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MENNONITE SILENCES AND FEMINIST VOICES:
PEACE THEOLOGY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

by

Carol Jean Penner

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Theology of the University of St. Michael's College
and the Department of Theology of the Toronto School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Theology
awarded by the University of St. Michael's College

Toronto, 1999

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ABSTRACT

MENNONITE SILENCES AND FEMINIST VOICES:
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The purpose of this thesis is to show that contemporary North American
Mennonite theology conveys a gendered message which perpetuates the conditions
leading to violence against women. Mennonite theology has been largely silent on the
issue of woman abuse. Some recent studies suggest, however, that abuse is as prevalent
in Mennonite homes as in the general Canadian population. While this silence is not
unique among denominational theologies, it is ironic considering the historical Mennonite
belief in peace and nonviolence.

While the subject of abuse has rarely been specifically addressed by theologians,
Mennonite theology has carried an implicit message about how women should react to
situations of violence. For generations women have applied the theology they have been
taught to their own particular contexts. It is the purpose of this thesis to attempt to
articulate the content of Mennonite theological "silences" around the context of violence
against women.

This thesis examines a number of different twentieth century North American
Mennonite sources through the lens of three theological concepts: suffering, obedience
and forgiveness. The sources examined are as follows: the major works of John Howard
Yoder and Guy Hershberger, Mennonite statements on peace, hymnbooks, and devotional
writings by Katie Funk Wiebe and Helen Good Brenneman. Many of these theological sources convey a theological message which is oppressive to women who are experiencing violence.

The thesis concludes with a survey of feminist writings on the topic of woman abuse. Using the same lens of suffering, obedience and forgiveness, new theological approaches are reviewed. The thesis ends with a discussion about the shape of a Mennonite feminist peace theology.
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INTRODUCTION

After my husband would hit me, he'd storm out of the house and I would be there crying. I would be so mad I felt I could have killed him. But you know, I would start to pray, and God helped me to forgive him, and so by the time he came back, all that anger would have drained away and I'd be totally over it and we could get along. You should try that if you ever have the same problem; prayer is a wonderful thing.

These words spoken to me by a Mennonite woman echo through my mind as I begin the writing of this thesis. They are, in fact, a catalyst for this work. What type of theology would produce such words? How would such a theology be formed? What type of theology might have enabled that woman to react differently to a violent situation?

Traditional Mennonite theology has conveyed a gendered message which perpetuates the conditions leading to violence against women. The bulk of this thesis will be spent exploring Mennonite theology in order to substantiate this claim. Having shown that the Mennonite theological tradition has carried an oppressive message for women, my task in the final section will be to outline a feminist Mennonite peace theology. This theology will be life-giving for women held captive by bonds of abuse.

In this thesis I am examining the context of violence against women. Domestic violence or family violence are terms which are commonly used in the church. I reject these terms because they disguise the fact that in the majority of cases, domestic violence is in fact violence against
women.\textsuperscript{1} I also choose the terms \textit{violence against women} and \textit{woman abuse} over the terms \textit{family violence} or \textit{domestic violence} to link the reality of sexual assault by strangers, friends or acquaintances, to the abuse of women by their partners. The violence women face in their intimate relationships is symptomatic of the violence women face in society at large. Whether abused by a stranger or a loved one, women struggle with some similar theological issues.\textsuperscript{2} A definition of violence will be examined in Chapter One.

For most of its history Mennonite theology has been silent about violence against women. The silence is ostensible for this theology has in fact carried messages which have been potent and effective in women's lives. Generations of Mennonite women have attended church looking for answers to their theological questions. Those women who were abused sought theological answers to the questions their suffering raised. Traditional Mennonite theology has taught that women should forgive their abusers. Women have been taught that their suffering will make them better Christians. Obedience to people in authority over you has been seen as a virtue.

Mennonites are not unique in their blindness to woman abuse as a theological issue. Most denominational theologies have only just begun to address this problem with any seriousness. The


\textsuperscript{2}I will not be specifically addressing the abuse of children here. Theological observations about woman abuse may be relevant to child abuse, but this is not the primary focus of my study.
feminist movement has brought the issue of violence against women and children to the fore, and the Christian church has been forced to address the reality which it can no longer ignore. While the historical silence of the Mennonite church on the subject of abuse is not unique, it is particularly ironic given that the theology of this historic peace church has wrestled with the importance of nonviolence in the Christian life.\(^3\)

This thesis is divided into three major sections. The first section, found in chapter one, will examine a range of methodological issues. The second section, comprised of chapters two to five, will explore various areas of Mennonite theology and how they have functioned in women's lives. I will focus my attention on selected twentieth century North American sources, including the work of theologians, statements of church conferences as well as more popular forms of theology, such as hymns and devotional literature. I will be using three basic theological concepts--forgiveness, obedience and suffering--as an operative way to explore the theology of the chosen sources. The interaction of these three concepts in Mennonite thought illustrates how theology has gender-specific messages which may perpetuate the abuse of women.

The third and final section of the thesis, found in chapters six and seven, will follow the themes of suffering, obedience and forgiveness as they have been reformulated by feminist writers grappling with the reality of violence against women. It will outline the parameters of a Mennonite feminist peace theology written from the context of violence against women.

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\(^3\)The question of whether Mennonite theology is more harmful than other denominational theologies is beyond the scope of this thesis. My claim is that Mennonite theology has functioned oppressively in the lives of women; the question of degree of oppressiveness is largely irrelevant to this study. The fact that Mennonite theology functions this way at all is the issue at hand.
CHAPTER I

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

I begin by identifying four major methodological issues which are integral to this project. The first is a discussion of the meaning of women's experience. The second is the importance of that experience for theologizing. The third issue is the method I will use to examine Mennonite theology for its implicit messages. The fourth section discusses the task of creating a Mennonite feminist peace theology.

A Discussion of Women's Experience

Feminist theology deals with the concrete and particular experiences of women. Feminist theology has been critical of theologies which speak of human experience in a general way, "...a conception that is not general at all but based on Western, white male experiences." Feminist theology seeks to reconstruct the way experience is viewed; it is not an attempt to change one general view of experience for another. Rather experience is that which reflects on situations in particular times and places. The following is a description of the experience of women in Canada.

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Statistics show that women in Canada are abused by their partners, and many women are sexually assaulted. Widely quoted Canadian statistics have shown that at least one in ten women are abused by their partners. More recently in 1993, Health Canada funded Statistics Canada's first national survey on Violence Against Women. "The primary objective of the survey was to provide reliable estimates of the nature and extent of male violence against women." A total of 12,300 women over 18 years of age were interviewed about their experiences of physical and sexual violence. The survey found that 29% of women who had ever been married or lived with a man in a common-law relationship have been physically or sexually assaulted by that partner at some point in the relationship. Measures of violence for the survey were restricted to Criminal Code definitions of assault and sexual assault. Fully one-third of the women who were assaulted by their partners feared for their lives at some point during the abusive relationship.

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7 Estimates of proportions of the female population produced in this survey are expected to be within 1.2% of the true proportion 19 times out of 20. Rodgers, "Wife Assault: National Survey," p. 3.

8 The categories used in questioning were whether the male partner had threatened to hit her with something; threw something; pushed, grabbed or shoved; slapped; kicked, bit or hit her with his fist; hit her with something; beat her up; choked her, threatened or used a gun or knife; sexual assault. "Although pushing, grabbing and shoving was the most frequently reported, only 5% of respondents said yes to only this type of violence. Similarly, only 4% of women indicated that they were just threatened." Rodgers, "Wife Assault: National Survey," p. 7.
Health Canada's survey on Violence Against Women also inquired about emotionally abusive behaviour in marriages.9 "Three quarters of all women who reported physical or sexual abuse also reported emotional abuse; 18% of women who reported no physical violence reported experiencing emotional abuse."10

Statistics were also produced concerning sexual assault for all women surveyed. Under the Canadian Criminal code sexual assault includes a very broad range of experiences ranging from unwanted sexual touching to sexual violence resulting in serious injury to the victim. The survey found that 39% of women surveyed had experienced sexual assault at least once. More specifically the survey asked about sexual attack; "Has a stranger, date or boyfriend, spouse or other man ever forced you or attempted to force you into any sexual activity by threatening you, holding you down or hurting you in some way?" The answer was that 24% of the women had experienced a sexual attack, 42% of that group reporting that they had experienced it more than once.11

Christian women are not immune from the violence which women experience in our society. Studies have shown that Christian groups have as high an incidence of domestic

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9The statements used to inquire about emotional abuse were "He is jealous and doesn't want her to talk to other men; He tries to limit her contact with family or friends; He insists on knowing who she is with and where she is at all times; He calls her names to put her down or make her feel bad; He prevents her from knowing about or having access to the family income, even if she asks." Rodgers, "Wife Assault: National Survey," p. 9.


violence as the general population. Nancy Nason-Clark asks the question whether "... conservative Protestant theology deters or exacerbates violence within the familial setting." The studies she cites suggest that conservative Protestants are not more prone to violence than the general population, however religious beliefs can restrict a woman's options once she is abused.14

Intensive sociological studies have not been done on Mennonite populations, although some studies have indicated that abuse is indeed present. Isaac Block, a Mennonite pastor in Winnipeg, has conducted a number of surveys in the Mennonite population of Southern Manitoba. Block surveyed pastors, college students and members of Mennonite congregations and discovered that domestic violence is a problem in the Mennonite community.15 Steven Martin's 1989 survey of counsellors with Mennonite clients, while limited in its scope, also suggests that abuse exists in Mennonite homes.16 Neither of these studies is sociologically adequate to make claims about the extent of woman abuse in the Mennonite context. More studies need to be done.

12 I use the term domestic violence in this section because that is the term used by the sources being discussed.


15 Isaac I. Block, Assault on God's Image: Domestic Abuse (Winnipeg: Windflower Communications, 1991). Block did not use gender as a category in his research.

However, these findings (however limited in scope), do run counter to commonly held beliefs that Mennonites are immune to social problems. For example, as recently as 1974 David Augsburger could write,

> Assault and verbal hostility have been consistently forbidden [in the Mennonite community]. Such behaviors have not been modeled, or were clearly rejected when they occurred. There is a consistently low incidence of such behaviors within the community, in contrast to the published norms of the broader American population.17

The belief that Mennonites are immune to the problem of violence against women must be rejected.

There are patterns in the violence that women experience. A feminist framework is used in this thesis because it most rationally explains these patterns. Not all women, particularly not all Mennonite women, would embrace this framework. As recently as a decade ago, many Mennonite women would not have even acknowledged the reality of abuse. Now while most Mennonite women would admit the reality of abuse, many would not see the significance of abuse in their own life and in the lives of women as a group. Yet understanding the nature of the violence is imperative if one is to overcome it. A feminist framework is essential to understanding the violence that women experience in our society.

While there are various strands of feminist thought, all feminists agree that violence against women is a symptom of a system which discriminates on the basis of gender. This system is called patriarchy. Men's power over women has been culturally sanctioned for centuries. This system is so pervasive and so insidious that it is hard for many women to envision a society without violence. They have been acculturated to this state of violence to such an extent that they

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accept it as normal. As Ruth Krall observes, "The patriarchal mandate is that women need to accept, unquestioningly, systems of male dominance over them. To enforce such a mandate, patriarchal systems create blinders and boundaries for knowing."18 This alienation from our own experience is also discussed by Dorothy E. Smith: "We have learned to set aside as irrelevant, to deny, or to obliterate our own subjectivity and experience. We have learned to live inside a discourse that is not ours and that expresses and describes a landscape in which we are alienated and that preserves that alienation as integral to its practice."19

The women's movement, which includes women's literature, music, art, social action, politics and theology has explored the way women have become anaesthetized to their violation.20 The systematic abuse of women, and its corresponding cultural acceptance, necessitates discussing woman abuse apart from the violence that men face.

Naming 'women's experience' is not a straightforward task because, as Pamela Dickey Young points out, what seems to be self-evident becomes much more obscure upon closer observation. The experience of women is "... the multiplicity of things women experience, both individually and as a group."21 Women experience many different things due to the exigencies of

their own lives. While the assumption of the feminist movement is that people of the same gender do have common experiences, within that commonality there is diversity and even contradiction.\(^{22}\)

This is true not only in terms of actual experiences, but also in terms of how women understand and interpret those experiences. All of our immediate experiences are interpreted through our understanding and knowledge of the world.\(^{23}\)

My call for attention to women's experience should not be interpreted as a lessening of the validity of men's experience. I acknowledge here that men face violence at the hands of other men, and also some men are abused by women. This violence is also wrong, and needs to be denounced. However it is not the purpose of this thesis to explore this type of violence.\(^{24}\)

I do not propose in this thesis, as some feminists certainly do, that women's experience is in any way ontologically superior to men's experience, nor do I suggest that women have any special access to divine truth. In that respect, I would concur with Sheila Davaney when she states that, "Women's experience and knowledge therefore cannot claim, any more than can males', an ontological grounding or an epistemological superiority."\(^{25}\)

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\(^{22}\)Plaskow and Christ observe that in their earlier feminist writing there was a tendency to speak of women's experience in a universal way, almost as a "Platonic form". The term women's experience was really speaking only of "white, middle-class women's experience". Feminist writing today attempts to name the diversity of women's experience and "...explore particularity rather than to homogenize significant differences." Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1989), p. 3.

\(^{23}\)Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*, pp. 49-51.

\(^{24}\)In a similar way, oppression of people of colour by white people must always remain a fundamental category of our understanding, regardless of the fact that white people inflict violence on other white people, and people of colour have made racist attacks on white people.

By focusing on woman abuse I also am not implying that women are always victims of abuse. Women can be and are often themselves abusers. Women are abusers of their children, white women along with white men benefit from the oppression of people of colour. Indeed, women of colour and women from the two thirds world have made the point that gender is not the primary category through which they can understand oppression in their lives. There are many webs of abuse, of which woman abuse is only one. It is a tenet of this thesis that in the context of North American women's experience of violence, gender is a helpful category for understanding that violence. Hopefully this examination will prompt further work on articulating other 'silences' in Mennonite theology.

The Theological Importance of Women's Experience

Having determined that women in our society experience violence, and having discussed the importance of gender as a lens through which to understand that violence, the following section addresses the theological question, "How does the experience of women affect how theology is done?" More particularly it examines the Mennonite tradition in this regard.

It is an assumption of this thesis that theology is produced by people who live in particular times and places. "Our words of, to, and about God are our words. They are earthbound articulations; they are not eternally or everywhere adequate or authoritative." Theology, defined

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as faith seeking understanding, is something that all Christians engage in to some extent, in that we reflect on our experiences of God. However, all Christians do not have equal access to sharing their reflections. People have differing amounts of power in the Christian community. In the Mennonite community, ministers, conference leaders and professors in colleges and seminaries have more power than others in spreading their theological views through their preaching and teaching. Sociologists Leo Driedger and Donald Kraybill use the interesting term 'theological brokers' to describe these theologians and teachers. This term points to the reality of power and how it is wielded in the church. Thus while theological reflection has always been carried out by women and men in the church, the theology of certain groups of people has been dominant.

Liberation theology has critiqued mainstream theology for reflecting only the context and concerns of one group, namely, white Western middle class men. Feminist theology, as a type of liberation theology, has emphasized that the agenda of theology needs to be broadened to include the questions of women which arise from their experience. Feminist theologian Pamela Dickey Young writes, "Women must begin to be the theologians . . . They must do theology in such a way that the history of women and women's experiences make a difference and can be seen to make a difference. Women must become equal shapers of the theological enterprise." Women's

28Within the church, the brokers—typically theologians, scholars, and elders—must negotiate between traditional convictions and new social realities. Indeed, theologians make old Scriptures say new and meaningful things in the face of different circumstances. The brokers, in essence, tinker with the ties between beliefs and plausibility structures. They reshape doctrines to make them chime with credibility in the context of new conditions." Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism (Waterloo, Ontario and Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1994), p. 44.

29Young, Feminist Theology/Christian Theology, pp. 16-17.
voices must not only be recognized, they must be granted theological legitimacy within the community.

I am writing a feminist theology, and thus a feminist understanding of women's experience will function as an important source for my theology. Statistics about abuse, women's stories, and the way theology has functioned in women's lives are all factors that are used to construct this theology. The theology of women, wherever it can be found, needs to be incorporated into this theology. The reflections of theologians and biblical scholars on scripture are an important source of theology, as are worship resources, church documents and devotional writings. The sources used for this theology are by no means harmonious, for patriarchal biases in scripture and history clash with feminist interpretations of women's experience. My theology strives to find a balance which neither compromises the integrity of feminist experience, nor loses the essence or the substance of my own Mennonite religious background.

Women's experience also functions as one of the norms of my theology. Pamela Dickey Young defines a norm as a criterion which "... the theologian uses to argue for the adequacy of her or his own theology or to judge the adequacy of other theologies." A primary criterion for the theology examined and constructed in this thesis is whether it contributes to or lessens the

30I use source and norm as they are defined by Young, Feminist Theology/Christian Theology, p. 19.

31Feminist theologians disagree over how compatible scripture and tradition are with the liberation of women from oppression. While all feminists admit that patriarchal biases exist, some feminists believe that the liberation of women will happen only when scripture and tradition are rejected as an important source of theology. Other feminists attempt to reclaim the tradition from those biases. I would place myself in the latter category.

32Young, Feminist Theology/Christian Theology, p. 19.
abuse of women in church and society. A theology which leads to abusive attitudes or actions is simply not credible from a feminist point of view. Other criteria are also important in my theology. My commitment to my Mennonite heritage means that my theology takes this tradition seriously and tries to situate itself within its trajectory.

Even a cursory feminist analysis reveals that women's experience has not been an important source for written Mennonite theology. The writers of this theology have been primarily male, and their theology is a response to the questions which have arisen out of their experiences as men. For example, in an annotated bibliography of Mennonite writings on peace and nonresistance, there are thousands of articles on conscientious objection and alternative service; issues which directly affected men (although certainly issues of concern to women as well). That same bibliography does not list a single article on child abuse, wife battering, incest or sexual abuse; violence which is a daily part of many women's lives. Driedger and Kraybill comment on the range of definitions of peace in Mennonite theology; violence against women is not a category which is discussed.

Women's experience has not been a norm in traditional Mennonite theology for this theology has not fostered abuse-free communities. Rather, the opposite is true. Mennonite theology does not address violence in Mennonite families, or its gendered nature. Driedger and Kraybill, Mennonite Peacemaking, pp. 157, 250.

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33In their preface the editors admit that identifying precisely what is a peace issue was difficult, and they do cast a broader net than just militarism, focusing also on justice issues such as race relations. Willard M. Swartley and Cornelius J. Dyck, eds., Annotated Bibliography of Mennonite Writings on War and Peace: 1930-1980 (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1987).

34The book does contain a short reference to MCC Women's Concerns desk, and its publication of information packets on domestic violence, as well as a one paragraph reference under the heading "Interpersonal Networks". They observe that peacemaking in the family goes largely unnoticed. They also observe that it is an essential infrastructure undergirding our larger efforts in the public eye. There is no acknowledgement of the extent or significance of violence in Mennonite families, or its gendered nature. Driedger and Kraybill, Mennonite Peacemaking, pp. 157, 250.
theology has helped to build communities where abuse is tolerated. The toleration of violence in a purportedly non-violent milieu is ironic. Looking at the broad range of Christian perspectives on theology, one might assume that Mennonites would have a particular interest in violence against women because of their historic non-violent peace stance.  

Mennonite relief agencies have been at the forefront of providing aid to people whose lives have been affected by war and economic injustice. Mennonites have often fled from situations of war and violence, migrating from country to country in search of a peaceful place to live. Given this Mennonite heritage, one might suppose that abused women would find a welcoming shelter within the Mennonite community. This is not the case, however, because patriarchal biases rampant in church and society often blame a woman for the abuse she has received, or place a higher value on the unity of the family than the safety of an individual within that family. Leaving a war-torn homeland is viewed very differently than leaving a violent home.  

Violence against women has been a reality for Mennonites, perhaps most vividly during times of war. The wartime experiences of men as conscientious objectors, workers in medical corps, or even as soldiers have been told; women's experiences of violence have tended to be depersonalized or skimmed over. Marlene Epp discusses the issue of rape in an article about

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35It is interesting to note that other historic peace churches are also dealing with the issue of abuse: "The 300-year history of the Religious Society of Friends has been a history of consistent advocacy for peace and nonviolence in the world. Unfortunately, recent findings have suggested that these pacifist values, surprisingly, do not ensure freedom from violence in Quaker families. This revelation among Friends in the United States and Canada is so startling that a growing movement has developed to focus on the problems and needs of these families and to find ways to respond that are healing and growth-producing." Judith L. Brutz and Craig M. Allen, "Quaker Family Violence: Bringing Peace Home," Abuse and Religion: When Praying Isn't Enough, edited by Anne L. Horton and Judith A. Williamson (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company, 1988), p. 136.
Mennonite women fleeing the Soviet Union after World War II. These stories have almost been forgotten because they had no place in the framework of meaning of the Mennonite community.\textsuperscript{36} She goes on to suggest that, "The problem of remembering wartime rape, particularly when it involved a woman's active choice of survival for herself and her children, was intensified when juxtaposed against the Mennonite community's standards of morality."\textsuperscript{37} Historically and currently women's voices about their experiences of violence have been silenced in the Mennonite community.

There are a number of possible ways of explaining why Mennonite theology is silent about violence against women. A blunt explanation would be that men were the abusers of women, and thus men as a group had a vested interest in keeping abuse private and unacknowledged. Another answer would be that men as well as women were so immersed in a patriarchal culture that violence against women was rendered invisible; it was a given that did not require discussion. Another explanation is that theologians, who were primarily male, simply did not have access to women's experience and may have been unaware of the severity of abuse.

Gayle Gerber Koontz offers another explanation for this Mennonite silence. She suggests that,


\textsuperscript{37}Epp, "Memory of Violence," p. 85. "Some women, after experiencing successive rapes, or threats of rape, sought out a protector usually in the form of a Soviet officer. In that way, they could escape ongoing brutal attacks from numerous soldiers in favour of "voluntary" rapes by the same man. Similar scenarios saw a woman submit to sexual acts in order to avoid other forms of violence against herself and her children, or to obtain assistance in crossing tightly-guarded borders." Epp, "Memory of Violence," p. 69.
. . . historically most Mennonite peace theology and ethics has been engaged with questions of and arguments for Christian pacifism in the face of violence that was being justified by others. Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist traditions developed complex system of theological-ethical thought justifying violence in war . . . . There is no comparable major Christian tradition which has sought to explicitly justify the use of violence against women. On the surface, such violence has been assumed to be wrong (therefore ethical debate was not needed) while actual practice has frequently been cloaked in silence and self-deception.38

Mennonite theology has been engaged in reacting against other religious traditions; this may be a factor in explaining why Mennonite theologians have not addressed this issue seriously. But non-violence has been a practical, as well as a theoretical concern. Mennonites have endured great hardship for their unwillingness to hurt other people through military service. Yet Mennonites have tolerated violence directed against vulnerable people in their own communities. Mennonite theologians have been blind to this dichotomy.

Regardless of the motivation of theologians, and their access or lack of access to women's experience, the fact is that Mennonite theology has exhibited a 'selective inattention' to the issue of abuse.39 Women who have turned to Mennonite theology with questions regarding abuse were forced to read the silences to find their own answers. These silences are multi-valent.


39Mary Potter Engel uses the term 'selective inattention' to describe the silence of historical theology about woman abuse: "We are left with the conclusion that violence against women, a key factor in society's oppression of women, has received 'selective inattention' in historical theology. At best this neglect suggests to students of historical theology that the violent reality of women's lives is of no significance for our understanding of the history of theology and spirituality. At worst it is a sign of the tradition's continuing complicity in the practice of violence against women." Mary Potter Engel, "Historical Theology and Violence against Women: Unearthing a Popular Tradition of Just Battery," in Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook, eds. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 243.
The silence of Mennonite theology on the subject of abuse can be read to mean that abuse simply does not happen in Mennonite homes. Mennonite theologians have tackled the subjects of peace and violence at length. If they have not examined violence in the home it could be inferred that Mennonite homes are free of violence. Thus any woman who was experiencing violence would feel isolated and alone; as if what was happening to her was a freak occurrence, and perhaps of her own making.40

Alternatively, a woman reading the silences in Mennonite theology might take that silence to mean that her experience is really quite trivial. Theologians are commonly believed to be engaged in tackling life's deepest problems, and if woman abuse is not discussed the implication is that it is not an important issue. War, non-resistance and conscientious objection are important issues which concern the church; violence against women is a private matter which is not worthy of discussion.41

40 Andy Smith examines the issue of denial in the broader evangelical context. He suggests that the widespread assumption that abuse does not happen in evangelical circles leaves women without the resources they need to name their experience; "The notion that evangelicals are more moral than non-evangelicals makes it difficult for evangelical women to defend themselves against potential assaults or to recognize abusive behavior. . . . Because women trust evangelical men and assume that they would never think of assaulting someone, they often ignore obvious warning signs. . . . Evangelical women often think to themselves afterward that, since evangelical men do not assault, then what happened to them could not have been an assault. They must have asked for it in some way." Andy Smith, "Born Again, Free from Sin? Sexual Violence in Evangelical Communities," in Violence Against Women, p. 341.

41 I have experienced this dual message of denial and minimization as I have struggled to articulate my own theology. It was initially extremely difficult for me to see the theological relevance of the violence in the lives of myself and my female friends. The parameters of the peace theology that I had learned in my church and at denominational colleges seemed firm, and those parameters did not include the violence which was very close to home. This silence of Mennonite theology contributed, I believe, to the long inability I had to even recognize the violence in my own life. Through an introduction to feminism I came to the place where I was able to name woman abuse as violence, but then I still faced hurdles from Mennonite peace theology. Inwardly I struggled with doubts about the
These two possible readings of the theological silence as denial or minimization, are significant in and of themselves, but they become more sinister because they are compounded by many other layers of denial and minimalization in our culture. In the face of an abuser who says that her suffering is unimportant, a church that says that her abuse is unimportant, a social system that provides little support for leaving an abusive situation and a legal system which makes successful prosecution of her abuser unlikely, it is no surprise that women find it difficult to name their own experience. The silence of Mennonite theology on the issue of violence against women is one small component of a larger patriarchal culture which has continually ignored or minimized the abuse of women.

This thesis holds that we must be responsible for our theological discourse. We must think and write with the knowledge that our thinking and writing affects people. We must be aware of how our theology affects the concrete cultural/social/political experiences of our readers. Similarly we must examine our tradition to determine whether it has served to liberate or oppress people.\(^\text{42}\)

**Approaching Mennonite Theology**

I turn now to my third methodological question: how to examine Mennonite theology in relation to woman abuse. There are many different avenues one could follow in reading the silences of Mennonite theology. I have chosen three avenues as a means to discover the message

Mennonite theology has had for women. The first avenue is the concept of suffering. Obviously, a survivor of abuse would be attentive to teaching on the subject of suffering because of the physical and emotional pain she is experiencing. This avenue was also chosen because suffering is a recurring motif in Mennonite thought.

The second avenue I have chosen is the concept of obedience. I made this choice because of the gendered message which obedience often carries. Feminist theologians have identified obedience as a term which has often functioned oppressively in the lives of women.

Finally, the third avenue I have chosen is the concept of forgiveness. The quote I used to open this thesis highlights the importance of this concept; forgiveness is often a precursor to accepting further abuse. Forgiveness is a very important concept in Christian feminist writings about abuse. This topic also surfaces frequently when Mennonites write about abuse.43

Suffering, obedience and forgiveness will reveal much about Mennonite theology not only in and of themselves, but particularly in their relationship with each other. It is at the intersections of obedience with suffering, or forgiveness with obedience, that the most powerful theological messages are delivered to women.

These three concepts, or avenues, which I have chosen to explore, will reveal only a partial view of the topography of Mennonite theology. I believe they are important concepts which will show where Mennonite theology has fallen short. Other concepts could also be profitably examined in this regard. I am aware that Mennonite women who have been abused

have also drawn strength from the Mennonite theological tradition; a study of other concepts would reveal that support. This knowledge does not, however, detract from the fact that some theological concepts have functioned oppressively.

The parameters of the theology examined in this thesis are North American sources written in the twentieth century. While there are many different varieties of Mennonites, theologians often represent and speak to the wider Mennonite constituency, and thus this study will not be limited to the theological work of any one variety of Mennonites. Books and articles written by theologians are the traditional sources of academic theology, and this thesis includes this source. However, books and articles are not always a primary formative influence in the theology of the average church-goer, and so theological sources such as hymns, church statements and devotional literature will also be examined. While these sources may not be seen as theologically complex or sophisticated, their influence is patent.

The first two sources I will examine are several works by the Mennonite theologians, Guy Hershberger and John Howard Yoder. While most Mennonites have not read the work of these two peace theologians, their thought has been formative for many Mennonite pastors and church leaders. Guy Hershberger was a prominent and active member of the Mennonite church, and a teacher at Goshen College for many years. John Howard Yoder also taught at a number of Mennonite schools and at Notre Dame University, and was widely influential.

