

# The “Divorce Evil” and the Response of the Mennonite Church (1880s to 1905)

Dwight Gingrich, July 2, 2022

In 1905 the Mennonite Church in the United States and Canada officially resolved that no divorced and remarried person should be accepted as a church member. How did they arrive at this absolute position, given the strong consensus among early Anabaptists that divorce and remarriage were permitted in cases of adultery?

The reasons are complex and not fully clear. I have written several blog posts discussing various historical factors that probably helped pave the way for the Mennonite Church to take a harder stance against divorce and remarriage.<sup>1</sup> These factors include a separatist mindset that encouraged the Mennonite Church to adopt unusually stringent teachings, the historical accident of American Mennonites losing touch with the early Anabaptist confessions that most clearly affirmed divorce and remarriage in cases of adultery, and the transition from the German language to English.

In this paper I will discuss several more immediate factors that help explain how and why the Mennonite Church reached a newly strict consensus on divorce in 1905. These factors include the development of Mennonite periodicals, the practice of church conferences, the eventual development of a General Conference, and, perhaps most importantly, a growing concern about the “divorce evil” in America.<sup>2</sup>

In a recent blog post I described three contrasting perspectives on marriage permanence, labeling them radical freedom (no restrictions against any mutually-desired divorce), radical faithfulness (second-mile devotion in marriage but acknowledging marriage can be broken by adultery, abuse, or abandonment), and radical permanence (nothing but death can end a marriage).<sup>3</sup> I also suggested that radical permanence tends to be “a reactionary stance.” It seems to me that the historical evidence shows this to be true, to a significant degree, for the Mennonite Church. Simply put, the early Anabaptists affirmed forms of radical faithfulness, but the Mennonite

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<sup>1</sup> See “Why did Mennonites Abandon the Early Anabaptist View of Jesus’ Exception Clause? (Separatism and Confessional Statements),” March 6, 2021, <https://dwightgingrich.com/why-mennonites-abandon-early-anabaptist-view-exception-clause-separatism-confessions/> and “Why did Mennonites Abandon the Early Anabaptist View of Jesus’ Exception Clause? (Transition from German to English),” April 6, 2021, <https://dwightgingrich.com/why-mennonites-abandon-early-anabaptist-view-exception-clause-transition-german-english/>

<sup>2</sup> Another factor that deserves separate treatment is how the Mennonite approach to Bible interpretation changed as they were influenced by the Protestant fundamentalist movement. See, for example, “Anabaptist or Mennonite? Interpreting the Bible” C. Norman Kraus, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2004), <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/fall-2004/anabaptist-or-mennonite-interpreting-bible-0>. It appears to me that such changes both shaped evolving Mennonite views on divorce and were used after the fact to explain the stricter stance the Mennonite Church had already adopted without detailed biblical defense.

<sup>3</sup> “Radical Faithfulness: A Proposal about Marriage Permanence,” June 25, 2022, <https://dwightgingrich.com/radical-faithfulness-proposal-marriage-permanence/>

Church in 1905 affirmed radical permanence as they witnessed the growth of radical freedom in American society around them.

In this paper I will share a lot of primary source evidence, mostly from Mennonite periodicals, that shows how Mennonites took an increasingly hardline stance against divorce as they became increasingly concerned about the “divorce evil” in society around them.

### **Early Divorce Debate in the *Herald of Truth***

In January 1864, John F. Funk began publishing the *Herald of Truth* and its German counterpart, *Herold der Wahrheit*. Although the idea of Mennonite periodicals had been proposed earlier, these papers were the first periodicals published in the Mennonite Church and they quickly became a quasi-official voice of this largest and most influential branch of all American Mennonites.

Within a year Funk had 1200 subscribers and within four years he had 2500.<sup>4</sup> At a time when the entire Mennonite population in America was less than 40,000 to 60,000,<sup>5</sup> Funk was soon reaching most leaders in the Mennonite Church and probably over half its membership.<sup>6</sup> Funk’s readers came from a variety of other Amish and Mennonite churches as well. As historian Nolt observes about the Amish Mennonites, “so many... read the Mennonite periodical *Herald of Truth* (and its German language companion *Herold der Wahrheit*) that for a time its editor listed the paper as the ‘Organ of 14 Mennonite and Amish Conferences’ (even though it never really held any such official status.”<sup>7</sup>

The *Herald* began as a four-page monthly paper, quickly expanding to eight (April, 1864) and then 16 pages (1867). In 1882 it became a semi-monthly, 16-page paper, and in 1903 it became a weekly, eight-page paper, totaling 416 pages for that year.<sup>8</sup>

In 1864, when the *Herald* was launched, publisher and editor Funk was not yet 30 years old, not yet married, and not yet ordained.<sup>9</sup> Funk’s impact was similar to that of some young Mennonite bloggers today, but much bigger, given the lack of competition and his ability to soon present his paper as the quasi-official paper of the Mennonite Church. But the similarities to today’s social media world are clear: Funk’s paper enabled, as never before, rapid (for the day) and prolonged

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<sup>4</sup> John A. Hostetler, *God Uses Ink: The Heritage and Mission of the Mennonite Publishing House after Fifty Years* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1958), 225.

<sup>5</sup> Schlabach estimates that in 1873 “there were 40,000 to 60,000 Mennonites in America.” In context it appears he is referring to Mennonites of all kinds. See Theron F. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 271.

<sup>6</sup> My very rough guess is that the membership of the Mennonite Church was around 10,000 to 15,000 when Funk started his paper, based on Schlabach’s figure and other information about the relative size of various Mennonite groups, such as found in Steven M. Nolt, *A History of the Amish* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1992), 170. I am also assuming that each subscription was read by multiple members, given the large size of Mennonite families.

<sup>7</sup> Nolt, *History of the Amish*, 162.

<sup>8</sup> Harold S. Bender, “Herald of Truth (Periodical),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1955, accessed July 2, 2022, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Herald\\_of\\_Truth\\_\(Periodical\)&oldid=143294](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Herald_of_Truth_(Periodical)&oldid=143294)

<sup>9</sup> Hostetler, *God Uses Ink*, 37-38.

discussion and debate between Mennonites across North America. Conference minutes were shared, so churches in one state learned how churches in another had decided on difficult topics. Sermons and letters were printed, sometimes leading to exchanges that lasted over several issues. As the paper expanded, it foreshadowed today’s social media even more by including notes about government decisions and even “tabloid news” about the rich and famous on matters such as divorce.

It was only four years after the *Herald of Truth* began that the question of remarriage after adultery exploded on its pages. In the September 1867 issue of the *Herald*, bishop John M. Brenneman raised the question of whether Jesus’ exception clause in Matthew 19:9 permitted both divorce and remarriage in cases of fornication. This started a vigorous debate in both district (regional) conferences and the pages of the *Herald* until the following summer.

