of interracial tragedies. The realities of racism, privilege, and resulting poverty are exacerbated by the church's silence about and complicity in these injustices.

## Biblical Foundations

God's abhorrence of inequalities that prop up one's affluence at another's expense is a repeated theme in the Bible (see, for example, Leviticus 19; Isaiah 56; Jeremiah 7; Mark 11:12-25; John 17; Acts 10, 11, 13; 2 Corinthians 5; Romans 4; Ephesians 2; Revelations 5; Revelation 7:9-11). Beyond this, it is the community of God which is meant to be God's agent of justice and mercy in the world. This community of God is intended to be one of diversity and radical generosity. John 17, Acts 13 and Ephesians 2 in particular make it clear that God wants to take people of different backgrounds and make them one in Christ. All grievous inequities are to be abolished; whatever gets in the way of unity and equality among God's People is a denial of God's intention for those who follow Christ together.<sup>13</sup> Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.<sup>14</sup> At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality,<sup>15</sup> as it is written: 'He who

gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little;” (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).

## Historical Foundations

The church has had a complicated history in its response to poverty and inequality. There has been little need to present a convincing argument that followers of Jesus ought to help the poor. Yet, much of the helping has been little more than dispensing charity and has often further hurt communities in poverty. Some voices in the church have misused the Bible to support the oppression and suppression of people in the heinous acts of (to name only a few things) the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Jim Crow, and even contemporary instances of racial profiling and police brutality. Other prophetic voices have fought against these practices, such as William Wilberforce, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as well as contemporary voices.

John Kline was a Brethren leader who stood against slavery in the American South during the 19th Century. Kline, martyred for his social witness, said, “I do believe that the time is not far distant when the sun will rise and set upon our land cleansed of this foul stain, though it may be cleansed with blood. I would greatly rejoice to think that my eyes might see that bright morning; but I can have no hope of that.”<sup>14</sup> Through Kline and others’ influence, the Brethren were encouraged in their opposition to slavery in the American South during the 19th century.

## Cultural Engagement

Poverty cannot be viewed in a vacuum and thus divorced from its systemic causes—often racial inequality. It seems that in each decade there has been a striking reminder of how much need there is for the people of God to model justice and reconciliation. Cultural wave after

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14. John Kline quoted in Benjamin Funk, *Life and Labors of Elder John Kline, the Missionary Martyr* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 2006), 213, 382.

cultural wave has broken upon the shores of the church to remind us of the changing tides. From barely-distant moments in our cultural history such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Watts Riots, and Rodney King, to recent events in Sanford, Ferguson, New York, Cleveland, Charleston, and Baltimore, one realizes that God's People cannot stop their efforts at living up to the biblical mandate to create just and equitable communities. This is especially true of those Christians who are in superior positions of power, prestige, and privilege.

Paul writes in Philippians 2, "if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Philippians 2:2-4). This humbling practice, which the church is called to embody, is energized by Jesus' own example as one "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:5-7). This "emptying," or *kenosis*, is something we, the Brethren Church, must embrace. Therefore, we are for emptying ourselves of our cultural privilege to create more just and equitable communities. We are for empowering diverse leadership in our churches and communities who can partner together to reverse systemic racism. We are for adopting a posture of listening in open and honest dialogue with those different from ourselves. We are for celebrating the mosaic diversity of the Kingdom. We are for the systematic development and empowerment of the marginalized rather than solely giving relief through charity (even as we remember Jesus' great promise of reward in Matthew 25 for those who selflessly give to the hungry, thirsty, sick, poor, and imprisoned). We are for caring for "orphans and widows in their distress," knowing that to do so is true devotion to God (James 1:27).

With regard to the biblical call to be counter-cultural in response to poverty and inequality, the Brethren find themselves in a peculiar position. Jesus envisions His church as an alternative community that practices radical inclusion and unity as we model the diversity of God's

Kingdom (see John. 17, Revelation 5, 7). However, the majority of our congregations are radically homogeneous and mono-ethnic. The Brethren Church paces with the average church in North America, which fails to meet even a mediocre inclusivity.

## **Conclusion and Application for the Local Church**

Implementing and engaging the issue of racial inequality and poverty in a local church necessitates that the local church should be a multi-ethnic and multi-economic community of faith. Intentionally being a diverse church means that the membership reflects its broader community. Offering a credible Gospel witness to inequality and poverty starts with a multi-ethnic local church, and a multi-ethnic church starts with multi-ethnic leaders. For example, the local church can “stage” this diversity, from the greeters to worship leaders and teaching pastors and from the church’s promotional photos to the dolls that are in the nursery.

