

Claiming Strength over Weakness: Ideas of Sexuality in the Marriage of Evangelist Menno S. and Clara (Eby) Steiner¹

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Introduction

The adoption of a theology of strength preceded and significantly determined the sexual theology published by Mennonite Church leaders in the United States at the dawning of the twentieth century.² Young men like Menno S. Steiner, Daniel Kauffman, George Brunk and A. D. Wenger, who emerged as young influential Mennonite Church leaders in the 1890s,³ rejected nineteenth-century Mennonite humility theology for its idealization of weakness and articulated a theology of strength instead. This theological shift stemmed from a male struggle to define manhood in the rapidly changing American context of the late nineteenth century. Later in his life, Daniel Kauffman described the choice facing men in the 1890s this way: “[W]hether they talked

about religion, or politics, or something else concerning which people differ, it was understood that a man was either a champion of the things that he believed in, or that he was a weakling, afraid to let people know where he stood.”⁴ The choice made by Kauffman and his peers to become champions instead of weaklings significantly shaped the sexual theology that they formulated and articulated in printed form near the turn of the twentieth century.

Three books published between 1898 and 1900 and a fourth published in 1906 are primary sources for discovering the content of Mennonite Church theology of sexuality around the turn of the twentieth century.⁵ The first is Daniel Kauffman’s *Manual of Bible Doctrines*, published in 1898. Two years later, Kauffman wrote *A Talk With Church Members* as a practical companion piece to the *Manual of Bible Doctrines*. Six years later, in 1906, he produced *A Talk With Our Boys and Girls On Subjects of Interest to Young People*, a similar practical resource for fourteen- to twenty-year-olds who had not yet joined the church. He desired “to direct the minds of our boys and girls heavenward, and give them clearer view of life’s pleasures and duties and responsibilities.”⁶ The fourth book is Menno Steiner’s *Pitfalls and Safeguards*, published in 1899. Steiner identified the pitfalls as poverty, wealth, city life, amusements, the saloon, fashion, falling in love and bad friends. He concluded that the Christian home and the Christian religion were the best safeguards against all of these evils.

Within these four books a newly articulated Mennonite theology of sexuality can be gleaned. What was previously passed on to children implicitly by the example of parents and the community now became explicit in written doctrines and precepts. Sexual matters rarely previously discussed now received limited public attention in written form and became a subject for specific instruction beyond the home by church leaders. Five core beliefs about sexual matters are to be found in these sources: 1) males have authority over females; 2) there are distinct roles for each sex due to different capabilities; 3) the human spiritual nature supercedes the physical/sexual nature; 4) mental control must be exercised over sexual desires; and 5) appropriate sexual behaviour should be motivated by duty to God, not desire for pleasure.

These five core beliefs about sexuality were not distinctively Mennonite at the turn of the twentieth century. Other North American Christians articulated these same beliefs in response to the social upheaval and ambiguity regarding sex roles and appropriate sexual behavior that existed at the time. The significant nineteenth-century shift from a rural, agrarian culture to an urban, industrialized one placed men and women together in the workplace and created a crisis about the meaning of manhood and womanhood in North America in the 1890s.⁷ The burgeoning entertainment industry that accompanied

this cultural shift (including vaudeville shows, movie theatres, amusement parks and dance halls) brought more explicit sexual behavior into public view and challenged prevailing Christian teachings.⁸ Within this broader North American social context, claiming strength over weakness coincided with the prevailing Progressive Era values of ambitiousness, competitiveness and aggressiveness for building a better society.

For Mennonites, these five core beliefs rested on a certain assumed theology of strength which began to be articulated and taught by the new generation of church leaders in the 1890s. The focus of this article is how one of these leaders, Menno S. Steiner, articulated this theology and how this theology took expression in his own life and primary relationship.

Menno S. Steiner

The teaching, writings and life experiences of Menno S. Steiner illustrate how one prominent Mennonite Church evangelist and leader expressed and lived out this early twentieth-century sexual theology of claiming strength over weakness. Steiner's sermons, writings and personal letters found in the Mennonite Church USA archives in Goshen, Indiana are primary sources for uncovering his sexual beliefs and teachings. Letters exchanged between Steiner and his girlfriend, and later, wife Clara Eby Steiner, between 1893 and 1910 disclose how the struggle to claim strength over weakness played out in Steiner's own life and intimate relationship.