Suddenly, Mennonites across North America began debating the same question: what did Jesus actually mean by his exception clause? Some, including Brenneman and the Virginia conference, affirmed remarriage in cases of adultery. Others argued against it. Soon everyone learned that the Indiana conference affirmed a differing answer than the Virginia conference and that bishops in Ohio disagreed strongly with bishops in Virginia.

Had bishop Brenneman quietly asked the Virginia conference for guidance, rather than his question being posed in the *Herald*, and had the *Herald* not printed the varied decisions of the Virginia, Ohio, and Indiana conferences, this whole divorce debate would have progressed much more slowly, or perhaps even fizzled out. Funk’s paper, however revealed deep disagreement, awakening hunger for greater clarity.

At first, Funk was willing to help host a divorce discussion in his paper:

We have received a large number of letters making inquiries and objections to the decision of the Virginia Conference in October last, in regard to divorce and marriage... The conference in Indiana adopted a conclusion which is in direct opposition to the conclusion of the conference in Virginia...

We will not pretend to say whether the one or the other is right or wrong. There are good reasons to be set forth for each view of the matter. An article on this very subject appears in this number of the *Herald*. Another has been received too late for publication this month, but will appear in the next issue. Now the way to reconcile this difference of views, let us carefully and prayerfully consider the matter, and hear each other’s views, and not be too ready to condemn the views of others without good Scriptural reasons. To discuss the matter candidly and kindly with due respect for the views of others, by reason and the Bible is the way to instruct the general reader, and enlighten the ignorant. Let every brother and sister reflect upon this matter, and search the Scriptures with care, that we may get the correct meaning of the word. Especially let the ministers take this point

into consideration and at our next conferences the subject may be properly decided. (January 1868, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>10</sup>

Six months later, however, in an editorial titled “Controversy,” Funk suggested that the divorce topic was not one suited to be decided in the pages of the *Herald*:

Something of the nature of a controversy has been admitted into the columns of the *Herald*. Considering the circumstances and character of the articles, we felt that there might be no harm in publishing them, but we have since learned that many of our readers did not consider it profitable. . . . We hope, while the brethren will be earnest and zealous in writing articles for the Herald, they will at all times seek to avoid *doubtful disputations*, and always to take grounds that can be clearly and beyond doubt substantiated and maintained by the word of God. There is a field large enough for every earnest and sincere seeker after the truth, without venturing upon the unknown, the uncertain, and the doubtful. (June 1868, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>11</sup>

In the following issue, in a rather pitiful paragraph titled “I Beg Pardon,” bishop Brenneman apologized for giving “an occasion of offense to many beloved brethren” by his “awkward article on divorce and marrying again.”<sup>12</sup>

Divorce debate temporarily simmered down in the *Herald*, but the topic was far from resolved within the Mennonite Church. Divergent views soon reappeared within the pages of the *Herald*. My research in the *Herald of Truth* (1864-1908) and in Daniel Kauffman’s rival periodical the *Gospel Witness* (1905-1908) uncovered enough editorials, letters, and articles addressing the topic of divorce to fill over seventy pages in a Word file.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I’ll share some of the most significant or representative material starting from about 1880.

### “A Matter of Question” in the Early 1880s

At an annual conference in 1881 in Elkhart County, Indiana, “there were twenty-seven ministers and deacons present, among whom were three bishops.” These leaders showed a surprising level of indecision about remarriage after divorce:

Bro. Kenagy, by request of Bro. H. A. Miller (who was absent) asked the following question:

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<sup>10</sup> John F. Funk, “Marriage and Divorce,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), January 1868, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 9, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth05unse/page/n7/mode/1up>

<sup>11</sup> John F. Funk, “Controversy,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), June 1868, Vol. 5, No. 6, p. 89, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth05unse/page/n51/mode/1up>

<sup>12</sup> John M. Brenneman, “I Beg Pardon,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), July 1868, Vol. 5, No. 7, p. 106, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth05unse/page/n60/mode/1up>

<sup>13</sup> This includes some short excerpts that mention divorce only in passing, but does not include several long articles that I didn’t take time to transcribe to my research notes.

When a man’s wife dies and another [man] leaves his wife, will the widower whose wife is dead be permitted to marry the forsaken woman?

After considerable discussion, this question was laid over until another conference.

Another question of a similar character which was brought before the conference was also laid over. (November, 1881, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, an anonymous article written for the *Herald of Truth* the next spring (1882) strongly affirmed the traditional Anabaptist understanding permitting divorce and remarriage only in cases of adultery:

I think it is plain enough that the children of God cannot separate for any cause save the cause of fornication. Christ says in plain language that fornication is the only reason for which they could separate and marry another. These are not my words but the words of Christ, and the Old Mennonites so understand them. I refer you to the first part of the article on *Matrimony* in the Confession of Faith in the Martyrs Mirror, in the year eleven hundred, and before, which reads as follows: “Of Marriage, it is confessed: That ... Christ, as a perfect lawgiver ... re-established marriage between one man and one woman, and rendered matrimony an indissoluble state, so that the parties cannot be separated, and be married to others, by other cause but adultery and death.” (March 15, 1882, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>15</sup>

An anonymous respondent soon disagreed, however:

The Herald of Truth, March 16th, contains an article in which the writer holds that in case of adultery a man may put away his wife and marry another, which I hold is contrary to the word of God. Neither the new nor old dispensation grants divorces, but forbids them... Paul tells the Romans that so long as one or the other liveth and they marry another, they are called adulterers. Now, the law that Paul here speaks of is not our law of the land, but it was the law that God had given his people. See Deut. 22:13-19. This is the law to which Paul referred. God gave this law; Christ confirms it... Death only gives privilege to marry again and be a true Christian. (May 1, 1882, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>16</sup>

Deacon Joseph Holdeman then joined the debate in agreement with the first writer:

Some one wrote an article on “Matrimony” opposing an article on the same subject in the March number of the Herald. I suppose the writer to have been a brother in the church and that he meant it all right. He holds that the writer in the March 15th No. erred in taking the position that in case of death or adultery a brother or sister was free to marry again, putting them on the same footing, which I hold Scriptural, as Christ’s sermon on

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<sup>14</sup> “Conference in Elkhart Co., Ind.,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), November, 1881, Vol. 18, No. 11, p. 194. <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth18unse/page/n110/mode/1up>

<sup>15</sup> “Matrimony,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), March 15, 1882, Vol. 19, No. 6, p. 85. [https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth19unse\\_0/page/n45/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth19unse_0/page/n45/mode/1up)

<sup>16</sup> “Matrimony Again,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), May 1, 1882, Vol. 19, No. 9, p. 131. [https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth19unse\\_0/page/n68/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth19unse_0/page/n68/mode/1up)

the mount clearly says. Read Matthew 5:32, and follow up the references, but do not omit putting in the sentences, “Saving for the cause of adultery,” as that belongs to the sentence wherever we find the subject spoken of...