Consider promoting the seriousness of poverty and inequality in the local church by a few important steps. First, learn about and teach the congregation the many ways in which poverty is perpetuated by inequitable systems, institutions, and laws in our society. Second, develop relationships that are mutually serving, authentic, and vulnerable with those who are unlike us in dramatic ways. Finally, consider the ways our own privileged positions—geographically, ethnically, racially, economically, and otherwise—blind us to how difficult it can be to escape systemic, generational poverty. These are not easy things to consider at any time, much less during times of economic distress and worry that currently face our society. We must ask ourselves, however, if we who have the very Spirit of God alive in us do not have the courage, resolve, and strength to deeply and critically examine our lives and laws, then who possibly can? God has blessed us so that we might be a blessing. Here then are a few ways in which this discovery process might begin:

1. A number of excellent book-length surveys of issues related to this topic would serve as great book or conversation club topics. Some of them include companion small group studies. Consider reading these or similar works together as a

congregation: *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church*, by Mark DeYmaz; *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, by Michael O. Emerson & Christian Smith; *Let Justice Roll*, by John M. Perkins; *Jesus and the Disinherited*, by Howard Thurman; *Toxic Charity*, by Robert Lupton; *Bridges Out of Poverty*, by Ruby K. Payne, Philip E. DeVol, and Terie Dreussi Smith.

2. Take some time in prayer to examine your material wants and your material needs. Ponder your situation in terms of wealth, income, and social mobility. Can you identify areas of privilege and socio-economic advantages over other people groups?
3. As an individual, form an intentional relationship with a Christian who is unlike you in some way, whether that is class, race, ethnicity, native language, citizenship status, or some similar socioeconomic or cultural difference. Share life together. Notice the ways our assumptions about what is normal or moral differ. As a congregation, do the same: worship together. Serve one another's neighbors together. Begin a conversation with others on how to make sense of your different experiences, assumptions, and fears. It is ultimately those empathetic relationships with others different from us that can begin to change our perspectives on questions of poverty, class, and inequality of all sorts. These conversations ought to motivate the local church to tangible and impactful community engagement that addresses the systemic issues of privilege, racial bias, and lacking access to resources ought to occur next via the local church.
4. The local church can engage the community in several ways. First, it may build relationships with many people on the opposite end of privilege. Relationships foster a sense of shared community that is a core value of spiritual growth and vitality for the Brethren. Secondly, churches can engage in the social and justice-related aspects of inequality and poverty that seem most pressing in their community. Perhaps an umbrella non-profit could be formed to provide long-term development, advocacy, and/or policy change within that church's community. Thirdly,



the local church can seek to address the deeply-rooted socio-economic inequalities in communities by creating economic incubators and businesses within communities.

# Discussion Questions: Poverty & Racial Inequality

## General Questions:

- Was the Introduction to this Topic what you were expecting?
- The Topic can be one that causes a lot of anxiety for people. Why do you think that is?
- What about this Topic do you find easiest to agree with? What do you find most difficult to agree with?

## Biblical & Historical Foundations Questions:

- What is the main argument made in the Biblical Foundations sections of this Topic?
- Take a moment to look at some of the passages cited in the Biblical Foundations section of this Topic.
  - Are they used appropriately?
- What did you find compelling or confusing in the Historical Foundations section?

## Cultural Engagement Questions:

- Do you think about the systemic causes of poverty and inequality, including racial inequality, when you consider these things?
  - “Systemic” refers to the way civil, economic, religious, and other societal systems are organized, which affect the

opportunities or lack thereof that types of people have. Such systems aren't ones we often think of as moral or immoral. Why is that?

- What is your response to the multiple “We are for...” statements in this Section?
- Does the last paragraph of this Section challenge you? In what way?

### **Conclusions and Applications Questions:**

- What suggestions in the Conclusions and Applications section seem reasonable? Unreasonable? Why?
- How does our congregation do at the three steps in the second paragraph of this Topic? How about you personally?
- Which of the numbered activities do you find the most difficult to engage? Why?
- What might be some of our blind spots when it comes to this Topic?
- *Bonus:* How would you improve this statement if you could?

# Sexuality

## Introduction

BRETHREN AFFIRM SCRIPTURE TO TEACH that marriage is between a man and a woman and that within the marriage relationship is found the ultimate expression of sexual love that promotes the flourishing of an intimate relationship between two people. A paramount issue for the church today is the nature of human sexuality, and specifically, whether the practice of homosexuality is permissible or not. In this section, we will explore the biblical, theological, and historical claims regarding the issue of homosexuality.<sup>15</sup>

## Biblical Foundations

Brethren come to the definition of marriage and an understanding of sexuality from both specific biblical passages and the larger narrative that God is telling through these texts. Our approach begins with the understanding that Scripture is never interpreted or read in a vacuum. A particular people in a particular time engage its words in community with one another. While this does not diminish the inspired nature of the Scripture nor distract from the radical truth claims it makes, the Bible is understood by, for, and with community. Even our understanding of

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15. This document draws content from other Brethren groups including the Church of the Brethren's 1983 Annual Conference statement on the issue entitled, "Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective." The 1983 document produced by our sister denomination is well worth revisiting.

truth, ultimately, is a relationship. Jesus declares in John 14:6, “I am the way, the *truth*, and the life [emphasis added].”