Menno Simon Steiner, son of preacher Christian P. and Barbara (Thut) Steiner, grew up in the Riley Creek Mennonite Church near Bluffton, Ohio.⁹ The elder Steiner welcomed pioneer Mennonite evangelist John S. Coffman's new revival-style preaching¹⁰ at Riley Creek in the 1880s. Nineteen-year-old Menno Steiner responded to Coffman's innovative and persuasive call and joined the church in 1885. He felt called to the ministry shortly thereafter. However, Mennonite humility forbade declaring such an aspiration, so Steiner finished high school and went on to teach school for three years.¹¹

In 1890 Steiner quit his Ohio teaching job and moved to Elkhart, Indiana to work full-time for John F. Funk's publishing company. There, in close relationship with Funk, John S. Coffman and other young recruits, Steiner gained new visions for the Mennonite Church.¹² Perhaps following his inner sense of call to ministry, Steiner left the publishing company for the 1891-1892 school year and sought further theological training at Oberlin College in Ohio. On 9 March, 1893, Bishop John F. Funk ordained Steiner at the Prairie Street Mennonite

Church in Elkhart, Indiana.¹³ Three days later he preached for the first time.

Steiner's Earliest Sermons

Steiner chose "The Manliness of God" as the title and focus for his first sermon, delivered on Sunday morning 12 March, 1893 at the Haw Patch congregation near Topeka, Indiana.¹⁴ He used Job 38:3 for his sermon text: "Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me." In this sermon Steiner extolled a posture of strength and boldness as expressing obedience to God. He emphasized that a "manly" God summons a response in kind in the face of life's trials. He taught that God provides the grace needed to stand up against trouble "like a man." This gracious provision then becomes the means for living a "Higher Life" – a life that rises above temptations and surpasses human shortcomings. Steiner's message is communicated more baldly in another outline of his "Manliness of God" sermon: "Men who will not stand up and face the trials of life and answer God like a man take their own life or become a mental wreck."¹⁵

In his second sermon, given that evening in the same church, Menno Steiner chose to address some "wrong views of Christ." He began by proclaiming that Jesus was "not only the lowly Nazarine [sic] but the Great King of Rev[elation]." Steiner desired to correct what he saw as a Mennonite overemphasis on Jesus' lowliness and humble origins by calling attention to Jesus' power and stature as well. Steiner sought to inspire the youth in his audience to claim a higher life and to grow spiritually rather than give in to a life of weakness and amusement.¹⁶

Steiner's earliest sermons are examples of articulating a theology of strength for his hearers. This theology of strength comes through in other notes found in Steiner's historical collection. In a small notebook of random notes and sermon illustrations dated November 1894, we find notations on "Be Strong" based on 2 Tim. 2:1.¹⁷ Steiner wrote: "Some people glory in their weakness and sometimes preachers take up half of their time in telling how weak they are. Imagine Paul going about preaching his weakness. The Lord wants strong workers, able men and women, but he does not despise the weak. He takes the weak, accepts them, not to keep them weak but to make them to be strong."¹⁸

The concerted effort made by Steiner and other Mennonite Church leaders during the 1890s to claim strength over weakness took on explicit sexual meaning as well. Mennonite men choosing to be champions rather than weaklings were determined to be conquerors over sexual weakness too. Their struggle with manhood involved a

battle with sexual desires and experiences. They applied their theology of strength to sexual matters and taught others to do the same. Thus the five core beliefs articulated in their earliest publications declared that spiritual and mental capacities must be exercised to control sexual desires and interests.

Steiner's Sex Lecture

In 1894, at age twenty-eight, Menno Simon Steiner began offering a lecture about sex for men entitled "The Curse of Manhood" or "Your Seed is Your Strength," when he traveled to Mennonite communities to preach.¹⁹ A full-page flyer announcing his address as "a rare opportunity for men and boys" beckoned "Come and learn to know yourself and take care of your strength."²⁰ M. S. Steiner considered dispelling ignorance about sex and sexual relations an important mission. In a 7 September, 1894 letter to Clara Eby Steiner, the woman he had married five months earlier, Steiner articulated his vision for his lectures on sex: "Tonight we give the boys a lecture – to men only . . . I hope to tell them some pointed facts. The relation of the sexes is indeed a great question. It is about time we begin to post upon that question so we can give lectures when we travel. You lecture to girls, and I to boys. Won't that be a grand mission? How ignorant so many people are on the first principles of conjugal love and of the right relation of the sexes. 'The use and abuse of the opposite sex' would be a good wording for the subject, or 'The use and the abuse of the affections and the passions,' would be still better."²¹

Steiner's vision for himself and Clara to share this mission never became a reality. Their correspondence reveals that Clara seldom traveled with Menno. By March, 1895 their first daughter Charity had arrived and Clara stayed at home to care for her while Menno spent considerable time away from home.

Undaunted, Menno proceeded to give lectures to men and women separately. His 10 August, 1895 letter to Clara from Garden City, Missouri included a small printed card announcing:

Lecture. For Men Only
By M. S. Steiner

at "Bethel Church Sunday 3 P.M." [written in by hand]

Subject: THE CURSE OF MAN.

Boys under sixteen not admitted [sic].