Christ does not say if adultery or fornication was committed that they were not permitted to marry again, but I hold that according to Scripture he did ~~not~~ [“not” was a printing error; see footnote] allow it, and the old Mennonites understood it so... (June 15, 1882, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>17</sup>

The following summer (1883), A. K. Zook wrote a thoughtful article that appears to affirm the freedom to remarry not only for the cause of adultery but also based upon Paul’s words “not under bondage” in 1 Corinthians 7:15:

“And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another committeth adultery,” verse 9... It is wisely said, “Where God speaks, let man be silent.” Here, as well as in many other Scripture quotations, there is sometimes more stress brought to bear to prove opinion than the sacred word will admit... Christ did not say that it was or was not right to give a writing of divorcement, neither does he say, that by putting away their wives they commit adultery, but by putting them away for other causes than that of adultery or fornication, *and marrying another*, they commit that crime; for which, under the law, the penalty was death...

Adultery, or a violation of the marriage relation, is defilement, abomination to God, abomination to the Christian; the guilty one is defiled, dead to all intents and purposes to the innocent one, as regards their former relation. Christ did not destroy one jot or tittle of the law, Matt. 5:17, but only censured, and corrected its abuse. ...

Paul, in answer to a request from the Corinthian Church, 1 Cor. 7, ... says, concerning their inquiry, “Unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, let not the wife depart from her husband. But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband; and let not the husband put away his wife.” Here he alludes to cases where both were members of the Church... In verse 12 he says, “But to the rest speak I,” &c. *To the rest*; notice that here is a different circumstance, one in which the man or the wife only, had been converted to the doctrines of Christ. The believing one was not to leave the unbelieving companion, but if the unbelieving one departed, he says, Let him depart. “A brother or sister *is not under bondage in such cases.*” Not under bondage of the word, “What God has joined together.” Under such circumstances, from this ruling of Christian law, they are free of their marriage vows. But in verse 39, as in Rom. 7: 23, the apostle again refers to man and wife as being members of the Church. Here he says, “The

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Holdeman, “Matrimony Again,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), June 15, 1882, Vol. 19., No. 12, p. 183. [https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth19unse\\_0/page/n94/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth19unse_0/page/n94/mode/1up). Funk made a correction in the July 1, 1882 issue: “It may be of some interest to all those who are interested in brother Holdeman’s article in the June 15th No. of the Herald, entitled ‘Matrimony Again,’ to know that the compositor made him say the exact opposite of what he wrote. On page 183, middle column, fourteenth line from the top leave out the word ‘not’ and you will have his meaning.” [https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth19unse\\_0/page/n103/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth19unse_0/page/n103/mode/1up)



wife is bound by the law as long as the husband liveth.” This is, by some, understood as binding for life, under all circumstances, but it does not strictly teach so, and is in full harmony with Matt. 19: 9... (July 15, 1883, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>18</sup>

That December an editorial note in the *Herald* mentioned the uncertainty within the Mennonite Church on the question of remarriage, then urged readers to consider statistics about the growing prevalence of the “evil” of divorce. Would the Mennonite Church take a better stand than “government and... many churches” were taking?

The Mennonite Church has never [always?] refused to recognize divorce except for the one Scriptural cause; and it has been a matter of question whether any divorced person has a Scriptural right to marry again while a divorced husband or wife is living. This the Church has never encouraged, and but few such persons have been received into her communion.

Since the evil results of the departure of the laws of government and the discipline of many churches from the teachings of the Savior are so plainly apparent, great care should be taken ... Yet all should avoid, in their zeal, making restrictions that the Savior did not make.

The following statistics, reported at an Episcopal Conference for Southern Ohio, by a committee on the evils arising from the prevalence of divorce, are worthy of consideration: “In Ohio in 1870 there were 1,008 divorces and 26,459 marriages; or 1 to 25.2. Since that time the number had increased, till in 1882 there were 1,806 divorces, and 30,528 marriages; or 1 to 16.9. Since 1867 the number of divorces has been doubled, while the population of the State has gained only about fifteen per cent. If the evil should progress in the same ratio, in twenty years longer there will be as many divorces as marriages; and the very existence of the Christian family, which lies at the foundation of the safety and prosperity of the community, will be endangered. Five-sixths of the divorces in 1882 were granted in violation of the rules laid down by our Savior, and mostly for trivial causes.” (December 1, 1883, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>19</sup>

### **“A General Conference is a Necessity”**

In the late 1880s and the 1890s a variety of perspectives on divorce and remarriage continued to be expressed in Mennonite conference sessions and the pages of the *Herald of Truth*. An annual conference in Indiana in 1887 affirmed the possibility of receiving as a church member someone who planned to remarry after divorcing an adulterous spouse:

Bro. Good of Ohio then presented a question sent to the conference for consideration. The question is, whether the Scripture will allow the church to receive into membership,

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<sup>18</sup> A. K. Zook, “Matrimony,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), July 15, 1883, Vol. 20, No. 14, p. 212-13. <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth20unse/page/n111/mode/1up>

<sup>19</sup> “Divorces,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), December 1, 1883, Vol. 20, No. 23, p. 361. <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth20unse/page/n186/mode/1up>

a man who was married years ago to a woman who proved an adulteress, and whom he returned to her home and abandoned. He has not heard from her for ten years, and then she was living in the West, and was married. Since this time he had been married to another woman who has since died. It is his purpose soon to marry a sister in the church, and now he applies for membership.

Bro. Funk stated that it has been decided in the Indiana Conference, that when such come in the spirit of true penitence they can be received, provided they have done such act while they were in the world without Christ, and have been divorced from their marriage relations. Bro. Nice followed with statements about the same as these. Bro. Jos. Holdeman stated, that if we stand upon the articles of our confession, the matter is clear, as the confession of 1632 shows. [See his June 15, 1882 article affirming remarriage.]

Bro. Nice stated that the Word does not give us room to reject such, and referred to the woman at the well, to whom Jesus offered salvation if she would ask; and to the woman who had been taken in the act of adultery. The conference decided, that upon true repentance, such may be received into the church... (November 1, 1887, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>20</sup>

The same conference rejected divorce and remarriage for causes other than adultery, but revealed some uncertainty even on this question:

Remarks were made to show that the church can not sanction the giving of divorces, where the Scriptural cause does not exist. The question was also asked, whether those who have been married and have separated from their companions, without the Scriptural cause, without a divorce, may be received into membership. Other explanations show that those separated without a divorce, if they will neither seek a divorce nor marry again, may be received into membership. See 1 Cor. 6:11...