We will review the pertinent texts and explore the biblical claims about issues of homosexuality as revealed through these passages:

### **Genesis 18-19**

The depiction of the moral decay of the city of Sodom reaches its apex with the attempted homosexual assault by a mob of men. Though these were not the only sins of the city (Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jesus will later point to the sins of self-indulgence, arrogance, inhospitality, and indifference to the poor), the behavior is understood contextually to portray licentious behaviors and depravity.

### **Leviticus 18:22; 20:13**

Leviticus’ Holiness Code (Lev.17-26) denounces homosexual acts decisively in these two almost identical texts. The difficulty comes in that the prohibition of homosexual acts occurs with other statutes related to the Holiness Code. The question for some interpreters is how the church can stand by the prohibition of homosexual acts from this text while ignoring the other prohibitions. One must ask what laws of the Holiness Code are reaffirmed in the New Testament. We now turn to the New Testament passages that shed light on this issue.

### **Romans 1:26-27**

The first chapter of Romans mentions both lesbianism (the only mention of female homosexuality in the Bible) and male homosexuality. Paul states that both are prohibited and that the parties involved have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (v. 25). In verses 26-27, Paul argues that any person involved in homosexual activities has given up “natural relations for unnatural [ones].”

### **1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 1 Timothy 1:9-11**

Both of the above texts present a list of condemned sins, and both of the lists include the Greek word *arsenokoitia*. This one word is translated

in the New Testament to mean heterosexual male prostitution, sodomy, cultic homosexuality, and all forms of homosexual activity.

While the above passages are often isolated as the focal point of the conversation, it is important to understand the larger framework within which the Bible upholds human sexuality. We turn to the Church of the Brethren's 1983 Annual Conference statement on the issue entitled, "Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective":

This overarching framework, identified in the opening sections of this paper, upholds heterosexuality as the reflection of God's image (Genesis 1:27) and as the culmination of creation (Genesis 2:18-25). It is in union with a sexual opposite that male and female find fulfillment as persons and identity as a family. While some modern distinctions about homosexuality are missing in the Scriptures, homosexual behavior is considered contrary to the heterosexual norm that runs throughout Scripture.

Jesus reinforced the unified biblical view of human sexuality. He upheld the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, reciting from Scripture God's original intention in creation: "Have you not read that He who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one?' So they are no longer two but one" (Matthew 19:4-8). Thus, Jesus affirms that heterosexual marriage is the pattern for sexual union God intended from the beginning.<sup>16</sup>

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16. Church of the Brethren, "Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective," (1983 Annual Conference, March 1983).

The Bible affirms heterosexual marriage and sex within the confines of that marriage as the most appropriate expression of sexuality. While the act of sex is important, Scripture does not make it paramount, but rather the relationships around sex are identified as the most important. Therefore, Scripture is framed around the values of love and covenant. The church has a tendency to focus on the perceived lack of love and covenant commitments in others while neglecting our own lack of love and covenant commitments. As a people following Jesus together we have freely received the love of Christ and must freely offer it.

Likewise, our covenant calling is to reconcile the world to Jesus. Reconciliation comes through a people who, by recognizing their utter dependence on God, are shaped into a people of loving stability in a world torn asunder by ideologies, fear and anxiety. Therefore, while Scripture prohibits homosexual behavior, it is important to realize that Brethren have understood the Scriptures to shape us into a peculiar people. In the end, the goal of the Christian journey is not to just be right but, even more so, to be faithful in helping others towards reconciliation to God.

## **Historical and Theological Foundations**

### *Following Jesus together*

Brethren follow Jesus together and recognize that life is created, inspired, and sustained within community. Our congregations are to be shaped by Jesus in such a way that we are known as a peculiar people to the surrounding world. Likewise, internally, we are to be a people so in love with our Lord and Savior that we want as many as possible to know Him.

At the cross of Christ we crucify our desires to control others; therefore, we should not demand that others perfect their behavior before we share Christ's love with them. We are all sinners daily saved by the sacrifice of Jesus.

## Alternative Witness of the Church

The church is an alternative witness to the ways of the world. As such, the church must stand as a bastion for the flourishing of healthy intimate relationships within an American culture that often confuses intimacy and sexuality. The Brethren, as a people of love and truth, Word and Spirit, male and female, reject any identity categories that dehumanize and bring confusion to personhood. We have historically understood ourselves as brothers and sisters of Christ Jesus. We, like Jesus, recognize the common humanity and unique stories of all the people we meet, and acknowledge all as children of God.