Menno followed this letter with a postcard three days later noting, "This P.M. I give the lecture to women, the one 'for men only' was very well attended, and was said to be just what is needed."²²

It is unclear whether Menno Steiner continued to give lectures to women and what the content of his lecture to women might have been. There appear to be no extant copies of these lectures.²³ However, he continued to present his lecture for men throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century.²⁴ Thus, during the 1890s this young Mennonite evangelist carried out a mission of helping men and boys confront "the curse of manhood" and maintain their physical stamina.

Numerous extant copies of Steiner's handwritten outlines for this lecture to men provide the essential content he offered them.²⁵ Steiner most often used the title, "The Curse of Manhood [or Man]" for his lecture. The less-frequently used title, "Your Seed is your Strength,"²⁶ focused on the kernel of Steiner's message to men. He proclaimed the natural law touted by nineteenth-century doctors that a man's "seed" [semen] was his strength. He taught that emissions of seminal fluid drained a man of his strength. Steiner appealed for men to take care of their strength rather than squander it by engaging in behavior that wasted a man's semen. Steiner cited dreams, masturbation, prostitution, excessive sex with a wife²⁷ and urinating²⁸ as examples of abusing sex.

Steiner's lecture on male sexuality shows that he assumed the scientific understandings of sexuality promoted through much of the nineteenth century.²⁹ He believed that semen not used for procreation changed into muscle tissue, brain tissue and vocal chord tissue, thereby increasing a man's virility. In a social climate that valued male strength to build a better civilization, it was in a man's best interest to control his emissions. Historian Michael Kimmel contends that the social upheaval of the nineteenth century caused by industrialization and urbanization demanded control from within:

To the medical experts of the time, the willful sexual control of a body was the ultimate test of mind over matter. Conservation of sperm was the single best way to conserve energy for other, more productive uses. It was believed that a body's total energy was finite, and the world of work demanded a full measure of it.³⁰

So controlling emissions amounted to preserving one's manliness and one's physical, mental and spiritual well-being.³¹ For Steiner, the battle to control emissions for the sake of preserving male strength constituted the "curse" of being a man.

This lecture indicates that Steiner turned to science in order to understand male sexual experience and the "right relation of the

sexes.”³² He drew upon the writing of Samuel R. Wells, a phrenologist³³ who explicitly sought to integrate “God’s will for marriage and the wisdom of science.”³⁴ Wells’ integration of these two is captured in his primary assumption that human beings have a God-given and sacred duty to improve the human race through breeding. Toward this end, Wells applied science to selecting a marriage partner and to exercising sexual capabilities. Wells taught that sexual intercourse facilitated health and long life, noting that “a certain regularity and moderation are requisite.”³⁵ Nineteenth-century medical authorities and phrenologists were concerned about men preserving their physical health and strength for building a better society. They applied this thinking to sexual behavior and told men to beware of becoming weak through sex. Steiner’s lecture shows that he accepted this perspective.

Steiner’s sex lecture proclaimed the same core message as his earliest sermons. The common link between the two is the subject of manhood and what constitutes “manliness.” Steiner simultaneously preached in Mennonite communities the manliness of God, the kingly Jesus and the sexual behavior that preserved manly strength. This was all a part of redefining Mennonite manhood and Mennonite male sexuality in a particular late nineteenth-century American context. Weakness and resignation were out; strength and control were in.

Letters During Courtship

The 1893-94 courtship letters between Menno Steiner and Clara Eby and the many letters exchanged after their marriage from 1894-1910 give a surprisingly open window into their relationship, including its sexual aspects. These letters allow us to see how Steiner lived out the beliefs he conveyed in his sex lectures to men. They exhibit Menno’s personal struggle with the “curse of manhood” and the way he claimed sexual strength over weakness in his own life.

Their pre-marital correspondence shows that both Menno and Clara believed physical intimacy should be expressed only with the person one intended to marry.³⁶ Freedom to demonstrate their affection for one another with kisses, hugs and touch increased during their courtship as they clarified their long-term commitment in marriage.

Clara’s 28 September, 1893 letter reveals the discoveries they made about each other as their physical relationship deepened.

I cannot forget one remark you made while I was at home, it was this, that you did not know that I was so affectionate. Let me explain why you did not know. It was because I always saved my affections to be bestowed upon my future

h—[husband] if I was to be blessed with one. . . I thought that if you felt yourself repaid by what you rec'd [sic] you should some day be surprised by what you will receive. I too can say that I would rather have you expect little and receive more than otherwise. One great question with me was for a long time, if your nature was such that it would permit me to bestow my affections upon you as freely as I would wish to do so. I at times almost decided in the negative. I feel so happy to know that it is all right. I wish you to know that you have struck a mine of affections that will never be exhausted as long as they receive in return.³⁷

It is evident that Clara embraced the “mine of affections” she recognized within herself and that she desired to unreservedly express her affections in an intimate relationship with her future husband. She appears to have been more free and expressive sexually than Menno, at least in public view. As a recently ordained minister, Menno conformed to the communal expectation that church leaders “bring love into subjection.”³⁸ In exchanges like these, Clara and Menno reflected together on their deep desires for affectionate expression of their reciprocal love.