Bro. Shaum presented the query: Has a minister the right to unite in marriage a man and a woman, one of whom holds a divorce from a former companion without a scriptural cause? The question was not answered definitively, but the feeling leaned on the negative side of the question. (November 1, 1887, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>21</sup>

Some six years later (1893) the Mennonite Conference of Missouri held a meeting which included several decisions foreshadowing future trends, such as encouraging the adoption of uniform attire. (Daniel Kauffman was secretary for this meeting.) A restrictive view was taken of Paul’s “not under bondage” statement in 1 Corinthians 7:15:

4 Do we understand from 1 Cor. 7:15 that a brother or a sister is at liberty to marry again in case one or the other departs?

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<sup>20</sup> “Indiana Conference Report,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), November 1, 1887, Vol. 24, No. 21, p. 329. <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth24unse/page/n167/mode/1up>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



*Resolved* — That the “bondage” here mentioned, refers to the tie that exists between man and wife; that in case the “unbelieving depart,” the other is not bound to the unfaithful for life; but this does not confer the right to marry again until one is removed by death. Marriage after divorcement is contrary to Matt. 5:32; Matt. 19:9; Mark 10:9; Luke 16: 18; 1 Cor. 7:27. (October 15, 1893, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>22</sup>

As conference decisions and *Herald* articles continued to reveal uncertainty and disagreements within the Mennonite Church, some began calling for a general conference to resolve questions plaguing the district conferences. John Umble, in a 1929 *Mennonite Quarterly Review* article called “Early Conditions Leading to General Conference,” noted that “the widest possible divergence of opinion developed” within the Mennonite Church of this time on a variety of topics, including “public prayer meetings, English preaching, protracted revival efforts, evening meetings, and even on important points of Christian teaching.” Umble featured two of these topics in his article:

An outstanding example of this difference of opinion calling for amicable adjustment or at least for a general meeting for discussion and conference is the disagreement between certain sections in the East and West on two important questions—Sunday school and divorce. These incidents seem worthy of note for two reasons: first, historically, they show the imperative need of a general conference due to chaotic conditions generally, and, second, the latter brings out graphically the historical position of the Mennonite Church on divorce.<sup>23</sup>

Bishop John Funk was an early advocate of the benefits of a general conference, and he repeated his call for such a conference in an editorial in 1896:

The general conference is a necessity... It is a fact that questions have presented themselves, and will continue to present themselves, which are of too grave importance, too far-reaching, for a district conference to assume the responsibility, either to sanction or condemn.

If a district conference would take upon herself this responsibility, it would have very little hearing from the fact that her authority reaches only to the limits of her own district. If, however, a general conference should adopt certain measures, or decide against certain innovations, and all the representatives of the conference tie in harmony with it, it would have the sanction and support of the entire church and would in this way be made effectual to accomplish the purpose for which it was designed. This general support of the entire church would give it a force which must be respected by all. And this way it

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<sup>22</sup> “Report of the Mennonite Conference of Missouri,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), October 15, 1893, Vol. XXX, No. 20, p. 323.

<https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth30unse/page/n166/mode/1up>

<sup>23</sup> John Umble, “Early Conditions Leading to General Conference,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, January, 1929, Vol. III, No. 1.

would be possible to enforce discipline which under other circumstances would not be possible. (January 1, 1896, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, district conferences continued to discuss divorce from time to time. Some promoted a hard line that prohibited not only remarriage but even all divorce. For example, at the Conference of Missouri Mennonites in 1897, moderator J.M. Shenk included the following in his conference sermon:

With reference to the divorce question, I would say that this also has been changed. When the Pharisees came to Christ and referred to what Moses said concerning divorce, He replied, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for the cause of fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.”

While we find that for a certain cause separation was permitted, we can nowhere read that divorce was ever sanctioned by our Savior. The Apostle Paul, whose inspiration is undoubted, gives us the Scriptural idea on this subject when he says, “If she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband; and let not the husband put away his wife.” (November 15, 1897, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>25</sup>

The Annual Amish Mennonite Conference of Ohio and Pennsylvania similarly ruled against all divorces the following year (1898):

Are divorces justifiable according to Scripture? *Ans.* According to Matt. 19:9 we understand that a separation may take place in case of fornication; but according to Mark 10:4; Rom. 7:12; 1 Cor. 7:10, 11, divorces are not justifiable. (July 1, 1898, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>26</sup>

## The “Divorce Evil” in America and the Response of Church and Government

The more nuanced, traditional Anabaptist perspective on divorce had not disappeared, however. As late as December 1, 1900, an editorial by Abram Kolb in the *Herald of Truth* praised a canon proposed within the Protestant Episcopal church. This canon barred all divorced and remarried people from baptism, confirmation, and communion, but ended with the specification that “this canon shall not apply to the divorce for the cause of adultery.” Immediately after quoting this

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<sup>24</sup> “A General Conference,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), January 1, 1896, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, p. 5. <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth33unse/page/n4/mode/1up>

<sup>25</sup> “Conference of Missouri Mennonites,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), November 15, 1897, Vol. XXXIV, No. 22, p. 341. [https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth34unse\\_0/page/n175/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth34unse_0/page/n175/mode/1up). Daniel Kauffman was listed as one of two secretaries for this conference.

<sup>26</sup> “Ohio and Pennsylvania Conference,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), July 1, 1898, Vol. XXXV, No. 13, p. 197. <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth35unse/page/n99/mode/1up>

canon Kolb gave it unqualified praise, saying, “That is the law regarding divorce as laid down by Christ.”<sup>27</sup>

About a year later, in a note titled “Cause for Alarm,” Kolb surveyed how easy divorce was gaining ground in America. Here, taking a slightly harder tone, Kolb wondered “if it were ever morally right” for remarriage to occur even in cases of adultery:

During the past year, less than twenty divorces were granted in the dominion and territories of Canada, which contain over six million inhabitants. In the state of Indiana, with a population less than half as large, one divorce was granted for every six marriage licences issued, the total number of divorces granted being 4099. In the city of Elkhart, 491 marriage licenses and 113 divorce decrees were issued. The divorce evil, the grounds on which people are granted divorces in this country, is a disgrace. This is indeed a “sweet land of liberty,” but when liberty becomes license to such an alarming degree as is evident from the abuse of the divorce laws, then the belief becomes strong that among a large portion of the people of this so called enlightened, Christian country, the same low grade of morality, not to say spirituality, exists that existed, when it was said that they “married and were given in marriage” until the flood came and destroyed them all. The sacredness of the marriage vow and the marriage relation does not seem to be comprehended by many, and the ease with which a divorce can be obtained may be largely to blame for this sad fact. If it ever were morally right for one to remarry who for the one cause of separation given in the Bible had obtained a divorce from a former partner, it can nevermore be right, according to God’s word, for one to remarry who has obtained a divorce for the flimsy causes on which divorces are often granted, especially when the grounds stated are largely imaginary or greatly exaggerated, and the plea for divorce is entered with the special object of entering upon legally licensed adultery with another. “What God hath joined together let not man put asunder.”... (February 1, 1901, *The Herald of Truth*)<sup>28</sup>

Kolb’s mention of the “divorce evil” was not the first time this term appeared in the *Herald*. The first occurrence<sup>29</sup> was in March 1, 1896, where the author Zadah wrote, “If we wish to see the divorce evil lessened, let us take care how we flippantly speak of serious things.” This same article asked, “Yes, why does not some one rise and speak on the divorce question?”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Abram B. Kolb, “Divorces Barred Out,” Editorial Notes, *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), December 1, 1900, Vol. XXXVI, No. 23, pg. 354.