44This limitation excludes the fascinating and important area of early Anabaptist thought. Such a study would profitably explore early Anabaptist attitudes about suffering and the family. Marcus Smucker uses this method to explore the deeply rooted nature of self-sacrifice in Mennonite thought. Marcus Smucker, "Self-sacrifice and self-realization in Mennonite spirituality," (Ph.D. dissertation, Union Graduate School, 1987), pp. 21ff.
The second source of theology I will examine are Mennonite church statements on peace. While the Mennonite church is not creedal, (in the sense that most Mennonite services do not include the recitation of a creed), church conferences have regularly attempted to articulate their beliefs through statements of faith. These statements provide a particular insight into the workings of the larger church community. While they may have been written by groups of men, these statements have been ratified by conferences which, at least in the last few decades, have included women. Statements are useful as a barometer of the theology of the church.

The third source of theology I will examine is found in Mennonite hymnody. Music plays a very significant role in the worship life of the Mennonite church. Hymns are particularly important in the Mennonite tradition which is non-creedal, for the repetition of certain hymns can function in a confessional way. I have surveyed the major twentieth century hymnals of all three major North American Mennonite traditions.

The fourth source of theology to be explored is to be found in the writings of selected Mennonite women. While women have historically largely been marginalized and excluded from public positions of power and authority (such as being pastors or professors), there are some women who have found a venue in theological writing. These theologies, written from a female perspective, provide a different window on religious thinking.

A Mennonite Feminist Peace Theology

Feminists have begun to challenge the agenda of Mennonite theology. In 1992 female Mennonite theologians gathered officially for the first time as a group at a "Women Doing Theology" conference in Waterloo, Ontario. There Mary Ann Hildebrand stated,
In all religious traditions, including the Mennonite tradition, theology has been passed on from father to son. It has been discussed, written about, formulated, and taught by men out of their legitimate experience. However we can no longer assume that what is verbalized and documented by men speaks also to the experience of women. We need to take another look at peace theology from the perspective of those suffering from violence in intimate relationships.\textsuperscript{45}

A new peace theology, which includes women's experience as a source, will necessarily grapple with the Mennonite theological tradition. It will have to examine the "silence" of Mennonite theology. A new peace theology which includes women's experience as a norm, will evaluate how theology functions in the lives of women who have been and are being abused. A new peace theology will be a theology which is good news for women.

The sixth chapter will examine the theological literature, both Mennonite and ecumenical, which concerns itself directly with violence against women. This literature will be explored using the themes of suffering, obedience and forgiveness, to see what new directions are being charted.

The final chapter of this thesis will suggest directions that a Mennonite feminist peace theology should take. It will seek to find a theology which is both credible to women in the context of violence, and authentic to the Mennonite tradition.

CHAPTER II

TWO MENNONITE THEOLOGIANS

I have decided to begin my study of Mennonite theology with an exploration of the theology of Guy Hershberger and John Howard Yoder, two prominent Mennonite theologians.¹ Both men had a lengthy and distinguished teaching career in the Mennonite church. Books and articles written by them have been widely used in Mennonite theological institutions. Their work has thus had the opportunity to be disseminated by the academically educated segment of the Mennonite church.

This examination of the work of Guy Hershberger and John Howard Yoder is not a comprehensive study of all of their work. It does not attempt to show how their thought changed and developed throughout their academic career, nor does it attempt to address the current academic debates about their ideas. Rather, I have read their major works with an eye for discovering what they had to say about suffering, obedience and forgiveness. It is the major works of these theologians that have been the most widely read and which most likely affected the theology of church members. Their major works provide an avenue to explore the theological mind-set of Mennonites.

¹By placing this chapter first I am not making a value judgement as to the importance of this theology over the other types of theology which will be examined in this thesis. However academic theology can bring the clarity of systematic thought to the issues at hand.
In this chapter I will be examining their work from the context of violence against women. Their theology is, in fact, 'silent' on the issue of woman abuse, yet abused women were part of the context into which their theology was launched. This thesis is not attempting to prove a cause and effect relationship between the work of Yoder and Hershberger and the suffering of abused women. Their theology was part of a mind-set which was blind to and tolerated violence against women while at the same time eschewing violence in other contexts.

By commenting on the oppressive nature of their theology in this context, I am not implying that Yoder and Hershberger intended their work to function this way. Indeed, this thesis is not concerned so much with the intent of the writers as with the function that theology had in women's lives.

Guy Hershberger

Guy Hershberger was an important Mennonite theologian whose thought was formative for several generations of church leaders. In addition to teaching history, sociology and ethics at Goshen College from 1925 to 1966, Hershberger was active in many Mennonite organizations. His first book War, Peace and Nonresistance was a landmark study which "... functioned as a foundational peace theology for all the major Mennonite bodies in North America." Published in 1944, it had later editions in 1953 and 1969, with a 1991 reprint of the 1969 edition. Another

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book, entitled *The Way of the Cross in Human Relations*, helped to shape Mennonite thought in the area of social ethics. Recent scholars have pointed to the importance of Hershberger as a major Mennonite thinker; "Hershberger became the broker who negotiated the rift between historic nonresistance and activist pacifism in the context of wartime conditions." Hershberger was an influential man in the Mennonite church and his ideas affected the students he taught, his co-workers in the church, and the people who read his writings.

**Suffering**

The concept of suffering is absolutely integral to Hershberger's thought for it is at the heart of his christocentric theology. This section will outline Hershberger's views on how Jesus suffered, and how that suffering provides a role-model for Christians to follow.

Hershberger emphasizes in his writings that Jesus was a person who suffered. His death was a corollary to his life; "Christ did not only die a cross death. He lived a cross life." The suffering Jesus experienced in his life was in complete harmony with his death on the cross. Jesus bore this suffering quietly. At a number of points Hershberger uses the image from Isaiah of the lamb going quietly to the slaughter; ". . . when he was afflicted he opened not his mouth."

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6Hershberger, *Cross*, p. 23.


8Ibid.
A quietly suffering Jesus is given prominence through his choice of scripture under the heading "The Example of Christ" in an Appendix to War, Peace and Nonresistance.

Hershberger emphasizes the selfless nature of Jesus' suffering. Jesus is described as someone who refused to use his divine power to resist his opponents or even to meet his own needs, "... these powers were used only sparingly, and then only in ministering to the needs of others. They never were used to satisfy His own hunger, or to contribute to His own comfort."9

Christians today are called to suffer gladly for the cause of Christ because "Christ also suffered, leaving an example that we should follow in his steps."10 Hershberger points to the witness of the early Anabaptists who were imitators of Christ. He suggests that the martyr theme for them was not a cry of despair, but rather a shout of triumph. Their suffering was seen as brief because "God was more real than the world."11 In an interesting twist he writes, "In the end the followers of Christ would reign with Him and the persecutors would stand before Him whom they had pierced."12 Here Hershberger implies that the sufferings of Christians are not merely imitative, but somehow become the sufferings of Christ Himself.

Members of the Christian church are called to live the cross life. They need to be ready to die the cross death if necessity requires it.13 Hershberger explains that being a Christian means

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9Hershberger, Cross, p. 23.
10Hershberger, War, Peace, p. 47.
11Hershberger, Cross, p. 162.
12Ibid.
13Ibid., p. 164.
presenting not only our bodies, but "our entire personality as a living sacrifice" [emphasis his]. Christians should, in fact, meekly renounce every personal right and bear injustice patiently; the Christian will hardly be aware of suffering because they are so oblivious to the self. He goes on to proclaim that "... suffering itself is the badge of the true Christian." The Christian who avoids the cross denies the possibility of the resurrection.

While the majority of Hershberger's writings focus on the Christian's relationship to the state, he does mention that the home must be a context for this cross life. Christian living must begin at home, "... in the family, in the congregation, and in the intimate community." In fact it is in the home where the true character of the Christian reveals itself:

In our primary group relationships, however, our real self becomes manifest. Here, if nowhere else, we really discover the extent to which we have been crucified with Christ. Here is the yardstick with which we can measure the degree to which we have given ourselves to the way of the cross. If we fail in this test it may well be questioned whether our conformity to the nonresistant way of love is genuine.

Hershberger admits that it sometimes happens that "... those who are nearest to us, and whom we love most, receive the most unchristian treatment at our hands." He states that he does not

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15 Ibid., p. 35.
16 Ibid., p. 40.
17 Ibid., Cross, p. 342.
18 Ibid., p. 42.
19 Ibid.
think Mennonites can claim great distinction in terms of having happy homes or harmonious family life. 20

Hershberger is aware of the irony that Mennonites are not always very peaceful in their private lives; "It would seem that a people like those of the Anabaptist tradition, in whose history the way of the cross has played such a conspicuous role, should be most successful in this respect." He goes on to express some discomfort at this disparity between theory and reality:

[The present writer] must confess, however, to an occasional uneasy feeling lest a Niebuhr or a Bennett, were he thoroughly acquainted with the inner workings and the intimate life of, say the historic peace churches or other brotherhood groups on the congregational and family level, would come to agree that there is little difference between private and public morals—not through conviction of the workability of the high ethic on the multilateral level, but rather through observation of its poor performance on the intimate personal level. 21

These uneasy feelings, however, do not lead Hershberger into a more thorough discussion of the significance of this line of thinking.

The teaching of Hershberger on the concept of suffering is not good news for women who have experienced violence. Jesus is consistently described as the one who suffered quietly and meekly and as one who refused to use his power to save himself. Hershberger describes Christians as people who are to be living sacrifices. They renounce every personal right and bear injustice patiently just as Jesus did. Indeed, he states that suffering is the badge of the true Christian. Hershberger repeatedly emphasizes Jesus' cross, and speaks approvingly of the Anabaptist martyrs; by doing this he suggests that suffering may very well lead to death. There

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20Ibid., p. 355.

21Ibid., pp. 342-343.
is no discussion in his theology of the possibility that minimizing or avoiding suffering is a Christ-like option.

An abused woman who encountered this theology would find no hope. If she were to avoid the cross of her suffering, she would be told that she is denying the possibility of resurrection. The only liberation offered is heavenly and it can only be gained through death. A woman who resisted a sexual assault would wonder whether she had acted in an un-Christian way by not submitting to the assault and accepting possible death.

Hershberger's theology is especially dangerous for women because of what he says about home life. He acknowledges that Mennonites don't act like peacemakers in the home, and he says that people receive 'unchristian treatment' there. Hershberger does not elaborate on this at all, neither in terms of the gender of the people who are acting in an unchristian way, nor in terms of the nature of this behavior. He does, however, deliver an extremely strong message to people in the family. Hershberger claims that the real self is manifested in the way one acts at home. He states that it is in the home setting that one can really see whether Christians have been crucified with Christ. The reaction of Christians to each other in the home, he offers, is a true yardstick of their Christian commitment.

These statements may very well have been directed by Hershberger to all people in the home, both the givers or the receivers of the unchristian treatment. His advice, however, is couched in a theology of suffering which seems to make them especially pertinent for abused people. Hershberger's theology of suffering is pointedly directed at people who suffer from abuse in intimate relationships. They are called to accept that suffering meekly as a way of being
crucified with Christ. Their ability to do this is a yardstick of their Christian commitment.

Hershberger's theology of suffering has not been good news for women in abusive situations.

Obedience

The concept of obedience is also very important in the theology of Guy Hershberger. He sees obedience to be the foundation of the human being's relationship to the Creator. Human beings are commanded by the Bible to respond to God with love and obedience; "Throughout the Scriptures love and obedience are associated in the most intimate manner. They are integral parts of the same experience." Hershberger points his readers to the example of the early Anabaptists who had "... a literal obedience to the commands of Christ, faithfully following his steps." Obedience to God is worked out by living according to the order which God has set in place in the world. This section will describe Hershberger's views on how gender fits into God's order, the consequences of injustice, and the options which Christians have in the face of that injustice.

Hershberger claims that there is a divine order in this world which was created and sanctified by God. Obeying God means synchronizing oneself with this divine order. The order of creation includes the state, of course, but it also includes other things:

As in the case of all social relationships, marriage, the family, and the relation of the sexes in society are established in the order of creation which requires the way of love and the cross if they are to function in accordance with the will of God.²⁵

²²Ibid., p. 6.
²³Ibid., p. 7.
²⁴Hershberger, War, Peace, p. 81.
²⁵Hershberger, Cross, p. 348.
Obedience to the order of creation is the only way that humans can live in a harmonious and healthful way. 26 The Christian must honour and respect those in authority. It is the job of those in authority to maintain order in the society of this world. 27 Christians can disobey those in authority only if those in authority ask them to be disobedient to God. 28

While Hershberger takes some pains to emphasize that men and women are both equal before God, 29 he states that God has given every creature a mode of being; "A woman has certain rights which belong to her as a woman, and a man has certain rights which belong to him as a man. In this sense men and women are unlike and unequal." 30 The relationship of men and women is similar to the relationship between child and adult. Although every person is equal before God, in this world each has certain rights endowed by the order of creation. 31

Hershberger's theology claims that the man of the house is the leader. The woman's role is as follows:

As queen of the home she looks to her husband to lead out in the rougher work of general administration while she leads in the exercise of tender love and intuitive understanding, in providing the aesthetic touch, in deep meditation on the meaning of faith and life, and in setting the tone of quiet, worshipful dignity which is the crowning glory of the home. 32

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26Ibid., p. 10.
27Hershberger, War, Peace, p. 55.
28Ibid., p. 57.
29Hershberger, Cross, p. 348.
32Ibid., p. 360.
He does say that man's function as 'head' of the home came to be distorted into a form of tyranny, but he does not spell out what tyranny might mean in real terms for women.

The concept of male headship is reiterated in the following way:

If husbands and wives and parents and children discover the way of the cross in their mutual relationships, the prospect for the future life of the church and community is good. If there is dictatorship, tyranny, and selfishness, disobedience, rebellion, and general lack of co-operation, the prospect is not good.

The pairing of husband/wife, and parent/child continues in the description of undesirable traits. Dictatorship, tyranny and selfishness are undesirable in men and parents, while disobedience, rebellion and lack of co-operation are particularly undesirable in wives and children. Because of the nature of the divine order, obedience is called for in women, while leadership is called for in men.

Hershberger discusses the nature of husband/wife relationships, quoting sociological studies which show the influence that a democratic society has had on marriage. He suggests that "... husband-wife and parent-children relations are better in families where responsibility is shared than in those where everything is controlled by a single hand." The decision to have a democratic structure, however, is obviously in the hands of the man who holds the balance of God-given power.

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33Ibid., p. 349.

34Ibid., p. 355.

35The word "tyranny" appears six pages earlier in the book as a temptation which men face.

36Hershberger, Cross, p. 357.
The order of male dominance and female submission is divinely ordained. Rebellion against this order is rebellion against God.\textsuperscript{37} Hershberger speaks delicately of the vulnerability of people within the divine order, suggesting that while "... justice is an integral part of the divine order of things,"\textsuperscript{38} sinful human beings create injustice. The correct or 'supernatural' way to correct injustice is through "... the way of love, of suffering, of the cross."\textsuperscript{39} In this way the Christian shares the spirit of the Suffering Servant, who was like a lamb led to the slaughter.\textsuperscript{40}

Thus Hershberger's message for people who suffer injustice within the divine order is clear. Christians should follow the way of the cross and never demand justice for themselves.\textsuperscript{41} The way of the cross means total nonresistance to evil; "... when one who is wronged begins to place the emphasis on a demand for justice, he has taken the first step on the road which leads away from Christian nonresistance."\textsuperscript{42} Nonresistance, Hershberger explains, means renouncing all attempts to coerce someone into changing. This includes using nonviolent techniques;\textsuperscript{43}

It is not nonviolent resistance which Jesus enjoins, for even this is but a technique, however mild its manner may be, to bring the enemy to the place where he will cease to do you evil--where he will do you good. The ethic of Jesus, however, enjoins the Christian to

\textsuperscript{37}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{38}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{40}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 21.

\textsuperscript{41}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 353.

\textsuperscript{42}Hershberger, \textit{War, Peace}, p. 186.

\textsuperscript{43}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 171.
seek the enemy's good, to do him good, even though the enemy may continue to return evil for good.44

Using a scriptural example, Hershberger rejects using legal recourse to correct injustice. Rather than appeal to secular authorities, Christians should allow themselves to be defrauded and suffer injustice.45 The correction of injustice, therefore, is solely dependent upon the conversion (by God) of the oppressive person or group.46 Disobedience to the divine order is never justified "... merely as a means of obtaining justice."47

Hershberger's theology calls both men and women to follow the way of the cross. The impact of his call for obedience to the divine order depends upon the context of the reader. A woman whose husband was following the way of the cross might not experience Hershberger's theology as oppressive. However, a woman in an abusive relationship who read Hershberger's theology would hear a clear call to be obedient and remain in an abusive situation. Headship of men over women is divinely ordained, Hershberger maintains, and rebellion against that order is rebellion against God. Hershberger does acknowledge that tyranny is a possibility within this order, but he offers no solution except the cross. Thus women who are being abused by their husbands cannot demand justice. Their only recourse is to suffer as Jesus did and hope for a conversion of their abuser. Self-assertion is sin, they are told, and it is unchristian to appeal for help from the secular authorities. Here the call for women's obedience to men is directly

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44Hershberger, Cross, p. 41.
45Hershberger, War, Peace, p. 185.
46Hershberger, Cross, p. 18.
47Hershberger, War, Peace, p. 83.
connected with a call to suffer. Hershberger's theology lends itself to functioning oppressively in
the lives of women who have experienced violence at the hands of men.

Hershberger's theology was written at a time when many Mennonite immigrants who had
been victims of World War II were entering North American life. A large proportion of families
were led by women, many of whom had experienced sexual assault in the context of war. The call
for obedience to God's order (of government and male headship) would have sent a powerful
message to these women about their experiences. Women are called to be obedient to those in
authority over them, and not to resist in any way. For women who chose resistance and managed
to survive, the corollary was that they had acted in an unchristian way.

Forgiveness

The concept of forgiveness is not featured as prominently in Hershberger's theology as the
ideas of suffering and obedience, but there are clear directives about it. Hershberger grounds his
understanding of forgiveness scripturally. At a number of points he refers to the forgiveness
Christ offered to his persecutors.\(^4^8\) An example from the book of Hosea is used as well; the
prophet has loving forgiveness for his unfaithful wife.\(^4^9\)

Christians are called to follow in Jesus' footsteps and to forgive, covering other people's
faults with a cloak of charity.\(^5^0\) There are no limits on forgiveness.\(^5^1\) Indeed, "The disciple of
Christ abandons all claims on his brother, forgiving him unendingly, even until seventy times

\(^{48}\) Ibid., p. 48 and Cross, p. 41.

\(^{49}\) Hershberger, Cross, p. 21.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 369.

\(^{51}\) Hershberger, War, Peace, p. 50.
seven.\textsuperscript{52} Hershberger reminds Christians that punishment awaits those who do not forgive others.\textsuperscript{53}

An abused woman would have need of this theology of forgiveness. Given that Hershberger's theology suggests that she remain in a position of obedience in the order of creation, and given that she cannot claim justice, her only alternative is to suffer. Being put in a situation where she must be obedient and she must suffer, an abused woman or a woman who had been raped would either be consumed with bitterness or anger, or use forgiveness as a coping mechanism. Hershberger suggests that forgiving an abuser limitlessly is her only choice if she wants to be forgiven for her sins. However Hershberger's treatment of forgiveness is very limited. The implication of this is that forgiveness is straightforward and simple, and needs little discussion. This ignores the depth of anger and rage which women feel when they are violated.

Having looked at Hershberger's theology of suffering, obedience and forgiveness, it is possible to apprehend the theological message given to women who have experienced violence. Suffering is seen as a very good thing which must happen to Christians if they are true to Christ. Any refusal to suffer abuse could be interpreted to be a refusal to live the 'cross life', and might throw into question one's genuine Christian commitment. In terms of family life, women's place is to be obedient to the authority of their husbands. In this relationship they are not allowed to seek justice for themselves. They should, instead, rejoice in their suffering. Finally, the message of forgiveness emerges as a minor theme, which enables women to endure further suffering in their obedient relationships.

\textsuperscript{52}Hershberger, \textit{Cross}, p. 41.

\textsuperscript{53}Hershberger, \textit{War, Peace}, p. 44.
John Howard Yoder was a prominent theologian in the Mennonite Church. He taught for many years at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana and was a professor at Notre Dame University. He worked with many Mennonite organizations and conferences, mostly in the area of theology. He is perhaps best known for his book *The Politics of Jesus.*\(^{54}\) It has become a standard in most Mennonite peace studies courses. The book was so significant to Mennonite thought that in 1976 Mennonite Central Committee sponsored a major Peace Theology colloquium which focused on this book.\(^{55}\) It was re-released in 1995. John Howard Yoder died in 1998, and this has prompted a new wave of scholarly evaluation of the legacy of his work and his life.\(^{56}\)

**Suffering**

Yoder's theology, like Hershberger's, is christocentric, and suffering is a dominant motif in all of his writings. This section will outline Yoder's view of Christ's suffering.

The most prominent aspect of Jesus' life, according to Yoder, is the fact that he consciously chose to suffer. Jesus accepted the cross as his destiny, moved towards it and even

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\(^{55}\) The colloquium was held at St. Paul's School of Theology in Kansas City, October 7-9, 1976.

\(^{56}\) John Howard Yoder's ministerial credentials were suspended in 1992 because of sexual boundary crossings with a number of women (*Elkhart Truth*, Monday, June 29, 1992, B1). He followed a process of accountability and restoration prescribed by the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite conference (*Gospel Herald*, June 18, 1996, p. 11). The morality of his actions has cast a shadow on his theological legacy; it is beyond the parameters of this thesis to look for possible connections between Yoder's misconduct and flaws that may be inherent in his theology.
Christians, as followers of Christ, are called to take up their own cross: "Only at one point, only on one subject—but then consistently, universally—is Jesus our example: in his cross..." The story of Jesus is a paradigm, and every strand of New Testament literature points to a connection between Jesus' suffering and the way Christians as disciples are called to suffer. This way of suffering is, in fact, the kingdom of God, and Christians should follow their Master in suffering for the sake of love.

Yoder suggests that Christians are called to suffer because by doing so they are participating in the "character of God's victorious patience" with rebellious powers. Christians can subject themselves to the powers that be because that is how Jesus revealed and achieved God's victory. Two of the subheadings in The Politics of Jesus are "Suffering in Christ as the definition of apostolic existence" and "Death is Victory."

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57 Yoder, Politics, p. 132.

58 Ibid., p. 97.


61 Yoder, Politics, p. 61.


63 Yoder, Politics, p. 213.

64 Ibid., p. 123.

65 Ibid., p. 129.
Yoder tends to discuss suffering in a theoretical rather than in a practical way. He rarely gives examples of what contemporary suffering might be. However at one point he does become more specific when he suggests that certain types of human suffering are not like Jesus' suffering. Yoder nuances his theology of suffering by dividing it into two categories; suffering which is cross-like, and suffering which is simply unfortunate.

The cross of Calvary was not a difficult family situation, not a frustration of visions of personal fulfilment, a crushing debt or a nagging in-law; it was the political, legally to be expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling his society. Already the early Christians had to be warned against claiming merit for any and all suffering; only if their suffering be innocent, and a result of the evil will of their adversaries, may it be understood as meaningful before God.66

Yoder is clear that suffering in and of itself is not redemptive.67 He says that self-mortification, or innocent suffering through sickness or accident are not to be confused with suffering like Jesus.68 Yoder's reference to 'a difficult family situation' is vague; it is the closest he comes to speaking of violence against women in his major works.

It is clear that Yoder's theology of suffering, like Hershberger's, is firmly rooted in his christology. Christians are to follow the example of Jesus, particularly in relation to the way he suffered. This narrow view of the message of Jesus is not good news for abused women for it provides no message of hope.

In fact, there seems to be no message of liberation from suffering at all in the theology of Yoder. He does at one point quote the Magnificat which speaks of an end to suffering, and he

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66Ibid., p. 132.
67Ibid., p. 243.
68Ibid., p. 132.
does suggest that the radical social change which will come about by living the ethic of Jesus will eliminate suffering. The way to achieve this radical social change, however, is through suffering.

Yoder does try to nuance his view of suffering, He is careful to delineate which types of suffering are Christ-like, and which are simply unfortunate. This differentiation is a movement which seems to offer hope for women suffering from abuse. Yoder's phrase 'difficult family situations' could be construed to mean abusive relationships, and these would not then be seen as something which a Christian is required to accept. They would be an unfortunate circumstance, like a bad debt. This type of suffering could presumably be avoided with impunity.

Yoder goes on, however, to speak of suffering as the expected result of a moral clash with ruling powers. His use of the words 'powers' and 'powers that be' bring to mind Hershberger's description of divinely ordained orders of society. This will be discussed below in Yoder's view of obedience. In any case, Yoder says that suffering will result from challenging those powers, yet remaining subject to them. It would appear that women suffering from abuse in relationships with men would still fall under the rubric of Christ-like suffering. Read from within the context of woman abuse, Yoder's heading that "Victory is Death" is not good news.

For women who have experienced suffering from sexual assault, Yoder's theology is ambiguous. For suffering to be Christ-like it must be freely chosen. Rape is certainly never something that is chosen.

Obedience

The concept of obedience is extremely important in Yoder's theology. Jesus was obedient unto death, and he is our model; "What [Jesus] did is the primordial definition of the human

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69Ibid., pp. 26-27.
obedience which God desires." While Yoder's work deals primarily with New Testament material, he does suggest that the Exodus account is all about believing and obeying God. When the Israelites obeyed "... the seemingly inevitable menace hanging over them disappeared." Obedience will, however, entail suffering. This suffering is the measure of obedience to the love of God. 

To understand Yoder's concept of obedience, one has to understand his world-view. Yoder, like Hershberger, believes that there are certain Powers that have a God-given ordering function in the world. Rather than being the servant of humankind, these Powers have tended to become humankind's master. Although fallen, they continue to have an orderly function in the world. Even in this fallen and rebellious state the working of the Powers is not limitlessly evil. Even tyranny "... is still better than chaos and we should be subject to it." These Powers have an extremely important function in the world, Yoder maintains, and they cannot simply be destroyed, set aside or ignored. Yoder often uses the word obedience, and in the following quotation he nuances its meaning. He explains that subordination is really what is required of Christians:

Subordination is significantly different from obedience. The conscientious objector who refuses to do what his government asks him to do, but still remains under the sovereignty of that government and accepts the penalties which it imposes, or the Christian who

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70Yoder, Priestly, p. 116.
71Yoder, Politics, p. 79
72Yoder, Eschatology, p. 10.
73Yoder, Politics, p. 144.
74Ibid., p. 144.
refuses to worship Caesar but still permits Caesar to put him to death, is being subordinate even though he is not obeying.\textsuperscript{75}

This subordination does not mean completely bending your will and actions to the desires of another, but instead it means doing what your conscience tells you. At the same time you must be willing to accept the consequences for your actions from the authority that is in place over you.\textsuperscript{76}

Yoder relies heavily on the New Testament passages commonly referred to as the \textit{Haustafeln} (household codes) to explore the topic of subordination. He suggests that these \textit{Haustafeln} teach us that people are called to be Christian within the roles of the social order.\textsuperscript{77}

As a Christian the social order has a new meaning because the gospel teaches that people are equal in worth regardless of their status. Christians can be encouraged by the fact that even the subordinate people in the social order are addressed by God as moral agents. Thus, the Christian embraces the social order willingly rather than with reluctance.\textsuperscript{78} They can have a meaningful witness and ministry no matter where they are.\textsuperscript{79}

Yoder is quick to point out that the rules in the \textit{Haustafeln} do not consecrate the existing order, for the people on the top of the social order are also addressed and called to compassion and understanding. People in authority are called to willing servanthood rather than domination. Since all members of the social order accept their place and strive to love each other, the

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{75}Ibid., p. 212.
\item\textsuperscript{76}Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{77}Ibid., p. 174.
\item\textsuperscript{78}Ibid., p. 175.
\item\textsuperscript{79}Ibid., p. 174.
\end{footnotes}
subordination is revolutionary. Yoder uses the phrase revolutionary subordination to describe a Christianity which "... enables the person in a subordinate position in society to accept and live within that status without resentment."\(^{80}\)

Yoder claims that Christians believe in their worth before God no matter what their place within the social order. Jesus himself was also willingly subject to the powers of the world and accepted his own status of submission.\(^{81}\) When he broke the rules he was willing to accept the punishment from those Powers.

Yoder's discussion of the Powers definitely includes the order of the family as one of the God-given structures of human relations. While the title of his major work includes the word *politics*, he does not use that word in a narrow way. He uses it broadly to refer to the "... structuring of relationships among men in groups."\(^{82}\) He states, "Thus government is, like the order of the family, one of the given structures of human relations within which the Christian is called to live up to his role."\(^{83}\) Christians can accept this subordination because they know that all people are equal before God. Fulfilling their role in the social order is what Christians are called to do; "Equality of worth is not identity of role."\(^{84}\)

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\(^{80}\)Ibid., p. 190.

\(^{81}\)Ibid., p. 148.