Before long, a call from the church had an impact on their developing love relationship. At the second annual Sunday School Conference held in October 1893, Menno was appointed to open the first Mennonite city mission in Chicago. By November he had moved to Chicago and began establishing a mission there. This new urban experience would bring additional complexity to Menno and Clara’s budding relationship and to their understanding of each other’s sexuality. As Menno walked the streets of Chicago for two days in search of a building for the mission, he was “solicited” for some kind of sexual experience. He wrote freely to Clara about his struggle on that occasion:

I received your much longed for letter last evening. It was indeed a welcome messenger. I was especially anxious to hear from you this week. I can’t [sic] hardly account for it either unless it is because ones temptations are severer when we first enter city life and that special grace is needed to sustain one. You don’t know, yes you can’t well realize, what a strong influence you exert over me in the hours of trial and temptation . . . never was I tried like I was yesterday and the day before. . . Now what was a temptation to me was . . . down town in what would be the “aristocratic centre [sic]” or near the respectable part of the city. I was not looking for any vile inducements or attractions there, and being solicited when not on my guard,

I was tried and had to fight myself when on other occasions, these same inducements would have been repulsive. I shall know better how to avoid temptations after this. Besides we shall organize our mission, as soon as we can secure a hall and settle on the location. That, I mean plenty to do, will prove a safeguard to us. . . . I don't want you to get the wrong notion of my trials yesterday, since I said so much about them. I am a conquerer [sic] and feel like the Lord in case of immergency [sic] would give me grace to meet with much severer ones today. But that will hardly be necessary. I have learned to be on the lookout. Praise His Name!³⁹

This letter divulges Menno's struggle with sexual temptation in the city. It also discloses how he dealt with it. He believed keeping busy with Christian work would protect him in the future. He also relied on his relationship with Clara to protect him and he communicated that to her. Most significantly, Menno believed God granted him grace to be a conqueror over sexual sin. Here is the theology of strength applied to sexual experiences. In this letter he both named his struggle and declared his strength to overcome temptation.

Menno's honest revelation to Clara about his sexual struggles in Chicago made a deep impact upon her, and he received an equally forthright response.

I don't think that any of your letters ever caused me more thoughts than the last one, and I can assure you serious thoughts. Our folks noticed it on me and asked me what is wrong. Do not understand me that I think less of you for you having told me your "trials." I only feel so glad that you have the confidence in me to tell me them. I was made to think, "What if you should fall." Oh Menno I never could have that. It would nearly kill me if not altogether, and the former would be worse than the latter because it would be a living death. Perhaps I should not think of this, but I cannot help it.⁴⁰

Clara used strong language to communicate to Menno how she would experience sexual failure on his part. Such a possibility troubled her greatly. She warned that it would "kill" her, or worse become "a living death" for her. This communicated how deeply his sexual experiences and behavior impinged upon her. It also conveyed her expectation for him to stand strong against sexual sin and Menno reassured her in his next letter:

Do not worry any longer your prayers with my own were heard and today, what provided an inducement the time referred to, is a repelling force, there is nothing tempting there, it is just the opposite. How every thing is changing!⁴¹

Thus Menno conveyed that his sexual struggle was successfully conquered.

As the relationship continued, the two of them openly anticipated a meaningful sexual experience in marriage and seem not to have expected any difficulty. Clara communicated to Menno her prayer “that instead of becoming less affectionate in later years – like a great many do – we may become more and more so as the years roll on.”⁴² Menno disclosed his thoughts on their deepening relationship in a 27 December, 1893 letter to Clara:

The sweet experience of soul coming in contact with soul, and mind and heart slowly opening to each other, and reviving, exciting and fascinating our very being with the discovery of each other – all this has not ceased, but is just budding into the sweet and grandest experience of a life long union. You are mine and I am yours, that is the grandest and most comforting thought that visits my mind! And how we shall go as you say not ceasing making love when the “honey moon” is over but in fact just begin to make love in earnest. That is my ideal, there should be something novel about every true union. The beginning of love between two lovers is the beginning of a novel, a real novel . . . Well I must quit going on at this rate or you will think, I am working you up more than ever.⁴³

Even before marriage they held up an ideal of increasing and deepening physical affection as well as unity. There seemed to be no conflict for Clara between her spirituality and her sexuality, for she prayed to God for deepening affections throughout their marriage years. Likewise Menno articulated the interconnection between their intimacy of soul, mind, heart and body. Thus far in their correspondence there is no hint of a concern about too much affection between them or excessive sex in marriage.

