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Symposium Review: *The Right Church: From a Seeker to a Finder*—Peter Hoover

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Review Symposiums

Symposium review: **Hoover, Peter. 2021. *The Right Church: From a Seeker to a Finder*. Waynesboro, PA: Metamorphose Publishing. Pp. 264. \$11.95.**

Review 1

By Sheila J. Petre
Washington County Mennonite

So many church groups everywhere! A dime a dozen. Yet all of them seriously believing they would, somehow, make it in through the narrow gate to everlasting life—to the wedding of the Lamb, in perfect unity, all around the table with Christ in lasting joy. All Christians talked like this. Dreaming. Conjuring up the most exotic—sometimes almost repugnant—scenes of a golden city, unending day, keeping on singing forever and ever yet loving it. The best thing ever! Absolutely never getting tired of being together during millions and billions and trillions of years while now, in Ontario, Canada, hardly any of them could stand one another for a day... I did not see too many Christians—particularly not my own kind, the so-called “plain people”—really loving one another fervently or actually caring for another in their hearts.

So read nine sentences from the first chapter of Peter Hoover’s book, *The Right Church, from Seeker to Finder*. Across 264 compelling pages of earnest semi-autobiographical work, Hoover sketches a poignant picture of many disintegrating organizations among which move small vibrant flames of living hope.

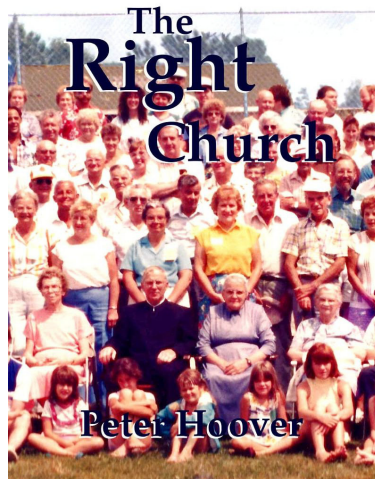
He tells the story of a young man seeking for answers about Christianity, and the religious entities within it. He intersperses his narrative with glorious scripture passages and hymns, and includes wisdom borrowed from his uninhibited correspondence with the leaders of many different Anabaptist groups. The main character is part of “only a small group—a very small and shrinking

group—of Old Order Mennonites trying to keep the ‘songs of Zion’ alive with all of Canada roaring around us.” With humor, anguish, and hope, he illustrates that God reaches every individual within that individual’s culture—and anyone can hear and respond to God, from right where he is.

Ought he, then, stay right where he is? Hoover models a “no” to this question. An itinerant believer, here to prove that not all who wander are lost, Peter has worshipped God in Belize, Costa Rica, Tasmania, Mexico, and the United States, as well as in Canada—and no doubt other countries I missed. On several occasions throughout the text, I felt resistant toward what seemed to be Hoover’s sense of judgment against believers whose physical location remains stationary. I imagine he would say that too often these practice a stationary faith as well. But not all do.

Soon after I finished Hoover’s narrative treatise, I read Dale Yoder’s *The Bread and the Wine, and Other Controversies Surrounding the Holy Christian Communion*. The “controversies” part of its title is true—Yoder meanders through the history and practices of established Christian institutions today, asking questions, spilling opinions, bleeding out sacred cows willy-nilly. In this, I found Yoder similar to Hoover, whom he describes in one of his entertaining footnotes in this manner: “Peter is a well-known, and probably controversial, personality in certain plain circles.”

The Right Church reveals why Peter Hoover might be a controversial personality—his character asks questions and thinks for himself. Recently, a Mennonite pastor’s wife sent a letter to a friend whose devotion to the dogmas of her local church body had begun to splinter. She included these words, “We tremble to think where your children will come out on church if they see that it is all right to stand on the outskirts and think what they want to think.” Thus she acknowledges, shamelessly, the offense with which some branches of conservative Mennonites have been charged: *they are thought-police, one of another*. Not only is di-



versity of practice discouraged, it is wrong, even dangerous, to “think what [you] want to think.” As a Mennonite bishop once said for all of us, “How can it be called a unity of believers when we don’t have unity of belief?”