\(^{82}\)Ibid., n.36, p. 50.

\(^{83}\)Ibid., p. 187.

\(^{84}\)Ibid., n. 23, p. 177.
Yoder emphasizes the scriptural maxim that men in authority are called to love their wives. Yoder observes that subordination to authority must continue regardless of whether the person in authority is Christian: "It is because she knows that in Christ there is no male or female that the Christian wife can freely accept that subordination to her unbelieving husband which is her present lot."

Yoder does say that if given the chance, Christians should maximize their freedom since Christ calls us to freedom. Yet he also claims that freedom can be realized within the God-given roles if one is voluntarily subordinate. Social distinctions are, in the end, relatively unimportant in the light of God's coming kingdom. Christians can be free of the desire of wanting to smash worldly structures because these structures will all in the end pass away. This is what Jesus taught and what he demonstrated through his suffering.

Yoder is also clear that obedience will result in suffering. Obedience will not necessarily attain the ends for which Christians hope; "The Cross is the extreme demonstration that agape [divine unconditional love] seeks neither effectiveness nor justice, and is willing to suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience." Thus Yoder, like Hershberger, emphasizes that the

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85 Ibid., pp. 181-182.
86 Ibid., p. 191.
88 Ibid., p. 192.
90 Yoder, Eschatology, p. 7.
suffering of Christians is not simply a strategy to achieve certain ends. Suffering occurs because of obedience, not because one thinks it is an effective way to change the heart of the person who is oppressing you: "Suffering is not a tool to make people come around, nor a good in itself."\(^91\) Rather, obedience to suffering love means abandoning a concern for managing the world and achieving certain results.\(^92\) The cross is not a recipe for resurrection.\(^93\)

The message which Yoder's theology conveys to a woman experiencing abuse is that she should be obedient to her husband. She is encouraged to see herself following in the footsteps of Jesus, who was also obedient. Yoder provides an elaborate explanation of why subordination is different than obedience. His work on the household codes is done in the context of a scholarly debate which viewed the *Haustafeln* as essentially conservative, and a pulling back from the radical ethics of Jesus. Yoder sees the household codes as profoundly liberative.

Yet in practical terms Yoder's framework for the household codes makes no difference to the abused woman for both obedience and subordination require her to stay in an abusive situation. Yoder's theology would assure the woman, however, that by accepting her suffering she is being a moral agent and can thus have a meaningful witness and ministry. Yoder claims that God will help the subordinate person to live without resentment.

Yoder does not address the situation of abused women specifically but his description of the Powers does include the power of men over women in the family. Tyranny, he suggests, is better than the chaos which would result from disobedience. His theology would allow women to

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\(^91\)Yoder, *Politics*, p. 245.

\(^92\)Yoder, *Priestly*, p. 96.

\(^93\)Yoder, *Politics*, p. 245.
make a stand for themselves and claim their right to justice, but they must accept the punishment which this claim might bring. This should not be disheartening, he claims, because that is the route that Jesus took. The implication is that abused women should not concern themselves with the outcome of their stand for justice, rather they should be willing to suffer any loss for the sake of obedience.

In Yoder’s theology, as in Hershberger’s, suffering and obedience are inextricably linked. Their belief in an order of society ordained by God consigns abused women to an obedient role in which their only option is to suffer. This is definitely not a hopeful theology for these women.

Forgiveness

The concept of forgiveness is not explored at great length in Yoder’s theology. He does point to the example of Jesus whose "uncomplaining and forgiving death" is a model.94 Yoder suggests, however, that the traditional view of what Jesus meant by forgiveness should be stretched to include the forgiveness of monetary debts.95 His statements about forgiveness are direct, however, and to the point in terms of the topic of this thesis.

There is thus but one realm in which the concept of imitation holds—but there it holds in every strand of the NT literature . . . this is at the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross in relation to enmity and power. Servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absorbs hostility. Thus—and only thus—are we bound by NT thought to "be like Jesus."96

The message of forgiveness is not a major theme in the writings of Yoder. Christians are called to suffer and to be obedient, yet forgiveness is not an issue which is foremost in his

94Yoder, Eschatology, p. 7.
95Yoder, Politics, p. 66.
96Ibid., p. 134.
theology. This silence could be read to mean that forgiveness is something very straightforward and needs little discussion. The phrase "forgiveness absorbs hostility" is given no content for women who face perpetrators of violence.

It would seem that the writings of Yoder have a specific message which women who are being abused can read. This message is that suffering is the badge of the true Christian. While there is a caution that not all suffering is redemptive, Yoder's explanation of the Powers and his renouncing of legitimate defence in favour of subordination, seems to apply precisely to the situation of women who are choosing to stay in abusive situations.

While *Politics of Jesus* is concerned with teaching Christians to accept the ethical call of Jesus to suffer and be subordinate to the powers, Yoder does provide a rather obscure disclaimer, "We are not affirming a specific biblical ethical content for modern questions; we are observing that where the New Testament offered specific guidance for its own time, that guidance confirms and applies the messianic ethic of Jesus."97 This quote would leave the door open for Yoder to object to any application of his writing to the subject of woman abuse, by saying that this is a modern question which is outside the scope of the biblical material. Significantly, his overarching message, however, is that Jesus' political message is immediate and important for Christians today. Jesus is "... not only relevant but also normative for a contemporary Christian social ethic."98 Yoder's theology relies extensively on scripture (particularly the *Haustafeln*), which emphasizes the subordination of women; he uses this scripture without any reference to the context of male and female relationships out of which his writing comes. Women reading his

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97 Ibid., p. 192.

98 Ibid., p. 23.
work find a message about obedience, suffering and forgiveness which they apply to their situation.

In conclusion, I believe that this study of suffering, obedience and forgiveness in the theology of John Howard Yoder and Guy Hershberger has been fruitful. The theologies of these two men call Christians to imitate Jesus' suffering. Suffering will serve a redemptive function, they suggest, and to reject suffering is to reject the cross. Their theology of obedience is also clear. The orders of society, however fallen, still serve an ordering function and thus wives are to be obedient to their husbands. They are called to accept the suffering which that role might bring. Finally, this study reveals that in the theology of these two men forgiveness is something which Christians are absolutely required to do, but neither theologian develops this concept in any depth.

The potency of the message of these theologians lies particularly in the intersection between the concepts of suffering and obedience. While all Christians are called to suffer, obedience carries a gendered message. Their theology may have been written primarily for men, or equally for men and women; yet it was launched into a context where women suffer abuse at the hands of men. Regardless of Hershberger's or Yoder's awareness of this context, their theology lent itself to functioning oppressively in the lives of women. Their theology provided an interpretation of the gospel which did not extend good news to women in abusive situations.

These observations are not meant to imply that the theology of Yoder and Hershberger needs to be abandoned. While aspects of their work lack credibility when viewed from the context studied here, any realistic appraisal of Mennonite theology must acknowledge the significance of their thought, and the brilliance with which they addressed the reality of their time.
Hershberger's work directly confronted the post-world-war two situation; the tension in Mennonite life between retreating to secure isolationism, and the bluntness of needing to deal with governments and wars. Yoder's work came at the end of the turbulent decade of the sixties. It is a passionate call to activism. Read within that decade, it provides a Mennonite rationale for the type of civil engagement that was sweeping the country.

Hershberger's work is more consciously contextual than Yoder's work. Hershberger sets out to address the Mennonite reality and he is clear in naming that to which his theology responds. The unfortunate aspect of his theology is that he does not examine the violence women face, and he is more clearly committed to the patriarchal notion of male headship. Yoder's work, particularly in Politics of Jesus, is not presented contextually and is thus much more dangerous for Mennonite women. He presents his theology in the guise of a theoretically ahistorical examination of the 'real' Jesus. By doing this, Yoder implicitly claims a universal legitimacy for his ideas. Since there is no reference to Yoder's social context, his biblical interpretation seems to be presenting timeless truths. These timeless truths have proven inspiring to countless Mennonites who faced the context implicit in Yoder's work; that of the move from quietism to activism in society, the call to interaction with the world. This discussion has shown that his theology can be very oppressive in contexts where women experience abuse.
CHAPTER III

MENNONITE CHURCH STATEMENTS

Having examined the thought of two influential Mennonite theologians, I turn in this chapter to a quite different expression of Mennonite theology. Church statements are a valuable theological resource for they serve as a barometer of the theological climate which produced them. In this chapter I will explore the themes of suffering, obedience and forgiveness in Mennonite church statements. These statements will provide a window through which to glimpse Mennonite theology and how it functions in the lives of women who have experienced violence. This chapter will begin with some introductory comments about the nature and function of church statements for Mennonites, and an explanation of which church statements this thesis used.

Mennonites are characterized as having a non-creedal tradition. The classical ecumenical creeds are not regularly used in public worship, nor are they seen as necessarily theologically normative.¹ Mennonites have historically emphasized the importance of scripture over and above any subsequent formulations of faith. This is not to say that Mennonites disagree with the classical creeds; on the contrary, they are largely in agreement with them. The disagreement is rather with the significance or usefulness of formulating faith in such a fashion.

While Mennonites have not overtly relied on patristic formulations of faith in developing their theology, they have from the inception of Anabaptism produced many statements, confessions and affirmations of their own.² There has been a drive to clearly articulate and preserve the uniqueness of Mennonite faith. An example of this is found in the following statement, "As our churches have done at various points in history, we find it helpful to once again state clearly our convictions regarding the church's calling to be God's people of peace . . . ."³ Historically these confessions and statements have not made claims to be final and authoritative.⁴ For example, "A position statement can never be an absolute or final statement. However, this statement testifies to our conviction that this is the direction the Spirit is moving us in these days."⁵ Indeed, church statements are sometimes made with the understanding that they have a time-limited usefulness, as in this statement; "Likely another series of affirmations will soon

²In this thesis the word statement refers to any document issued by a church; it refers to both confessions and statements.


⁴For example, Hans de Ries, an early Dutch Mennonite leader, wrote in 1626, "The confession is simply a short statement of what we believe we find in God's Word in contradistinction from others who also claim to hold to the Scriptures. And shall we be bound by it? We say no, it is subject to improvement." Mennonite Encyclopedia, vol. 5, s.v. "Confessions," by Howard John Loewen.

be needed as the church faces new problems, new temptations, and new pressures . . . " Other statements reflect a more dogmatic approach to theology.

While the basic unit of organization and power among Mennonites is the individual congregation, in twentieth century North America these congregations have been organized into conferences and assemblies which represent and advise the congregations. Both congregations and conferences make statements. Inter-church agencies, such as the relief organization Mennonite Central Committee, produce statements which are also representative of Mennonite thought. Conference statements are sometimes written for congregations to promote study and discussion. They can also be directed towards other parties, such as the government, in order to inform them of Mennonite thought.

The actual writing of statements is usually done by committee, as illustrated by the following description: "We had divided the work among the members of the committee . . . it would seem advisable that one man write up the first draft and present it to the committee for review and necessary changes, before presenting it to the Conference." Assemblies or conferences usually vote on whether they accept a statement. In some cases, as in the 1933


7Delegates to conferences, assemblies and meetings of church agencies may be appointed or elected, depending upon the tradition of that particular type of Mennonite church.

Articles of Faith, the General Conference never formally adopted the confession, but gave official permission for its printing, thus guaranteeing that it would have a relatively broad circulation.  

How normative or representative are these statements? Little scholarly work has been done on Mennonite confessions. This probably reflects the traditional mind-set that these documents have had very little importance in determining the theology of Mennonites. This low estimation of the importance of church statements explains these words by Howard John Loewen, one of the scholars who has begun work in this area; "The authority of confessions is not zero in the Mennonite tradition, it is something . . . " He points to the work that careful historians need to do in determining how confessions have actually functioned in the church. Loewen argues for the importance of these statements; "In the absence of a systematic theological tradition these confessions have often served an important role in preserving theological unity and identity in the Mennonite communities. They have also been used to reinforce schisms." Loewen does not, however, go into the practical details of how this important role was accomplished or provide examples of how church statements have historically functioned.

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10 Loewen, One Lord, p. 23.

11 Ibid., p. 47.

12 Ibid.


14 From a purely anecdotal point of view, church statements have not figured at all in Mennonite religious life as I have experienced it, neither in the congregations I have attended nor in the denominational college in which I studied. I only really became aware that these documents existed as a graduate student interested in studying the theology of Mennonites. My hunch is that my lack of exposure to church statements is not unique, and that these statements do not play a prescriptive
While the question of the prescriptive nature of church statements must be left unanswered, their descriptive nature is indisputable. Church statements are the product of groups of Mennonites coming together to share ideas and clarify issues. They are a mirror of their time. Loewen suggests that most church statements are consensus documents which reflect the doctrinal summary of a common majority.\textsuperscript{15} John Lapp writes that church documents reflect "... the compromises required to link wide-ranging representative positions," but he goes on to make the point that it is always appropriate to ask about dissenting voices in church documents.\textsuperscript{16} Each church statement could be studied to discover the theological bent of the committee members and the politics of how members were chosen, as well as whether the statement was unanimously received or passed with a slim majority. The gender, age and race of the conference participants or statement writers is also a factor. Thus while official statements may be a mirror, it is always appropriate to ask who was holding the mirror, and what is being reflected.\textsuperscript{17}

Richard Detweiler, another scholar of church statements, raises a slightly different point. He suggests that, "Official church documents may not always reveal underlying trends, since such

role in the Mennonite church today. People I have spoken with do remember a time when Mennonite confessions of faith were used as a catechism in preparation for adult baptism. I agree with Loewen that the past role of confessions in the life of the Mennonite church must be determined by careful historians.


\textsuperscript{16}John A. Lapp, "Introduction" in Peachey, \textit{Mennonite Statements}, p. xvi.

\textsuperscript{17}Ervin Stutzman also explores Mennonite church statements in his doctoral thesis. He attempts to balance these official church documents by examining letters to the editors of church periodicals. Ervin Ray Stutzman, "From Nonresistance to Peace and Justice: Mennonite Peace Rhetoric, 1951-1991" (Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 1993).
documents are generally formulated on end-points of agreement." Some church statements may be a reaction against certain populist trends in the church. It is thus possible to see quite dramatic theological changes in church statements within a relatively short period of time. Church statements can, in fact, mask a more gradual period of change in the minds of church members.

I have made use of a number of helpful collections and indexes which have been produced by scholars in recent years. Howard John Loewen's book One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America. An Introduction has proven invaluable, as has the anthology edited by Urbane Peachey entitled Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns, 1900-1978. A collection of Mennonite Brethren statements\(^ {19} \) and a microfilm collection of Canadian peace and social concern statements were also used.\(^ {20} \) More recent church statements were researched at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada Archives. Throughout the research I have concentrated primarily upon statements by national or bi-national church bodies and agencies.

I will make some reference to church confessions written before 1900. The influence of the Dordrecht Confession, for example, must be discussed in any study of Mennonite confessions


\(^{19}\)A. E. Janzen, and Herbert Giesbrecht, eds. We Recommend...Recommendations and Resolutions of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches, (Fresno, California: The Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978).

\(^{20}\)Bert Friesen, An Index of Peace and Social Concern Statements by the Mennonites and Brethren in Christ in Canada, 1787-1982 (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Mennonite Central Committee Canada, Microfilm #001913-001914,1986).
in North America.\textsuperscript{21} Written by Dutch Mennonites in 1632, this confession was brought to North America with the Mennonites and was commonly used by churches. Its importance can be illustrated by the fact that there are 255 known editions of this confession.\textsuperscript{22} It is the confession found in the \textit{Minister's Manual} written by J.S. Coffman and John Funk in 1890, which had its 13th printing in 1974.

Another document which will be mentioned here is the Ris Confession of 1766 which came out of the European context and was translated into English in 1902. It became the unofficial confession of the General Conference Mennonite Church.\textsuperscript{23} One of the earliest Mennonite statements is the Schleitheim Confession. While relatively unknown in North America in the first half of this century, it came into vogue again during the 1940's and influenced subsequent statements.

I turn now to a discussion of the themes of suffering, obedience and forgiveness as they emerge from these documents.

\section*{Suffering}

This section will outline how suffering was viewed in some major Mennonite statements. While the frequency of its occurrence varies, the meaning of suffering is fairly consistent in the

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\item \textsuperscript{21}Loewen, \textit{One Lord}, p. 23.
\item \textsuperscript{22}And, in fact, the Dordrecht Confession is still consistently used by conservative groups such as the Old Order Amish and the Old Order Mennonites. Irvin B. Horst, ed. and trans., \textit{Mennonite Confession of Faith}, (Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, 1988), pp. 9-10.
\item \textsuperscript{23}\textit{Mennonite Encyclopedia}, vol. 1, s.v. "Confessions," by Christian Neff, J.C. Wenger and H.S. Bender.
\end{itemize}
first half of the twentieth century. An evidence of a shift in the usage of suffering is evident in more recent decades. At the same time, specific references to family violence and violence against women appear. In the most recent statement surveyed, the word 'suffering' has all but disappeared.

The concept of suffering is present in very early Mennonite statements, although it is not spelled out in any detailed way. The Dordrecht Confession states that Christians are not allowed to cause suffering since they are following the example, life and doctrine of Christ.\textsuperscript{24} Further, Christians are instructed to "...suffer the loss of goods rather than bring harm to another..." and to turn the other cheek rather than to take revenge.\textsuperscript{25} Other than these brief references there is no elaboration of what suffering means.

In the Ris Confession of 1766 the concept of suffering is more clearly spelled out. Here Jesus' identity as one who suffered is explained and there is reference to his bitter and his precious suffering.\textsuperscript{26} Christians are called to be like Jesus and suffer wrong "... instead of violently resisting the evil with the object of destroying it... Only as we do this shall we be children pleasing to our Father in heaven and true followers of Jesus Christ."\textsuperscript{27} The statement goes on to say that all malevolent treatment strengthens "... the faith and patience of the saints," and shows how the grace of God makes all things work for their good.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{24} Horst, \textit{Mennonite Confession of Faith}, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} Mennonite Articles of Faith, General Conference Ris 1766/1895, in Loewen, \textit{One Lord}, p. 91.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p.100.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
The Ris Confession describes both the suffering fire of eternal punishment and the glorious reward in heaven; "... there will be degrees of glory (1 Cor 3:8), some shining as the sun (Dan. 12:3; Matt. 13:43) others as the stars, even as also one star differeth from another in glory, according as they suffered much and contended rightly."29 Here suffering is clearly linked with eternal reward, the implication being that the more one suffers, the greater the reward in heaven. Thus in the influential Ris Confession suffering is given a high profile.

The General Conference Common Confession of 1896 mentions suffering in a number of contexts. It states that mental and physical suffering is a consequence of the transgression of Adam and Eve.30 The suffering of Jesus is mentioned,31 as well as the fact that followers of Jesus shall "... suffer patiently and not resist the evil done to them."32 Christians should flee and "... suffer the 'spoiling of our goods,' rather than give offense to any one," (a phrase taken from the Dordrecht confession). As in the Dordrecht confession, this statement is immediately followed by a reminder that Christians are to turn the other cheek rather than ever taking revenge.33

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29Ibid., p. 105.


31Ibid., p. 109.

32Ibid., p. 111.

Subsequent statements reaffirm this concept of suffering. A 1943 statement from the Mennonite Brethren tradition presents a clear picture of the nature of suffering in the Christian life:

41. What if we do the right and then are made to suffer for it? If we do the right and then are made to suffer for it and we take it patiently, this is acceptable to God, and is following the example of Christ. I Peter 2:20-23
42. How does Christ comfort His own in their suffering? He says: Blessed are you, rejoice, your reward is great in heaven. Matt 5:11-12

This model of a suffering Jesus figures strongly in other statements as well. In a 1951 statement the meaning of the cross is explained, "[The cross] stands for the acceptance of unlimited suffering, the utter denial of self, and for complete dedication of life to the ministry of redemption for others." It is this same cross that Christians are called upon to take up daily. It is a "... discipleship of self-denial, nonresistance, and suffering love."

In a 1953 peace statement Jesus' work is discussed again; "The atoning cross of Christ in the center of human history stands also for the acceptance of suffering, the sacrifice of self, the outpouring of love, and the complete surrender of life to the ministry of redemption for others."

This statement is immediately followed by a call for Christians to also take up their cross daily.

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34"Attitudes to Enemies, to Revenge, and to Suffering," (1943) Fundamentals of Faith, in Janzen and Giesbrecht, We Recommend, pp. 56-57.


36Ibid.

The emphasis on the suffering of Jesus and the call for Christians to follow continues into the 1960's, where a statement claims that the teaching of the New Testament is epitomized by the statement, "Christ . . . suffered for us, leaving us an example."  

A different emphasis on suffering seems to enter into the statements in the 1960's. While earlier statements always called for Christians to help their brother, in the 1960's this idea is developed to include the possibility of suffering in the service of humanity. Suffering begins to have a purpose in the world other than for strengthening the faith of Christians. The spectre of atomic warfare looms large in some of these statements. In the face of the serious devastation which an atomic war might bring, Mennonite Central Committee's Winona Lake Statement calls Christians to " . . . willingly render every help which conscience permits, sacrificially and without thought of personal safety, so long as we thereby help to preserve and restore life and not to destroy it."  

In 1963 one statement suggests that " . . . we must aggressively, at the risk of life itself, do whatever we can for the alleviation of human distress and suffering," and a 1971 statement calls

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39This conference " . . . was not only the first inter-Mennonite peace conference attended by delegates from virtually all of the Mennonite and Brethren Groups in the US and Canada; the 'Declaration of Faith and Commitment' signed by the delegates has become a bench-mark for articulating the peace position of MCC constituent groups." Patty Shelly, "Winona Lake Memories," Peace Office Newsletter 21:6 (Nov-Dec 1991): 4.


41Horst, Mennonite Confession of Faith, p. 77.
for Christians "... to move into conflict situations with the willingness to absorb hostility and to suffer for the sake of righteousness and peace even as Jesus suffered." These statements all show a movement away from accepting suffering passively as the lot of Christians. Instead, there is a trend towards seeing suffering as a tool for social change which the Christian should embrace. The following statement illustrates this trend:

We will resist evil and oppression in the nonviolent spirit of Jesus. Our stand against unjust treatment of people employs the "weapons" demonstrated by Jesus—love, truth, forgiveness, and the willingness to suffer rather than inflict suffering.

Here suffering is seen as something to be used in the fight against injustice.

This new emphasis on the meaning of suffering does not entirely supersede the older idea of suffering. For example, a 1981 statement speaks of "meekness and suffering love" in the context of witnessing for Christ. While still occasionally present, this style of language about suffering is less evident, or evident within slightly changed contexts. For example, one statement speaks of "... God's suffering love which is redeeming the world."

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43This trend from quietism to activism has become a subject for many studies. See, for example, Joe Mihevc, "The Politicization of the Mennonite Peace Witness in the Twentieth Century" (Ph.D. thesis, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology, 1988).


suffering love has different connotations than earlier calls for Christians to imitate Christ's precious suffering.

By the late 1970's the rhetoric of suffering had shifted to allow the following interpretation: "Suffering for Christ is not the pain of what is old and dying being replaced; rather, it is the pain of birth, in that the new order of things is about to appear." This type of suffering is done in the "power of the resurrection." This view of suffering reinforces the idea that pain is something which is undertaken by the Christian for a purpose. The following statement asks probing questions about the nature of suffering:

What place does concern for justice/righteousness have in such [current] situations? To seek peace with justice will frequently include suffering, sometimes from personal submission to injustice, sometimes from active confrontation with injustice. When should we submit? When, and how, should we confront? These are among the most urgent questions arising out of recent Mennonite mission and service work. It is interesting that in spite of this call to explore the reasons why Christians might be called to suffer, the concept of suffering is not utilized in a subsequent major statement.

In the new 1995 summary statement entitled "Confession of Faith In a Mennonite Perspective" adopted by the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Church, suffering is only mentioned a single time. Christians are encouraged to follow Jesus' path "... through suffering to new life." Jesus' death is mentioned and he is described as the Lamb who was

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slain. The Lord's supper is described as something which "... thankfully remembers the new covenant which Jesus established by his death."50 The only reference to suffering in this summary statement is clearly linked with a new creation.

The summary statement is the part of the 1995 Confession which is most widely circulated in the church. The longer version of the statement (found in a 100 page booklet containing both articles and explanations of the articles) does make more extensive use of suffering imagery. However the use of the term is rather uneven and even puzzling at times.51 In an explanatory footnote the topic of suffering is explored, "Yet suffering is not to be sought for its own sake. Jesus healed many who suffered, and it is right to pray for healing and for rescue from evil (Matt. 6:13). God does not tempt anyone (James 1:13) nor desire that we suffer, though God can use suffering to instruct us and bring us to salvation."52

I turn now to a consideration of the specific context of violence against women as it appears in church statements. This context is indirectly introduced in the discussions surrounding marriage which surfaced during the late 1970's and 80's. The following 1979 statement has definite implications for those who are suffering;

We believe that it is the will of God that the marriage vow stands as a commitment for life. Any violation of the marriage vow is an offence to the Lord and is sin... Believing that Jesus does not provide any grounds for divorce, nor do insanity, mental cruelty, infidelity,

50 Ibid, p. 95.
51 For example, the article on Jesus has only one reference to suffering, while the article on baptism has four references. The article on the church has only one reference while the article on the Holy Spirit has three references to suffering.
52 Confession of Faith, p. 67.
we also believe that the marriage law for kingdom living is the practical living out of the marriage vow, "until death do us part."  

This statement seems to provide a rigid and uncompromising view of human relationships, a view that is not seen at all in subsequent statements. This illustrates Detweiler's claim (mentioned earlier) that some church statements are a reaction against populist trends in the church. This statement may be masking a more gradual period of change in the minds of church members.

Subsequent statements have a different flavour, emphasizing the importance of peace in all human relationships, including relationships in the home. For example, "... there is no peace without justice. God calls us to abandon hatred, strife and violence in all human relations, whether between individuals, within the family, within the church, among nations and races, or between religious factions, and to pursue a just peace for God's whole creation." There is a call for people to live together in

...relationships of love and mutual respect. We seek to model such relationships in our homes, churches, and work places, and to refrain from behavior which violates and abuses others physically or emotionally. In the spirit of Christ, we will oppose and seek to correct abusive relationships within our church family.  

Eventually in the mid-80's church statements begin to appear which address the subject of women's suffering. For example, the Mennonite Church in 1987 stated that wife battering is a sin.  


55 Ibid, p. 44.

56 "We understand the Bible to teach that genital intercourse is reserved for a man and a woman united in a marriage covenant and that violation even within the relationship, i.e., wife battering, is
In the 1990's both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church issued statements concerning violence between women and men.\textsuperscript{57} They were in response to a consultation held in February 1992 by a group of Mennonite and General Conference men which dealt specifically with the issue of male violence against women. The statements adopted by the two conferences are similar yet contain some word changes which reveal subtle differences in the conferences' stances. The Mennonite Church entitled their statement "A Resolution on Male Violence Against Women". It states;

Therefore as delegates we resolve:
1. to break the silence and admit that there are Mennonite men who abuse women in various forms such as verbal abuse, psychological control, sexual harassment, battering wives and children, committing incest or rape;
2. to listen to, believe and feel the pain of women who have been violently abused or sexually harassed by men;
3. to declare that abuse is a violation of the marriage covenant and that persons are free to be sheltered from exposure to acts of violence while working at the confrontation and healing processes . . . .
4. to provide safety for abused women and children,\textsuperscript{58}

The General Conference Mennonite Church has a very similar text. However they entitle their statement "A Resolution Against Interpersonal Abuse", and in their first resolution they broaden the context of abuse, stating that there are ". . . Mennonite women who abuse their husbands, sin." "A Call to Affirmation, Confession, and Covenant Regarding Human Sexuality," \textit{Assembly Proceedings, Mennonite Church General Assembly} (West Lafayette, Indiana: July 7-12, 1987), p. 21.

\textsuperscript{57}See the Appendix for the full text of these two documents.

children, or others. The third part of the resolution in the General Conference statement is also different. It states that ". . . individuals so victimized in marriage are not bound in the eyes of God or the church to submit themselves to further acts of abuse."

While both statements are clear that abuse is a sin, the General Conference statement is more emphatic in saying that submission to further suffering is not required. While the Mennonite Church statement does say that survivors need to be sheltered from violence it also maintains that they are required to work at the confrontation and healing process. The implication here is that the marriage covenant needs to be respected; there is no proviso for those marriages where confrontation is not successful.

It is clear that suffering is a dominant motif in many Mennonite church statements in the twentieth century. For the majority of this century the suffering of Jesus is described as precious and holy; Christians are called to imitate Christ in his acceptance of suffering. Suffering is seen as redemptive because it is the way Christians are tested by God and made stronger in their faith. Suffering is to be welcomed, some of the statements suggest, because it increases one's heavenly reward. There is an overall tone in these statements that suffering should be accepted patiently. These general observations about church statements are echoed by Richard Detweiler in his commentary on Mennonite peace statements; "The tenor of peace witness reflected by the

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59 "A Resolution Against Interpersonal Abuse," Minutes, General Conference Mennonite Church, 46th Triennial Session (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: July 22-26, 1992).