Only a month before the wedding, Clara began to have some doubts about getting married so soon. In a 5 March, 1894 letter she suggested putting off the wedding until fall.⁴⁴ Menno responded by making a trip to see her to discuss her concerns face-to face. His letter following that visit reveals that the two of them discussed their sexual relationship after marriage:

It is a great source of satisfaction to me to think of all we discussed and all we agreed upon. I am especially pleased for what you said on that delicate question, the question you asked if it was proper for us to discuss. We shall have more to say about that later on but one thing I am settled on more fully now is that there is no use for us to make the mistake so many make and ruin our health, but instead “be strength” to each other.⁴⁵

Here is the first evidence within their relationship of the central message Steiner conveyed in his sex lecture to men. Menno and Clara appear to have agreed to preserve each other’s health by guarding against having too much sex after marriage.

In her study of courtship in America between 1770 and 1920, Ellen Rothman found that women were less eager to make the transition to marriage than men because of all the responsibilities that came with the sudden transition from girlhood to being a wife. She identified sexual intimacy as one of the aspects of married life that caused women to be hesitant. Others included birthing children and the risk of death involved, meeting their husband’s needs, raising children and training them in faith, and dependency on their husband for their well-being. Rothman stated, “When the courtship drew to a close, even the most confident women were gripped with anxiety.”⁴⁶

As their wedding day approached, the usually confident Clara Eby desired to delay her transition into marriage. The bride-to-be, who earlier declared the “mine of affections” she had to offer Menno, now apparently raised questions about their sexual relationship after marriage. Their clarifying conversation together appears to have lessened her anxiety because they married as planned on Sunday, 8 April, 1894.

Claiming Strength after Marriage

Letters sent between Menno and Clara Steiner after they married disclosed the sexual struggles and joys they experienced early on as a married couple. Since Menno frequently traveled to carry out his evangelistic calling and to attend church meetings, a considerable amount of their communication took place in letters. Through their letters we are privileged to see how Menno and Clara attempted to live out their agreement to “be strength” for one another after they married.

Clara’s 1894 diary offers glimpses into the first weeks of their married life together in a new urban environment. They arrived in Chicago on a Tuesday evening two days after their wedding. The following

Tuesday, Menno traveled to Elkhart, Indiana and was gone overnight. He returned on the evening of her twenty-first birthday and they had a “sweet time.” Two days later she recorded again, “Sweet time with _____.” On 24 April she wrote: “M.S. left me for the second time. Went to Conf[erence] at Freeport, Ill.” He was gone for several weeks and her 25 May letter expressed that

...last evening when I retired I felt so lonesome I scarcely knew what to do with myself. I put on extra cover to keep warm. I slept quite well, but this morning I wanted you with me so much. I almost cried, no doubt I will tonight or in the morning. The other time you was [sic] gone only one night. I thought of a great many things and about came to the conclusion you can never go away for any length of time, I can't stand it.⁴⁷

Clara clearly struggled with adjusting to life in Chicago and with Menno's absences from her while carrying out work for the church.

By early June, just two months after they married, Clara relocated to Elkhart, Indiana while Menno stayed in Chicago. Their letters indicate that they decided living separately for a while would improve their health. Their correspondence reveals that in their first months of marriage Clara and Menno attempted to sort out a healthy sexual relationship. In a letter of 7 July Menno wrote:

We must not let love interfere with duty to our Master because He has the first claim on us. . . . You had better make up your mind to stay a few weeks longer. I fear if I come now it will only make things worse. We are too lovesick to “spunk up” when we get together.⁴⁸

Here is evidence of a struggle between their commitment to Christian work and their love relationship. Menno's perspective was not unusual in a nineteenth-century context bent on directing all energies toward social progress. In 1856 phrenologist O. S. Fowler had advised:

Frequent indulgence [in sex] in any of its forms, will run down, and run out, any one, of either sex. Those who would write, or speak, or study, must forego this indulgence, or intellectual exertion, or else die. . . . those highly organized must partake rarely, else it will excite to distraction, and proportionally exhaust. . . . Frequent indulgence must necessarily be lustful, and therefore debasing to their higher feelings.⁴⁹

Menno believed they needed to subject their sexual desires to their higher missionary calling. Yet the two of them struggled to live up to this belief.

Clara was not convinced by Menno's reasoning and offered some insights of her own in her next letter:

Menno, I don't believe it improves our health in the least to be apart. We love each other to [sic] dearly for that and we may resolve over and over again to not let that – our love – interfere with us, we will in spite of all. I know that I just long to have you here and won't be satisfied until you come. . . .I don't believe our love has injured our health thus far as much as we have been thinking. It has taken our thoughts from our work to a great extent but it does that just the same when we are separated or more so on my side. When I feel content I can work much better and feel much better too. We have tried being apart now and have found that it does no good. I believe I can come home and our health will improve faster than this way. I think my medicine will help me.⁵⁰

In a letter penned two days later, Clara picked up the topic again:

The more I think of us trying to live apart in order to get well, the more erroneous it seems. I begin to think if there is not enough manhood and womanhood about us to live together and improve our health instead of ruining it, we should never have been married. I am anxious to try life with you again. It seems I have been gone for months.⁵¹

These letters reveal that Menno and Clara struggled to live out the ideal of being strong for one another when they resided together or lived apart. They tried to manage the intensity of their love and sexual desire along with their commitment to Christian service.