According to Jenell Williams Paris, a Brethren in Christ author, determining our identity using sexual categories is, as she writes:

... a Western, nineteenth century formulation of what it means to be human. [They are] grounded in a belief that the direction of one's sexual desire is identity constituting, earning each individual a label (gay, lesbian, straight, etc.) and social role. Perceived as innate and as stemming from inner desire, sexual identity has to be searched out, found, named and expressed in order for each person to be a fully functional and happy adult. Finding our sexual feelings is part of how we come to know ourselves and present ourselves to others.<sup>17</sup>

While the Brethren affirm the importance of healthy human sexuality, we do not believe that sexuality alone constitutes identity, and we do not allow modern categories of "sexual identity" to determine our understanding of sexuality, marriage, or personhood.

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17. Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 41.



## Celibacy and Conversion as Two Alternatives

All of the above brings us to the necessary concluding question: If unmarried sex is out, and same-sex sex is out, and being married is not an option, what is left? The Brethren suggest two alternatives while recognizing the extraordinary difficulty of both options: celibacy as sexual restraint and conversion of sexual orientation. The option of celibacy is made especially difficult in our American cultural context because of the emphasis placed on sexual freedom and fulfillment.<sup>18</sup> Our society is hyper-sexed and struggles to think outside the framework of sexual fulfillment.

The other option is a conversion of sexual orientation that mitigates same-sex attraction. The Church of the Brethren statement reads:

For many homosexual persons, however, this choice is extraordinarily difficult and complex. For some it is impossible. The church must seek to create a climate for hope, for praise of God, for renewed effort, for claiming and exploring the heterosexual dimensions of being.<sup>19</sup>

If such an option is sought, the Brethren make it clear that we do not approve of coercive “cure” tactics that seek to change sexual orientation. We must appreciate and be sensitive to the needs of those struggling around us, realizing that all human sexuality is subject to the Fall, which renders all of us sexually broken. We share the journey with all people in their quest for sexual health and wholeness.

## Cultural Engagement

The topic of homosexuality is currently one of the most pressing moral issues in contemporary society. The American church itself is conflicted in its response to homosexuality, yet it must wrestle with the issue in

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18. *Ibid.*, 129.

19. Church of the Brethren, “Human Sexuality.”

order to provide effective guidance in the face of the instability of moral shifts in a postmodern society. While our culture becomes increasingly fixated on the pursuit of sex outside of the Judeo-Christian boundaries of monogamous heterosexual marriage, the church can serve as a guide, directing us to the true fulfillment of our human need for intimacy and relational wholeness. That fulfillment is found ultimately in our communion with Christ and with one another.

Intimacy, wholeness, love and acceptance are inherent to our human nature as created by God. Yet in the pursuit of these legitimate needs, our culture offers the false and misguided promise that they can be satiated wholly through human sexuality. The Brethren Church, as a people who want to be known by their relationships and their love for one another, are positioned to be a witness to the world regarding the most intimate of all relationships: our relationship with Christ and His church. We have an opportunity to show our world that we are made to be known by God, fulfilled through our communion with Christ. Therefore, against the tide of culture, we freely and joyfully forgo the pursuit of false loves and the emptiness of distorted sexual desires.

Consequently, we as Brethren are to proclaim our position not in words of condemnation of those misled by an overtly-sexualized society, but in the affirmation that the culmination of our deepest human desire for intimacy between two people is that expressed solely within the bounds of a heterosexual marriage.

## **Conclusion and Application for the Local Church**

To continue to be an effective witness to our world, our churches would do well to engage this issue with grace, compassion, maturity, humility, and truth. We must not avoid the topic in fear of rejection, but seek to demonstrate the heart and mind of Christ.

Some intentional steps to assist our churches in a practical engagement of this topic include the following:

1. Consider the wise counsel of Scripture to “speak the truth in love.” Particularly in its concerns for sexual morality,

the church has been too quick to speak the truth first as a defensive response to the sexual immorality of others. While the truth must be spoken, perhaps we can emphasize to our congregations the imperative to do so “in love,” with a spirit of patience, with compassion, and most of all with grace, just as Christ deals graciously with our sin. In this way, we let the work of the Spirit become evident over time with a person who experiences same-sex attraction.

2. Make the topic of alternative sexual-orientation an intentional point of conversation in our congregations. Use opportunities in our preaching schedule, small groups, focus groups, and among our leadership teams to wrestle through this challenging topic and come to steps of practical engagement that will work in your specific community of faith. There are myths and stereotypes attached to the homosexual community, to the ill intent of those supporting gay marriage, and to the faithfulness of believers who experience same-sex attraction. Our love for God and for others demands that we do not fall prey to stereotypes, but rather do the hard work of educating our churches on the topic. We are afforded a great opportunity to share in this process together with our brothers and sisters, as a community, listening to and discerning the Spirit’s guidance for our churches.