60 Ibid.
documents is one of nonresistance and willingness to suffer (the 'way of the cross'), rather than demanding rights or expressing harsh judgment.\textsuperscript{61}

The mind-set illuminated by these church statements spiritualizes the meaning of suffering. Suffering is spoken of in an abstract and non-specific way. Because it does not contextualize the meaning of suffering, it lends itself to being applied to all situations of suffering. For women who have been assaulted or abused, the message to passively accept suffering as the will of God is not good news. The encouragement that there is a reward in heaven and that their suffering will strengthen their faith does not offer concrete hope in difficult circumstances. There is no indication that God's way may lead away from suffering to new life. It would be theologically treacherous for a violated woman to reject further suffering. This theology would question whether she was refusing to take up her cross and follow Jesus.

In the 1970's and 80's church statements began to reflect a new mind-set among Mennonites. Suffering is no longer to be mindlessly and patiently endured by Christians. Instead, Christians willingly take on suffering for the practical purpose of changing the world. Whereas earlier statements saw suffering's purpose to be internal, that is, making a Christian stronger and offering heavenly rewards, more recent statements suggest that suffering should be effective in the world. Suffering is seen as a process through which the world can be changed. It is something which can be embraced in order to bring new life.

I see this stage of Mennonite theology as particularly dangerous in terms of women suffering from abuse. Studies have shown that women stay in abusive relationships not simply because they believe it is their lot in life, but because they have hope that they can change their

\textsuperscript{61}Detweiler, \textit{Mennonite Statements on Peace}, p. 23.
partners. They hope that their suffering will prompt a change of heart. Some women remain in abusive relationships because they believe that a physically intact family is more life-giving than single parenting, and they endure suffering for this goal. The theology implicit in these statements justifies the decision of abused women to stay in dangerous situations, as long as they can rationalize that their suffering serves a useful purpose.

On the other hand, this theology could prove helpful to abused women, depending on their understanding of their situation. If a woman could be convinced that the most effective way to change her husband would be to seek safety and stop the cycle of abuse, then this theology of suffering would justify her decision to do that. The message of this theology is ambiguous, depending upon the context and self-understanding of the abused woman.

Interestingly, the church statements of the 90’s precisely address this ambiguity. They become much more specific about abuse and the responsibilities of a victim of abuse. In this decade it became widely accepted that submitting to abuse was more likely to escalate an abuser’s activity than convert him. It also became common wisdom that it was more harmful for children to observe abuse than for them to live in a single parent home. Given this cultural milieu, the theological stage was set for a re-evaluation of violence against women. Certain pressure groups within the conferences almost always served as a catalyst in bringing the issue of violence against women to the conference floor.  

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62 The important question of whether this recent Mennonite willingness to address the topic of abuse is primarily a result of outside pressure, or whether it has naturally evolved out of the Mennonite peace position, would need to be explored through a comparative study of Mennonite and other denominational groups.
The statements which dealt specifically with violence against women were an important theological step forward for women who have been abused. Finally there was an official acknowledgement of the type of pain that they were experiencing. Some statements give theological permission to leave abusive relationships. It is significant that some of the statements prefer to speak of interpersonal violence, and remain unwilling to see a gendered pattern in the violence of our communities. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Surprisingly, the term suffering is not used at all in the statements which speak specifically about domestic violence and violence against women. I believe this is unfortunate given the strong emphasis on suffering in Mennonite theology. A clear statement that "It is sometimes Christian to reject suffering," would have been important given our theological heritage of redemptive suffering.

It is puzzling that the word suffering is barely present in the new summary statement of the Mennonite Confession, and used inconsistently in the longer text. Its absence can be explained in several ways. It may be that the Mennonite theology of suffering has proven so distressing in people's lives (as for example, in the lives of abused women), that theologians may be reluctant to even use a concept with so many negative connotations. It may be that new theological terms are being developed which name that same reality, or perhaps the pendulum will swing and suffering terminology will again be used.

Alternatively, it may be that suffering has fallen out of vogue in Mennonite statements for a different reason. Perhaps this theology reflects a North American mind-set which is uncomfortable with the cross, but instead prefers the comfort of the resurrection. A comparison
of these statements with Mennonite theologies from the two thirds world would undoubtedly prove insightful in this regard.

I hope that the concept of suffering re-emerges in future church statements. To ignore it is to overlook a basic part of human life and an important part of Christian theology. A theology of suffering needs to be nuanced and specific, acknowledging that there are many different contexts in which people suffer.

Obedience

The concept of obedience does not figure strongly in the earliest Mennonite church statements of faith. In the Dordrecht confession the only reference to obedience is in terms of the importance of obedience to the state. The Schleitheim Confession does mention obedience a number of times, referring to the "obedient children of God" and "the obedience of faith".

Obedience takes centre stage, however, in the Ris Articles of Faith published in 1766. As in the earlier statements, obedience is viewed as something which is owed to the state. Obedience is also owed to the law which is written on every human being's heart. People owe obedience to God and it was as a result of disobedience that sin came into the world. Those

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63 Horst, Mennonite Confession of Faith, p. 32.
64 "Schleitheim Confession", Loewen, One Lord, p. 79.
65 Ibid., p. 80.
66 Mennonite Articles of Faith, General Conference Ris 1766/1895 in Loewen, One Lord, p. 100.
67 Ibid., p. 87.
68 Ibid., p. 88.
69 Ibid.
who are obedient to unrighteousness will experience the wrath of God.\textsuperscript{70} Christians are called to "hear, believe and obey" the Holy Spirit,\textsuperscript{71} and the Scriptures are owed "supreme reverence and obedience."\textsuperscript{72} Further anyone who "... yields himself in honest obedience and submission to the Word of God, finds peace of heart."\textsuperscript{73}

In this statement there are also numerous references to the obedience of Christ. Jesus is described as being perfectly obedient to the law, thus fulfilling all its demands.\textsuperscript{74} Jesus is also described as being fully obedient.\textsuperscript{75} More specifically, Christ is described as one who "... obediently took upon Himself the most grievous suffering."\textsuperscript{76} He was obedient unto death.\textsuperscript{77} Here suffering and obedience are linked closely, with reference to the precious suffering of Jesus and the call for Christians to be obedient to Christ.\textsuperscript{78}

The Ris Confession refers to Christians as "obedient ones" who walk with "love, gratitude, child-like fear, obedience" before God.\textsuperscript{79} The temptations of the devil are permitted in order to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p. 104.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p. 90.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid., p. 87.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p. 90.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p. 94.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p. 91.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p. 104.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p. 91.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Ibid., p. 95.
\end{itemize}
prove ". . . their faith and obedience and keep them in humility through the experience of their weakness."80 People in church ministry are also to be obeyed.81 While the word obedience is not used specifically it is implied in the following description of marriage;

If matrimony is thus begun in the fear of the Lord and conducted in a Christian manner . . . then shall the man, who is the head of the woman, strive to be a worthy copy of Jesus Christ in His relation to His church. The wife shall be saved through the child-bearing, her seed shall be blessed . . . 82

The concept of obedience is extremely important in a number of different contexts in the Ris Confession.

The Common Confession of the General Conference Mennonite Church written in 1896 was heavily influenced by the Ris Confession. Christians are called to honour and obey those to whom honour and obedience belong.83 There is the suggestion that in the garden of Eden the tree of knowledge was placed to test Adam and Eve's freewill obedience, and that Satan induced them to disobey God.84 The consequences of this sin was mental and physical suffering.85 Obedience and disobedience can both result in suffering.

In a 1917 Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith there is an explanation of the created order; "For there is no power but of God: the powers that be, are ordained of God . . . .

80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., p. 97.
82 Ibid., p. 102.
84 Ibid., p. 107.
85 Ibid., p. 108.
Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God . . . . For this reason are all believers . . . to fear the powers and bound by the word of God to honour them and obey them in all things not conflicting with the word of God." This emphasis on the importance of obedience is strongly echoed in the 1921 Articles of Faith of the Mennonite Church. Obedience is due to those in authority in state and nation, as long as it does not violate obedience to God's commands. Obedience to God is first and foremost for "... the obedience of faith is essential to the maintenance of one's salvation and growth in grace." Mennonite Central Committee statements also speak in strong terms about the importance of obedience in the Christian life; "... obedience to His will in all things is the ultimate test of discipleship." The influential MCC declaration at Winona Lake states in its first article that supreme loyalty and obedience is owed to Jesus. Christians are called to live lives of holy obedience.


87"Christian Fundamentals, Articles of Faith," Mennonite Church (1921), in Loewen, One Lord, p. 72.

88Ibid., p. 71.


In a 1963 statement Christian discipleship is defined as obedience to Christ. People who refuse the obedience of faith have decided to live "for sin and self" and belong to Satan's kingdom. There is an explanation that obedience to scripture requires obedience to law and order and those in authority, as long as what is required does not conflict with the higher law of God. In this statement the relationship between men and women is spelled out. Article 14 opens with the claim that men and women are all equal before God because in Christ there is neither male nor female. It goes on to say that:

...in the order of creation God has fitted man and woman for differing functions; man has been given a primary leadership role, while the woman is especially fitted for nurture and service. Being in Christ does not nullify these natural endowments, either in the home or in the church. The New Testament symbols of man's headship are to be his short hair and uncovered head while praying or prophesying, and the symbols of woman's role are her long hair and veiled head. The acceptance by both men and women of the order of creation in no way limits their rightful freedom, but rather ensures their finding the respective roles in which they can most fruitfully and happily serve.

While the term obedience is not expressly used in this passage, the idea of the headship or leadership of men contrasted with the service of women certainly brings this to mind.

The maintenance of order through obedience to the orders of creation applies both to the secular world of the state and the Christian world of the church, "...the Mennonite General

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93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., p. 77.

95 Ibid., p. 76.
Assembly affirms that the state is to be obeyed because it functions to maintain order in the world. In an ordered world the church is able to pursue her divine ministry of reconciliation. 96 Obedience to the orders of creation, whether that be the state or head of the household, are seen as crucial if the work of the kingdom is to progress.

In 1971 there is an interesting new turn of phrase in terms of obedience. The General Conference General Assembly stated that, "As Christian disciples, we seek to be obedient to the way of peace Jesus taught and lived and for which He died." 97 Here the link between peace and obedience is made but it is not explored in any detail. In the same decade another General Assembly would reinforce the older rhetoric about obedience, linking it to suffering, "The followers of Jesus cannot use weapons of force, but must also rely upon the Word of God and obedience, which may involve suffering, to overcome the evil of this world." 98

In the 1970's the church statements begin to show a more careful reflection about the nature of obedience in terms of gender relationships:

Attempts are being made from within and without our brotherhood to prepare the family for its challenges and to strengthen its life as a basic building block of the church. For some, a part of the solution seems to be to reorient our attitudes toward male and female roles, resulting in "liberation" of both partners and negotiation of a family system suitable to them. For others, the solution seems to lie in the direction of clarifying the lines of


obedience and love in the context of the more traditional authoritarian patriarchal family. For both, there is a strong appeal to the Bible as the basis for direction.\(^9\)

There is a polarization between the call for liberation and the call to obedience in the context of the patriarchal family.

Fifteen years later the General Assembly of the Mennonite church was still divided on the question of obedience. A preamble to the statement on "Male Violence Against Women" states;

Too often in our biblical teaching and practice, we have distorted the Genesis account to mean that the curse was part of God's creation order. We must be clear--the rule of man over woman is the result of sin . . . . The fall into sin has shattered God's intended mutuality of women and men, distorting personal relationships and resulting in dominance and violence of men against women.\(^{100}\)

These are strong words denouncing patriarchy but it is significant that they are found in a preamble.\(^{101}\) The actual resolution of the statement does not reject male headship and female obedience. The resolution states, "We are aware that more work needs to be done on the broader expressions of abuse. There is difference among us on the biblical interpretation expressed in the preamble so we accept it as a challenge to further study and dialogue."\(^{102}\) While abuse was unilaterally denounced, there was a difference of opinion over the issue of obedience. Some felt that obedience of women to men was sinful and led to situations of abuse. Others saw abuse as a result of improper abuse of divinely sanctioned obedience.

\(^9\)Ibid., p. 17.

\(^{100}\)A Resolution on Male Violence Against Women," p. 41.

\(^{101}\)These strong words rejecting male headship were initially in the body of the statement. Intense debate on the floor of the conference resulted in the words being moved out of the statement proper and into a preamble. This made it possible for the statement to be ratified by the delegates.

\(^{102}\)Ibid.
Concurrent to this statement, the General Conference Mennonite Church issued a statement against 'Interpersonal abuse'. There is reference to a "... patriarchal society whose structures imply power and superiority of some (overwhelmingly men) over others (usually women and children).'' The statement goes on to say that:

We confess that we, women and men, have by our silence consented to this system of male dominance and to individual acts of abuse. As churches we have contributed to these same attitudes by our teaching on the relation of men and women in marriage and in the church.103

The word obedience is not used specifically here, but the significance of the word patriarchy in a Mennonite church statement cannot be underestimated.

In the 1995 "Confession of Faith" the word obedience is occasionally used, almost exclusively in reference to obedience to Jesus or God. In the article on the family there is one reference to obedience, "Children are also to honor their parents, obeying them in the Lord."104 There is no mention of the word patriarchy. In a footnote of the article on sin, the domination of men over women is named as a sin.105

This survey has revealed that obedience is a significant concept in Mennonite theology. Christians were called to be obedient to God, to the state, to leaders of the church. In addition women were called to be obedient to their husbands. All of these forms of obedience were linked in that they created an ordered society which could function smoothly according to God's plan. The term obedience is the critical link between these different areas. There seems to be an

103"A Resolution Against Interpersonal Abuse."
awareness that there was a chain of command, and breaking one link in the chain was tantamount to revolt against God. The quotation cited above which links disobedient people with Satan is telling; obedience in and of itself was disloyalty to God. The only place where disobedience was sanctioned was when a person in authority commanded you to do something that was contrary to a commandment of God.

The traditional Mennonite message to women in situations of abuse was clear. Obedience is essential for Christians. To be disobedient to your husband meant disloyalty to God, for God was responsible for ordering society. The only proviso for disobedience was if someone commanded you to do something that was in direct contradiction to the commands of God. Suffering was not an adequate reason for leaving an abusive situation for God did not forbid suffering. In fact, suffering was something that traditional Mennonite theology called Christians to embrace. If obedience caused suffering for women, this was theologically sound for to be loyal to God required suffering. To remove oneself from an abusive situation would require both disobedience and a rejection of suffering. This study shows that there are strong theological sanctions in Mennonite theology for women to remain in abusive situations.

This theological mind-set is changing, as evidenced by more recent church statements. Some sectors of the Mennonite church still believe that male headship of the family is ordained by God, although they denounce abuse within that relationship. Other statements show that portions of the Mennonite church reject dominance of men over women as sinful.

The use of the word patriarchy is significant for it links the abuse women face in intimate relations with a broader web of oppression. Sexual harassment, sexual assault, employment
discrimination on the basis of gender (particularly in terms of employment in church ministry) are all issues which can then be linked to an oppressive system.

It is puzzling that the word obedience does not appear in most of the recent statements which deal with gender, particularly in light of the disappearance of the word suffering. Again, this omission may reveal an implicit recognition that a theology of obedience has functioned oppressively in the past. It is my belief that a theological exploration of the word obedience would be important precisely because it has been so significant in Mennonite thought. In a chain-of-command framework, power is God-given. How does removing the link between men and women affect the other relationships within that traditional framework? To abandon the word obedience may make it easier for people to overlook the connections between different types of power relationships. For example, how does the new relationship between women and men affect how children relate to their parents? These are subjects which need to be explored.

The statements surveyed here show some theological movement around the concept of obedience, movement which is good news for women in abusive situations.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is certainly a Christian principle that is mentioned, at least briefly, in many Mennonite statements. The references refer to the forgiveness that we have from God, and the forgiveness that is due to each other.
The Dordrecht confession states that Christians must love their neighbours, forgiving and absolving them. The Ris confession speaks of the forgiveness of sins as something which the converted possess. It also maintains that Christians should bear with and forgive each other.

A 1939 Mennonite Brethren statement suggests that if Christians don't forgive each other, God won't forgive them. This reference to Matthew 6:14 is echoed in a 1953 General Conference statement as well. Here there is also an admission that forgiveness is sometimes lacking in our Christian lives, and that "... the way of reconciling love should find its first expression in the intimate relationships of home." This is echoed in a General Conference statement in 1971;

As reconciled people, Christians live the way of reconciling love. It should be expressed in the home, church, school, community, nation, and world ... The way of love is the way of forgiveness, patience, peacemaking, and service.

106 Horst, Mennonite Confession of Faith, p. 33.

107 Mennonite Articles of Faith, General Conference Ris 1766/1895 in Loewen, One Lord, p. 92.

108 Ibid., p. 98.


111 Ibid.

God's forgiveness for the penitent sinner is also mentioned in the MCC Winona Lake Statement. This is reaffirmed in a Mennonite Church statement which suggests that "It is God's forgiveness which enables us to forgive others as we have been forgiven." Repentance is expressed that Christians are too slow to forgive, but there is reassurance that God continues to offer forgiveness to everyone. Jesus demonstrated, "... love, truth, forgiveness, and the willingness to suffer rather than inflict suffering." The only modification on the theme of forgiveness that I was able to find was one statement which linked forgiveness to a change which enables Christians to be peacemakers.

In the Summary Statement of the "Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective", there is, surprisingly, not one use of the word forgiveness. However the term reconciling is used four times, "... we are reconciled with God and brought into the reconciling community". This Summary Statement actually masks a frequent usage of the term forgiveness in the longer

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117 Ibid., p. 44.

118 Ibid.

statement. In fact, the term was used more frequently here than in any other statement which was examined.

The majority of the statements surveyed exhibited much less of an emphasis on forgiveness than I expected to find in Mennonite thought. Forgiveness is a standard Christian concept which is reiterated but never explored. The statements reflect a mind-set where forgiveness played a small but important role. The message to women who have been violated was clear—it is their Christian responsibility to forgive the one who has hurt them. They must forgive if they want God to forgive their sins. For women who have difficulty forgiving, or find themselves unable to forgive someone who has hurt them, there is no explanation of how forgiveness happens. There is no discussion of the dynamics of forgiving someone who you may never see again after an assault.

The use of the word reconciling rather than forgiveness in the summary statement of the current Confession of Faith poses definite hazards for women in abusive situations. The two terms are not synonymous. The word forgiveness can be lived out in a number of ways. For example, I may forgive you, but if you refuse to accept that forgiveness, we may never be reconciled. Or forgiveness might be seen as something which you do in your heart and which might take a lifetime to accomplish; in this context reconciliation with an abuser may not be something which is absolutely required by God. The use of the term reconciling in the modern statement in the place of the traditional word forgiveness makes a definite assumption about what the goal of forgiveness is. Women who have left abusive relationships would have difficulty theologically justifying their actions since reconciling love carries the implication of restoration of broken relationships.
At the same time, the prominence of the word forgiveness in the most recent Confession is noteworthy. It seems ironic that the waning of the popularity of the terms suffering and obedience coincides with the emergence of forgiveness as an important issue. One would think that an emphasis on suffering would require a well developed concept of forgiveness, and a theology which de-emphasizes suffering would have less need of such a concept.

Conclusion

The church statements used in this thesis are not easily accessible as a single text, as they must be hunted down in archival collections of church conferences, microfiched records and special collections in academic libraries. In all probability, few people have made the effort to do this. This should not, however, detract from their value as a theological resource. They serve to illuminate the mind-set of the Mennonites who wrote and ratified the statements. To some degree, these statements would also have permeated the church via the people who attended the conferences and ratified the statements. It this this mind-set that I wish to explore from the context of violence against women.

I believe that this survey of Mennonite church statements has been fruitful in exploring the theological importance of suffering, obedience and forgiveness for the context of violence against women. The interaction of these concepts, particularly the interaction between obedience and suffering, has produced a gendered message: women have been called to be obedient to men, and within that relationship abuse has not been seen as reason for disobedience. Suffering within an obedient relationship would have been theologically justified since suffering was something which Christians should expect.
Current church statements show a re-evaluation of how the concepts of suffering and obedience are to be understood, particularly in how they are lived out in women's lives. Forgiveness seems to be relatively unexplored, but there may be signs that it is being re-evaluated as well. Theological movement around these areas is encouraging, and I would hope that future statements will reflect a theology which provides good news for women in abusive situations.
CHAPTER IV

MENNONITE HYMNODY

In this chapter I will be examining hymn texts as a window through which the theology of the Mennonite church can be viewed. Hymns both reflect and inform the theology of a people. Hymns can "... express the religious life and thought of our people,"1 and they give expression to "... what the church believes, represents and lives."2 Hymns are particularly important in the Mennonite tradition which is non-creedal, for the repetition of hymns can function in a confessional way.

Hymns are an extremely effective way of teaching theology in the church. The pedagogical effectiveness of hymns lies in their accessibility. While relatively few Mennonites have read books by theologians or texts of church statements, all Mennonites sing hymns, for they are a vital part of any Mennonite worship service. Further, hymns reiterate their theological message whenever the tune is remembered. In some Mennonite traditions, it was common for church members to own their own hymnals, taking them home during the week for use as


devotional material. Theological views are passed from generation to generation in musical form.

In this chapter I will first describe which hymn books were used in this study, discuss some methodological issues around the use of hymns, and then explore the theology of suffering, obedience and forgiveness which can be gleaned from this source. The theology of Mennonite hymnody will then be viewed from the context of violence against women.

I will be examining the following hymnals which are representative of the three main Mennonite traditions. From the Mennonite Church tradition I have chosen the popular 1927 book Church Hymnal, Mennonite, edited by J.D. Brunk and S.F. Coffman, as well as the 1953 text Songs of the Church, edited by Walter Yoder. The General Conference Mennonite tradition is represented by the 1927 Mennonite Hymn Book, and the 1940 text The Mennonite Hymnary, edited by W.H. Hohmann and Lester Hostetler. Mennonite Hymnal and Hymnal: A Worship Book, published in 1969 and 1992 respectively, were joint products of the Mennonite Church

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and the General Conference and are also important resources. From the Mennonite Brethren tradition the earliest English hymn book, the 1953 *Mennonite Brethren Church Hymnal*, will be used. Also included from the Mennonite Brethren tradition, are the 1960 English translation of the well used German "Gesangbuch" and the book currently in use in most Mennonite Brethren churches, *Worship Hymnal*, published in 1971. These books, which span the period from 1927 to 1992, are a representative sample of the hymns which have been sung by Mennonites in North America during the past seventy years.

The majority of hymns found in Mennonite hymnals are not written by Mennonites. Lester Hostetler writes, "Instead of producing original hymns and tunes, we have borrowed, with minor exceptions, our entire repertory from other denominations." This chapter is specifically studying hymnbooks, and the theology implicit in the hymns as a group. Hymnbooks reveal the theology of the compilers, because, as Mary Oyer suggests, "... a hymn tells us something of the culture that produced it and about each group that uses it and makes it their own."  

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11 Lester Hostetler, *Handbook to the Mennonite Hymnary* (Newton, Kansas: General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America Board of Publications, 1949), p. xxix. The committee working on *The Mennonite Hymnal* agreed that the hymnal should include several Mennonite works, but their inclusion was to be based on the integrity of the material. Mary Oyer, *Exploring the Mennonite Hymnal: Essays* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1980; Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1980), p. 68. More recent hymn books have shown a renewed interest in hymns authored by Mennonites.

The hymnody of a people, like the language of a people, is not static, but is constantly changing to reflect the experiences of the group. As one hymnbook editor wrote, "... the church senses more keenly today the need to make contemporary adaptations. We are stating the reasons for our faith in new or revised language. We feel the urgency to speak to key issues, some new and some old, but always pressing in upon us in modern forms." The way that hymns are added or discarded from hymnal to hymnal can reflect broad theological trends.

Mennonite hymnbooks contain hymns from many different sources. Hymns were adopted from various European traditions, and the influence of the gospel hymns of North America is evident. More recent hymnals include hymns from Third World sources. The ecumenical nature of Mennonite hymnals is celebrated; "... our hymnal is a treasury, containing a rich sample of the total heritage of hymnody, and spanning the entire history of the Christian church." Mennonites have tended towards cultural insularity, both in a secular and religious sense. The fact that ecumenical hymnody has been embraced by Mennonites is an exception which is striking. Lester Hostetler points this out as he writes, "In no aspect of our church life do we attain so nearly to ecumenicity as in our worship in song."

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14 "Descendants of European Mennonites have inherited hymns from three sixteenth-century Continental movements—Anabaptist, Lutheran, and Calvinist. The predominance of any one of these traditions in the worship of a given group in America depended on where the group lived in Europe, when they left, where they settled in the New World, how long they retained the European language, and how much they accommodated to their surroundings." Oyer, Exploring, p. 33.


While Mennonites were eager to draw on a rich ecumenical tradition of hymnody, the fact that Mennonites compiled their own hymnbooks reflects their concern for theological orthodoxy. Many of the hymnbooks state in their introductions that the hymns collected were examined for their "theological appropriateness," "purity of doctrine," or "doctrinal soundness." Editors often changed the wording of hymns to make them more theologically appropriate, or omitted verses which were problematic. It is my claim that while hymns are ecumenically authored, hymnbooks can reveal Mennonite theology because the hymns have been selectively chosen.

Some early hymnals were edited by individuals, but most of the hymnbooks surveyed were edited by committees. These committees usually contained a combination of music specialists, theologians, ministers and laypeople. For example,

During the fall and winter of 1951 a group of ministers and laymen met once a week . . . for the express purpose of critically reading and examining every song, laying special emphasis on doctrinal and ethical expressions found in these hymns. This procedure naturally eliminated many of the songs and hymns as not suitable for inclusion in our conference church hymnal.

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20For example, "The editorial practice for Mennonite Hymnal 1969 was one of respect for the author's text unless, for reasons of clarity or theological position, a change seemed necessary." Oyer, Exploring, p. 7.

21For example, the Mennonite Hymnal (1969) omits the second verse of "Alas and did my Savior Bleed" which refers to Jesus as the "glorious sufferer." Oyer, Exploring, p. 13.

22Mennonite Brethren Church Hymnal Committee, MB Church Hymnal, p. vi.
It is interesting to note that while early hymnals may have had one or two editors, they were also influenced by decisions of committees in the church. For example, S.F. Coffman and John David Brunk were well into their editorial process for the 1927 *Church Hymnal*, when they received the directive that the new hymn book should have 150 hymns with refrains (i.e. gospel songs). This was a source of great disappointment to the editors, as they were forced to include a large number of songs which they felt should not go into the book.\(^2^3\)

The methodology used in this chapter is straightforward; I read the texts of all of the hymns, noting whenever the words suffering, obedience or forgiveness were used. There is often overlap as the same hymn appears in several books (this will be evident in the footnotes which show multiple sources for the same song).

The theologies presented in the hymnbooks are not unified and I am not attempting to synthesize the ideas into a coherent theology. Rather, the hymnbooks reveal various strands of theological thinking around suffering, obedience and forgiveness. Their presence in these hymnbooks suggest that they were acceptable ways of thinking within the Mennonite community.

Suffering

The word suffering appears regularly in all of the hymnbooks surveyed.\(^2^4\) The concept of suffering as revealed in hymns can be divided into two broad themes. The first theme is why Christians should suffer, and the second is how Christians should respond to suffering.

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\(^{23}\) Oyer, *Exploring*, p. 68.

\(^{24}\) There are similar numbers of references to suffering in all of the hymnbooks. *Songs* (1953) had the least number of references, which reflects the fact that it is the smallest hymnbook. There were significantly more references to suffering in *English Gesangbuch* (1960).
The primary explanation for why Christians should suffer is that Jesus suffered. Every hymnbook examined had multiple references to Jesus as the one who suffered. He is referred to as the suffering Savior, the "Calm suffering man of Galilee," the patient sufferer, the royal sufferer and the suffering servant. There is reference to his "Holy suffering." The cross is the "emblem of suffering and shame," and on it "Jesus suffered and bled and died." The purpose for his suffering was to release us, redeem our loss, set us free from the curse and to rescue us from Hell. The "victories of meekness" were won through suffering. Jesus is frequently

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25 Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #103, and Hymnal: A Worship Book (1992) #241. All citations for hymns in this chapter will indicate the number of the hymn and not the page number.

26 Hymnal (1992) #540.

27 Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #537.

28 Church Hymnal (1927) #262.

29 Worship Hymnal (1971) #162.


31 Worship Hymnal (1971) #173.

32 Hymnal (1992) #100.

33 Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #122, English Gesangbuch (1960) #60.

34 Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #114.

35 Hymnal (1992) #344.

36 English Gesangbuch (1960) #144.

37 Hymnal (1992) #410.
referred to as the Lamb of God who suffered. In one early hymnbook Jesus is even referred to as the "Mighty Victim from the sky." 

