Sexuality, Intimacy, and Boundaries
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The mystery of human sexual experience remains; it even deepens and broadens. Greater access to information and the extension of rights give people more freedom and sexual satisfaction. Much that has been accepted or assumed is being challenged; long standing conundrums stubbornly refuse solution. New discoveries and old difficulties pose hard questions and require difficult choices. Some of the questions are radical, asking what constitutes sexual identity and orientation; others have to do with the safety and ethics of basic reproductive processes; still others have to do with stemming sexual irresponsibility, injustice, and violence. All of them influence decisions which shape human sexuality and its role in the life and salvation of individuals, families, and communities.

Some contemporary theologians address these questions by exploring the nature of sexuality, others by formulating foundations for sexual behavior, but, important as the nature and expression of sexuality are, these are not the primary issues in the quest to understand human sexuality theologically. Near the center of humankind’s relationship to God and to each other stand two primary questions: What is the purpose of sexuality? How can this purpose best be realized?

I. SEXUALITY

The largest corpus of biblical and classical Christian theology understands human sexuality to be a fundamental building-block of corporate and individual existence; sexuality is for building community and fostering personhood. It does so as an indispensable dimension of human identity, procreation, companionship, co-creativity, and pleasure.

A. Identity

“And God said: ‘Let us create humankind in our image....’ So God created humankind in God’s own image, in the image of God God created them, man and woman God created them.” Lisa Sowle Cahill writes of these verses: “Humanity is essentially male and female. Man and woman are created for a physical, procreative, psychological and social partnership, which presupposes sexual differentiation but not hierarchy.”

Humanity takes particular form in each person’s existence as he or she lives out answers to the questions: What does it mean to be a woman? A man? What kind of man or woman am I? Does God, do I, do others respect my womanhood or manhood?

Common human experience corroborates the biblical assertion. Perceptions of one’s
manhood or womanhood are major contributors to one’s self-understanding, acceptance, and estimation. Anatomy and physiology distinguish humans as females and males. Psychology and sociology speak of the formation of male or female consciousness and roles.

There is much debate about how to fill out the categories, but overwhelming evidence establishes sexuality as a foundational dimension of human identity. It is one way humans orient themselves in time and space before God, self, and others.

B. Procreation

“And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply...’” Sex is for propagating the race. Out of the lives of man and woman additions will be made to the species and humankind will fill the earth. Sexuality is the fundamental means of human survival.

Scientific technology increases the possibilities and complicates the process of reproduction. Birth control provides many persons and couples with options as to whether, when, or how many children. Abortion and intra-uterine testing open the possibilities of selection. Test tube fertilization and embryo implantation spark hope in the infertile. Yet, even the legal struggles generated by these new discoveries point to the complex role of human sexuality in creating another person.

C. Companionship

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone’...and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man God made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh...’” From sexuality comes desire for the other. Women and men are drawn into relationships which overcome loneliness. To be sexual is to need to know and be known, to love and be loved. Sexuality is a fundamental force in creating community.

Since the Reformation the relational dimension of sexuality has assumed greater import in the writings of Christian theologians. James Nelson writes:

Sexuality thus is a deep human energy driving us toward bonding and compassion, and without it life would be cold and metallic. Even in its distorted and destructive expressions, sexuality betrays this fundamental longing. It is God-given for no less than that.2

D. Co-creativity

“And God blessed them, and God said to them...‘Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing which moves upon the earth...’” In partnership with each other and God, woman and man exercise positions of privilege and power, shaping the unfolding of nature and history so that all are cared for and life is sustained. In their

1Lisa Sowle Cahill, Between the Sexes (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 8.

common work, woman and man form each other even as they shape the rest of nature and
history. Through knowing the other, needing the other, sharing authority and responsibility with
the other, the mutuality becomes a crucible in which both man and woman are developed. In
these cooperative enterprises, sexuality becomes a major source of energy and inspiration. The
arts and the sciences find impetus in the motivation and symbolization flowing in part from
sexual imagery, thought, and emotion.