When the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Galatia that is being tormented by a group known as the Judaizers who are attempting to insert the old Law into the loving plan of Christ, an insertion that would turn Gentiles away from the gospel, he writes, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). On the surface, this declaration is intended to instruct church life, but the ramifications of a people who understand themselves through this lens are massively important to the watching world. We are not held hostage to the anxieties, fears, and beliefs of the surrounding culture, but instead are free to engage them redemptively with love. In taking the stand that homosexual marriage is

wrong, we must communicate the message that heterosexual marriage is healthy, holy and fulfilling and, above all, Christ-honoring. Most importantly, we must be a people who embody clarity in the difference between sex and intimacy as we call for the flourishing of healthy intimate relationships for everyone.

# Discussion Questions: Sexuality

## General Questions:

- Why is this Topic so divisive? Do you find this Topic something easy to discuss, or difficult to discuss? (In what situations? With whom?)
- What are your basic impressions of how this Topic is treated?
- What in this Topic do you find easiest to agree with? What do you find most difficult to agree with?
- This is “General Questions” time: What do you think about what you read here?

## Biblical & Historical Foundations Questions:

- Do you think the philosophy outlined at the start of this section is appropriate?
- Take a moment to look at some of the passages cited in the Biblical Foundations section of this Topic.
  - Are they used appropriately?
  - Do you think the argument made here is a strong one?
- The Historical Foundations section of this Topic pays special attention to issues of identity. Do you think this is appropriate? Why or why not?
- Take a moment to reflect on the “Two Alternatives” sub-section. What strikes you in these paragraphs?

## **Cultural Engagement Questions:**

- Do you think the posture taken in this section is appropriate? Why or why not?

## **Conclusions and Applications Questions:**

- Does the idea of engaging this topic as an “intentional point of conversation” in our congregation cause you worry, anxiety, or even excitement? Why?
- How can we live out the Church’s “Alternative Witness” with regard to sexuality better than we do now?
- In what ways does our congregation respond well to this Topic? In what ways do we respond poorly?
- Can Christians disagree about the position taken in this Topic and still be part of the same congregation? Why or why not?
- What is missing from this Topic’s discussion of sexuality?



# Stewardship of Creation

## Introduction

ALTHOUGH GLOBAL WARMING AND CLIMATE change have become a controversial topic in the past several years, in addressing this issue our approach is to avoid polarization over the debate of the rising temperature of our planet. Instead we will focus on what the Bible says about how we should steward the resources we have at our disposal. These resources are not limited to money, clothing, and housing but include everything a Christian has and does, as well as any influence he or she has in the world.

## Biblical Foundations

Early Christians understood that the resurrection of Jesus ushered in a new creation for both humans and creation. We can see the Apostle Paul's understanding of this reality in Romans 8:19-21: "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration...in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." Creation eagerly waits for the restoration that Jesus' resurrection started.

This view of creation and redemption has been forgotten occasionally in Brethren thought, as a shift away from the Christian hope of physical resurrected life in a resurrected body (cf. 1 Corinthians 15) has been replaced with a hope for a disembodied eternal existence in "heaven." As such, the vision of "new heaven and new earth" given in Revelation 21, what we could call a "resurrected creation," has been discounted. Yet, our Brethren hope lies in the vision of the resurrected life in a resurrected



world. This has led us to act as though creation itself is expendable and something to be used up, rather than that which “groans” like the Spirit in us (Romans 8:22, 24) in our waiting to be redeemed. Humanity was made to be its steward and protector.

Like the early church and Brethren before us, we believe that God’s creation is good and has been corrupted by sin. We believe that Jesus will return and restore all things and make all things new! We also believe that restoration started with the resurrection of Jesus. We are to be good stewards over all we are given (Luke 12:48).

## Theological and Historical Foundations

The Brethren understanding of creation has been less doctrinal than confessional, affirming our total dependence upon God the Creator. Brethren have always believed that gratitude and obedience are the proper responses of those whom God has created and seeks to re-create. God’s power is not limited:

God creates solely out of the might of His Word--original, dynamic, gracious, all-powerful. The same word of God active in creation is active also in redemption (John 1:1-3). The very God who created all things is also the maker of a “new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1a). So the fitting response of all creatures, Brethren believe, is obedient gratitude for the gift of life, yes, of new life in Christ through His Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

Brethren have historically understood God’s creative act in Genesis to have relevance for all of creation, not just humans, believing that God’s purpose for humanity is not separate from the purpose for the rest of creation. Humanity was placed in the garden after all the necessary elements for human survival had been produced. Humanity was given

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20. *The Brethren Encyclopedia, Vol. 1: A-J*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press), 351.

the mandate to rule over the earth (Genesis 1:28). Just as ancient kings would make statues of themselves and set them up throughout their territory as a reminder of who ruled it, we people were called to spread out over the face of the earth and, through our presence and the caretaking work, prove that the earth is God's territory. We would be the boundary markers all over the place, images of God that say "This is the Lord's."