In every hymnbook Christians are urged to imitate Jesus and his willingness to suffer. Suffering was a very frequent theme in early Anabaptist hymns, many of which spoke explicitly of martyrdom. While this is a part of Mennonite history, very few of these hymns were translated into English and fewer yet were selected for twentieth century hymnals. One which does appear reads,

He who would follow Christ in life
Must scorn the world's insult and strife,
And bear his cross each day.
For this alone leads to the throne;
Christ is the only way.
Christ's servants follow Him to death,
And give their body life and breath
On cross and rack and pyre. 

Most Mennonite hymnals talk more vaguely about suffering, suggesting that "... there's a cross for ev'ry one, And there's a cross for me." Christians are simply called to follow where Jesus has led;

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38 For example, "the Lamb that uncomplaining Suffers for us all," Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #537, and "O Lamb of God all holy! who on the cross did suffer," Hymnal (1992) #146.

39 Mennonite Hymn Book (1927) #316.


41 Church Hymnal (1927) #297; MB Church Hymnal (1953) #423; Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #345 and Worship Hymnal (1971) #459.
Thru suffering Thou, O Christ, didst go Unto Thy throne above
And leadest now the self-same way Those true in faith and love;
So lead us, then, tho' sufferings wait . . . .  

What precisely comprises suffering is not frequently addressed.

Some hymns are slightly more explicit about what the cross means, "Shun not suffering, shame, or loss; Learn of Christ to bear the cross . . . . Learn of Jesus Christ to die." Suffering in one hymn is seen as being the result of abstaining from earthly joys. Loving Christians will suffer for, "Love is kind and suffers wrong." Suffering is something which the Christian can expect, and so some hymns appeal to God for strength, "I would be strong for there is much to suffer."

Christians can take comfort in the fact that Jesus suffered like them, "The thorns in my path are not sharper Than composed His crown for me; The cup that I drink not more bitter Than He drank in Gethsemane." Other hymns suggest that our sufferings are minor compared to what

42 Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #550; Songs of the Church (1953) #145; English Gesangbuch (1960) #401; Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #426; Worship Hymnal (1971) #552 and Hymnal (1992) #396.

43 Church Hymnal (1927) #107; Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #107; MB Church Hymnal (1953) #92; Worship Hymnal (1971) #161; Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #160 and Hymnal (1992) #240.

44 Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #144.

45 Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #174; MB Church Hymnal (1953) #142 and Hymnal (1992) #542.

46 Mennonite Hymn Book (1927) #246; Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #207; MB Church Hymnal (1953) #254 and Worship Hymnal (1971) #360.

47 MB Church Hymnal (1953) #311.
Jesus experienced; "If in thy path some thorns are found O, think who bore them on His brow," and,

Lord, should my path through suffering lie,
Forbid it I should e'er repine;
Still let me turn to Calvary,
Nor heed my griefs, remembring Thine.49

These hymns suggest that Christians should imitate Jesus, realizing that the imitation will never be complete.

There are other theologies of suffering present in the hymnals. Some hymns suggest that suffering is simply the natural consequence of living in the world, "From tender childhood's helplessness, From woman's grief, man's burdened toil . . . Oh Master . . . Make haste to heal these hearts of pain."50 There is the suggestion that the world is a place where people suffer tribulation.51

Other hymns express the view that suffering is something that is sent from God. God's hand leads people into suffering, and God sends "grief and pain"52 as well as "Sorrow, toil and woe."53 Some hymns see suffering as a punishment, a sign of God's chastening.54 Suffering is

48English Gesangbuch (1960) #301.
49Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #349.
50Mennonite Hymn Book (1927) #276.
51Hymnal (1992) #647.
52Mennonite Hymn Book (1927) #207; MB Church Hymnal (1953) #337 and English Gesangbuch (1960) #229.
53Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #195.
54English Gesangbuch (1960) #324 and "beneath the chastening rod" Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #259.
also viewed as a test to purify Christians, as in these hymns, "Ready to suffer grief or pain, Ready to stand the test,"55 or "As gold is tried and purified, they stand the test of fire."56 Sometimes no real reason is given for suffering, it is simply something Christians should do because it is required by God;

So send I you to labor unrewarded,
   To serve unpaid, unloved, unsought, unknown,
   To bear rebuke, to suffer scorn and scoffing...
So send I you to suffer for my sake.57

Occasionally the poetic reference to suffering is oblique, or unclear, but the message seems to be that suffering is sent from God,

   What God-word brings, may we embrace;
   success and suffering greet us;
   confronting evil face to face,
   as scorn and anger meet us.
   For freedom's sake we bend, we break,
   a sign to ev'ry nation
   that we have found a solid ground;
   God's word our sure foundation.58

   Many of the hymnbooks refer to the reward gained from suffering. The one who bears the cross and sufferings shall live and reign forever,59 will wear the "royal crown of heaven,"60 will

55Worship Hymnal (1971) #538.


57Worship Hymnal (1971) #540.

58Hymnal (1992) #314.

59Church Hymnal (1927) #151 and Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #194.

60English Gesangbuch (1960) #279.
"shine in glory like the sun,"\textsuperscript{61} and have "joy beyond measure" as a reward.\textsuperscript{62} Sometimes this reward is cast in the language of battle, as in "Sure I must fight, if I would reign; Increase my courage, Lord; I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, Supported by Thy Word."\textsuperscript{63} The hope of reward is something which can console and encourage the Christian today,

And when the strife is fierce, the suffering long,
steals on the ear, the distant triumph song,
and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.\textsuperscript{64}

It is clear that there will be no suffering in heaven.\textsuperscript{65} The hymns reveal a variety of possible Christian responses to suffering. The first response is patient acceptance. Many hymns suggest that no matter how great their suffering, Christians should not complain. They are called to be patient in suffering,\textsuperscript{66} and to "Wait, meekly wait, and murmur not."\textsuperscript{67} Acceptance is the required response; "Though dark my path and sad my lot, Let me be still and murmur not."\textsuperscript{68} Christians should pray for a faith that "... will not shrink ..."

\textsuperscript{61}Mennonite Hymnal (1969) \#417.
\textsuperscript{63}Mennonite Hymnal (1969) \#348.
\textsuperscript{64}Hymnal (1992) \#636.
\textsuperscript{65}English Gesangbuch (1960) \#417.
\textsuperscript{66}English Gesangbuch (1960) \#246, \#283 and Worship Hymnal (1971) \#438.
\textsuperscript{67}English Gesangbuch (1960) \#301.
\textsuperscript{68}MB Church Hymnal (1953) \#382.
That will not murmur nor complain." That Jesus, Christians should "Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain," not counting the cost or the suffering.

The second response which the hymns reveal is that Christians should be comforted by the fact that Jesus is with them in their sufferings; "Does Jesus care when my heart is pained . . . Oh yes, He cares! His heart is touched with my grief!" More specifically, one hymn suggests, "In your sickness, your sufferings, your trials, and pains, He is with you all the time. Persecution, temptations, and loneliness, He is with you all the time." Jesus "sympathizes with our grief," and God's word is "... gentle dew To suffering hearts that want it." Prayer brings relief from suffering, "In ev'ry pain I bear, My heart shall . . . seek relief in prayer." The image of God carrying the Christian's burden is used in a number of hymns; "All my pain and anguish, All my grief and care, All my greatest burdens Thou wilt surely bear." In some hymns, this comfort is viewed in rather dramatic terms,

On Thee we cast each earth-born care,  
We smile at pain when thou art near . . .

69 Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #259.
70 Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #73.
72 Church Hymnal (1927) #286.
73 Hymnal (1992) #585.
74 Church Hymnal (1927) #287.
75 English Gesangbuch (1960) #341.
76 Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #199.
77 English Gesangbuch (1960) #290, #148.
On Thee we fling our burd'ning woe,
O Love Divine, forever dear,
Content to suffer, while we know,
Living and dying, Thou art near.  

This same sentiment is suggested by the words, "Gladly will I toil and suffer, Only let me walk with thee." 

The third possible response to suffering is prayer to God for deliverance from oppression. There is reference to how Jesus healed people from physical pain in these hymns,

"O Master, from the mountain side, Make haste to heal these hearts of pain," and,

Thou to whom the sick and dying
Ever came, nor came in vain,
Still with healing words replying
To the wearied cry of pain
Hear us, Jesus, as we meet,
Suppliants at Thy mercy seat.

Jesus is seen as the one who ". . . comes with succor speedy To those who suffer wrong." A more recent hymnbook has modified that hymn to read, "He comes with justice surely to those who suffer wrong." Jesus is the one who sees both the oppressor and the oppressed, and he

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78 Mennonite Hymn Book (1927) #228; Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #172; Songs (1953) #181 and Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #306.
79 MB Church Hymnal (1953) #360.
80 Church Hymnal (1927) #295.
81 Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #222.
82 Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #370.
83 Church Hymnal (1927) #263; MB Church Hymnal (1953) #126 and Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #113.
84 Hymnal (1992) #185.
gives the sufferers rest.\textsuperscript{85} Jesus rescues people from their misery\textsuperscript{86} and is "fighting for human welfare."\textsuperscript{87}

The fourth possible response to suffering seen in these hymnbooks is that Christians should try to relieve the suffering of others. Christians are encouraged to work for the good of their brothers who suffer.\textsuperscript{88} Another hymn pictures Jesus giving responsibility to Christians:

\begin{quote}
Thou, Lord of Life, our saving health,  
Who mak'\textsuperscript{st} Thy suffer\textsuperscript{ing} ones our care...  
To heal the wound, to still the pain,  
And strength to failing pulses bring.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}

The work of relieving the pain of others, may result in suffering as Jesus did; "O to be like Thee! lowly in spirit, Holy and harmless, patient and brave; Meekly enduring cruel reproaches, Willing to suffer others to save."\textsuperscript{90} Another hymn speaks more specifically about the sacrifice for others "We give our lives with glad intent To serve the world and Thee, To die, to suffer and be spent To set our brothers free."\textsuperscript{91}

The final possible response to suffering was only seen in one recent hymn. It is a version of Psalm 22 where the psalmist cries, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? and are so

\textsuperscript{85}Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #72; Worship Hymnal (1971) #61 and Hymnal (1992) #600. Also, "He fills the poor with good; He gives the sufferers rest," Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #245.

\textsuperscript{86}Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #264.

\textsuperscript{87}Hymnal (1992) #537.

\textsuperscript{88}Church Hymnal (1927) #304 and Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #353.

\textsuperscript{89}Church Hymnal (1927) #521 and Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #437.

\textsuperscript{90}Worship Hymnal (1971) #354.

\textsuperscript{91}Songs (1953) #132.
far from my cry and the words of my distress . . . Be not far away, O Lord; you are my strength; hasten to help me." Here the response to suffering is appeal to God for help, but there is an element of dismay and questioning God about the reason for suffering.

Having surveyed hymnbooks from the twentieth century Mennonite tradition, it is clear that they contain a variety of theologies of suffering. These theologies primarily view suffering in a positive light; suffering is redemptive. For women who are facing abusive situations, the call to suffer can be extremely compelling. The most basic christological claim of these hymns is that Jesus himself was a sufferer. While the wording "Mighty Victim from the sky" was not popular, it does encapsulate this view rather expressively. Christians are called to suffer like Jesus.

A number of the hymns suggest that Christians will be called to suffer to the point of death. The hymns are rarely specific about what is meant by the word suffering. For women who are or have been in abusive situations, the call to "take up their cross" needs little explanation. It means to carry on with the suffering they are experiencing, and to prepare themselves to be like Jesus, and to suffer even if it means death. In the face of this pain, they are encouraged to never complain and to be patient. These are mirror images of society's traditional response to their pain.

There are other justifications given in the hymns for suffering—it can be seen as a test or a punishment. Women who have experienced sexual assault and who sing these hymns might be encouraged to think that God was punishing them for something they had done. Many survivors of rape face societal messages which blame them for their assault; these hymns confirm that message. The hymns also suggest that suffering is sent from God to strengthen their faith. Women struggling to cope with the evil of sexual assault are burdened with the idea that what

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92 Hymnal (1992) #248.
they experienced as evil may in fact be something God meant for them. A similar message is
given to women who are in abusive relationships. They would be encouraged to look at what
they had done wrong and to learn from the abuse they are suffering. In a context where husbands
are seen to have spiritual headship and God-given authority over their wives, these hymns could
suggest that God is testing or punishing through male violence against women.

The reminder that Jesus' sufferings were worse than any other human suffering is hardly a
comfort to someone being abused. In the same way, the theological message that Christians
should exchange happiness in this life for hope in the world to come does not address the
seriousness of pain in this life.

The hymns reveal a number of different possible Christian responses to suffering. The
first is that Christians should be patient and not complain. This theology coincides precisely with
societal teachings about how women should respond to violence and abuse. It is something that
should just be accepted and not discussed.

Another possible response to suffering is to believe that God is present with Christians
when they suffer. For women who suffer abuse, this theological tack is less offensive than the
view that God has sent the suffering for a purpose. God is viewed as sympathetic, and as standing
with the Christian as they suffer. Some of the hymns raise this to over-dramatic levels, claiming
that Christians can smile at pain and be "content to suffer" because of God's presence. This does
not reflect the reality of women who have been sexually assaulted. None of these hymns suggest
that a Christian might reject suffering, for suffering is the lot of those who follow Jesus.

A number of the hymns do present another response to suffering, namely the idea that
Jesus is someone who delivers Christians from suffering. These hymns cry out to God for
freedom from pain. The words "He comes with justice surely to those who suffer wrong," would provide hope for women who have experienced violence. In these hymns the Christian is not blamed for their suffering, they are not told it will get them to heaven, or make them better Christians. Rather, suffering is an evil which God wishes to end.

Other hymns take this idea further and say that Christians are called to relieve the suffering of others. This message, however, is sometimes linked again with the idea of suffering. We should suffer so that others will not suffer. Many women remain in abusive situations in order to save their husbands, hoping that their suffering will encourage repentance. Others remain in abusive situations so that children will grow up in a home where there are two parents. In order to avoid the suffering of their husband (in hell) or their children (in a broken home), abused women accept further suffering. These hymns would encourage that type of self-sacrifice. While relieving the suffering of others is seen as Christian, none of these hymns mention the possibility of relieving one's own suffering.

The one hymn which cried out to God, questioning why one must suffer, is a hymn which could express the theological questioning of a woman who had experienced violence. Instead of quick and easy answers which say why she is suffering, or for what end, there is acknowledgement of fundamental injustice. The word 'forsaken' allows for a type of radical questioning of God which was seen in no other hymn.

None of the hymns specifically look at the issue of violence against women. In fact, few of the hymns speak in a specific way about what suffering means. Hymns tend to look at the broader picture, which is understandable given their limited length and poetic style. This theology, however, is sung by people in specific contexts who have specific questions. The
answers that most of these hymns give to women in the context of violence is not good news.

Obedience

The theological concept of obedience appears regularly and with relatively similar frequency in every hymnbook studied. It is prevalent enough to often appear in topical indices of hymnals. Obedience is something that is owed to God and to people in authority over you.

The majority of references to obedience in the hymnbooks pertain to the need for obedience to God. In many hymns Christians are encouraged to obey the Spirit, to obey Jesus, and to obey God. More specifically, Christians are called to obey the will of God, the command of God, the call of God, and the Gospel call. The will of God is linked to the law of God; "While my heart Thy will obeys, I am kept from evil ways; From Thy law, with Thee to guide, I have never turned aside." Another context for the use of the word obedience is in reference to the Bible. The Word of God is something to be obeyed as Christians are encouraged to "walk obedient to Your word." One hymn refers to the need for obedience to the "sovereign word" of

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96 *Church Hymnal* (1927) #522 and *MB Church Hymnal* (1953) #191.
97 *Songs* (1953) #221.
98 *Church Hymnal* (1927) #513.
Reference is also made to the need for obedience to God's holy love, and "Love's sweet lesson to obey."

In the hymns surveyed, obedience is often linked to family relationships. There are a number of references to Jesus being obedient in the context of his family. Four of the hymnals carried a children's song which describe Jesus as obedient,

He would honor and obey,  
Love and watch the lowly maiden  
In whose gentle arms he lay;  
Christian children all must be  
Mild, obedient good as He.

In the most recent hymnal surveyed, obedience is also a link between Jesus and children, "How good it is, and excellent to see the children turning to righteous ways, obedient and innocent, in Jesus' school of learning." Hymns speak of Jesus being obedient to God, His Father. Young Christians, who find themselves in relationships which require obedience, are urged to use Jesus as a model, and be obedient in those relationships.

100 Worship Hymnal (1971) #632.


102 Worship Hymnal (1971) #335.

103 Mennonite Hymn Book (1927) #367; Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #412; Songs (1953) #78 and Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #466.

104 Hymnal (1992) #489.

An interesting study could be done on how often children are urged to be obedient in hymns, compared to how often parents are urged to be loving and gentle with their children. The subject of obedience and its effect on children is discussed in Chapter 3 "Religious Sources of Childhood Trauma" in The Child's Song: The Religious Abuse of Children by Donald Capps, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp. 37-57.
Obedience is also mentioned in the context of the Servant/Master metaphor which describes the connection between Christ and the church;

Then let the servant church arise, a caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ's sacrifice, and clothed in Christ's humanity. We have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord, to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word.\footnote{Hymnal (1992) #403.}

Another hymn which links obedience with a Master/Servant relationship reads; "Lord, may Thy Spirit sanctify Each household duty we fulfill, May we our Master glorify in glad obedience to Thy will."\footnote{Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #462 and Hymnal (1992) #490.}

One hymn, authored by S. F. Coffman, does not use the word obedience, although it is implied,

Thy plighted faith to Him, the Lord,  
Thy bridal veil doth ever show;  
Thy husband, He: thy law, His Word:  
None other law or service know.\footnote{Mennonite Hymn Book (1927) #330.}

References to plighted vows, laws and service, in the context of a husband/wife metaphor is noteworthy. Interestingly, this hymn is found in the section on church ordinances, along with communion, baptism and footwashing. It is listed as a hymn which speaks about "The devotional Veil", referring to the headcovering that Mennonite women wore to show their submission to their husbands and to the church.
Obedience was also linked to the King/subject metaphor; "True-hearted, whole-hearted, fullest allegiance, Yielding henceforth to our glorious King; Valiant endeavor and loving obedience, Freely and joyously now would we cling."109

Obedience is linked to suffering, particularly in reference to the type of obedience that Jesus had to His Father; "Jesus, all our ransom paid, All Thy Father's will obeyed, By Thy sufferings perfect made, To perfect us, Jesus."110 Christians are called to suffer for obedience's sake, "... counting not the cost, Unflinching, to obey."111 Obedience is also linked with humbleness, "Gold of obedience and incense of lowliness."112

Obedience and trust are linked to a variety of messages in the following hymn. This hymn is noteworthy because of its unique popularity. It was the only hymn found on the theme of suffering, obedience and forgiveness which was present in almost every hymnbook,

Not a doubt nor a fear,
Not a sigh not a tear,
Can abide while we trust and obey....
Not a burden we bear,
Not a sorrow we share,
But our toil He doth richly repay;
Not a grief nor a loss,
Not a frown nor a cross,
But is blest if we trust and obey.
Trust and obey,
For there's no other way

109MB Church Hymnal (1953) #300.
110Church Hymnal (1927) #116.
111Worship Hymnal (1971) #530.
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey.\textsuperscript{113}

This theme of obedience and gladness is also linked in another popular hymn. It suggests that "Love's sweet lesson" is something that should be obeyed, and that this will be the path to joy.\textsuperscript{114}

Another hymn suggests that the "glow of love" destroys "Cold obedience faintly given."\textsuperscript{115}

The theological messages of these hymns may appear to be neutral, in that all Christians are called to be obedient. These messages, however, can best be understood by considering the context of the people singing the hymns. Mennonite culture and theology taught that women were expected to be obedient to their husbands. This is the context in which these hymns would have been sung. Given this context, these hymns have both a visible text and an invisible subtext.

For example, the words, "Lord, may Thy Spirit sanctify Each household duty we fulfill,
May we our Master glorify in glad obedience to Thy will,"\textsuperscript{116} can be read as a simple appeal for Christians to be faithful in everyday matters. Given the context of a society which believed in God-ordained roles in the household, this hymn can have a subtext of reinforcing that status quo. It is women who are called to be obedient to their husbands, and it is women who were seen as being given the task of caring for the home. In a similar way, obedience to God's word implies obedience to the patriarchal order which many scriptural passages endorse.

\textsuperscript{113}\textit{Mennonite Hymn Book} (1927) #235; \textit{Mennonite Hymnary} (1940) #486; \textit{MB Church Hymnal} (1953) #433; \textit{English Gesangbuch} (1960) #288; \textit{Mennonite Hymnal} (1969) #577 and \textit{Hymnal} (1992) #544.

\textsuperscript{114}\textit{Mennonite Hymn Book} (1927) #195; \textit{Mennonite Hymnary} (1940) #424 and \textit{MB Church Hymnal} (1953) #336.

\textsuperscript{115}\textit{Mennonite Hymnal} (1969) #484.

\textsuperscript{116}\textit{Mennonite Hymnal} (1969) #462 and \textit{Hymnal} (1992) #490.
When obedience is linked in a hymn with the concept of suffering, this subtext becomes even more defined. Who precisely does suffer as a result of obedience? For women in abusive relationships, the answer is simple. They suffer because they are being obedient to God's law which says they are to be obedient to their husbands.

The message of a hymn like "Trust and obey" carries a subtext for women in a patriarchal context. The only way to happiness is to submit to God's law. This may result in suffering and the cross, but there will be a reward in heaven. Obedience and suffering often intersect in the theology of these hymns, presenting a strong theological message to women in abusive relationships.

Forgiveness

The hymnbooks surveyed all contain references to forgiveness. The occurrence of forgiveness in the hymnbooks gradually increases over time, with the most recent hymnal using the term most frequently. The recent hymnals also show a shift in the usage of the word forgiveness, with more of an emphasis on the need for Christians to forgive their neighbours.

The hymnals surveyed reveal a God who is giving and forgiving. The "sweet story" of Christ has to do with his power to forgive. This forgiveness was accomplished through suffering; "Lamb of God! He came from heaven, Gave His life, His side was riven, That my sins

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117For example, Church Hymnal (1927) has 10 references to forgiveness, Mennonite Hymnal (1969) has 18 references, and Hymnal (1992) has 23 references.

118Church Hymnal (1927) #25; MB Church Hymnal (1953) #14; Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #13 and Hymnal (1992) #71.

119MB Church Hymnal (1953) #474.
should be forgiven. He has suffered death for me."¹²⁰ Christians are called to imitate Jesus, who was so "... meek, forgiving, God-like, high, So glorious in humility."¹²¹ There are numerous references to the Lord's prayer; a prayer to God to "... forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."¹²²

In the early hymnals, there is practically no mention of the need for Christians to forgive each other. This contrasts quite markedly with a number of hymns from more recent hymnbooks which consider this theme. There was no similar shift in any of the hymnbooks on the other themes of suffering and obedience. These newer hymns are particularly remarkable because of the detail with which they explore what forgiveness means.

In these more recent hymnals, there is specific reference to those who need to be forgiven. Enemies are occasionally mentioned,¹²³ but more frequently friends are mentioned as people who need forgiveness: "Thy foes might hate, despise, revile, Thy friends unfaithful prove, Unwearied in forgiveness still, Thy heart could only love."¹²⁴ Misjudgment and defamation by friends, and the faithlessness of the brethren are also reasons to offer forgiveness.¹²⁵ Unkindness in others should also prompt forgiveness, "Whene'er in this wild world we meet Unkindly deeds that anger move,

¹²¹Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #103.
¹²²Mennonite Hymnary (1940) #610; Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #627 and Hymnal (1992) #137.
¹²³"Thank you for even greatest enemies I can forgive," Worship Hymnal (1971) #618.
¹²⁴MB Church Hymnal (1953) #87.
Teach us forgiveness, triumph sweet, To conquer evil will with love." Christians are called to "... meet the evils of our time and the demons of despair with forgiving, living love." Detailed instructions are given on how to treat the person who has done something wrong,

Even if he [your friend] is in error,
Be discerning, lest you find
That you strike the heart with terror
And with blasphemy, the mind.
Show your brother that you bear
His mistakes with loving care...
Meet him on a Christian standing,
Wish him well in his success;
Show him, too, with understanding
How to reach true godliness.

The thrust here seems to be to convert the offender through forgiveness. This hymn suggests that if one withholds forgiveness, the offender will be led towards blasphemy. One hymn states that the Christian's aim, like God's, is to win the offender over by loving them.

Some of the hymns focus not on the person who has done something wrong, but rather on the mental state of the one who has been wronged;

Whene'er the angry passions rise,
and tempt our thoughts and tongues to strife,
to Jesus let us lift our eyes,
bright pattern of the Christian life.
Oh, how benevolent and kind,
how mild! how ready to forgive!

\[126^\text{Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #452.}
\[127^\text{Hymnal (1992) #132.}
\[128^\text{English Gesangbuch (1960) #265.}
\[129^\text{Mennonite Hymnal (1969) #451.}
Be this the temper of our mind,  
and these the rules by which we live.\textsuperscript{130}

Kindness and mildness are here equated with Christ and forgiveness, while anger and passion are described as temptations.

A number of the hymns encourage the hurt person to forgive by reminding them that they too are "... in danger of a fall."\textsuperscript{131} This hymn suggests that forgiveness from God is dependent upon the Christian's ability to forgive,

\begin{verbatim}
   How can your [God's] pardon reach and bless  
   the unforgiving heart  
   that broods on wrongs and will not let  
   old bitterness depart?  
   In blazing light your cross reveals  
   the truth we dimly know;  
   what trivial debts are owed to us,  
   how great our debt to you.  
   Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls  
   and bid resentment cease.  
   Then, bound to all in bonds of love,  
   our lives will spread your peace.\textsuperscript{132}
\end{verbatim}

Here the Christian is reminded that offences committed against them are trivial in comparison to the sins they have committed against God. Resentment and brooding on wrong are contrary to the nature of love.

Only one hymn linked forgiveness of others with confession. The most recent hymnal has one hymn which reads, "Forgive we now each other's faults as we our faults confess."\textsuperscript{133} The

\textsuperscript{130}Hymnal (1992) #406.  
\textsuperscript{131}English Gesangbuch (1960) #265.  
\textsuperscript{132}Hymnal (1992) #137.  
\textsuperscript{133}Hymnal (1992) #305.
hymn is not speaking of an offender's confession as a prerequisite for forgiveness. Rather the focus is on the person who has been hurt. They will forgive others as they remember that they have also hurt others.

The hymnals surveyed reveal a shift in the theology of Mennonites around the theology of forgiveness. Early preoccupation with forgiveness from God is not rejected, but a new emphasis on forgiving others is added. From the context of violence against women this shift is of particular interest.

Statistics show that more women are violated by people they know than by strangers. Thirty percent of women have been assaulted by the man with whom they live. The emphasis in the hymns on forgiving friends who defame, commit acts of unkindness or are unfaithful, speaks to this context.

The evil that one meets in one's friends is to be conquered by love and forgiveness. The purpose of forgiveness is to convert the offender. It would seem to be the Christian duty of women to offer forgiveness to their abusers so that they could be converted. If women focus on their own woundedness, or their own need for healing, they might be seen to be harbouring bitterness and resentment. This focus on the offender coincides neatly with other Christian messages to abused women; their needs are secondary to the needs of the offender.

Anger and passion are ruled out as unchristian responses to injury. Benevolence, kindness and mildness are the Christ-like pattern which should be imitated. Women who do feel hatred and rage at someone who has sexually assaulted them would be given the message that the emotions that they are experiencing are inappropriate and sinful.
The hymns seem to suggest that forgiveness is a simple process, easily accomplished by an act of will. The suggestion that God's forgiveness of a victim's sins might be limited by their ability to forgive their abuser, could be terribly distressing for those who are on a long journey of forgiveness.

None of the hymns mention confession as a prerequisite for forgiveness. Forgiveness is seen to be a one-sided action on the part of the abused person. This type of forgiveness can be seen to perpetuate a cycle which does not take repentance on the offender's part into consideration. It also leaves the way open for further revictimization.

Conclusion

Each of the hymns quoted in this chapter may have words which seem innocuous when looked at individually. Each song could be explained away with an appeal to poetic license. However, when one examines hymns as a group there are trends and emphases that emerge.

The majority of the hymns discussed in this chapter reinforce messages about suffering and obedience found in the writings of Yoder and Hershberger, and in the survey of church statements. Christians are called to suffer patiently like Jesus did. Obedience to God and those in authority over you may lead to suffering.

In comparing the findings from this chapter on hymns with the previous chapter on church statements, one can see a trend regarding the concept of forgiveness. The emphasis on forgiveness in current hymnbooks is mirrored in more recent church statements. Forgiveness is a concept which seems to be gaining momentum in the church. Interestingly, the decline in
popularity of both suffering and obedience which was evident in church statements is not reflected in Mennonite hymnody. It will be interesting to review future hymnals in regard to this theme.

While an examination of hymnody is time consuming and often tedious, it provides a unique insight into the theology and worship life of the average church member, and of the people who compiled the hymnals. It reveals in sometimes striking ways both the continuity and the development of broad theological trends over time. Suffering, obedience and forgiveness are recurrent themes in all of the hymnbooks. These books contain hymns which perpetuate theological ways of understanding that are not good news for women who experience violence. The theology found in hymnbooks should be sensitive to the contexts in which they will be used.