Peter Hoover’s view from the outskirts reflects a disunity of belief with modern conservative Mennonite thought concerning the kingdom of heaven—and thus with my entire upbringing. Near the back of the book, in the context of one of the most critical defamations of an actual named character which he allows himself, Hoover includes, in full, the song, “Twilight Is Stealing Over the Sea.” And then proceeds to shred it.

This song was (and is) one of my mother’s favorites. Her diligence in anchoring my behavior to the threats and promises of the afterlife meant that my own cultural unsettling came later; I waited for years before I asked some of the questions which Hoover asked as a teen. Though Hoover himself refers, on several occasions, to vaguely ominous indictments like “all of eternity” being “at stake” for our choices, he also challenges the Anabaptist culture’s false assumption that mythical visions of elsewhere ought to matter more to our now than the God of that elsewhere—who is the stunningly incomprehensible God of now.

A central theme of his book is found in its final pages: “A Christian’s membership and undivided loyalty belongs to Christ, not to his church. Christians are to be the bride of Christ. For a Christian to marry a church is a same-sex marriage and God hates it. Unconditional loyalty to a church quickly becomes idolatry (ecclesialatry) [sic] and leads to spiritual death, but unconditional loyalty to Christ leads to lasting unity amongst believers.”

Hoover stands on the outskirts, unashamed not only to think but also to say, write, and publish what he wants to; his book describes a character who stands on the outskirts, as well. Does this make me tremble for him and his readers, in tune with Mennonite bishops and pastors’ wives nationwide? It might—except for one thing. When Christ came, He came to the people in the dead center of the most disciplined religious structure of that day. And they? They crucified Him.

The people on the outskirts, though, thought what they wanted to think: that *never Man spoke like this One*. No, nor ever Man loved—or was so loved by the outskirts, like this One. They washed

His feet with their hair. They denied Him, yes, but broke into repentance before His compassion—they knew they were sinners. They brought spices to His tomb. It is the people on the outskirts—down through the centuries, and in every land and nation—who lift holy hands of great diversity to receive Him to their hearts.

In the end, it is the characters, both within and without organized religious structures today, who seek Him like Peter Hoover does, who dare to ask the questions he raises in this book, who love His appearing wherever they find Him—it is exactly these characters who keep the true song of Zion alive today.

Sheila is a Pennsylvania housewife; the mother of nine; the author of several books of poetry and stories; the compiler of several editions of Vignettes, a directory of Anabaptist women writers; and the editor of a quarterly for young Anabaptist women. Theology, culture, and relationships fascinate her; particularly where such discussions intersect with language and hope. Reach her at sheilajoyful@emypeople.net

Review 2

By Osiah Horst
Markham-Waterloo Old Order Mennonite
Conference

Peter’s story, a work of fiction based on real life experiences, deals with his searching in Ontario as a teenager. In the book, as well as in real life, Peter searches far and wide for the “Right Church.” Eventually, Nellie, his sister, and her husband John, end up being baptized in a “little house church, a little fellowship, not a branch of any organized denomination” (p. 192). Here begins a process of stripping away all layers of the Old Order church, drilling down to the base layer where we have only the Church of Jesus Christ with the believer as His Bride. Yet, striving to live out his life in Christ, Peter slowly adds back those layers of order and ritual, without which the body seemingly cannot function.

What is the right church? Judging a book by its cover might not be a good idea, certainly not in this case. From the cover, we might deduce that someone, in this case Peter’s parents, Anson and Sarah Hoover, have found the right church, a plain

or Conservative Mennonite church. Anson, in his black Plain cut suit, and Sarah, with her cape dress and good-sized head covering, sit prominently in the front row, appearing in stark contrast to the rest of the people pictured at a Hoover family reunion in 1987.

The story setting is in the old Rainham Mennonite community on the shores of Lake Erie where Peter's grandfather Menno Hoover was raised. However, the Old Order Hoovers and Sherks had left Rainham almost 50 years before the era in which the story is placed. Arriving in Waterloo County with convictions about how a proper Old Order community should live and believe, they sought to find or establish the right church. Over the following 50 years, they split from and merged with other groups of plain seekers, sometimes going back to others they had earlier split from (Hoover 2010).