The "Fall," that great act of distrust on humanity's part, broke our relationships not simply with God and each other, but with creation itself (Genesis 3:14-19). Sin, having entered the created world by our hand, has caused the creation to "fall" along with us. All creation is in need of reconciliation to its creator, both humanity and that which humanity was meant to govern. The Fall included the alienation of humanity and nature from God and could only be undone with the redemption of both. When creation is redeemed, it will happen simultaneously with the total redemption of humanity, which is why Paul can say in Romans 8:19-21 that creation itself awaits humanity's redemption.

With these understandings in mind, we must address creation and environmental issues from a stewardship perspective. Brethren have commonly addressed stewardship in a way that examines our relationship to the material goods we own and the resources we can produce without an equal concern for the care of creation. While we understand that all we have belongs to God, our stewardship must be broadened to include environmental issues in the same measure as faithful stewardship of material goods and resources.

## **Conclusion and Application for the Local Church**

Regardless of what one believes about the legitimacy of climate change, our mandate by God to be stewards of all that He gives us is a charge Brethren must take seriously. With such an aim in mind, we encourage the local churches to consider some ways in which individuals and congregations can live out this stewardship mandate:

1. Gather with others to better the local environment: organize a litter cleanup, naturalize some part of your church property with wildflowers, plant a butterfly garden, or pull invasive plants

at a park. Plant a tree.

2. Provide ways for individuals to recycle their trash and minimize their use of non-recyclables. Consider using ceramic mugs and rainforest-friendly coffee when gathering together. Learn about the hidden environmental effects of those purchases made by the church.
3. Reconsider the theology you have regarding creation, resurrection, and where you fit in these things. Is it biblical? Consider a congregation-wide journey through questions about how a Christian can be a better steward of the creation God has made.
4. Talk about this well. If the church cannot discuss the topic in a peaceable way, find ways to explore the topic of creation care and environmental stewardship in a way that brings you closer to others, rather than farther apart.
5. Spend time in nature. Take your children. Consider the miracle of what God has made, especially if for one reason or another (location, ability, etc.) you are fairly removed from what God has made.

# Discussion Questions: Stewardship of Creation

## General Questions:

- What in this Topic do you find easiest to agree with? What do you find most difficult to agree with?
- In your experience, have you found issues of creation-care or stewardship of creation to be a dividing or unifying thing with others?

## Biblical, Theological, & Historical Foundations Questions:

- What do you find surprising about the broad argument in the Biblical Foundations section?
  - How does it affirm or challenge your typical way of thinking about creation?
  - Have you been taught that stewardship of creation is a biblical issue or isn't something Christians are meant to care about?
- The third paragraph of this Section deals with theological “place” that humans have in creation. Language of the “dominion” that we people have over creation is usually brought up here. How is this different from what you've heard or learned? Do you agree?
- Do you agree that “all creation is in need of reconciling with its creator?” What are some implications of this?

## Conclusions and Applications Questions:

- What suggestions in the Conclusions and Applications section seem reasonable? Unreasonable? Why?
- Are these applications concrete enough?
- In what ways does our congregation respond well to this Topic? In what ways do we respond poorly?
  - What might be some of our blind spots when it comes to this Topic?
- How can we agree to disagree about this topic well, if that's what we need to do? What common ground can we find here?
- *Bonus:* How would you improve this statement if you could?

# Peace and War

## Introduction

THE FORMER STATEMENT ON THE topic of Peace and War, *Brethren Resolve for Peace*, written in 1986, was exceptional in a number of ways. It sought to graciously include the wide-ranging experiences and theologies of various Brethren peacemakers, while acknowledging The Brethren Church's denominational history and commitment to "not repay anyone evil for evil" (Romans 12:17, 1 Peter 3:9).

Yet, for all its inclusiveness, the *Resolve* was also a product of its time, explicitly reacting to a global stage shaped by the ongoing anxiety of "East-West relations" and the threat of nuclear war. The world has experienced phenomenal changes, both positive and negative, on this same stage since the time of the *Resolve's* writing. It becomes clear, upon reading the work included in the 1991 "Brethren Positions on Social Issues," that by allowing global events to so deeply shape many of the document's talking points, the *Resolve's* relevance was primarily oriented toward the time of its own creation. A new statement, in the tenor and spirit of the *Resolve*, is necessary.