Future hymnals should contain hymns which both express the reality of abused women and offer hope for them in their context.
CHAPTER V

MENNONITE WOMEN WRITERS

Women have always created their own theologies, however their means to share these theologies have been limited. Women were excluded from Mennonite seminaries and pulpits until very recently. One way that women in the twentieth century have shared their theology is through devotional writing. This writing, found in books and periodicals, addresses the spiritual questions of laypeople. Writers of devotional work are not normally considered theologians by academic standards, both because they lack the credentials of seminary training, and because their chosen audience is not the academic world. Ironically, devotional writers are more widely read than most theologians because of the accessibility of their writing.

The two female writers that will be considered in this thesis are Helen Good Brenneman and Katie Funk Wiebe. While their work is not systematic or comprehensive in the sense of most theological writings, they write with the intention of articulating how "faith seeks understanding." These two theologians have had an enormous impact on the lives of laypeople. This chapter examines several of their major works to discover their perspectives on suffering, obedience and forgiveness.
Helen Good Brenneman

Helen Good Brenneman has been an extremely popular inspirational writer in the Mennonite church. Born in Virginia, she studied at Eastern Mennonite College and Goshen College. One of her books, Meditations for the Expectant Mother,¹ was reprinted 35 times and has sold 370,000 copies.

Brenneman's books are written in a popular style. She blends her personal experience with poems, photographs and theological reflection. This blending of personal story and theological reflection models a contextual theology. The reader is aware of the life experiences out of which her theology flows. Her books cover a wide range of topics: Mennonite biographies, reflections for expectant mothers, meditations for people who are ill.

Suffering

Suffering is a theme that surfaces repeatedly in Brenneman's work, but makes its appearance most clearly in her later works. Brenneman suffered from multiple sclerosis, and several of her books reflect her experiences coping with hospitalization, disability, and the Christian community's support for her in her pain.

While Brenneman speaks broadly about difficulty and suffering, these statements are usually framed within the context of her own suffering, or within the context of stories of others. Many of the stories she shares have to do with physical illness. Brenneman is careful to explain

that her theological insights are not arrived at lightly. She reminds the reader of her own trauma of lying partially paralyzed in the hospital while she had a young family at home.²

One striking aspect of her theology of suffering is that at several points she admits she does not understand why people suffer. She observes that the problem of suffering was not solved in the book of Job, and that she has no answer either.³ She quotes Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus who writes, "Still no answers to the mysteries of suffering, yet strength for the day. Faith in God and his purpose when all seem hopeless and I am at the end of myself."⁴ Brenneman observes, "So with our sorrows, pain, bereavements and sufferings we cannot understand it but God does, and that is enough."⁵

Brenneman devotes an entire page to "Why?" prayers, which ask God why there is suffering. After these questions she says that people have to move beyond questioning to acceptance. Sufferers must know that God gives strength for every experience, and God is always with them.⁶ While she allows time for the Christian to question God, she also cautions about the dangers of this questioning:

But the question, "Why?" which comes to us during hard experiences ... is a deep and nagging threat to our peace of mind. It can form itself into a doubt—a doubt as to the

³Ibid., p. 12.
⁵Brenneman, Marriage, pp. 83-84.
⁶Brenneman, Morning Joy, p. 19.
existence and love of God or a doubt as to our own integrity and worthiness as a child of His.7

She allows for questioning, but encourages sufferers to move beyond that to a faith in a God who is always present, who can bring good even out of extremely painful situations.

Brenneman emphasizes that God is present in every experience, no matter how painful. God is present even when Christians feel forsaken and alone.8 She quotes Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus who writes, "Trusting God as a child does his father while walking in the dark. Sensing the presence of the Person who will never leave me nor forsake me. His love, mercy, and faithfulness are new every morning."9

Only at one point in the writings surveyed does she suggest that God will deliver the Christian from suffering. Brenneman claims that God waits for the right time. It is important for Christians to trust God.10

Christ is an important figure in Brenneman's theology. Jesus is described as the "greatest of sufferers,"11 and a man of sorrows.12 Jesus shares our griefs with us and carries the heaviest part of our burdens.13 Because Jesus suffered, God understands what human beings feel.14

7Brenneman, My Comforters, p. 57.
8Brenneman, Morning Joy, p. 27.
9Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, quoted in Morning Joy, p. 17.
10Brenneman, Marriage, p. 44.
11Ibid., p. 23.
12Ibid., p. 62.
13Ibid.
14Brenneman, My Comforters, p. 12.
The most prominent message Brenneman gives about suffering in her writings is that people can learn valuable lessons through suffering. She believes that God speaks through personal tragedy, and counsels her readers in the face of their own suffering to ask themselves, "What does God want to teach me through this problem?" This attitude will help Christians find some good in every situation. She even says suffering is "... a gracious bestowment, a gift of God for the enrichment of the spiritual life and the good of others and the glory of God." She observes that the New Testament was written in the context of suffering, as were many great works of art and literature, and thus suffering has enriched the world. Most importantly, people learn how to be sympathetic with others by experiencing pain themselves.

Brenneman recalls that when she was ill her friends would come and tell her that her illness could be a creative experience. She records how she was initially sceptical, but she writes, "Pain can cause us to be irritable and self-centred. We do have a tendency to look too much to ourselves and not enough to Christ. But God can come into the scene and sanctify even suffering to our spiritual growth."

Her writing has other brief references to suffering. At one point she states that suffering is God's way of chastening us. In another context she calls suffering both a punishment and a test, "I know that there is a reaping for what has been sown. And there are trials sent for purifying

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18 Ibid., p. 55.
your servants. But, O God, spare us the trials we cannot bear, as You have promised in Your Word."20 While these references suggest that God takes an active role in sending suffering, in other places she uses language that suggests that God only permits suffering.21

Heaven is a place where sufferings and sorrows are left behind.22 In heaven Christians will stand in the presence of God and understand why suffering happens.23 Brenneman believes that our brief sufferings on earth cannot compare to the joy of heaven.24

Obedience

The word obedience was not found in Helen Good Brenneman's books, except for one instance, where she speaks of Mary being obedient to God.25 The word submission is discussed at several points, particularly in her discussion of marriage. She quotes the verse, "Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands," saying that she prefers the J.B. Phillips translation that reads 'adapt' rather than submit. She also notes that Paul calls for mutual submission or adaptation in the marriage relationship.26 At another point she recounts the story of a husband who misinterpreted what submission means.27 While Brenneman's books call for mutuality in


21Brenneman, Marriage, p. 23.

22Ibid., p. 84.

23Brenneman, My Comforters, p. 12.

24Ibid., pp. 14, 55.

25Brenneman, Meditations, p. 35.


27Brenneman, Marriage, p. 66.
relationship, she was quite definite about the complementarity of women and men's roles; "Women's place, it seems to me, is in the center of God's will, and often that will be in the home." 28

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is only occasionally mentioned in Brenneman's work, the bulk of the references being made in those books that deal more specifically with the marriage relationship. She suggests that the Christian should have "... instant forgiveness when someone crosses one's path, threatens one's self-image, or does violence to one's ego," 29 and she says that to forgive and be forgiven is one of life's difficult lessons. 30

In a chapter on family harmony, Brenneman interviews Dr. Walter Drudge. He suggests that the popular phrase 'forgive and forget' is humanly impossible because everyone has the capacity for recall. Forgiveness is about not using what has been said or done against that person. 31 Drudge suggests that forgiveness of others is integrally related to self-forgiveness, "If we have trouble forgiving ourselves, we will have difficulty forgiving other people." Brenneman summarizes his words by saying, "if we understand our own humanity, it's easier to overlook the other fellow's faults." 32


29 Ibid., p. 17.

30 Ibid., p. 106.

31 Ibid., p. 143.

32 Ibid., p. 144.
Using examples from several marriages that were on the verge of divorce, Brenneman illustrates how important forgiveness can be in healing relationships. She quotes one wife who said that forgiveness was something that she could not do herself, no matter how hard she tried. Instead, she experienced forgiveness as a gift of the Holy Spirit; "I discovered that He also enabled me to forgive, love, and accept other persons whom I had hated deeply. That was no less than a miracle to me."33

Conclusion

Brenneman's work is devotional rather than systematic, and she does not outline her theological views in any great detail, or with the intention of presenting a cohesive theology. Some of Brenneman's views on suffering, (and her view on the issue of obedience, although it is only referred to briefly), are similar to the mind-set found in Hershberger and Yoder, and the church statements and hymns. Yet her theology differs significantly from the theologies reviewed in this thesis up to this point because it is openly contextual. She tells her own story to her readers, and then explains how she finds meaning in that story.

Brenneman's contextual approach is significant for women who bring questions about violence to her writings. She does not provide a message that suffering can be rejected, however she is very contextually specific about how she has arrived at her own theology of suffering. If Brenneman's answers do not seem to match women's questions, they can attribute this to a difference in circumstance, rather than feeling that their own experience is invalid. She does not present her theological views as the correct way to interpret scripture, or as the key to living a holy life.

33Brenneman, Marriage, p. 64.
Significantly, Brenneman does not set herself up as someone who has all the theological answers. She does not claim to a theological expert. Her stance is humble, admitting that she has a limited perspective. Her admission that she does not understand why suffering happens can be liberating for women who also have no answers about why they have experienced rape or abuse from a loved one. Her freedom to ask the question "Why?" gives her readers that freedom as well.

Brenneman’s affirmation that God suffers with us is comforting for women who have experienced violence. She encourages fellow sufferers by saying that lessons can be learned even through suffering. She avoids glibness by sharing the agony of her own suffering and the lessons that it has taught her.

Brenneman’s discussion of forgiveness is fairly brief. She does suggest that forgiveness does not mean forgetting the wrong done; this validates the experience of women who have tried to forgive after being assaulted. Interestingly, she describes forgiveness not as an act of the will, but as an experience of grace. Forgiveness is something that comes from God, and is sometimes not humanly possible. This concept of forgiveness could free women from the burden of having to will themselves into forgiving their abuser.

Katie Funk Wiebe

Born in northern Saskatchewan, Katie Funk Wiebe lived most of her life in Kansas. She attended Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Tabor College and Wichita State University. Wiebe taught English at Tabor College for 24 years. She has been an extremely popular writer and
speaker in the Mennonite church. She has published hundreds of articles in Mennonite periodicals and numerous books.

**Suffering**

Wiebe's theology, like Helen Good Brenneman's, is contextual. Her writings often consist of stories drawn from her own experience as a woman, and she offers theological reflection on the basis of those experiences. Wiebe is more theologically self-reflective than Brenneman; "If you ask me to tell you about my God, I can't tell you without telling my story. You will see the God I really know and trust only as you learn to know my story. Here my true theology is revealed." She suggests that articulating one's own story of suffering is an important part of healing; people need to tell their own stories.

The interaction of story and theology is clearly seen in her book *Alone: A Search for Joy*. Here Wiebe relates how her husband became seriously ill and died while they had a young family. In this book she includes a chapter entitled "When you suffer" in which she specifically looks at loss surrounding the death of a loved person. Reflecting on this journey she writes of two ways to approach this suffering, "There is the way of rebellion and bitterness, and the way of acceptance and submission. One way leads to greater darkness; the other to light." In a

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35 Wiebe, *Border Crossing*, p. 185.


different book she writes of suffering again, this time in the context of a daughter's serious illness. She remembers that "I wanted to shove the experience of dealing with suffering from me." In a book on aging she describes the losses that seniors face as they grow older. On another occasion she recounts the suffering that Mennonites faced in Russia, and the effect that the suffering had on them: "In the face of such intense suffering, hearts became like stone. Some people could no longer cry." Suffering is not spiritualized in her writing; she speaks of its effect in a contextual and concrete way.

Like Brenneman, Wiebe admits that she does not understand why suffering happens. She does know that suffering can be an opportunity for growth; "Anxiety and pain are part of life, yet suffering remains a mystery, part of which is the recognition that pain has a deep purpose in the community of the children of God." Wiebe rejects the view that all suffering is sent from God. God sometimes permits suffering.

Wiebe believes that even suffering that originates out of sin can become redemptive in the grasp of faith; "Instead of being something to be endured, [painful circumstances] can through faith become an instrument of good. This is the meaning of the Cross: death is transformed into

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38 Wiebe, Bless Me Too, p. 114.


41 Wiebe, Alone, p. 132 and Wiebe, Border Crossing, p. 93.

42 Wiebe, Alone, p. 131.

43 Ibid., p. 127.

44 Ibid., p. 132.
life." Her theology is summed up with the words, "Where is God when we suffer? On the cross, suffering with us." God gives comfort to people who are suffering, and the way that comfort comes is through other Christians.

Wiebe does refer briefly to other types of suffering. She observes that much suffering is the result of "human willfulness and sin." In one passage she defines violence and how that leads to suffering. She then adds the important question, "Where did I see violence in daily life? Where did I use it?" She goes on to write,

Violence says to the other person by word, action, or attitude: "You are less than a person. I am up here. You belong down there." It prevents the victim from functioning as a free moral agent by fostering fear and doubt that the person can control his or her life, or is not as worthwhile as other persons. Violence destroys people and their relationships. Love draws together and restores to life.

She rejects the interpretation of turning the other cheek which would let "... an oppressor slap us around like a punching bag. . . . Respond instead with an action that will shock that person into an awareness of your love."

Another part of the self-reflective nature of Wiebe's theology is that she acknowledges that there are different theologies of suffering. She observes that having chosen one theology, it is

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46 Ibid., p. 134.
47 Ibid., p. 142.
48 Ibid., p. 127.
49 Wiebe, Bless Me Too, pp. 194-195.
50 Ibid., p. 195.
difficult to change your viewpoint. "To let go of a view of God picked up through preaching and teaching, literature, movies, television, and radio, which seemed right at the time we latched unto it, but which later doesn't match her biblical teaching or experience, is tough." 52

Obedience

Wiebe writes of the importance of being obedient to God. She challenges the biblical world-view which believed that obedience to God insured long life. This view creates difficulties for modern readers, who observe that long life is given to both the just and the unjust. 53

Wiebe observes that many in the church view the Bible as "... a system of hierarchies, or a chain of command, in which God, Christ, angels, men, women, children, government and church leaders all find their precise pecking order." She rejects this view in favour of a theology which reinforces equality among humankind rather than hierarchies. 54

Her contextual approach is again evident when she observes, "In the early years of my writing career I promoted what the church openly espoused: strong male leadership and dominance in home, church, and society." 55 She also notes that, "Changing my mind about women's place in God's economy has been a painful and far-reaching decision." 56 Many in the church believe that the Bible says that women should be silent and submissive. Wiebe responds

52 Ibid., p. 116.

53 Wiebe, Life After 50, p. 17.

54 Wiebe, Border Crossing, p. 77.

55 Wiebe, Bless Me Too, p. 228.

56 Ibid., p. 238.
by writing, "We tend to forget that sometimes what we consider the absolute truth of the Word of God is but a thick slice of our particular culture thinly frosted by a few Scripture verses."\(^{57}\)

She writes specifically about obedience in the context of wife battering;

When I was young, some women in our immigrant village accepted abuse from their husbands as their lot. If a wife disobeyed, she had to be beaten into place—and the Bible admonished a wife to submit, so she thought . . . . \(^{58}\)

Wiebe rejects a theology which places submission to husbands above personal safety.

**Forgiveness**

The issue of forgiveness is something that Wiebe addresses. Again, she does this in a contextual way, sharing a story from her own life of a broken relationship with her daughter. She describes how painful forgiveness can be. From that starting point, she outlines some general comments about forgiveness;

There are several reasons we don't forgive. We, in the church with a long tradition of good names, worry more about our own reputation than reconciliation with the offender. The child, maybe a spouse or friend, has hurt us. Our concern is for ourselves, for the hurt we are feeling and the accompanying anger, frustration, and mistrust. What will people think of me now that he or she has done this?\(^{59}\)

Forgiveness is a necessary component of relationships, and without forgiveness relationships dissolve.\(^{60}\) She admits that sometimes some relationships need to be ended;

The aim of a forgiving person is to keep relationships together—to hold together—to be a peacemaker that Christ might be glorified. One syndicated columnist advises her readers, "Don't waste yourself on the person who has hurt you. Get rid of the jerk." Sometimes

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\(^{57}\) Wiebe, *Border Crossing*, p. 78.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., p. 116.

\(^{59}\) Wiebe, *Bless Me Too*, p. 57.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 58.
such advice may be necessary. I don't deny it. But not always. God's word is "Forgive, release that person. Forgive as I forgive. Don't bind him or her with your anger." 61

Forgiveness is ultimately an act of the will which can bring healing and comfort to the pain of broken relationships. 62 Healing does bring relief to the injured person because it allows for the healing of memories, yet a component of forgiveness also involves seeing the past through the eyes of Christ, and giving up the right to get even. 63

When we don't forgive, we bind ourselves to that other person and destroy ourselves. Forgiveness releases us from bondage to that other person. We're free. We don't need to rehearse revenge speeches anymore . . . The hurting can stop. You and the other person can start over again. Reconciliation can take place. 64

Conclusion

Wiebe's theology is contextual, addressing the subject of suffering and forgiveness within the context of stories from her own life. While some of her theology resonates with the mind-set explored in this thesis, her contextual approach sets her theology apart. Readers of Wiebe's theology know the circumstances out of which her theology comes. If Wiebe's answers do not fit with the context of the reader, the reader is free to challenge her conclusions. Wiebe does not claim to be a theological expert, nor does she claim that her views are normative for Christians.

Her theology has striking similarities to that of Helen Good Brenneman. Wiebe, like Brenneman, admits that she does not understand why suffering happens. She emphasizes that

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61Ibid., p. 59.
62Ibid., p. 54.
63Ibid., p. 45.
64Ibid., p. 59.
God is with those who suffer, and that lessons can be learned even in suffering. This theological approach is liberative for women who have experienced violence.

At several points Wiebe speaks of her own experience of changing her theological views. She rejects a patriarchal mind-set and explains what this means. This type of storytelling is important for women who have experienced violence. As has been shown in this thesis, there are aspects of Mennonite theology that have not been life-giving for women. By speaking openly of the fact that changing theologies is permissible, Wiebe frees women to search for a theology which answers their questions and is life-giving.

Her discussion of forgiveness is also contextual, lending itself to acceptance or rejection by women who have been abused, depending upon how closely they can relate to Wiebe's story. Her discussion of forgiveness, while very brief, has a component not found in other theologies surveyed in this thesis. She suggests that forgiveness is something that benefits the survivor. It is something that helps them to survive. By not forgiving, one is bound to one's abuser forever. Forgiveness helps the hurting to stop. Traditional theology has viewed forgiveness as a Christian duty which benefits the person who has hurt you. Forgiveness benefits a survivor only in a negative way; if you do not forgive, God will not forgive you.

This survey of a selection of writings by two Mennonite women has proven extremely interesting. In spite of the briefness of the survey, a different style of writing theology was evident. A contextual approach that incorporates personal stories and reflection characterizes their work. Both writers happen to deal with the context of serious illness and this shapes their theology of suffering. Echoes of the theology of Yoder and Hershberger, Mennonite hymnody and church statements can be seen in their writing, particularly in the writing of Brenneman.
Wiebe and Brenneman's contextual approach, however, qualifies the observations they make about suffering, obedience and forgiveness. Women who have been abused can decide whether their own context is similar to the stories that Brenneman and Wiebe share. They can then choose to accept or reject the theological answers they offer. The women's voices sampled here suggest a way of doing theology that can be life-giving for women who have experienced violence. They model a way of doing theology that legitimizes the incorporation of personal experience into theological reflection.
CHAPTER VI

FEMINIST THEOLOGIANS

In this thesis I have surveyed a variety of Mennonite sources, exploring the themes of suffering, obedience and forgiveness. For the most part, these sources have revealed a theological mind-set that perpetuates the conditions leading to violence against women. This theology does not provide a liberating message for those who suffer from abuse. In this respect these theologies are not credible to women.

It is the purpose of this chapter to survey feminist theological writings. By definition these writings strive to be credible to women. They offer hope in the face of patriarchal violence. Many feminist theologians write about suffering, obedience and forgiveness, but for the purposes of this chapter I have limited myself to those who name violence against women as their theological context. This survey encompasses a broad variety of ecumenical sources that includes Mennonite writers.

Feminist writing about woman abuse is quite pointed in its criticism of traditional theology. In a world where woman abuse is increasingly recognized, theology needs to be reexamined as to the way it has upheld abusive structures, practices and attitudes. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes, "As long as Christian theology and pastoral practice do not publicly repent their collusion in sexual, domestic, and political violence against women and children, the
victims of such violence are forced to choose between remaining a victim and remaining a Christian."  

Women who are abused need the resources of their theological traditions to strengthen them in their journey from victim to survivor. Feminist theologians are seeking to discover and construct theologies which are relevant to women's lives. These theologies will not only contribute to analyses of woman abuse, but will also provide a stimulus for liberating change.  

Suffering  
The concept of suffering is examined carefully in feminist theological literature about women abuse. There are three main ways that suffering is discussed. First, suffering is defined in terms of what it means in women's lives. Second, the relationship of God to human suffering is debated, particularly in terms of the normativity of Jesus' suffering. Finally, there are practical suggestions for how suffering can be alleviated. This section will explore these three themes.  

Defining suffering  
The works surveyed are characterized by careful definitions of how suffering is present in the lives of women. Suffering is not abstract but specific; words such as rape, assault or battering are used. Writers speak about the meaning of this type of suffering, "Sexual assault threatens the core of the human psyche--its capacity to reach out, to trust, to respond to another, to experience

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pleasure." This naming is significant because traditional theology has not named the suffering of women, nor has it explored the meaning of that suffering.

Statistics about abuse and sexual assault abound in these writings. In addition, small excerpts from women's personal stories are frequently used to illustrate the effect of suffering in people's lives. For example,

Whenever he hit me, of course I was afraid. But I didn't think anybody could help me. I called the police once after he beat me up and kicked holes in all four walls of our apartment living room. They came, walked him around the block to cool him off and then brought him back home. He beat me again for calling the police. I really couldn't do anything about it. I was so afraid and felt completely helpless.4

The inclusion of stories such as this one remind the reader that theology must speak to agonizing situations. A survivor of abuse often faces re-victimization in the medical system, the legal system, the social welfare system and the church. By using stories of women, writers can vividly show the effect of the interaction of these systems.

Many writers emphasize that women suffer not simply during an actual event of assault, but for years afterwards. Krall refers to the terms 'pre-rape world' and 'post-rape world'.5 An experience of assault or abuse changes the way a woman lives in the world. One survivor of sexual assault writes, "For years I hurt deep inside and I thought there was no way to fix the hurt. My world had been crushed . . . . I felt emotionally ruined. I knew. I knew what horror and hate


4Anonymous story, Bussert, Battered Women, p. 34.

were. The transition from basketball and cheerleading to horror and hate happened in one split second." Krall also observes that terror continues after the event itself in the form of anxiety and terror, nightmares and flashbacks.

The theological meaning of suffering as it has been traditionally articulated does not describe the reality of suffering in women's lives. Feminist writers name what suffering does in women's lives:

But it is certainly dangerous—and also cruel—to assume that suffering inevitably leads to real life, to joy, to meaning, to wholeness. For suffering destroys. It kills, it maims the body and the spirit, it produces despair and evil... History continues to demonstrate that if there is a lesson to be learned from suffering, it is that many violated persons become violent, that those treated inhumanely often become inhumane, and that some, when left without hope, kill themselves in despair. Suffering both kills and deforms. The message of the gospel is a hope-filled response to this truth—not a negation of it.

The reality of suffering is that it leads to profound emotional and spiritual pain.

Naming women's experience of suffering is the way feminist theologians critique a church that has equated all types of suffering. They reject a theology that romanticizes, spiritualizes and minimizes the violence women face, for this theology tends to "comfort the comfortable and afflict the afflicted." Marie Fortune refers to this type of thinking as "doormat theology".

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7Krall, "Rape's Power to Dismember," pp. 350-351.


where suffering is God's will and the only option is to endure. Abused women who hear this theology understand it to mean that they are called to accept their abuse.

Suffering and God

The relationship of abused women to a Christ who suffered is pivotal. One of the most central metaphors for Christian faith is the crucifixion. In traditional Mennonite theology, Christians are encouraged to suffer patiently like Christ suffered. Generally there is little differentiation between different types of suffering. The result is that women with broken bodies have sat in pews and listened to a theology that seemed to spiritualize their very real agony. Fiorenza suggests that the use of scriptural texts which glorify suffering "... construct a sacred canopy that compels victims to accept their sufferings without resistance." She writes, "How can we point to the eucharistic bread and say, 'This is my body;' as long as women's bodies are battered, raped, sterilized, mutilated, prostituted, and used to male ends." The problematic juxtaposition of abused women whose suffering should be alleviated, and a Christ who suffered is approached in different ways by different theologians.

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11Ibid.

12Gudorf, *Victimization*, p. 91.


One of the most influential approaches in the works surveyed was presented by Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker in their article "For God so Loved the World?" This article proved to be a benchmark for feminist theological writings on woman abuse. Many subsequent writers have responded to their claims. Brown and Parker grapple with the basic concept of soteriology and the centrality of Jesus' suffering for salvation. They suggest that God's actions regarding Jesus can be described as "divine child abuse." To base a religion on this primary symbol has far-reaching consequences;

The image of God the father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son has sustained a culture of abuse and led to the abandonment of victims of abuse and oppression. Until this image is shattered it will be almost impossible to create a just society.16

In their article they survey several classic theories of the atonement, but they conclude that,

Though there are many different interpretations of how we are saved by the death of Jesus, there is no classical theory of the atonement that questions the necessity of Jesus' suffering. And, though the way in which suffering gives birth to redemption is diversely understood, every theory of the atonement commends suffering to the disciple . . . imitation of Christ is first and foremost obedient willingness to endure pain.17

Brown and Parker suggest that while liberation theology has tried to provide correctives on how to interpret suffering, Christian theology with its emphasis on atonement will always encourage martyrdom and victimization. They suggest that women's internalization of this theology traps

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16 Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker "For God so Loved the World?" in Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse, p. 9.

17 Ibid., p. 4.
them into an "... almost unbreakable cycle of abuse."\textsuperscript{18} Their article seems to make the claim that suffering can never be redemptive.\textsuperscript{19}

Since the publication of Parker and Brown's article, feminist theologians have debated the issues they raise about suffering. Most theologians surveyed come to quite different conclusions than Parker and Brown, while admitting that certain elements of their critique have validity. Referring to certain theories of the atonement, Christine Gudorf states that feminists are moving away from "... demonic understandings of the gospel."\textsuperscript{20} Sally Purvis suggests that doctrines of atonement that glorify suffering are "revolting" to the sensibilities of many Christian feminist thinkers.\textsuperscript{21} Both writers suggest that theological understandings of suffering can be reworked, and that Christianity can offer hope to abused women.

Feminist theologians in the Mennonite tradition echo both the critique of the theological tradition of suffering and the belief that while the concept of suffering has been used oppressively, it can be redeemed. Mary Anne Hildebrand writes this critique;

Through self-sacrificing love and self-abnegation we are taught that our suffering is justified, that this is being kind and Christ-like, and that it will somehow redeem us. Faithfulness is measured in terms of how well we are able to put up with our oppression and victimization. The glorification of suffering, servanthood, and the loving-your-enemy model of turning the other cheek have helped to acculturate women to abuse. Denying our right to self-determination, giving up creative efforts for the sake of others, and

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 3.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 4.

\textsuperscript{20}Gudorf, \textit{Victimization}, p. 71.

general female shame have made women the victims of abuse and oppression. These injustices must be named and dealt with.  

Rachel Reesor suggests that theories about the atonement (and Christ's suffering) must be analysed according to how they have been used or misused. She claims that images, metaphors and symbols which have been used abusively in the past need not be rejected if theologians are vigilant and discerning about their use.

Feminist writers differ as to how much vigilance needs to be used; some writers seem more at ease with traditional symbols than others. Joy Bussert believes that there has been an overemphasis on the crucifixion and Jesus' suffering. She claims this can be balanced by paying closer attention to the importance of the resurrection. Marie Marshall Fortune and Carol Adams speak of Jesus's suffering as a unique and one-time event; "Did not Jesus suffer once and for all so that no one else would ever have to suffer as he did? Jesus' suffering liberates us from having to follow this path." Jesus' suffering was for a purpose, these writers suggest, while the suffering that abused women experience serves no purpose.

Quite a few of the feminist writers make a distinction between voluntary and involuntary suffering (as was seen in the work of John Howard Yoder in chapter II). They claim that Jesus'  

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22Hildebrand, "Domestic Violence," pp. 78-79.


24Bussert, Battered Women, p. 65.

25Carol J. Adams, Woman-Battering (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 109. Also, "Jesus' crucifixion does not sanctify suffering . . . . It is not a model of how suffering should be borne but a witness to God's desire that no one should have to suffer such violence again." Fortune, "Transformation of Suffering," p. 145.
suffering was freely chosen, and therefore only freely chosen suffering can be redemptive;

"Sexual and domestic violence are forms of involuntary suffering. Neither serves any useful purpose; neither is chosen by the victim; neither is ever justified." Mennonite biblical theologian Mary Schertz makes this distinction as well.