The issue was not only whether or not they could live together and stay healthy: they also differed on where they should live. Clara did not want to stay in Chicago and preferred returning to Ohio. Menno did not want to leave his mission post so soon after getting it started and remained committed to his wider church involvement no matter where they located. However, Menno agreed to leave Chicago and arrived in Elkhart in mid July. Menno and Clara spent a month together in Elkhart so there is no correspondence between them to reveal what transpired during this time. In mid August Menno left for another two months of church-related work. Clara moved back with her family in Pandora, Ohio.

Their correspondence during this separation continued their debate about Menno's lengthy absences and Clara's desire to have him home with her. In fact, Clara and Menno carried on this dispute for the rest of their married life together. Sixteen years later, Clara was still articulating her desire for Menno to stay home. On 6 September, 1910 just six months before Menno's unexpected death, Clara wrote:

I wish you would not make any engagements for this fall and that you could make up your mind to be content just to be a husband to me and a father to the children for awhile. You have been sacrificing my health along with yours for some time. I am getting so I cannot bear the sight of suitcases and trunks. If you could give me the assurance that you will make it your first business to look after us for awhile and do so without making us feel that you should be doing something better it would go far toward pacifying my weakened nerves and heart.⁵²

In the same letter, Clara made explicit reference to her need for his love:

I crave your love, your presence and attention above everything else these days but hope to bear up a few weeks longer if you write me nice letters in the meantime.⁵³

Throughout their years together Menno justified his travels from home on the basis of his higher calling from God. On 7 September, 1894, Menno wrote:

I am as anxious to come [home as] . . . you are to have me come. But my duty is urgent and my calling is from above, I dare not interfere with them. The good Lord will give us grace to look after His interest first and then bless our meeting doubly for having done so and for making sacrifices of a personal and domestic nature.⁵⁴

Menno Steiner's ideal of taking care of his strength for his mission work by controlling his sexual interactions with Clara warred against his genuine passion for intimacy with her. On the one hand, he regarded their intimate relationship as divine and sacred.⁵⁵ On the other hand, he worried he might regard her too highly and thereby rob God of ultimate love and loyalty. Throughout their marriage he continued to spend large blocks of time away from home doing church-related work despite Clara's persistent requests for him to stay at home. It is arguable that Menno kept busy with church work in order to manage

his sexual desires and to take care of his strength. Clara never fully accepted his frequent absences and acknowledged she did not sacrifice Menno's presence with her willingly. Sadly, on 12 March, 1911, a month before their seventeenth wedding anniversary, Menno died of Bright's disease at the young age of forty-four. Menno's untimely death cut short his ongoing influence in shaping the Mennonite Church.

Clara Eby Steiner, however, would go on to make a significant impact of her own on the Mennonite Church by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century. After Menno's death she channeled her passion for mission work and for women's active involvement in the Mennonite Church by organizing women's sewing societies across the church to materially and financially support Mennonite missions in North American urban centers and in locations overseas.

Conclusion

The extensive correspondence between Menno and Clara Steiner reveals how Menno's core belief in strength over weakness dictated his sexual beliefs and behavior in his own primary relationship. He accepted the idea that a man needed to preserve his male strength for his work in the world that God and the Mennonite Church called him to do. Both before and after marriage he controlled his sexual interests and responses for the sake of higher spiritual goals. In this way, he placed his spirituality over his sexuality and exerted considerable energy to maintain this order in his life. He responded to his sexual desires and temptations by exerting power over them for the sake of his ministry. Menno Simon Steiner both taught and practiced claiming strength over weakness.

Notes

- ¹ This article draws on material from my forthcoming book from Cascadia Press addressing Mennonite beliefs about sexuality from 1890 to 1930.
- ² This is the thesis asserted in my dissertation titled, "The Articulation of Mennonite Beliefs about Sexuality, 1890-1930" (Ph. D. dis., Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, 2003). Note that the focus of both the dissertation and this article is specifically the (Old) Mennonite Church branch of what is now Mennonite Church USA.
- ³ Menno Simon Steiner (1866-1911), ordained for the ministry in 1893 in Elkhart, Indiana, pioneered Mennonite city mission work in Chicago by November of that year. From 1894 to 1911, Steiner conducted evangelistic meetings in Mennonite communities in the U.S. and Canada. Daniel Kauffman (1865-1944) joined the Mennonite Church in Missouri in 1890, was ordained for the ministry two years later and by 1898 played a key role in organizing the Mennonite General Conference by becoming its first moderator. Kauffman gave leadership to many denominational

committees between 1898 and 1944, at one point serving on twenty-two church committees or boards. As editor of the Mennonite Church's weekly periodical from 1905-1944 and author of several doctrinal books, Kauffman shaped the beliefs and practices of the Mennonite Church to the mid-twentieth century. George Brunk (1871-1938), ordained for the ministry in Kansas in 1893 and as a bishop in 1898, took a leadership role as secretary in the emerging Mennonite General Conference in 1898 and served on numerous denominational committees. He conducted evangelistic meetings in many Mennonite communities and published numerous tracts in the early twentieth century. A. D. Wenger (1867-1935) joined the Mennonite Church in 1890 and was ordained for ministry in Missouri in 1894. He became a successful evangelist who traveled widely and drew hundreds of other young people into the Mennonite Church between 1895 and 1908.