[https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth37unse\\_0/page/n183/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth37unse_0/page/n183/mode/1up)

<sup>28</sup> Abram. B. Kolb, “Cause for Alarm,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), February 1, 1901, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3, 34, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth38unse/page/n18/mode/1up>

<sup>29</sup> The noun *evil* was used to refer to divorce already in 1881, in an article by John S. Coffman: “Has the Believing a Right to Separate from the Unbelieving?” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), November, 1881, Vol. 18, No. 11, 194-95, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth18unse/page/n110/mode/1up>

<sup>30</sup> Zadah, “Jesting of Sacred Things,” *Herald of Truth* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), March 1, 1896, Vol. XXXIII, No. 5, 76, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth33unse/page/n40/mode/1up>. Zadah appears to be a female name. No last name is given.

It is essential to note that *divorce evil*, *divorce question*, and similar expressions such as *divorce problem* were not original with Mennonites. Such expressions, which appeared multiple times in Mennonite periodicals in the late 1800s and early 1900s,<sup>31</sup> were terms that were popular in American print in general during the same years.

It is hard to adequately express in a few short paragraphs the intensity of interest the American public gave to the problem of divorce during this time.<sup>32</sup> The United States started recording divorce statistics shortly after the Civil War and a rise in the number of divorces was soon noted. Worse, divorce rates in America appeared much higher than in most other nations, giving America a bad name internationally as a divorce-prone society. Newspaper editors, preachers, legislators, judges, and policy shapers of all sorts weighed in. Many were alarmed and called for reform, some organizing in efforts such as the National Divorce Reform League. Others, such as some women’s rights advocates, argued for further liberalization of divorce laws.

The following excerpt from an article in the *Michigan Law Review* in 1910 must suffice for non-Mennonite primary evidence of how divorce gripped the attention of the American public:

There is no doubt that divorce is anathema in the United States at the present time, and has been for some years past. The tremendous increase in the rate of divorce, which far exceeds the rate of increase of our population, is by most people regarded as a serious evil... This increase in the number of divorces has been the subject of editorials, of sermons, of investigations by various unofficial bodies and by the United States government... President Roosevelt, in an address to the Inter-Church Conference, said “Questions like the tariff and the currency are of literally no consequence whatsoever compared with the vital question of having the unit of our social life, the home, preserved. It is impossible to overstate the importance of the cause you represent. If the average husband and wife fulfill their duties toward one another and toward their children as Christianity teaches them, then we may rest absolutely assured that the other problems will solve themselves. But if we have solved every other problem in the wisest possible way it shall profit us nothing if we have lost our own national soul, and we will have lost

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<sup>31</sup> *Divorce evil* appeared about 19 times in the *Herald of Truth* and *Gospel Witness* from 1883 to 1908 (increasing in frequency), alongside similar terms like *this evil*. *Divorce problem* appeared about 9 times from 1887 to 1908 and *divorce question* appeared about 8 times during the same years.

<sup>32</sup> Those who want more evidence and analysis about the history of divorce in America will find the following sources fascinating: Paul R. Amato and Shelley Irving, “Historical Trends in Divorce in the United States,” in *Handbook of Divorce and Relationship Dissolution*, ed. Mark A. Fine and John H. Harvey (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), Routledge Handbooks Online. <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315820880.ch3>; Timothy Crumrin, “Women and the Law in Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century,” article on Connor Prairie website, N.D., <https://www.connerprairie.org/educate/indiana-history/women-and-the-law-in-early-19th-century/>; Andrew E. Eichmann, Henry F. Harris, and William Wickham Turlay, three contrasting articles together titled “The Divorce Evil,” *The Arena*, ed. N.O. Fanning, Vol. 23, January through June, 1900, pp. 88-102, <https://archive.org/details/ArenaMagazine-Volume23a/page/n99/mode/2up>; Ellen Feldman, “Till Divorce Do Us Part,” *American Heritage*, November 2000, Volume 51, Issue 7, <https://www.americanheritage.com/till-divorce-do-us-part>; Adam Goodheart, “Divorce, Antebellum Style,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2011 <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/divorce-antebellum-style/>; Ashley Ross, “A Brief History of Divorce in America: From Legal Rarity to Dark Comedy,” October 7, 2016, <https://time.com/4521314/divorce-history-sarah-jessica-parker/>; Walter George Smith, “Divorce,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, pub. 1907 to 1912, available from Catholic Answers, <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/Divorce> .

it if we do not have the question of the relations of the family put upon the proper basis.”<sup>33</sup>

Zeal for holy living was in the air during the revival era at the turning of the century. The “Mennonite Church, particularly in the western United States, began grappling with some of the holiness and sanctification debates” that were happening within the Methodist world.<sup>34</sup> These debates birthed several new holiness denominations (such as the Church of the Nazarenes) which taught, among other things, “a holy living style that rejected worldly dress, divorce, musical instruments, and membership in secret societies.”<sup>35</sup> In 1903, for example, a radical branch of the holiness movement in Chicago adopted some “new teachings” on divorce which were especially rigid.<sup>36</sup> The next year, 1904, leaders from this Chicago holiness group made divorce the central topic of a Los Angeles revival effort. They sternly rebuked the Nazarenes there for “allowing the remarriage of the so-called ‘innocent party’ in a divorce” and for offering church membership for those who were divorced and remarried.<sup>37</sup> These new, firmer teachings on divorce and remarriage then became “prominent features of the Azusa Street Revival” in 1906 which helped trigger the birth of the Pentecostal movement.<sup>38</sup> Daniel Kauffman, from Missouri, and George R. Brunk, from Kansas, were among the new English-language Mennonite leaders who directly interacted with the topics raised by these new Methodist holiness debates.<sup>39</sup>

For me, the ultimate proof that Mennonites were participating in a larger national discussion came when I plugged the terms *divorce question*, *divorce problem*, and *divorce evil* into the American English data set of the Google Books Ngram Viewer. This software uses the millions of books scanned by Google to trace changing word usage over time. As the following graph shows, the terms *divorce question*, *divorce problem*, and *divorce evil* all peaked in usage in American publications in about the year 1904.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, this was roughly one year before the Mennonite Church officially resolved to exclude all divorced and remarried persons from church membership.

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<sup>33</sup> Evans Holbrook, “Divorce Laws and the Increase of Divorce,” *Michigan Law Review*, 8 (1910), p. 386.