This distinction between voluntary and involuntary suffering assumes that women who stay in abusive situations are trapped and hopeless, and see no way out of their predicament; their suffering is not freely chosen. Carol Adams challenges this assertion. She suggests that while abused women are often characterized by social workers as hopeless, they stay because they are profoundly hopeful about their marriages. She observes that, "The Christian victim is equipped with formidable tools for altering an unbearable reality." Other writers look at Jesus' suffering in terms of effectiveness. Effectiveness is something that Jesus also considered. Jesus did many things before he was crucified; ". . . there were first speeches and sermons, private interviews, public denunciations, demonstrations, examples, stories, healings, exorcisms, the calling of an alternative community." Further, Jesus ". . . did not ask for suffering, tried to avoid it when he could, and begged in the Garden of Olives to be

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28 Adams, Woman-Battering, p. 104.

delivered from pain and death.\textsuperscript{30} Suffering was chosen when there were no other choices. It was a means, rather than an end in and of itself, and it was a means of last resort.\textsuperscript{31}

Some feminist theologians point out that there are many other options that are more effective than suffering. Fortune writes,

Enduring suffering as a means of converting your oppressor simply does not work. There is no virtue in enduring suffering if no greater good is at stake. Certainly, being battered or sexually abused is such a situation. There is \textit{no greater good} for anyone—certainly not for the victim and children and others who witness the violence but also not for the abuser. Endurance that merely accepts the violence ignores the abuser's sinfulness and denies him a chance for repentance and redemption which may come from holding him accountable for his acts.\textsuperscript{32}

Staying in an abusive relationship means that the abuser is not called to account and thus misses the opportunity of redemption. It also guarantees that the violence will continue.\textsuperscript{33}

While suffering is a reality that sometimes cannot be avoided, feminist writers unanimously suggest that women suffering from abuse in family relationships should take advantage of every choice they can to minimize their suffering. They emphasize that the gospel's message is about birth and life. To forget that leaves one open to the temptation to love death and glorify victims.\textsuperscript{34} The question is not so much "Am I willing to suffer" but rather "Do I desire fully to live?"\textsuperscript{35} Jesus

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30}Wilson-Kastner, "Theological Perspectives," p. 105.
\item \textsuperscript{31}Schertz, "Creating Justice," p. 18.
\item \textsuperscript{32}Fortune, "Transformation of Suffering," p. 144. See also Procter-Smith, "The Whole Loaf," p. 473.
\item \textsuperscript{33}Adams, \textit{Woman Battering}, p. 108.
\item \textsuperscript{34}Gudorf, \textit{Victimization}, p. 73.
\item \textsuperscript{35}Brown and Parker, "For God so Loved," p. 18.
\end{itemize}
is portrayed as a person who loved life and would have avoided death on the cross if there were other options.

Parker and Brown claim that suffering cannot be redemptive; other feminist theologians disagree, protesting Parker and Brown's blanket rejection of suffering. Sally Purvis suggests that suffering is a reality in our flawed world. It is a by-product of love, it is what happens when our lives are open to one another. "This is a fact, a terrible, horrible, never justifiable fact, but a fact nonetheless."36 There is great evil in the world, and sometimes it does overpower us regardless of our struggle.37 These theologians claim that there is a theological truth in the crucifixion; suffering can be required of Christians. They emphasize that suffering has no intrinsic value; it is an evil that must be endured when there are no other options.

Many feminist theologians addressed the relationship between Jesus and suffering. These theologians tended to concentrate on the context of wife battering. Relatively few writers examined sexual assault. Some writers did look at how God relates to suffering, and here the contexts of both sexual assault and abuse are considered.

Traditional theology has viewed God as someone who sends suffering as either punishment or pedagogical tool. Feminist writers critique this view, and urge their readers to see that suffering is a result of an individual's choice to commit sin, and is not part of God's plan.38 There is a welcoming vision of a God who suffers with people, who hears the cries of women and

36 Purvis, Power of the Cross, p. 89.
37 Gudorf, Victimization, p. 73.
38 Adams, Woman-Battering, pp. 105-106.
cries with them. Brown and Parker acknowledge this movement in feminist and liberation theology but add:

To see God as the "fellow sufferer who understands" is to draw God close to all those who suffer and give divine companionship to the friendless . . . . The advent of the suffering God changes the entire face of theology, but it does not necessarily offer liberation for those who suffer. 39

For Brown and Parker a God who suffers does not offer the liberation they seek.

The larger question of theodicy, or why God allows evil and suffering to happen is rarely addressed in feminist writing on abuse. Patricia Wilson-Kastner, one of the few people who looks at the issue of suffering in relation to sexual assault, acknowledges that there are no answers to the question "why". She cannot explain why God allows rape to happen. She points to Jesus,

In the extremity of his suffering, he could not even see what his suffering meant; he was thrown up against a wall of his own loss of understanding and trust in the God who sent him and whom he expected to protect and guide him. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" both Mark and Matthew report as his last words. Jesus articulated for suffering humanity, and especially for the victim of assault that strikes at the fundamental integrity of body and spirit, the cry of one who could see neither meaning nor hope in the depths of pain. 40

She suggests that the person of Jesus was a divine response to human suffering.

Alleviating Suffering

The feminist writers surveyed seemed to be always conscious of the fact that women who were in situations of abuse would be reading their work. The tone of the writing was often persuasive, seeking to change the reader's point of view. There is encouragement for women to end their suffering, and flee from situations of abuse.


Some writers are conscious of the fact that women who are being abused may choose to leave an abusive situation. This can lead to feelings of profound dislocation. Many women endure abuse for years, believing that it is their cross to bear. It is a huge shift for them to move to the place where they view their own suffering in a different way. Adams writes,

Finally, the meaninglessness of suffering needs to be discussed. If there is no meaning to the suffering, or if her traditional interpretation of suffering is now meaningless, are we perhaps suggesting to her that her past beatings were in vain? Are we denying her an interpretive framework that made sense out of her experience? No, not at all. If the repositioning of the meaning of suffering and her christological model produces the anguish that her suffering has been meaningless, one way to respond is to say that her past suffering has brought her to the point of being able to say, This is enough. 41

Most writers do not worry about this dislocation, focussing instead on the liberation that a new theology can bring to survivors.

The writers surveyed articulate their hope for a church that can be a shelter for women in their suffering. The church can be a source of support and a sign of God's presence, it can be a place where people ask hard theological questions along with women survivors of violence.42

The church needs to be a place where suffering, and its attendant emotions, must be welcome. The church today is afraid of these extravagant emotions.43 Nancy Nason-Clark observes that evangelical women in Canada do provide support to women they know who experience violence.

41 Adams, Woman-Battering, p. 112.


This includes financially supporting transitional housing. They do this in spite of the fact that the institutional church pays little official attention to the suffering of women.  

It is significant that the theology about woman abuse is rarely theoretical. It is oriented in a practical way towards women who have experienced violence. Many of the writings surveyed contain rituals and liturgies that can be used in the church. These worship resources help women to name their suffering within the church.

The examination of suffering in feminist writings reveals different theologies. Some writers are optimistic that women can name their suffering and be healed in the church. Other feminist writers believe that the church's complicity in glorifying suffering is an integral element of Christian theology and must be rejected. Brown and Parker suggest that women must leave the church in order to be liberated.  

The critique of Brown and Parker has limited appeal to Christian women because it in effect calls for an exodus from the Christian church. They reject Jesus as a primary symbol. Pamela Dickey Young writes that feminist theology must be credible to women, but if it wishes to be called Christian it must also be authentic to the Christian tradition. By rejecting the atonement of Jesus, Brown and Parker seem to be placing themselves outside of the Christian


45 Brown and Parker, "For God so Loved," p. 3.

46"If the notion of being an adherent of one religious tradition and not another is to have any rational content, it must be derived in part from the symbols that give that tradition an identity through time." Young, Feminist Theology/Christian Theology, p. 78.
tradition. Most of the writers surveyed reject Brown and Parker's view, taking a position that grapples with the tradition rather than rejecting it outright.

Obedience

Feminist theologians who examine the issue of violence against women invariably point to the connection between the church's teaching on obedience and patriarchy. Obedience of women to men is part of a patriarchal system that has been theologically justified throughout the Christian tradition. These theologies have legitimated women's subservience to men and colluded with their oppression.

The essence of patriarchy is an unjust imbalance of power which is predicated on female obedience to men. This obedience manifests itself in many ways, including male dominance in making decisions within marriage relationships, the pressure women feel to adopt the "female role", and the hierarchical structure of the church. Feminist writers emphatically state that violence must be placed on a continuum of male power and control over women and children. Violence against women is the logical conclusion or natural consequence of patriarchal assumptions about women's subordination to men. As Fiorenza suggests, "... overt physical


and sexual violence must not be seen as isolated incidents or perverse behaviour but must be explored as structural normative practices.\textsuperscript{49}

If the church wants to address sexual or domestic violence it must confront its own patriarchal structure and the way theologies of obedience have oppressed women.\textsuperscript{50} Mennonite theologian Ruth Krall proclaims, "Christendom's historical teachings about men's necessary dominance over women, are, to me, no longer the gospel."\textsuperscript{51} She points to the Mennonite tradition,

Those of us in the peace church tradition have repudiated the war-texts of the Biblical tradition. We have claimed that the New Testament witness to the teachings of Jesus has created a new way; a new community, a new society.

We have been much less willing to repudiate the patriarchal claims for a gendered society in which men are given cultural permission to dominate women. We have continued the traditions of Christendom which deny women's full humanity, those traditions which claim the necessity of women's suffering as payment for her role in human disobedience. Can we, seeking faithfulness as a people, see the Jesus materials as creating a new way for women and men in gender relatedness?\textsuperscript{52}

Other theologians join with Krall in stating that the church must not lend its support, either explicitly or implicitly, to patriarchy.\textsuperscript{53} Theology must name sources of violence in religious

\textsuperscript{49}Fiorenza, \textit{Violence Against Women: Concilium}, p. x.


\textsuperscript{53}Phyllis Alsdurf and James M. Alsdurf, "Wife Abuse and Scripture," in \textit{Abuse and Religion}, p. 226.
traditions and fight the belief that "... God intended for men to dominate women and children."55

Writers in evangelical churches in particular point to the dangers that evangelical women face due to a theology of female submissiveness of male authority; "It is a perspective that makes women more susceptible to violence and also heightens the likelihood that battered women will remain in abusive relationships long after they should."56 Some theologians emphasize that the Bible points to the value of mutual relationships,57 and that Christ came to deliver an emancipation proclamation to women.58 Others point to the need to work at dismantling the structures as well as the teachings of the church which insist that women obey men.59

Marjorie Procter-Smith looks carefully at the theology of obedience. Using liturgical resources for communion, she analyses how obedience language functions in the church.

Disobedience is often equated with sin. This is contrary to the experience of women,

For the woman battered by her husband, for the child abused by an adult, obedience does not equal freedom, but rather suffering, terror, and possible death . . . . The rebellion against their abuse, their refusal to accept victimization, and their willingness to claim well-being for themselves, which are the very things they must do in order to survive, these things are defined as sin in this prayer of confession.60


55Heggen, Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes, p. 176.

56Alsdurf and Alsdurf, "Wife Abuse and Scripture," p. 221.

57Fortune and Hertze, "Religious Issues," p. 76.


Procter-Smith calls for a new approach to worship, an approach which takes the context of violence against women seriously. Liturgy and ritual have the potential to be life-giving rather than death-dealing.

Ruth Krall discusses the issue of obedience in reference to the actual experiences of rape victims. She suggests that a rape event is filled with demands for obedience:61

Perceiving herself as powerless to do more than attempt survival, the woman reacts to rape as a total body-self. She searches for her own route out of a dangerous interpersonal transaction. Often that route involves obedience behaviors. Powerless to stop her rape, the woman seeks to protect her life by compliance. She does what she is commanded to do by her rapist in the hope that she will not inadvertently trigger him into mutilating or killing her.62

The internalization of obedience to her rapist has intense ramifications for the survivor. One of these ramifications may be that for the survivor of rape, the patriarchal system is unmasked, "Rape, as a cultural form, reminds women that submission to the authority of men is seen as an essential aspect of women's existence in patriarchal societies."63

Obedience of women to men is something which feminist theologians invariably link with woman abuse. Dorothee Soelle passionately rejects the concept of obedience. She links the word "obedience" with the oppressive history of Nazism in Germany; her position is that it is impossible to use this theological concept without reference to the concrete effect it has had in people's lives.

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61 Krall, "Rape's Power to Dismember," p. 338.
62 Ibid., p. 407.
63 Ibid., p. 338.
lives. Obedience is the linchpin of a patriarchal structure which has led to the oppression of women, and must be theologically rejected.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a significant topic in the writings of feminist theologians who speak of woman abuse. These writers critique the way forgiveness has functioned in the church. They propose a new way of looking at forgiveness; a perspective which takes into account the needs of the survivor of abuse.

There are two main criticisms of traditional theology. First, forgiveness has been seen as an obligation that the survivor must fulfill. Second, forgiveness has been used as a way for abusers to sidestep the issue of accountability. This section will end with observations about a new theology of forgiveness. This is a particularly important discussion in terms of the contribution feminist writers can make to a Mennonite theology of forgiveness, which has not been extensively developed. It is significant that Mennonite feminist theologians and biblical scholars are initiating work on this topic in the Mennonite context.

Forgiveness as Obligation

A number of the writers observe that traditional theologies view forgiveness as an obligation for the injured person. Forgiveness is not optional—it is something that an injured person must do. Human and divine understandings of forgiveness have been unified, and abused people have been expected to forgive their abusers immediately and unconditionally, like God forgives. This theology is bolstered by popular scripture such as Colossians 3:13, "... just as the

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64Dorothee Soelle, Creative Disobedience (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), p. x.
Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive", and the Lord's prayer, which link divine and human forgiveness. Mark Yantzi also refers to the misuse of scripture; "We must avoid using the Bible to command victims to forgive offenders. We can offer the Bible as a rich resource for healing rather than as a club to beat the wounded."65

Procter-Smith comments on how abuse can be spiritualized,

By defining sin as primarily an offense against God, and by offering forgiveness immediately following the confession, the message is given that even if violence and abuse of women and children are understood as sin, God will readily forgive. And if God will so readily forgive, the victim should also be willing to forgive.66

Survivors have been told that they must forgive, they must stop feeling hurt, and they must extend forgiveness regardless of whether a confession or apology is forthcoming.

Discussions of forgiveness have tended to focus more on the victim than the offender. Yantzi claims that this is unfair, "The Bible has much more to say about repentance than it does about forgiveness. We would be wise to follow that example."67 Traditional theologies of forgiveness suggest that the victims should be concerned about the soul of the person who has hurt them. Extending forgiveness to an unrepentant sinner is a way of trying to convert that person. This loving and self-less attitude is particularly expected of women in our culture. Women ". . . are encouraged to be nice, and to yield to the needs and desires of others."68

65Yantzi, Sexual Offending and Restoration, p. 132.


67Yantzi, Sexual Offending and Restoration, p. 124.

68Gayle Gerber Koontz, "As We Forgive Others: Christian Forgiveness and Feminist Pain," Mennonite Quarterly Review 68:2 (April 1994), p. 183. Koontz goes on to remark that women who have been abused face a catch 22, "If they forgive too quickly or inappropriately they may slip back into the ocean of unworthiness and lack of self-respect--the sea from which
idea of forgiveness as obligation is clearly seen when an abuser has confessed and is willing to say they are sorry. If the survivor does not offer forgiveness, they are blamed for harbouring bitter feelings. The broken relationship can even be seen as their fault.\textsuperscript{69}

There are strong theological messages which reinforce the idea of forgiveness as obligation. Marjorie Procter-Smith examines the practice of communion. She claims that survivors may feel unwelcome at communion because of the emphasis on individual worthiness to take communion. The Christian survivor may feel anger and resentment towards their abuser, and be unable to forgive them. This can lead to feelings of profound unworthiness to take communion.\textsuperscript{70} They are being asked to do something which they cannot do; forgive immediately and unconditionally as God forgives. Forgiveness is so obligatory that it "... may feel to an injured one like a moral club pressing her to relate to those who have abused her when she does not feel strong enough to do so."\textsuperscript{71}

\textbf{Forgiveness and Accountability}

Traditional theologies of forgiveness have tended to sidestep the issue of accountability. Women are encouraged to keep their abuse private and to forgive their abuser. Mennonite churches stress the Matthew 18 passage where Christians are urged to go privately to the person who has hurt them. Melanie May writes, "But my experience teaches that, if privacy is privileged, they are just emerging; if they refuse to forgive they fail not only be to 'nice', but to be truly 'Christian'." p. 184.

\textsuperscript{69}Heggen, \textit{Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes}, p. 122.

\textsuperscript{70}Procter-Smith, "The Whole Loaf," pp. 468-470.

\textsuperscript{71}Koontz, "As We Forgive Others," p. 190.
forgiveness may bottle up what an offense or abusive act stirs up. Forgiveness may function as the flip side of guilt and give in to the perpetrator's cry for relief from responsibility. Privacy intensifies these possibilities."72 Yantzi points out that, "We must view forgiveness as a product of earlier stages, which include the confession of a wrong, remorse, repentance, restitution, and reconciliation. These steps can lead to forgiveness."73

Feminist writers on abuse also observe that justice is ignored because sin has been spiritualized. Examining communion rituals, Procter-Smith demonstrates that sin is usually defined as an offence against God.74 The abuser, sensing their unworthiness, can take advantage of the prayer of confession before every communion service. They are immediately forgiven and are then ready to partake. This type of theology completely ignores the harm that has been done and the obligation of the sinner to try to right that situation. Andy Smith suggests that it is a theological problem when one's relationship with God is separate from one's relationship with the community:

We need to develop an understanding that the self-in-community is not separate from self-in-God . . . . It is not possible to violate someone and be right with God. And it is not possible to restore one's relationship with God until one has restored one's relationship with a survivor to the satisfaction of the survivor.75


73Yantzi, Sexual Offending and Restoration, p. 124.


75Smith, "Born Again, Free from Sin?" p. 346.
Forgiveness must involve a change of behaviour and an attempt to make justice, to right the situation that is wrong.\textsuperscript{76}

Sometimes abusers will approach clergy to ask for forgiveness for their abusive behaviour. If they receive an assurance of forgiveness, this may mean that they feel absolved, and have no need to approach the person they have hurt. In that sense, forgiveness can be used as a tool for power.\textsuperscript{77} It can be a device abusers use to avoid taking responsibility for their actions.

Forgiveness before justice is 'cheap grace' and cannot contribute to authentic healing and restoration to wholeness for the victim or the offender. It cuts the healing process short and may well perpetuate the cycle of abuse. It also undercuts the redemption of abusers by preventing them from being accountable for their abusive behavior.\textsuperscript{78}

Forgiveness does not mean trying to make someone feel better, or to help them avoid the consequences of their actions.\textsuperscript{79}

Traditional theology which tries to coerce the survivor into forgiveness, regardless of how they feel about forgiving, and which allows the perpetrator to avoid accountability, do a disservice to the real meaning of forgiveness. While traditional theology may provide a "quick fix", it does little to address the profound brokenness at the root of abuse.

A pastor may experience pressure from both a survivor and an abuser to rush into forgiveness. The survivor may really desire to forgive quickly, in the hope that forgiveness will

\textsuperscript{76}Adams, \textit{Woman-Battering}, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{77}Koontz, "As We Forgive Others," p. 186.

\textsuperscript{78}Ibid., p. 202.

\textsuperscript{79}Adams, \textit{Woman-Battering}, pp. 52-53.
bring healing and resolution to the pain of the experience. The abuser may want to be forgiven quickly so that they need not face the results of what they have done. However, premature forgiveness, or shortcuts which avoid the deeper brokenness, "do not serve the victim, the offender, or the wider community." Indeed, that type of "forgiveness" can enhance the power of the abuser and disempower the victim even further.

A New Theology of Forgiveness

Feminist writers who grapple with issues of abuse go into some detail outlining what forgiveness should look like in the Christian community. Every writer who discussed forgiveness said that it is a long process which is extremely painful. While God may be able to forgive immediately, human beings, if they do forgive, do so over long periods of time.

An essential prerequisite for forgiveness is truly understanding what needs to be forgiven. That means naming the injustice that has been done. This can be extremely difficult for survivors to do since their offenders often minimize what has happened. Further, the survivor may experience "indifference, opposition, or ridicule" from the legal system, her church community, or her family as she attempts to name what has happened. Survivors must be empowered by their community and their theology to clearly name the evil that was done to

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81 Ibid., p. 204.


them; "Survivors of abuse feel extremely powerless, and cannot forgive when the imbalance of power is that extreme. The church community can help facilitate righting that balance so that the woman feels empowered." For this to happen the church must be a place where sin can be named. Words like incest, rape and sexual assault, which are not commonly spoken in church, need to become part of the Christian religious vocabulary. In order for survivors to find the courage to name what was done to them, they need to be in communities that will not blame them for being a victim.

In addition to naming the abuse, victims must decide not to allow the abuse to continue; they must move from being a victim to being a survivor. Empowering a woman who has been abused means helping her to claim her history. The pain she has suffered is a part of her story, and she will never forget it. This memory will be a key to her survival; it empowers her to not allow it to happen again. As Karen Lebacqz writes, "Like most feminists, I am very uneasy about any understanding of love or forgiveness that urges a losing of the self or of the self's perspective, for this contradicts the value of survival." Women who have experienced violence must find their own voice and decide to become a survivor.

This process of empowerment would preclude any discussion of forgiveness while trauma is happening. This contradicts the way forgiveness has been used in the church in the context of violence against women. The church has often counselled immediate forgiveness. Women have been told to forgive their abuser and return to the abusive situation. This type of theology has

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84 Koontz, "As We Forgive Others," p. 182.


86 Adams, Woman-Battering, p. 82.
perpetuated cycles of abuse. A survivor with a memory will not act as if her abuser has been given a clean slate; she will be wary, and concerned about her own safety. Forgiveness does not mean losing the self, or spiritualizing the concrete things that have happened. It doesn't mean trusting someone totally and unconditionally.

Forgiveness ultimately is a process by which the survivor stops letting the experience dominate her life. It is a process of letting go and moving on.\textsuperscript{87}

For the victim, forgiveness is letting go of the immediacy of the trauma, the memory of which continues to terrorize the victim and limit possibilities. The memory is the lens through which the world is viewed. Forgiving involves putting that lens aside but keeping it close at hand. It is the choice to no longer allow the memory of the abuse to continue to abuse. But this step of healing must be carried out according to the victim's timetable.\textsuperscript{88}

Many of the writers view forgiveness as something which the survivor needs to do for her own well-being.

Forgiveness is enabled when there is repentance on the part of the abuser, which is demonstrated by an attempt to make justice. Some writers give a biblical explanation of justice, showing that forgiveness and repentance are linked in scripture.\textsuperscript{89} Justice can take the form of apologies, restitution or paying for counselling. It involves a change in the abuser's behaviour.\textsuperscript{90} Once the abuser's actions have demonstrated that inner feelings of contrition are present, the stage is set for forgiveness to happen. However, even if an abuser is unrepentant, other factors can

\textsuperscript{87} Fortune and Hertze, "Religious Issues," pp. 82-83.

\textsuperscript{88} Fortune, "Forgiveness: The Last Step," p. 203.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p. 201.

\textsuperscript{90} Heggen, Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes, p. 126.
facilitate forgiveness on the part of the survivor. 91 "Justice, forgiveness, and healing for the victim cannot be dependent upon the offender. These steps then become the responsibility of the wider community. The church, the legal system, and family and friends can also make justice for victims." 92 The law can convict and incarcerate an offender, a church community can condemn an action, and withdraw fellowship from an offender.

Feminist theologians speak of the mystery of forgiveness, in that forgiveness cannot be contrived. It cannot be rushed. It is something that happens according to the timing of the victim. 93 The church community must realize that it may take years before a victim of abuse may be ready to forgive. 94 While a survivor may want to forgive, and may want to let go, forgiveness is a gradual process. Feelings of bitterness and anger are residual, and even if a person makes a decision for forgiveness, these feelings do not miraculously disappear. 95

Forgiveness can be seen as a direction, rather than as a destination. Several writers stressed the fact that even when forgiveness happens, reconciliation is not a given. The survivor may never trust the abuser enough to renew a relationship. Yet forgiveness has happened in the sense that the survivor has moved past the abuse, and no longer holds it against the person who hurt them. Some writers emphasize that forgiveness is something God does,

91 Fortune and Hertz, "Religious Issues," pp. 82-83.
94 Fortune and Hertz, "Religious Issues," pp. 82-83.
Forgiveness is ultimately God's work in a person's heart. It is an act of grace. For the Christian, it is finally the power of the Holy Spirit that enables the healing process to take place. This spiritual power gives the victim the strength to forgive, to let go. It gives the victimizer the strength to repent, to change. It gives the church the strength to help both persons in the justice-making process.  

Forgiveness is a gift from God which happens mysteriously over time.

Gayle Gerber Koontz addresses a subject which is not discussed by other theologians who write about woman abuse. She writes:

There is a strong pastoral rationale calling us to respect the psychological and spiritual healing process of injured ones . . . . At the same time, we may recognize that psychological considerations can at times be used as an excuse by injured ones to avoid the necessary pain of healing and reconciliation process or to rationalize "not forgiving." Brooding on the reality of "I am a victim," rather than saying "God is calling me to let go and forgive this offense," prevents the cultivation of a spiritual disposition toward forgiveness.  

Most writers do not discuss the fact that survivors may "fail" to forgive, because they disagree with the idea of forgiveness as obligation. Koontz comes closest to suggesting that forgiveness is an obligation for the Christian believer, albeit an obligation that takes a great deal of time and support. Koontz suggests that some people close themselves to forgiveness, and that it is the responsibility of the church community to nurture a disposition of forgiveness. Koontz does not give any practical suggestions as to how this could be done. It is an extremely delicate proposition, particularly given the fact that historically the church has perpetuated abuse by "nurturing" forgiveness.

Koontz was also the only writer who discussed the importance of forgiveness for the abuser. She suggests that, "In some cases when injured individuals may not be psychologically or  

96Ibid., p. 205.

97Koontz, "As We Forgive Others," p. 190.
spiritually ready to forgive, the larger Christian community can embody God's grace for repentant ones." 98 This is, in effect, the way the Christian community has functioned in that past. While Koontz definitely would not accept the spiritualization of sin, she suggests that forgiveness is something that is needed by abusers, and can be offered by a community if the abuser has tried to make justice. Again, implementing this in a practical way is a delicate proposition, particularly since many abusers and survivors are found in the same congregation.

Finally, one writer also pointed to the fact that many survivors of sexual assault and abuse feel very guilty. While this guilt may not have a rational basis, the feelings remain. Roberta Morris suggests that, "Forgiving oneself can be the hardest task for a victim whose self-image has been shattered, either by a single assault or by chronic abuse." 99

In conclusion, the concepts of suffering, obedience and forgiveness surface repeatedly in the work of feminist theologians. Writing from the perspective of women who have been abused, they critique traditional theology for its collusion with patriarchy. Too often theology has maintained the status quo, encouraging women who are suffering to continue suffering, legitimizing female obedience to men, and requiring women to forgive their abusers. In contrast to this, feminist theologians proclaim a theology which is based on freedom; freedom from suffering, freedom from male authority and control, and freedom to claim safety and experience grace.

98Ibid., p. 192.

CHAPTER VII

TOWARDS A MENNONITE FEMINIST PEACE THEOLOGY

One of the major burdens which feminist theologians carry is the task of making theology credible for women. The patriarchal world we live in profoundly shapes our theologies. While some aspects of faith have always proven life-giving for women, there are significant elements of the Christian religion that have been oppressive for them. An awareness of patriarchy (an awareness that is often called a "hermeneutics of suspicion"), necessitates that the yardstick of feminist credibility never be far from hand. Theology is judged as to whether the gospel is good news for women and men. It is judged as to whether it promotes the full humanity of both women and men.

Much of the work in this thesis has been concerned with judging the credibility of existing Mennonite peace theology. Theology books, church statements and hymns were examined with the purpose of discovering what they taught about the themes of suffering, obedience and forgiveness. This teaching was then measured against the yardstick of the experience of a certain group of people, women who have been abused. The theology was judged as to whether it contributed to the oppression of this group, or offered a message of good news or liberation.

Often, this theology was lacking in credibility. The theology often perpetuated the attitudes that would lead to submitting to abuse rather than resisting it. Female experience is not
evident as a source in the formulation of this theology. The chapter that examined theology written from a female point of view revealed a different way of doing theology.

Making theology credible is an important task for feminist theology; however making feminist theology authentic, or true to the Christian tradition, is equally important. A Mennonite feminist peace theology must take the inherited tradition seriously, grappling with its heavy load, discerning which parts are integral, and which are harmful or useless. This thesis has performed a modest task in this regard. It has often highlighted the oppressiveness of certain aspects of our theological tradition.