Living in a group with no ordained leadership at the time, Anson Hoover, Peter's father provided informal leadership until other ordained leaders joined the group that adopted the name Orthodox Mennonite Church. In 1965, Anson was ordained to the ministry of this group. In 1974 the group once more divided, leaving Anson as the only ordained leader. He ordained several more men to the leadership but in 1976 the group again divided. In 1978 the Anson Hoover group disbanded with Anson and Sarah joining the Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario. Even though these groups all practised non-resistance as a core tenet, it is hard to believe that the principle was always observed for as Peter writes in the Epilogue, "What took place – the whirlwind amongst us in southern Ontario during the 1970s – was not always nice." This then, is the basis for the "dys-functional church" mentioned in the book.

Peter wrote the original manuscript as a teenager during the 70s when all the turmoil was real, as the adults in his life sought for the right way, a Pure Church (Hoover 2018). In the late 70s, while writing for Rod and Staff publishers, he showed the manuscript to one of the people there who read it, edited it, but about three quarters of the way through, stopped. He made the comment that while he found the text quite interesting, "It is not exactly *Rod and Staff* material" (p. 10). The manuscript disappeared only to be found again in 2021. Peter and Susan, his wife, reviewed, edited, and updated it to include life experiences from

the 40 years since. So, today, when reading it, it is difficult to sort out what took place when, but it is not intended to be a book of historical fact but rather a study of some of the things Peter saw and the conclusions he has formed. He is making a point that we in the plain churches, as well as other Christians, need to heed.

The negativity towards the Old Order churches could turn off the reader of that persuasion before reaching the conclusion, so I encourage the reader to remember that much of this is in the mind of a young adult believer, trying to make sense of what he sees. On the first page of the introduction, he writes:

As a teenager, I often suspected that I had become the most confused Christian on earth. Fifteen years old when I decided to follow Jesus, things made sense - to a degree. I had no problem understanding Jesus' teachings. The only thing I could not understand was what had become of the Church of Jesus Christ in my time. So many church groups everywhere! A dime a dozen [...] (p. 7)

In another essay, Peter writes,

Only today, on a lovely moonlit night, Velina [aka "Nellie" in *The Right Church*] and I sensed a cloud over the beautiful snowy scene. My Dad, a Diener (Servant), had spent all day with the brothers at Wallenstein, Ontario, trying to get several factions in our communities reconciled. All day long, but no success. That night I wrote in my diary:

March 2, 1977, 11:45 p.m. Just came home from taking Velina to North Woolwich, with Sunny. Meeting today at Emmanuel Sherks. Argued all day but . . . I don't want to hear anything more of our mess. I wish we'd forget it all and move away as far as possible. (Hoover, "No Mistakes")

These words turned out to be prophetic, as Peter, in his search for the Right Church, travelled through all four hemispheres, including Australia, New Zealand, and Tanzania. He served for a time as a minister in a Hutterite colony in Manitoba, worked in a Beachy Amish-Mennonite group in Costa Rica, and, at present, is back in Pennsylvania.

At the end, Peter shares some personal conclusions, and these are what he wants us to take home from the book:

A Christian's salvation does not depend on where he or she was baptized – nor by whom.

A Christian's membership and undivided loyalty belongs to Christ, not to his church. Christians are to be the bride of Christ. For a Christian to marry a church is a same-sex marriage (I had to struggle a bit with that one!) and God hates it.

Unconditional loyalty to a church quickly becomes idolatry and leads to spiritual death but unconditional loyalty to Christ leads to lasting unity amongst believers. Unity is a gift from God – not something to fight for. (p. 263)

I think that Peter comes, belatedly, to the same conclusion that many of us who have been with the same church group all our lives have; that we all want to belong to Jesus Christ and his Right Church forever. What I take from the book personally is that most of our plain churches have areas that could be improved. We can all strive to learn from each other, but in the end, we must accept that no amount of searching on earth will find the perfect church and we do well to seek contentment where we are.

Osiah Horst is a member of the Beachburg congregation, about 1.5 hours west of Ottawa, Canada's capital (of Trucker Convoy fame) just off the trans-Canada Highway. The church is just over 40 years old, so we have to go places to find Mennonite history, as we have very little here.

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