- 4 Daniel Kauffman, *Fifty Years in the Mennonite Church, 1890-1940* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1941), 6.
- 5 Daniel Kauffman, *Manual of Bible Doctrines: Setting Forth the General Principles of the Plan of Salvation, Explaining the Symbolical Meaning and Practical Use of the Ordinances Instituted by Christ and His Apostles, and Pointing Out Specifically Some of the Restrictions Which the New Testament Scriptures Enjoin Upon Believers* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1898); Daniel Kauffman, *A Talk with Church Members*, (Dakota, Illinois: J. S. Shoemaker, 1900); Daniel Kauffman, *A Talk with Our Boys and Girls on Subjects of Interest to Young People* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1906); M. S. Steiner, *Pitfalls and Safeguards*, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1899).
- 6 Kauffman, *A Talk With Our Boys and Girls*, 9. This book and Kauffman's *A Talk with Church Members* were still in print as late as 1941 when Kauffman published *Fifty Years*. Thus these two books influenced Mennonite Church life and thought at least until the 1940s.
- 7 Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 9, 78, 82-86. See also John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 1997), 18-19.
- 8 Sharon R. Ullman, *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997).
- 9 Biographical sources are material from the Menno S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. I-33 and the Clara Eby Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. I-20, Mennonite Church USA Archives - Goshen, Indiana (hereafter MCUSAA-G); Esther Steiner Meyer, "Steiner, Menno Simon," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (hereafter *ME*) IV:626-627.
- 10 John S. Coffman (1848-1899) opened the way for evangelistic preaching in Mennonite communities and played a major role in persuading many aspiring young men and women to join the Mennonite Church between 1881 and his death in 1899.
- 11 Meyer, *ME*, IV: 626-27.
- 12 Historian Albert Keim describes Funk's Elkhart publishing company as "a leadership school" for the Mennonite Church in the 1880s and 1890s. Funk consciously invited bright, educated young Mennonite men to come to Elkhart to pursue their progressive dreams for the church. See Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897-1962* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 21-24.
- 13 This is recorded in Steiner's copy of the *Confession of Faith and Minister's Manual* compiled by John S. Coffman and John F. Funk, (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1890) which was likely a gift received on the occasion of his ordination and is preserved in the M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 17, MCUSAA-G.
- 14 Menno S. Steiner, "Sermon No. 1," M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 18 entitled "Notebooks, Sermon Notes," MCUSAA-G. These notes provide a handwritten outline of Steiner's basic points in the sermon.

- ¹⁵ This outline is found in a different small black undated notebook, M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 18 entitled "Notebooks."
- ¹⁶ Menno S. Steiner, "Sermon No. 2," M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 18.
- ¹⁷ 2 Tim. 2:1, "You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."
- ¹⁸ Small notebook marked on cover, "November 1894, Canton, Ohio," M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 18 entitled "Notebooks," MCUSAA-G.
- ¹⁹ Letter from M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby Steiner, 7 September 1894, M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 3, MCUSAA-G. Multiple copies of Steiner's hand-written notes for his lecture to men are preserved in the M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 19, Files 1 and 2, MCUSAA-G. The outline and content is essentially the same on all these lecture notes. Unfortunately none are dated. Some evidence regarding when and where Steiner gave these lectures is uncovered in correspondence between M. S. Steiner and Clara Eby Steiner found in the M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Boxes 20-22 and the Clara Eby Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Boxes 8-10, MCUSAA-G.
- ²⁰ A flyer announcing his lecture on 2 December, 1898 at Ringgold, Maryland accompanied a letter from M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby Steiner, 3 December, 1898, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 21, File 1, MCUSAA-G.
- ²¹ M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 3, MCUSAA-G.
- ²² 10 August, 1895 letter and 13 August, 1895 postcard, M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 4, MCUSAA-G.
- ²³ M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 19, File 6 entitled "Miscellaneous Clippings." I was unable to find any notes for Steiner's lecture to women in his collection.
- ²⁴ Letter from M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby Steiner, 31 October 1899, M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 21, File 2, MCUSAA-G.
- ²⁵ M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 19, Files 1-3 entitled "Sermon Notes," MCUSAA-G.
- ²⁶ Though some of Steiner's outlines for his lecture for men carried this title, the outline for this lecture remained essentially the same.
- ²⁷ I found no specific indication of what constituted "excessive sex" for Steiner. O. S. Fowler, whom he cited in his lecture on marriage (see a large sheet outlining this lecture in M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, M. S. Steiner Collection Box 19) indicated once a week was excessive for married or unmarried people. See O. S. Fowler, *Amativeness: or Evils and Remedies of Excessive and Perverted Sexuality Including Warning and Advice to the Married and Single being a Supplement to "Love and Parentage"* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1856), 25
- ²⁸ One outline clarified that semen was drained in urination when the "safety valve" was "ruptured" or "sprained." See outline titled "Your Seed is Your Strength," M. S. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 19, File 1 entitled "Sermon Notes 1," MCUSAA-G.
- ²⁹ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988, 1997), 66-70.
- ³⁰ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, Free, 1996), 45.
- ³¹ Patricia J. Campbell, *Sex Education Books for Young Adults, 1892-1979* (New York & London: R. R. Bowker Company, 1979), 4.
- ³² This is the language Steiner used as early as September 1894 to articulate what he wanted to address in his sex lectures. See quote from Steiner's letter to Clara Eby Steiner above. His source for this language is likely S. R. Wells, *Wedlock; or the Right Relations of the Sexes: Disclosing the Laws of Conjugal Selection and Showing Who May, and Who May Not Marry* (New York: Samuel R. Wells, 1870). Steiner cites this book in *Pitfalls and Safeguards* and significant sections of Steiner's chapter on "Falling in Love" come directly from *Wedlock*.