<https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles/1094/>

<sup>34</sup> Samuel J. Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015), 214.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>36</sup> William Kostlevy, *Holy Jumpers: Evangelicals and Radicals in Progressive Era America* (United States: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), 190.

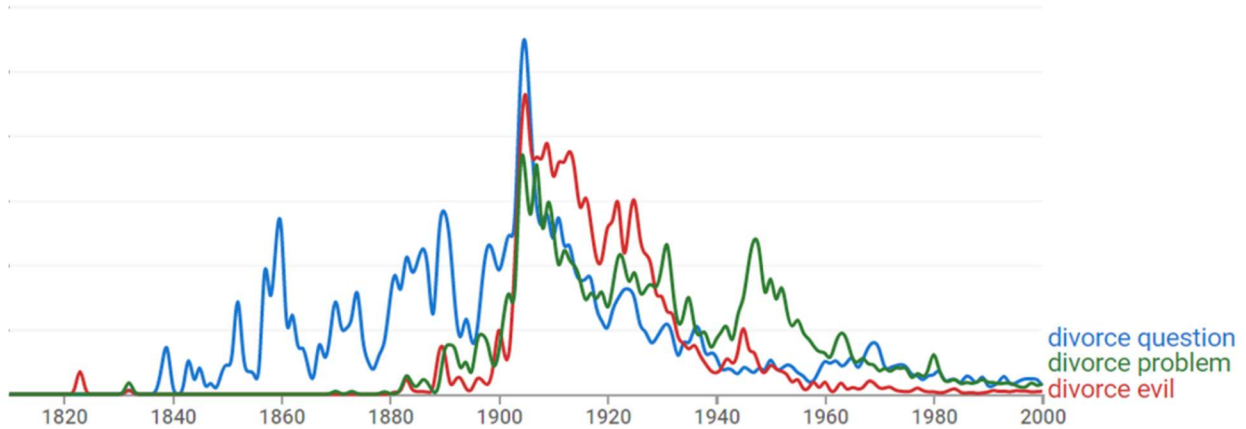
<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Steiner, *Ibid.*, 214. It is very likely that Kauffman and Brunk were aware of the strict divorce teachings of these holiness groups and that they were favorably impressed. The dots are all there, even if I can’t quite connect them.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Baptiste Michel\*, Yuan Kui Shen, Aviva Presser Aiden, Adrian Veres, Matthew K. Gray, William Brockman, The Google Books Team, Joseph P. Pickett, Dale Hoiberg, Dan Clancy, Peter Norvig, Jon Orwant, Steven Pinker, Martin A. Nowak, and Erez Lieberman Aiden\* “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books,” *Science* (Published online ahead of print: 12/16/2010), accessed 6/22/2022, [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=divorce+question%2Cdivorce+evil%2Cdivorce+problem&year\\_start=1810&year\\_end=2000&corpus=28&smoothing=0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=divorce+question%2Cdivorce+evil%2Cdivorce+problem&year_start=1810&year_end=2000&corpus=28&smoothing=0)





Usage of the terms divorce question, divorce problem, and divorce evil in American publications from 1810 to 2000.

Meanwhile, Mennonites noted and praised various political efforts to counter the “divorce evil,” as in this 1902 note in the *Herald*:

Radical change in the matter of divorce proceedings is a feature of the new code of laws for the District of Columbia, which was passed at the last session of Congress and went into effect on the first of January 1902. The new law prohibits the granting of divorce except for infidelity, divorces being no longer procurable for desertion, drunkenness, cruelty and other offenses formerly recognized as valid ground for legal separation. A good beginning, and from the right source. May it spread over the whole country. (January 15, 1902, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>41</sup>

The *Herald* also frequently reported and assessed the decisions of other churches and ministerial unions on the topic of divorce, including those of the Church of God, Church of England in Canada, Congregational, Baptist, Episcopal, Methodist, Protestant Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Unitarian churches. For example, it praised the Presbyterian church for having “placed itself squarely against the divorce evil”<sup>42</sup> but condemned the Unitarian Church for adopting “milk-and-water resolutions” against divorce.<sup>43</sup> It also reported on interdenominational church efforts such as the following:

The Interchurch Conference on Marriage and Divorce is a recent organization holding meetings throughout the various states in the Union, the object of which is to arouse sufficient sentiment to cause laws to be enacted to put an end to remarriage of divorcees,

<sup>41</sup> “A Good Beginning,” Editorial Notes, *Herald of Truth*, ed. Abram B. Kolb (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), January 15, 1902, Vol. XXXIX, No. 2, p. 17,

<https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth39unse/page/n9/mode/1up>

<sup>42</sup> Editorial note, *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), June 1, 1902, Vol. XXXIX, No. 11, p. 161, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth39unse/page/n81/mode/1up>

<sup>43</sup> “Unitarians and Divorce,” Editorial note, *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), November 9, 1905, Vol. XLII, No. 45, p. 353, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth42unse/page/n178/mode/1up>



and finally to have the constitution amended to this end... The Movement is expected to be far-reaching. (May 19, 1904, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>44</sup>

### “The Only Way to Reform It Is to Abolish It”

Reports from Mennonite district conferences continued to show some uncertainty and variation of thought. Assumptions about church membership and ministerial authority often framed the discussions about divorce. The Virginia Conference of 1902 focused on church membership:

Question 2.— Can we consistently hold those as members who get a divorce and marry another?

Answer — We cannot hold such a one as a member. See Mark 10:11-12 Matt. 5:32...

Question 3. — If a divorced member who marries again is put away from the church, can he or she again be received into the church?

On motion, the question is tabled. (November 1, 1902, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>45</sup>

The Indiana and Michigan Conference of 1903 did the same:

6. If a member has been excommunicated because of being divorced and has married again while the first husband or wife are living or because of marrying a divorced person, can such an one be again received into church fellowship?