Toward that end, this present statement on peace and war is an attempt to first locate and articulate the biblical witness regarding these two topics and then discuss the way that this witness can connect with Brethren faith and practice. Finally, suggestions regarding how this conviction might be practiced are included at the end of this work.

## Biblical Foundations

The New Testament clearly talks about peace as an absence of anxiety, or sense of inner peacefulness, as when Paul reminds us that through grateful prayer, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,

will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7). This is seen also in Jesus’ great promise, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). However, this is not the primary way in which the New Testament understands peace. Peace is most often understood as the absence of conflict and division between two parties. This peace is characterized by interactions with others that are humble, gentle, patient, forgiving, and loving (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12).

Much of what Paul writes to the church centers on this sort of relational peace. Christians are to make every effort to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). As members of “the one body,” we’re called to “let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts” (Colossians 3:15). Paul does not mean here that we are supposed to “feel peaceful,” but that we are not supposed to be in conflict together! This follows from the work of Christ; because of our reconciliation with God, we are to be reconciled to one another. Paul’s statement in Colossians guides us in our practice: “...In [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him God was pleased to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross” (Colossians 1:19-20).

Because we have been reconciled to God, there is no condemnation for us who are in the family of Christ Jesus—Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 10:12). We have all been marked by the Spirit, and look forward to worshipping God with others from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9). Our relationship with God is one characterized by peace, that is, an end of all hostility, and so our relationship with all kinds of people is to be characterized by the same peace: “Live in harmony with one another.... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends” (Romans 12:16a, 17-19a). It is noteworthy that where Paul talks about our need to “live peaceably with all,” he ends his plea by demanding that Christians treat their enemies well. Any retaliation on our part is supposed

to take the form of blessing those who mistreat us: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

Christians are to be people who engage in acts of reconciliation. God made peace with us, and so we make peace with everyone. Jesus’ reconciling work is the “peace of Christ” that we *both* experience in the relationships we have with other Christians *and* also obediently reproduce in whatever relationships we have (see Colossians 3:12-15). That this peacemaking is an act of obedience to Christ is clearly seen in Jesus’ most basic, yet difficult, commands to His followers. For example, Jesus, after saying, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9), declares in Matthew 5:38-48:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Christians are called to emulate God’s perfection, part of which is seen in extending hospitality and grace to our enemies and especially



avoiding violent retaliation. Paul, writing in Romans 12:19-21, is only echoing Jesus' own command to His followers when he reminds the church in Rome:

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

## **Theological and Historical Foundations**

Only occasionally in the history of the Church, usually during seasons of persecution, has a commitment to obey Jesus' call to nonresistance and nonviolence been a majority commitment. More often, the church has simply accepted that a Christian's involvement in armed conflict and war, as a representative of the State, is a necessary part of life until Jesus returns. In this majority perspective, to live under the government of a nation or ruler is to accept the nation's enemies as one's own—even if these enemies are brothers and sisters in Christ. This same perspective is found in Paul's letter to the Romans: "authorities that exist have been instituted by God," and therefore, "whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed" (Romans 13:1-2). Those Christians who have chosen to take a nonviolent or nonresistant stance in the present world thus understand that their civil disobedience will result in punishment, for, as Paul notes in Romans 13:2, those "who resist [authority] will incur judgment." Such Christians have come to believe that although Paul says, "rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad," this is not always the case. Often rulers are a terror to whatever conduct does not agree with their rule (Romans 13:3; a biblical example of this is, of course, seen throughout Revelation, particularly 17:6, in which the state is seen as the "Whore of Babylon" who is "drunk on the blood of the saints").

The Brethren movement was born out of conflicts between the church and State, and has, along with Mennonites, Quakers, and others, a long commitment to nonviolence and nonresistance. These so called “peace churches” include not only The Brethren Church, but many denominations closest to us including Church of the Brethren, Dunkard Brethren, and German Baptist Brethren. This commitment to do as Jesus commands has been historically referred to as the “nonresistant commitment,” in reference to Jesus’ command and Paul’s reaffirmation that Christians should “not resist an evil person” (Matthew 5:38).

Brethren have often held our commitment to “nonresistance” as a fundamental value, going so far as to bar from communion those fellow Brethren who bore arms in conflict, and to only cautiously accept self-defense, and that with criticism. However, following the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this commitment increasingly became a minority perspective. This was a result of both a rise in obedience to personal conscience over unity or conformity to congregational practices and new attention to, and national involvement in, global warfare. Our nonresistance stance retains this minority perspective status today, even as we create space for a revival of this historic core value and proudly claim our heritage as a historic “peace church.”