The purpose of this thesis is not to propose that the theology of Hershberger and Yoder be jettisoned from the Mennonite tradition. Nor do I propose that hymnals and church statements be discarded because they do not speak to the context of abused women. These theological works are all important developments in Mennonite thought, and they have been life-giving in various contexts.¹ What I do propose is that these theologies must be used critically, with an understanding of the harm and the good they have done. This critical awareness is vital in the forging of a new theology.

Making a Mennonite feminist peace theology both credible (so that it speaks in a life-giving way to women and men), and authentic (so that it is in dialogue with the Mennonite tradition) is a fine balance. Pamela Dickey Young writes of the burden of credibility and authenticity,

To do Christian feminist theology, then, requires balance, not the balance of walking a tightrope, afraid to look either way for fear of plunging to death below, but the balance of

¹For example, the work of John Howard Yoder has been extremely significant in the lives of many people. See the tributes to his theology in The Mennonite February, 1998.
trying to carry two heavy objects. One must keep shifting the weight in a search for equilibrium. There are various ways in which the weight can be redistributed. The aim is to carry the burden toward one's goal rather than to be so weighted down by it that one cannot move.  

A Mennonite feminist peace theology grapples with the twin burdens of credibility and authenticity.

This chapter will comment on the method of doing a feminist Mennonite peace theology, and then make some observations on the themes of suffering, obedience and forgiveness.

A Method for Feminist Mennonite Peace Theology

An important part of constructing a feminist Mennonite peace theology will be evaluating the Mennonite tradition from the context of violence against women. This thesis has taken some modest steps with a few key concepts. Much more work needs to be done. Both traditional academic theologies and more popular expressions of theology, such as hymnals or Sunday school curriculums, need to be explored from this context.

A great deal of work needs to be done on women's expressions of theology. Stories of faithful women need to be gleaned from books, letters, diaries and other historical records. Women's voices will provide new sources for our theology.

I believe that a feminist Mennonite peace theology will at times necessarily take a narrative form. Most of the Mennonite sources examined in this thesis simply did not use women's experience as a source for their theology. It is significant that the writings by Brenneman and Wiebe were more narratively based. This is not to say that feminist theology is necessarily narrative. Many feminists do write with a more objective style and make little reference to story.

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let alone their personal stories. A narrative approach continually reminds the reader (and the writer) about the practical consequences of theology; it can serve as a checkpoint about the credibility of a theology. Yantzi points to the importance of narrative in his discussion of a theology of forgiveness.

Much of what has been said and written about forgiveness describes stages of forgiveness and outlines the steps of resolution. While such a model may provide a helpful framework, we need to listen to how people actually handle the issue in their own private worlds, which may vary greatly.

The dilemma that faces theologians who wish to write about the context of violence against women is that these stories are extremely personal. The pain and anguish of being raped or brutally beaten by your husband is not easily shared. To share these stories means embarking on a journey of great personal risk. The teller is not sure that their story will be given an adequate hearing; it may be misconstrued or it may be used against them. Women will only theologize using their personal stories of violence if they have a safe place in which to do so.

It is extremely telling that in all of the academic theological writing about violence against women surveyed here, very few women identified themselves as survivors of violence. A similar observation can be made about the Consultation on Peace Theology and Violence against Women sponsored by the Institute of Mennonite Studies in 1992. Among the one hundred and twenty people gathered, doubtless there were many survivors of violence. The stories of these women were not accessible to the theologizing that happened in the group setting.

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3For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether's work is extremely important in feminist theology, yet she rarely uses narrative (her own or other women's) in her work.

4Yantzi, Sexual Offending and Restoration, p. 128.
To articulate a theology of violence against women without reference to stories about the
violence that the writers themselves have experienced, impoverishes that theology. Many writers
use short quotations from survivors' stories (usually anonymous) to fill this lacuna. I am not
implying that a theologian has to experience everything about which she theologizes. A woman
need not be a survivor of abuse to write a theology that speaks of abuse. A narrative theology
can be written which flows out of novels or poems and historical sources such as diaries and
memoirs. However, statistically it is likely that many theologians are survivors. It is doubtless
that this affects the way they theologize.

A primary issue in this discussion of narrative theology is safety. It is simply not safe as a
woman to speak the truth about your experiences of male violence. Most theologians are not
willing to risk being that vulnerable. Melanie May addresses the issue of vulnerability in her
writings. She chooses to speak about her lesbian sexuality and her experience of her female body.
She writes a theology out of the depth of her own experience, "... I choose to lay my body bare,
to tell the truth of my body as battlefield, the truth of my body created to glorify God. I still
believe truth sets free, even from the bondage born of violation and the threat thereof." She
claims that theology has one hope: it must be written out of our deepest vulnerabilities. She calls
for a theology "... not bent on protectionism or pretense or proving ourselves," but one that is "...
ready to risk for the sake of life abundant for all."\footnote{Marlene Epp lists a number of these sources in her paper "The Memory of Violence," \textit{Journal of Women's History} 9:1 (Spring 1997).}

\footnote{May, \textit{A Body Knows}, p. 87.}

\footnote{May, "The Pleasure of Our Lives," p. 39.}
May acknowledges that the academic world is not conducive to this type of writing. She recognizes that it is even hostile to it. Divorcing bodily knowledge from academic work is a given in the theological academy. She sees this split in her own academic training, "I still ache as I struggle to stitch flesh and blood sensibilities onto the apparent self-sufficiency of scholarship. I am still mending my own alienated choice to dissociate logic from life that I thought was the ticket to academic achievement."8

May's writing makes her deeply vulnerable. This vulnerability shocks the reader. One is used to reading theological reflection, yet one is less accustomed to reading the painful stories out of which that theology has come. She describes, and the reader experiences, her writing as, "A letter. An invitation to each of you to think theologically through your bodies, minds, and hearts."9 Similarly, when Mary Pellauer recounts her adult obliviousness to the abuse she witnessed as a child, it acts as an invitation to readers to examine their own lives.10

Ruth Krall points to the theological power of stories to communicate truth; "... these stories enter the liminal space of our lives. They assist us to find our way in and among the questions and ordinary needs of living. They become sacred to us because they surface the deep, guiding metaphors and stories of our lives so that these metaphors and stories can be examined by and transformed by the Holy Presence, whom we seek."11

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9May, "The Pleasure of Our Lives as Text," p. 34.
10Mary D. Pellauer, "Invitations to the Reader" in Sexual Assault and Abuse, p. vii-x.
Krall also suggests that it is in telling our own story that we learn the most about our theologies. "Sometimes as the teller of our own story we are grasped mid-sentence and mid-breath with the previously hidden-from-awareness meaning of the story that we have begun to tell."¹² May refers to this when she speaks of the personal cost of not speaking the truth about one's own experience. Freedom comes to her when she articulates what her body knows.¹³ She vividly articulates the personal cost of not speaking the truth about one's own experience.

The only way to tell the truth about violence against women is to have an audience, however small, however limited, that is willing to hear the story that you need to tell. May writes, "If we lay our bodies bare in our world so inhospitable to truth and to vulnerability we need to be in the company of others--a communion of saints, indeed--who choose to live with thin skins."¹⁴

Theological storytelling about violence against women has always happened. Women have shared stories, and the meaning of their stories, with each other. In the Mennonite church there have been forums where violence is discussed on a personal level. These have mostly been found at the congregational level where groups of women have met together. In the broader church setting there have been fewer forums for this to happen.

One exception to this is Mennonite Central Committee's Women's Concerns Report, a publication written and edited by Mennonite laywomen. The Report has devoted a number of

¹²Ibid., p. 191.

¹³May, A Body Knows, p. 108.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 86.
issues to the subject of violence against women.\textsuperscript{15} These reports have a limited circulation, primarily to women, and so they provide a safer forum in which to share stories of violation. The voice of the Report has been significant in speaking about violence against women. The Women's Concerns desk of Mennonite Central Committee has also sponsored a number of collections of theological resources on domestic violence, incest and child abuse.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1994 seven Mennonite women began a theology project entitled Piecework: A Women's Peace Theology\textsuperscript{17} sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee. They set out to discover "What would peace theology look like if it were located right in the midst of women's daily lives?" A presupposition of the project was that in order for women to share their theology of peace (and the stories out of which it flows), they must have a safe place in which to share it. Piecework is a compilation of the conversations, letters and writings that these seven women shared over the course of several years.

\textsuperscript{15}For example, "Wife Abuse," Women's Concerns Report 74, Melita Rempel, ed. (September-October 1987). The Report is written and edited by laywomen in the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches.

\textsuperscript{16}Mennonite Central Committee, Broken Boundaries: Resources for Pastoring People, Child Sexual Abuse (Akron, PA and Kitchener, ON: Mennonite Central Committee, 1989); Mennonite Central Committee, Expanding the Circle of Caring: Ministering to the Family Members of Survivors and Perpetrators of Sexual Abuse (Kitchener, ON: Mennonite Central Committee, 1995); Mennonite Central Committee Domestic Violence Taskforce, The Purple Packet: Domestic Violence Resources for Pastoring Persons, Wife Abuse (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1985); Shantz, Kathy, ed., Lord Hear Our Prayers: Domestic Violence Worship Resources. Winnipeg: Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1994.

\textsuperscript{17}Rosalee Bender, Eileen Klassen Hamm, Wendy Kroeker, Carol Penner, Valerie Regehr, Gloria Neufeld Redekop, Kathy Shantz, Piecework: A Woman's Peace Theology (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1998).
One topic discussed in *Piecework* was the subject of violence against women. The issue of safety was central to this topic in particular. One woman comments to another, "When you said yesterday that you wanted this to be a safe place I said, 'That's it!' This is different than any theological conference I've ever been at because there no one ever worries about safety—they think it's not about safety, it's about ideas!"\(^{18}\) Creating a place where women might feel comfortable to share personal stories was an integral part of the method of the project. There was no assumption that theology takes place on a level playing field where everyone is perfectly willing to share their stories or theology.\(^{19}\) In the *Piecework* project women did share pieces of their lives; stories of sexual assault, sexual harassment and abuse, and the meanings these stories had for them. There was a clear awareness that some stories were not being shared.

The *Piecework* project highlights the importance of finding safe spaces in which to share a theology of peace. Creating safe places for theology to be shared should be an agenda of the Mennonite church. Mennonite Central Committee gave funding for the *Piecework* project, and published its report. This not only facilitated the project itself, but it also granted legitimacy to this type of theologizing. Small groups of women meeting to share the stories of their everyday lives can be seen as theological work that is as legitimate as groups of academics (primarily male) gathering to share papers.

I believe that a Mennonite feminist peace theology will take a narrative form. A feminist peace theology will lack power unless it includes the stories out of which the reflections come. I perceive the irony of making this statement in a thesis that has not taken a narrative approach!

\(^{18}\) *Piecework*, p. 45.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
The reader does not have access to the personal stories that motivate and shape my theology. I have chosen to write this way because a doctoral dissertation is not the safest place in which to share personal stories. My participation in the Piecework project is more illustrative of the direction I think Mennonite peace theology should take.

I turn now to a brief discussion of the themes of suffering, obedience and forgiveness, and the direction a Mennonite feminist peace theology will take around these issues.

**Suffering**

The Mennonite tradition has a rich heritage of non-violence, and suffering has been an important concept within that tradition. This tradition needs to be evaluated both in terms of its value and its harmfulness to women who have experienced violence.

An important aspect of the Mennonite tradition is its emphasis on community. Men who have chosen conscientious objection to military service have received counsel and support from their congregations and conferences. Theologians frequently attempted to provide theological justification for people who suffered as a result of being conscientious objectors.

Some writers have characterized patriarchy as a "war against women." In the face of this violence, who will be the new conscientious objectors? Will the Mennonite church rally around the victims of this war? How will the church come to support women and men who speak out against violence against women? Where are the theologians who will articulate theologies to support these people?

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20 Hildebrand, "Domestic Violence," p. 79.
In the past, the Mennonite community failed its members by refusing to dialogue with those people who chose not to be non-violent. By shunning men who participated in war, or by allowing them to remain only if they did not speak of their experiences, the Mennonite church has lost the opportunity to learn from the stories these men could have shared.

Many Mennonite women make choices to defend themselves with physical force if they are attacked, yet this can lead to intense feelings of guilt because of the heritage of the non-violent tradition. Currently these women's stories are also being silenced. How will the church change so that these stories can be heard?

The Mennonite church does have a rich heritage of stories of people who resisted violence in non-violent ways. These stories are celebrated and passed on from generation to generation. Many women have avoided or survived rape using similar strategies, but these stories are not heard by the church. The result is that they cannot be shared with young women who need to have these theological resources.\(^{21}\) Ruth Krall observes that it is common in our culture to share "worst case" stories of rape; this can lead to a type of paralysis where one can feel helpless in the face of assault.\(^{22}\) The Mennonite community needs to add stories from women's lives to the non-violent story-telling that we do.

Women telling their stories of violence (and the meaning these stories have for them) need to be respected. I am uncomfortable with some of the feminist literature which is categorical about defining the meaning of suffering. I would agree with the observations of feminist


\(^{22}\)Krall, "Rape's Power to Dismember," p. 467.
theologians that staying in an abusive relationship is neither redemptive nor effective in changing a spouse's behaviour. However I know Mennonite women who have stayed and are staying in abusive relationships. They believe that they are being called by God to stay. Against all popular and politically correct feminist teaching, some have indeed converted their husbands through their suffering.\textsuperscript{23} If we allow people to tell their own stories, there will be stories that do not fit into the moulds that we cast. Being a community means allowing for diversity not only of experiences, but also of the meaning we attribute to those experiences.

Allowing for this diversity does not mean that theology must be vague and undefined in order to accommodate all stories. I believe that the theology of suffering as it has been traditionally articulated has caused great pain for women, pain that could have been avoided. Along with other feminist theologians, I strongly advocate and work for change in our theology of suffering. This should not preclude being open to hearing different stories, "If, as feminist women, we insist that our politically correct view of that hearing is the only possible hearing, we do a disservice to many women who are in search of the ear that will hear them into speech and into life itself."\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23}This need to respect the self-definition of the story teller is something Krall points to in her work. She cites a study which showed that women labelled themselves as a "rape victim" or a "rape avoider" depending on whether there was penetration. Women who defined themselves as "rape avoiders" healed more quickly from the experience. Krall writes, "If women's recovery from sexual assault is partially determined by their self-defininitions of themselves as rape victims or rape avoiders, what is the effect of the contemporary mood in which all forced sexual encounters are defined as rape? What is the impact when counselors or other helping people attempt to 'prove' to a woman that she has been raped when she does not so define her life situation in this manner?" Ibid., p. 200.

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., p. 473.
A feminist Mennonite peace theology can best be forged in a community where all members have access to sharing the way they understand their faith. Feminist theology, as shown in chapter VI, is divided over issues of christology, with some feminists rejecting a suffering Christ, and others embracing that Christ. In the Mennonite church, the crucified Jesus has been emphasized. The importance of the incarnation and the resurrection have not been emphasized to the same extent. Women need to find spaces in the church where they can articulate how Christ is life-giving for them.

A feminist Mennonite peace theology must be concerned with making the church a place where suffering can be expressed. This means that communities need to be tolerant rather than disapproving of or embarrassed by extreme emotions such as anger and rage. Churches need to be structured so that people who are experiencing suffering from violence (which continues long after the event itself) can find support. Ritual expression of their experiences can be helpful. Some Mennonite churches have offered services of lament and services of mourning for women who have been abused. Other churches offer a service of cleansing for someone who has been raped. Regular acknowledgement in pastoral prayers that there are people in the congregation who have been hurt by abuse or assault is another way of recognizing this reality. Similarly, the songs we sing must not offer glib or simple answers to deep pain; we need to sing songs that reflect the depth of the pain of suffering. These songs need to articulate the hope that we find in Jesus.

Finally, Mennonite feminist peace theology must be concerned not only with life within the church building, but also with the practical lives of women and men in the community. Mennonites will work out their commitment to peace by engaging in work to end the suffering
caused by violence against women. Mennonites will be active in transitional housing, in providing services for abused and abusers, and in doing preventative education so that violence in our society is reduced.

Obedience

The concept of obedience has played a significant role in the way Mennonites have related to each other and to the world around them. There has been a gradual rejection of a theology that calls women to be obedient to their husbands. This theology is by no means extinct, but it is less prevalent than it was several decades ago. I believe that this is a life-giving direction, and I think that it needs to be moved forward. The submission of women to men must be challenged in many structures, not just the marriage relationship.

Many structures in the Mennonite church continue to be patriarchal. The understanding of male dominance is more subtle and less overt than it was fifty years ago; however in many congregations and conferences, men are more likely to hold positions of power. Women need to have the power to make their voices heard in the Mennonite church. For this to happen women need to have access to preaching, to teaching, to membership on decision-making boards and conferences.

Breaking the bond of obedience between women and men may have far-reaching ramifications. How does this new re-alignment of male/female relations affect other traditional hierarchies? Mennonites have traditionally given a great deal of authority to their church leaders. While many church structures have become less hierarchical in recent decades, obedience is still an operative concept in our church communities. Several conferences have recently expelled
congregations who admit gays and lesbians as church members. Obedience does not seem to be a life-giving relationship in these situations.

Similarly, the recent Mennonite Confession of Faith called for children to be obedient to their parents. Given the rejection of obedience between women and men, what are the parameters of obedience between children and their parents?

Christian theology has perpetuated attitudes towards the environment that are integrally linked with the idea of a divine chain of command, starting with God, and going down through men, women, children, animals and the natural world. If we reject a theology of obedience between women and men, how does that affect how we view our relationship with the environment?

Obedience to government is something that Mennonites have debated whenever the issue of military involvement arises. Governments are always investing money in preparation for war, and some people believe that part of a peace witness should involve protesting against the preparation for war. Some Mennonites advocate for a peace tax fund, or become conscientious objectors to taxation for military purposes. What does obedience to the government mean in this context?

Finally, a more nuanced approach to the concept of obedience to God is also necessary. If obedience to people in authority is to be questioned, the notion of an authoritarian God must also be questioned. What are the dynamics of obedience to God? How is obedience mediated; by what means can Christians ascertain what they are called to do? If obedience language is found to be inadequate, what other theological terms are more adequate to describe the nature of the relationship between humans and God?
This thesis has documented that obedience language is less popular in current Mennonite theological discussions. I think that this concept has been so important to Mennonite theology that it must not be ignored. It must be kept alive so that we can explore what it has meant, and what it should mean.

Forgiveness

An important part of Mennonite peace theology has been an emphasis on community. It is no coincidence that many Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs have emerged out of Mennonite communities. There has been an awareness that victims and offenders are both children of God, and need to be treated with respect. Forgiveness is one way that the children of God can heal from the trauma of violence.

As was seen in this thesis, there is a growing interest in the subject of forgiveness in the Mennonite church. Church periodicals frequently carry stories of difficult cases where victims forgive their offenders. This seems to correspond with the new Confession of Faith which uses the word 'reconciliation' as a substitute for forgiveness.

This type of theology needs to be nuanced very carefully. Constant repetition of success stories about forgiveness can leave people who cannot forgive with enormous feelings of guilt or inadequacy. If we take our community seriously, we must admit that there are people in our congregations that have not forgiven, and may never be able to forgive.

Here again the issue of narrative theology comes to the fore. It is only as people share the deepest stories of how they have forgiven, and how they have not forgiven, that a theology adequate to those stories will be formed. This theology will also need to listen to the stories of
perpetrators of violence, to discover what forgiveness offered and forgiveness withheld means to them. Accountability and restitution are a necessary part of this discussion. This type of theology can only be formed in communities where survivors and offenders can find safe spaces to share their stories.

Experience has shown that congregations often become divided over issues of sexual violence. Too often churches side with the more powerful (usually the perpetrators) and victims' voices are ignored. Too often churches invite perpetrators to return to fellowship before survivors are ready to worship with them. Clear thinking about power dynamics in the church is an absolute necessity in any discussion of forgiveness. Understanding patriarchy and the need for empowerment for victims of violence will provide a solid undergirding for a successful theology of forgiveness.

Finally, forgiveness needs to be considered not only at the personal level, but also on the institutional level. At times the church is guilty of re-victimizing survivors of violence. The dynamics of forgiving an institution are very different than forgiving an individual. Accountability, repentance and restitution are not easily obtained from an institution. Our theology needs to envision ways that forgiveness can operate at a corporate level so that healing can happen.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project has been to demonstrate that Mennonite theology has carried a gendered message which has not been good news for women who have experienced violence. The Mennonite theological tradition has been oblivious to and has tolerated violence against women while at the same time eschewing violence in other contexts. For generations women
have applied the theology they have been taught to their own particular context. This theology carried an implicit message for them; even though Mennonite theology was ostensibly "silent" on the issue of woman abuse. The theological tradition helped to maintain communities that were unsafe for women who have been abused.

I chose to examine the tradition through a variety of sources. The major works of John Howard Yoder and Guy Hershberger, hymnals, church statements and devotional literature by women were chosen as windows through which to explore a mind-set which has been present in the Mennonite church. These theological sources both reflect and informed that mindset. Three concepts were chosen as avenues through the sources: suffering, obedience and forgiveness.

In most of the sources surveyed suffering was viewed in a redemptive way. Christians should imitate Jesus' suffering. A meek acceptance of suffering is emphasized at the expense of defining what is actually meant by the term suffering. Obedience to God and those in authority over you was also prescribed. Obedience is described as difficult for Christians because it can result in more suffering. Forgiveness is a minor theme in most of the sources surveyed but it was generally viewed as a necessary part of the Christian life. The sources suggest that you should always forgive those who wrong you, or God may not forgive you your sins.

The theology surveyed was produced and read by people in specific contexts. When read from within the context of violence against women, this theology carries an oppressive message which perpetuates the conditions of abuse. Women would find no encouragement to find safety, flee from suffering or secure justice from their abusers. The theological message of obedience to those in authority had specific gendered connotations for married women in the Mennonite cultural context. The warning that obedience would result in suffering offered little comfort to
abused women, and the assurance that forgiveness of wrongs was required by Christians added yet another sanction to maintaining an abusive status quo.

This thesis has found evidence that this theological mind-set is changing. The chapter on church statements revealed that Mennonite theology is beginning to address the context of violence against women. A more nuanced theology of suffering is beginning to emerge and a patriarchal ordering of the family is being challenged. The sources also revealed a new interest in the meaning of forgiveness. The devotional literature by women which was examined also demonstrated a theological method which was more consciously contextual, opening a window for women to theologize from the particularities of their experience.

The chapter on feminist voices showed a broad range of discussion on the topic of woman abuse, and a careful development of a theology of suffering, obedience and forgiveness. This theology was consciously contextual, addressing the reality that women face in specific situations of abuse. The final chapter outlined some new directions that Mennonite feminist theology can take both in terms of method, and how suffering, obedience and forgiveness can be understood. The feminist voices attempt to provide a theology which is good news for women who have been abused.

This thesis has demonstrated that parts of our Mennonite peace theology tradition have not brought peace to women's lives, but rather increased suffering. A theological mind-set has existed which needs to be challenged. It is my hope that in challenging that mind-set, we can create a theology which brings God's peace to people who have experienced violence. This theology will nurture a community which rejects all types of violence.
APPENDIX

A Resolution on Male Violence Against Women
Mennonite Church General Assembly
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
July 31, 1993

Background
In February 1992 a group of men from the Mennonite church and the General Conference
Mennonite Church gathered in Colorado for a consultation. The clearly stated focus was to have
male church leaders confront the violence being perpetrated against women. The experiences and
learnings of that weekend had a profound impact resulting in confession, repentance and renewal
for the participants. Following that event a call has come for the Mennonite Church to adopt a
statement on male violence against women.

Preamble
Too often in our biblical teaching and practice, we have distorted the Genesis account to mean
that the curse was part of God's creation order. We must be clear—the rule of man over woman is
the result of sin. In Jesus, the redemption, this curse has been lifted. Jesus restores the blessing
and shows how to live in the New Creation "like one who serves" not as Gentiles who "lord it

We believe that life is a gift from God and that women and men are created equally in God's
image with inherent worth and dignity and entitled to the same respect. The fall into sin has
shattered God's intended mutuality of women and men, distorting personal relationships and
resulting in dominance and violence of men against women. We believe that the death and
resurrection of Jesus Christ has saved and transformed us from these broken relationships and that
Jesus call us to live in love and harmony with all (Genesis 1:27; 2:20-24; Galatians 3:28;
Ephesians 5:21, 25-33).

However, we live in a society whose structures imply men's power and superiority over women.
Within that system too many Mennonite fathers, husbands, employers and even church leaders
have used their power in oppressive and violent ways. They have excluded women from
opportunities, silenced their ideas and protests, sexually harassed them and violently abused them.

We confess that we, women and men, have by our silence consented to the system of male
dominance and to individual acts of abuse. We also confess that while we have claimed to be a
peace-loving people, we have not effectively translated our theology into peaceful interpersonal
relations in our homes, churches and institutions.

Resolution
We the delegates gathered at Philadelphia 93 have heard the word of the brothers calling us to
acknowledge the sin of male violence against women. We are aware that more work needs to be
done on the broader expressions of abuse. There is difference among us on the biblical interpretation expressed in the preamble so we accept it as a challenge to further study and dialogue.

Therefore as delegates we resolve:

1. to break the silence and admit that there are Mennonite men who abuse women in various forms such as verbal abuse, psychological control, sexual harassment, battering wives and children, committing incest or rape;

2. to listen to, believe and feel the pain of women who have been violently abused or sexually harassed by men;

3. to declare that abuse is a violation of the marriage covenant and that persons are free to be sheltered from exposure to acts of violence while working at the confrontation and healing processes.

4. to hold abusers accountable for their actions, to call them to repentance, and to support them toward healing.

5. to provide safety for abused women and children

6. to hold church agencies accountable for dealing appropriately with abuse that occurs within their organizations;

7. to model, within our congregations, alternative and countercultural ways of being male and female; to practice parenting skills that help families learn how to share power and resolve conflict peacefully;

8. to encourage study in our congregations and church schools of issues of violence against women. (Suggested resources include these materials prepared by Mennonite Central Committee: The Purple Packet: Wife Abuse; Broken Boundaries: Child Sexual Abuse, and Crossing the Boundary: Sexual Abuse by Professionals. Lessons 9 and 10 on "Widening the Circle Through Care of Victims and Survivors" are in the WMSC and Women in Mission Resource Packet 1991-92. See also Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches, Herald Press (March, 1993) by Carolyn Holderread Heggen.)

The Mennonite Church General Assembly approves the statement "A Resolution on Male Violence Against Women," and calls on our conferences, congregations, schools, agencies and individual members to test the biblical and theological assumptions being made, to give serious attention to its message and fulfill its resolutions in a spirit of prayer and repentance.
Resolution #10
A Resolution Against Interpersonal Abuse
Adopted by the General Conference Mennonite Church, July 25, 1992.
Minutes, General Conference Mennonite Church, Forty-sixth Triennial Session, July 22-26, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 1992.

We believe that life is a gift from God and that women and men are created equally in
God’s image with inherent worth and dignity and entitled to the same respect. The fall into sin has
shattered God’s intended mutuality of women and men, distorting personal relationships and
resulting in relationships based on dominance and violence. We believe that the death and
resurrection of Jesus Christ has saved and transformed us from these broken relationships and that
Jesus calls us to live in love and harmony with all (Genesis 1:27; 2:20-24; Galatians 3:28;
Ephesians 5:21-33).

However, we live in a patriarchal society whose structures imply power and superiority of
some (overwhelmingly men) over others (usually women and children). Within that system, many
Mennonite family members, employers and even church leaders have used their power in
oppressive and violent ways. We have systematically excluded some groups from opportunities,
silenced their ideas and protests, sexually harassed them and violently abused them.

We confess that we, women and men, have by our silence consented to this system of
male dominance and to individual acts of abuse. As churches we have contributed to these same
attitudes by our teaching on the relation of men and women in marriage and in the church.

Therefore, we resolve as congregations and individuals:
1. to break the silence and admit that there are Mennonite men who sexually harass women, who
batter their wives or children or who commit incest or rape; we admit that there are Mennonite
women who abuse their husbands, children, or others;
2. to listen to, believe and feel the pain of those who have been violently abused or sexually
harassed;
3. to declare that abuse is a violation of the marriage covenant and that individuals so victimized
in marriage are not bound in the eyes of God or the church to submit themselves to further acts of
abuse;
4. to hold abusers accountable for their actions and to provide safety for the abused;
5. to hold church agencies accountable for dealing appropriately with abuse that occurs within
their organizations;
6. to find ways to restore and to bring healing both to those who abuse and to those who have
been abused;
7. to encourage study in our congregations, colleges and seminaries of issues of interpersonal
abuse and of healthy relationships between men and women.

(Suggested resources include materials prepared by Mennonite Central Committee: The
Purple Packet: Wife Abuse; Broken Boundaries: Child Sexual Abuse; and Crossing the
Boundary: Sexual Abuse by Professionals. Lessons 9 and 10 of "Widening the Circle Through
Care of Victims and Survivors" are in the Women in Mission Resource Packet, 1991-92)
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