Answer.— Yes, if the party to whom he or she was first married is dead, he or she may be received into church fellowship by making a confession and showing fruits of repentance. (October 22, 1903, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>46</sup>

The annual Ohio Conference of 1905 framed divorce as a topic where ministers needed clarity about their authority. The following resolution was adopted:

3. That on marriage in the Lord we confirm the position taken by our forefathers as given in Art. 12 of our Confession of Faith... In case a member of the church wishes to unite in matrimony with an unbeliever, we do not approve of our ministers performing such ceremonies under any circumstances, nor shall a minister officiate at a marriage where one or both parties had been divorced. In case parties are chaste and honorable, although not Christians, the minister may exercise his judgment (Heb. 13:4). (June 15, 1905, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> “Items,” *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), May 19, 1904, Vol. XLI, No. 21, p. 168, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth41unse/page/n85/mode/1up>

<sup>45</sup> “Virginia Conference Minutes,” *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), November 1, 1902, Vol. XXXIX, No. 21, p. 333, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth39unse/page/n167/mode/1up>

<sup>46</sup> “Report of Indiana and Michigan Conference,” *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), October 22, 1903, Vol. XL, No. 43, p. 342, [https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth40unse\\_0/page/n174/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth40unse_0/page/n174/mode/1up)

<sup>47</sup> “Report of the Ohio Conference,” *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company), June 15, 1905, Vol. XLII, No. 24, p. 189, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth42unse/page/n95/mode/1up>

Curiously, the record of the same conference minutes published in the *Gospel Witness*, Daniel Kauffman’s new rival paper, reported that the conference happened a day later (May 25 rather than May 24). More significantly, though the conference minutes generally matched word for word in both papers, the *Gospel Witness* included a phrase (“for nonscriptural reasons”) that implies that the Ohio Conference had not prohibited ministers from officiating at marriages of persons who had been divorced for scriptural reasons:

3. ...Under no circumstances should any minister officiate at a marriage ceremony where one or both parties had been divorced for nonscriptural reasons. — Matt. 5: 32... (June 14, 1905, *Gospel Witness*)<sup>48</sup>

Daniel Kauffman used his new periodical that year (1905) to call both the nation and the Mennonite Church to take a radical response to the “divorce evil”:

The divorce evil is receiving wide attention today. As a growing evil which threatens the very institution of marriage itself, it is made a subject for discussion from the pulpit, lecture platform, in church conferences, and legislative halls, and various ideas are advanced as to how it may be regulated. In our opinion, the evil does not need regulation as much as abolition... (April 5, 1905, *Gospel Witness*)<sup>49</sup>

...Divorce has no place in the Gospel. Our modern divorce system is a stain upon so-called Christianity, a curse upon home and society, the destruction of thousands of souls. The only way to reform it is to abolish it. (August 2, 1905, *Gospel Witness*)<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, an editorial note in the *Herald of Truth* (1905) exhorted ministers to take “a strictly scriptural attitude on the subject” and refuse to marry all divorced persons:

At a recent meeting of the East Pennsylvania Eldership (conference) of the Church of God the divorce question was fully discussed and the resolution, “That we as a body hereby express it as our judgment that ministers of the gospel should not under any circumstances, marry divorced persons,” shows that there is in that body an element that takes what we believe to be a strictly scriptural attitude on the subject. Another resolution, “That it is the sense of this Eldership that none of its ministers are justified in performing the marriage ceremony for any divorced person, except for the innocent party in case of divorce when the cause is fornication or adultery,” was presented, as the expression of the liberal view of the Eldership, but the vote was so close between the supporters of the two resolutions that neither was adopted at the time. No matter what the civil law may say on the question, the minister of the gospel must, if he is truly such, be

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<sup>48</sup> “Ohio Conference,” *Gospel Witness*, (Scottsdale, PA: Gospel Witness Company), June 14, 1905, Vol. I, No. 11, p. 86, [https://archive.org/details/gospelwitness01unse\\_0/page/n47/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/gospelwitness01unse_0/page/n47/mode/1up)

<sup>49</sup> “The Divorce Evil,” Daniel Kauffman, *Gospel Witness* (Scottsdale, PA: Gospel Witness Company), April 5, 1905, Vol. I, No. 1, 7, [https://archive.org/details/gospelwitness01unse\\_0/page/n6/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/gospelwitness01unse_0/page/n6/mode/1up)

<sup>50</sup> “Church Ordinances,” Daniel Kauffman, *Gospel Witness* (Scottsdale, PA: Gospel Witness Company), August 2, 1905, Vol. 1, No. 18, 138, [https://archive.org/details/gospelwitness01unse\\_0/page/n73/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/gospelwitness01unse_0/page/n73/mode/1up)

under the administration of the gospel... Matt. 5:32 and Matt. 19:9 are plain enough for all. (October 19, 1905, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>51</sup>

In September 1905, the *Herald* noted the example of a church to the north:

The Church of England in Canada, in its recent general synod... decided that no clergyman owing obedience to its decrees can hereafter pronounce the wedding ceremony for the marriage of one divorced person with another, as long as the other party to the divorce is alive. (September 28, 1905, *Herald of Truth*)<sup>52</sup>

The “divorce evil” was in the air in America in 1905, and winds of reform were blowing in both the nation and the Mennonite Church. That fall the Mennonite Church finally resolved a matter that had been a point of vigorous public disagreement for at least 38 years (1867-1905). Should divorce and remarriage ever be permitted?

The Fourth General Conference of the Mennonite Church was held in Berlin (now Kitchener), Ontario, from November 16 to 18, 1905. Fourteen bishops were present, along with fifty-four ministers and eleven deacons. They represented eleven states and two provinces, coming from as far away as Kansas, Virginia, and Alberta.<sup>53</sup> Daniel Kauffman, listed as being “of Scottdale, Pa.” where the *Gospel Witness* was published but also helping to represent Missouri, gave the opening conference sermon on Thursday morning. He urged the church to “seek unification” as they “build upon the foundation as Christ would have us to do.”<sup>54</sup>

Thursday afternoon was filled with reports from each district of the Mennonite Church. On Friday morning committee reports were given, representing efforts such as the Book and Tract Society, the Chicago Mission, and Goshen College. On Friday afternoon the conference began discussing several questions that needed resolution:

Question 1. What lines of teaching are especially needed at the present time throughout the church in general?...

Ques 2. What position should the General Conference take on the questions upon which the opinions of our people are to a great degree divided?...

Ques. 3. What reasons does the church have for rejecting instrumental music from religious worship?<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Editorial Notes,” *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company) October 19, 1905, Vol. XLII, No. 42, 330, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth42unse/page/n167/mode/1up>

<sup>52</sup> “Marriage of Divorcees Banned,” *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company) September 28, 1905, Vol. XLII, No. 39, p. 305, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth42unse/page/n153/mode/1up>

<sup>53</sup> A brother of my great-great grandpa was among the church leaders present—Silas Bauman, a deacon from Floradale, Ontario. Talk about making history come alive!

<sup>54</sup> “Fourth General Conference,” *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company) November 30, 1905, Vol. XLII, No. 48, p. 378, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth42unse/page/n190/mode/1up>

<sup>55</sup> “Fourth General Conference,” *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company) November 30, 1905, Vol. XLII, No. 48, p. 381-82, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth42unse/page/n192/mode/1up>

The conference was extended longer than initially planned and on Saturday morning, November 18, a final question was discussed and resolved:

Ques. 4. Is it scriptural to receive a person into church fellowship while he lives as husband with another woman before a divorced wife be dead?