E. Pleasure

“O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than
wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is oil poured out.” The Song of Solomon drips
with delight. Desire drives the lovers; separation torments; satisfaction swells in praise of the
beloved. Sights and sounds attract and fulfill; smell and touch exult the spirit. Beards and breasts,
bellies and bodies cavort in revery. In their sexual excitement the woman and the man delight
not only in each other but in the fruits, flowers, trees, and fountains of living water around them.
In sexuality God is reminding humankind that life is eminently enfleshed, that it is
through the finite that the highest ecstasy and deepest consolations reach into the depths of
human existence. Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

It is certain that the divinest consolation is contained in humanity itself...but our
eyes should be a shade more perceptive, our ears be more receptive, the taste of a
fruit should be absorbed more completely, we should be capable of enduring more
intense smells, and be more alert and less forgetful when we touch and are
touched, so that in our most immediate experiences we might find consolations
which are more convincing, stronger and more valid than the most overwhelming
sorrow.3

Sexuality is a fundamental source of human refreshment and satisfaction, even ecstasy.
When good, sexuality fosters community and individual life by focusing identity, producing
wanted progeny, creating companionship, engendering co-creativity, and refreshing body and
spirit.

II. INTIMACY

Good sexuality is nurtured through intimacy and channeled through boundaries. When
sexuality becomes bad and wrong, it is through clearer boundaries and healthy intimacy that sin
must be curbed and its wounds healed. Even as sexuality creates intimacy, it requires intimacy
for its own formation and integration; even as sexuality produces boundaries, it requires
boundaries for its own formation and integration. There are those who would have intimacy in
sexuality without boundaries; there are others who would have boundaries without intimacy.
However, there is finally no intimacy without boundaries; there are finally no boundaries without
intimacy. Intimacy and boundaries in their delicate tensions, rhythms, and balances are
constitutive of sexuality.

3Rainer Maria Rilke, The Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke and Princess Maria von Thurn un Taxis-
Hohenlohe (London: Hogarth, 1958) 144f.
A. Innermost Being

Intimacy is an intra- and interrelational activity whereby the essence of being is connected and revealed to one’s self or another. Intimacy comes from the Latin intima, meaning inner or innermost. Our deep, innermost, essential selves are present when there is intimacy. To be intimate is to move in and out of the thoughts, feelings, needs, values, memories, and dreams which constitute our core selves.

To be intimate is to be active within ourselves and between ourselves and the other. Intimacy is awareness; it observes the details of the existence of the self and the other. Intimacy is related to the Latin intimatus, to announce or make known indirectly. Being intimate reveals our deep, innermost, essential thoughts, feelings, needs, and values—reveals them in symbols, words, and actions that protect at the same time they make known. In intimacy our core selves are revealed in ways that are safe and respectful.

B. Active Openness

To be intimate is to be open, open to oneself and the other. Intimacy is receiving oneself and the other; allowing the shared experience to register, to influence one’s innermost being. It is being me and being me in relationship to you, simultaneously. It is knowing and bringing my innermost self into significant interaction with you and your innermost self. Intimacy is intercourse, dialogue about that which matters in symbols and experiences which both parties understand.

C. Intra- and Interpersonal

The intrapersonal and interpersonal, the two basic arenas of intimacy, suggest the necessity of foundational relational attitudes. Intrapersonal intimacy requires a good enough sense of self to find that one’s own existence is worth knowing. It is believing that Socrates’ dictum (“Know thyself”) is one element of the informed life—a way out of ignorance into truth. Intrapersonal intimacy is enhanced and strengthened as an individual speaks and acts on the basis of her or his own thoughts, feelings, values, or beliefs and is affirmed in that speaking and acting, thereby gaining confidence in the integrity of his or her awareness and agency.