- ³³ Phrenology was a “new science” introduced in America in 1832 by German physician, Dr. Johann Spurzheim. It involved the examination of head and skull shape to determine human character, abilities and tendencies. Nineteenth-century phrenologists believed their science was the key to reforming and perfecting human society. Brothers Orson and Lorenzo Fowler popularized the philosophy and science of phrenology in America through publishing many books after Spurzheim’s sudden death in 1832. S. R. Wells became a partner in the Fowlers’ publishing enterprise in 1833 and married their sister Charlotte Fowler in 1834. The Fowlers and Wells carried out a sex education campaign beginning in the 1840s. See O. S. Fowler, *Creative and Sexual Science or Manhood, Womanhood, and Their Mutual Interrelations* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1875), which compiled his writings on sex and marriage into one volume. See Madeleine B. Stern, *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1971).
- ³⁴ Wells, *Wedlock*, iv.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ³⁶ M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby, 31 July 1893, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 2, MCUSAA-G; Clara Eby to Menno Steiner, Sept. 29, 1893, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Box 8, File 1, MCUSAA-G.
- ³⁷ Clara Eby to Menno Steiner, 28 September, 1893, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Box 8, File 1, Clara Eby Steiner Collection, MCUSAA-G.
- ³⁸ M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby, 1 March, 1894, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 3, MCUSAA-G. Menno wrote, “Probably we will have to guard ourselves against manifesting our love and affections when we meet in public and give vent to them when to ourselves. You see other people will hardly realize our situation. They may think a minister . . . to be able to bring love into subjection.”
- ³⁹ M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby, 10 November, 1893, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 2, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁴⁰ Clara Eby to M. S. Steiner, 13 November, 1893, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Box 8, File 1, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁴¹ M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby, 16, November, 1893, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 2, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁴² Clara Eby to M. S. Steiner, 3 December, 1893, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Box 8, File 1, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁴³ M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby, 27 December, 1893, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 2, MCUSAA-G. It is likely that S. R. Wells’ book, *Wedlock*, informed the conception of marriage that Menno expressed in this letter. Wells wrote that marriage is “a union of souls. . . as well as bodies,” 104.
- ⁴⁴ Clara Eby to M. S. Steiner, 5 March, 1894, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Box 8, File 3, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁴⁵ M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby, 14 March, 1894, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 2, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁴⁶ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 71.
- ⁴⁷ Clara Eby Steiner to M. S. Steiner, 25 May, 1894, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Box 8, File 3, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁴⁸ M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby Steiner, 7 July, 1894, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 3, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁴⁹ O. S. Fowler, *Amativeness: Or Evils and Remedies of Excessive and Perverted Sexuality Including Warning and Advice to the Married and Single Being a Supplement to “Love and Parentage”* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1856), 22.
- ⁵⁰ Clara Eby Steiner to M. S. Steiner, 9 July, 1894, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Box 20, File 3, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁵¹ Clara Eby Steiner to M. S. Steiner, 11 July, 1894, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Box 20, File 3, MCUSAA-G.

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- ⁵² Clara Eby Steiner to M. S. Steiner, 6 September, 1910, Hist. Mss. 1-201, Box 10, File 7, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ M. S. Steiner to Clara Eby Steiner, 7 September, 1894, Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 3, MCUSAA-G.
- ⁵⁵ Menno Steiner to Clara Eby Steiner, 9 November, 1896. Hist. Mss. 1-33, Box 20, File 5, MCUSAA-G.