Resolved, That in the light of the scriptures (Matt. 5:31, 32; 19:3; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor. 7:10-17:39 [sic]), we hold that a separation between husband and wife is allowable only for the cause of fornication. That a person holding a divorce obtained for the sake of remarriage, or being married a second time, and continuing to live with a second companion while the first companion is living should not be received into the church. That we pledge ourselves to use all consistent efforts to convince humanity of the sin of divorcement and prevent further propagation of the evil.<sup>56</sup>

At the end of this final session, bishop Daniel Kauffman joined the moderator in giving closing comments and then led in a final prayer.

Thus, on Saturday morning, November 18, 1905, the Mennonite Church finally brought their divorce debate to an official resolution: the way to solve the “divorce evil” was to abolish it. Henceforth, no divorced and remarried person was to be admitted as a church member unless they abandoned their second spouse or their first spouse died. Separation was permitted in cases of “fornication” (adultery), but never “divorce obtained for the sake of remarriage.” Radical permanence was now the official doctrine of the Mennonite Church.

### **The Significance of the 1905 Divorce Decision**

Was this 1905 resolution really a turning point in the Mennonite Church? Mennonite historian Samuel Steiner seems to think so. Here is his quick summary of the Mennonite divorce debate over this time:

In the nineteenth century some Mennonite Church district conferences in the United States occasionally accepted divorced and remarried persons as members in good standing... In 1905 the Mennonite Church said a divorced and remarried person should not be received into membership. In 1914 Daniel Kauffman, in a chapter titled “Marriage” in *Bible Doctrines*, published by the Mennonite Church, stated that “whoever lives with wife No. 2 while wife No. 1 is still alive lives in adultery.” This became the denominational understanding until the 1950s, when respected theologians like John C. Wenger of Goshen Biblical Seminary asked whether the nineteenth-century position might actually be more redemptive.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> “Fourth General Conference,” *Herald of Truth*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company) November 30, 1905, Vol. XLII, No. 48, p. 382, <https://archive.org/details/heraldoftruth42unse/page/n193/mode/1up>

<sup>57</sup> Samuel J. Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 2015), p. 384.

In the 1954 booklet of J. C. Wenger to which Steiner alludes, titled “Dealing Redemptively With Those Involved in Divorce and Remarriage Problems,” Wenger gives a concurring summary:

A new generation of leaders appeared around the turn of the century, men who did much to mold the Mennonite Church into the kind of group it now is. Outstanding among them was our revered Brother Daniel Kauffman. These men began to understand the continuance of a second marriage relation, with a former companion still living, as a continuing sin. (This the Bible never states explicitly, however.) But the view became more and more commonly accepted. In 1905 the General Conference went on record...

This view of Brother Daniel Kauffman gained general acceptance in our brotherhood, and is only in recent years being reexamined and questioned.<sup>58</sup>

A recent article by Andrew V. Ste. Marie takes issue with Wenger’s analysis, asserting that

Mennonites in the nineteenth century held at least four views on divorce and remarriage, and the shift toward a stricter attitude in the twentieth century was not the result of a new view introduced by Daniel Kauffman, but rather the victory of one nineteenth-century view over competing views.<sup>59</sup>

Ste. Marie’s outline of four competing views among nineteenth-century Mennonites is helpful:

1. All divorce and remarriage is prohibited...
2. Divorce and remarriage are not allowed for church members, but persons previously divorced and remarried may be accepted as members.
3. Divorce is permitted for adultery, but remarriage is not permitted for any reason...
4. Both divorce and remarriage are permitted for adultery.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Wenger, “Dealing Redemptively With Those Involved in Divorce and Remarriage Problems,” (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1954), pp. 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew V. Ste. Marie, “Research Note: Nineteenth-Century Mennonites Deal with Divorce and Remarriage,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 94 (April 2020), p. 233. How big a role did Daniel Kauffman play in the adoption of the 1905 resolution against divorce and remarriage? It is hard to say. On the one hand, Kauffman was far from the first or only proponent of a stricter stance on divorce, and the resolution against divorce was ultimately a group decision. On the other hand, the following points also appear clear to me: (1) The Missouri Conference, in Daniel Kauffman’s home district, took a harder stance against divorce than many other conferences, as witnessed by the decisions of 1893 and 1897 quoted above. (2) Kauffman’s new paper reinforced his position in 1905 as one of the most influential voices in the Mennonite Church. (3) Kauffman used his paper to urge for the “abolition” of divorce. (4) Kauffman played an influential role at the General Conference later that year where divorce was discussed. (5) Kauffman’s viewpoint ultimately won the day. (6) Over the next two decades, Kauffman powerfully promoted and defended the hardline stance against divorce in his several doctrine books.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew V. Ste. Marie, “Research Note: Nineteenth-Century Mennonites Deal with Divorce and Remarriage,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 94 (April 2020), p. 246.

Despite challenging parts of Wenger’s analysis, however, Ste. Marie does not deny that the Mennonite Church officially endorsed the first and most stringent of these four views in 1905, thus rejecting the other three in both doctrine and practice.<sup>61</sup>

The 1905 divorce resolution, then, was indeed a significant turning point in the Mennonite Church. It provided an official end to a debate that had troubled the church for at least a generation and its view of divorce remained mostly unquestioned by Mennonite leaders for nearly fifty years afterward.

### **A Call to Radical Faithfulness Today**

Today it is over a century since the “divorce evil” in America first alarmed the Mennonite Church and drove them to adopt a stance of radical permanence. We now have an opportunity to reexamine both our Mennonite history and the biblical witness about divorce and remarriage.

We, like the Mennonite Church a century ago, have forums for vigorous debate, historical decisions to draw upon, church decision-making processes, prominent church leaders who influence opinions, people with complex life situations needing pastoral care, and a lot of disagreement over divorce and remarriage. While divorce is no longer a burning topic in the American public today, other public concerns do press upon us, including a “MeToo” movement against sexual abuse; continuing revelations of religious abuse, authoritarianism, and hypocrisy in church leaders; and wide-spread questioning of the basic principles of male-female, life-long marriage.

The challenge for us today is to avoid mistakes of the past and present without becoming merely reactionary ourselves. May God give us grace to teach and practice radical faithfulness—first to the heart and will of God as expressed in Scripture, and then to each other in our marriages.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Further, it appears to me that Ste. Marie’s critique of Wenger suffers from its own biases, including an overly-zealous attempt to assert how early the most stringent view on divorce can be traced in Anabaptist history and an evident eagerness to clear Daniel Kauffman’s name. On the first point, Ste. Marie misreads the significance of a modified version of the Dortrecht Confession, wrongly suggesting it provides evidence of a stricter view on divorce and remarriage. On the second, he fails to acknowledge that merely proving Kauffman’s view was not new does not prove he did not play a significant role in making that view dominant.

<sup>62</sup> To learn more about what I envision radical faithfulness to look like, see “Radical Faithfulness: A Proposal about Marriage Permanence,” June 25, 2022, <https://dwrightgingrich.com/radical-faithfulness-proposal-marriage-permanence/>