Since the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, peace has been primarily understood by our branch of the Brethren movement as “inner peacefulness” and “harmony in family and personal relationships,” and far less as an intentional choice to “not repay evil for evil.” The Brethren Church acts as an endorsing agent for a number of military chaplains, and many Brethren serve or have served in various armed forces roles, as well as representatives and agents of city, state, and local governments. The majority of Brethren understand the State as an agent who acts for the good of its citizens and sees violent conflict as a necessary evil until Jesus returns. Other Brethren, however, continue to suggest that Jesus was aware of the deep costs associated with rejecting violence as a means to solving conflict; these brothers and sisters recognize with ambivalence the benefits war has brought them.

While our historic nonresistance stance continues to be a minority perspective among the members of The Brethren Church, we believe it deserves equal footing with the more common “inner peacefulness”

stance held by most of us. We welcome the counter-cultural voice of the nonresistance stance with its reminder of the many difficult demands Christ makes upon those who follow Him, even as we struggle to find unity on these topics. All of us recognize the need to engage with the rights and responsibilities that citizenship demands of us while also claiming first our primary allegiance to God's Kingdom. We seek to "obey God, rather than men" in all circumstances in which we feel these loyalties are in conflict (Acts 5:29).

## **Conclusion and Application for the Local Church**

There are many ways in which any particular congregation or individual might explore issues of peace and war as well as the related concepts of peacemaking, Brethren nonresistance, State-Church relations, nonviolent action, and military chaplaincy. We encourage local churches to consider some suggestions about how to enact these principles:

1. Encourage pastors to teach about, preach on, and model the historic nonresistance commitment.
2. Create in your local congregation a support program for those required to register for Selective Service, yet want to do so as Conscientious Objectors (see <http://www.sss.gov/FSconsobj.htm>).
3. Discern ways to provide job training or resume assistance to returning veterans, as well as to create PTSD support groups for veterans.
4. Seek to reconcile relationships. When in conflict with others, maintain communication, respect, and emotional boundaries. Keep short accounts. We must practice forgiving people quickly instead of holding a grudge. Invite mediation from trusted sources when conflict gets out of control. Avoid lawsuits and legal recourse, and commit to being friends with those who believe differently than you about "hot button" issues. Do not quickly divide from people.

5. Provide symposiums, classes, and other learning opportunities to explore various issues related to war and peace. Many of the historic “peace churches” have free, ready-made studies on these topics.
6. Engage with those ministries and organizations supported by The Brethren Church that are explicitly related to peacemaking in all its forms, such as the work of The Brethren Peace Initiative and the programming of The Ashland University Center for Nonviolence.
7. Befriend a Christian who has different convictions than you do regarding how to apply Jesus’ call to “not resist an evil person” or Paul’s reminder to “overcome evil by doing good.” Let your friendship include dialogue on these issues. Remember that it is by your love for one another that others will know you are followers of Christ (John 13:34-35).

Our Brethren commitment to making peace is one of the greatest, most counter-cultural practices to which Jesus commands obedience. Jesus inspires us to forgive even our murderers (Luke 23:34). Paul demands of those who would learn from him, “as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). Peacemaking marks us a people who truly do seek to live in peace together, committed to a dialogue on this topic that may not end until “swords are beaten into plowshares” (Isaiah 2:4) and we say, alongside all those our governments may have labeled as our enemies, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah, and He will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

# Discussion Questions: Peace & War

## General Questions:

- Have you ever had a difficult conversation on this Topic? What differences of opinion came up? What shaped these differences of opinion?
- What in this Topic do you find easiest to agree with? What do you find most difficult to agree with?

## Biblical Foundations Questions:

- What different understandings of the term “peace” exist in Scripture?
- Compare what you usually think of when it comes to “peace” to what the Topic suggests is the most biblical understanding of “peace.”
  - How do they relate? If there is a difference, where does this come from?
- What argument is being made here? Is it a strong one?
- What are the implications for a Christian’s (or the Church’s) life, given the argument made in this Section?
  - How do you personally resolve the tension between what Christians are supposed to do and what we often do instead when it comes to issues of peace, war, and violence?

### **Theological and Historical Foundations Questions:**

- What is your reaction to the first paragraph of this Section? Why? What surprises you here?
- How might identifying with our Brethren history influence our engagement on this issue?
- What do you make of the changes in perspective on this issue in the 20th century?
- Can you agree with the last paragraph in this Section? Why or why not?

### **Conclusions and Applications Questions:**

- What suggestions in the Conclusions and Applications Section seem reasonable? Unreasonable? Why?
- Should a Christian act with violence? Is there such a thing as “Christian violence?”
- What is the last paragraph of this Section trying to achieve?
- In what ways does our congregation respond well to this Topic? In what ways do we respond poorly?
  - What might be some of our blind spots when it comes to this Topic?
- *Bonus:* How would you improve this statement if you could?