Intrapersonal intimacy requires skillful attention to one’s own consciousness. Men and women, boys and girls become intimate with themselves when they are in contact with their own sensory data, the meanings they make, their emotional responses, their intentions, their roots, their priorities, their faith, and their behavior. As a child, one is “naturally” in tune, especially with one’s sensations and feelings; developing intrapersonal intimacy as adults often means unlearning the socialization which has cut one off from these sensations, while at the same time developing those dimensions of awareness which come through higher powers of reasoning.

Interpersonal intimacy requires a good enough respect of self and the other to venture into dialogue. A foundational belief in the corporate nature of existence is essential to intimacy. One must be convinced that I need you in order to be me and that together we can be more than we can be alone. Interpersonal intimacy is accomplished through basic relational skills. It requires putting the depth and breadth of one’s awareness into words and actions, symbols that mean to the speaker and the hearer what the speaker wants them to mean. One must be able to listen accurately and respectfully. The ability to affirm, disagree, confront, ask, negotiate, console,
forgive, and celebrate enhances interpersonal intimacy.

D. The Many Forms of Intimacy

Intimacy comes in many forms. It can be intellectual, as in the meeting of two minds. To snuggle or embrace or cradle is physical intimacy. At the beauty of a concert or a painting or on a mountain side one might experience aesthetic intimacy. Intimacy can also be emotional, relational, familial, philosophical, or spiritual. The many forms of intimacy have profound implications for the satisfaction of human need for integrity and transcendence.

They point out the varied channels available for satiating the longing to be connected with oneself and the other. One needn’t meet all one’s needs for intimacy through one or two of these channels. Being clear about the particular need for intimacy can give direction to the way that need might be satisfied. Sometimes being held is more important than sexual intercourse; sometimes reading a good book is more to the point than being held; at other times conversation with a good friend is better than reading a book; at still other times meditation and prayer provide what can’t be satisfied in communion with a friend; at yet other times, sexual intercourse provides what cannot be experienced in worship. Intimacy’s variety, intimacy’s specificity provide richness and direction for life-giving contact with ourselves, others, nature, and God.

E. Sexuality the Prototype

Perhaps the prototype of all forms of intimacy is sexual intimacy. In sexual intimacy the intellect, the emotions, the will, and the body are drawn into intense, active participation in being oneself in the presence of the other. Patrick Thomas Malone describes this prototypical experience of intimacy:

Sexuality is one of the pivots. In it, the me and the I are merged, experienced simultaneously as self. Real sexuality is the prototype of the intimacy-relatedness experience. Being yourself fully while accepting the other as he or she is fully....So when I am close to you I nourish you. When I am intimate with you I nourish myself. Nourishing myself means simply increasing my capacity to be passionate with you. Hence, it lends greater depth and breadth to our closeness. The sexual and the personal intensify each other.4

James Nelson articulates this essential relationship between sexuality and intimacy as a biologically grounded desire for communion:

Above all, sexuality is the desire for intimacy and communion, both emotionally and physically. It is the physiological and psychological grounding of our capacity to love. At its undistorted best, our sexuality is that basic eros of our humanness—urging, pulling, luring, driving us out of loneliness into communion, out of stagnation into creativity. Indeed, the word “sexuality” itself comes from the Latin secare, meaning “to cut or divide”’ The word suggests our appetite for a wholeness that can be appeased only through intimacy. It suggests the primitive longing for reunion and communion.5
From the writings of Malone and Nelson one can easily discern both the critical role sexuality plays in intimacy and the equally critical role intimacy plays in shaping and strengthening sexuality’s purposes of focusing personal identity and fostering interpersonal relationships.

The mutually beneficial relationship between intimacy and sexuality positively influences sexuality’s other purposes as well. If there is openness and revelation of the innermost thoughts and values between the participants in the procreation of a new human being, a superior environment is created in which to decide if there should be a child, and if so when, and what roles those participating will have in raising that child. The same quality of intimacy enriches the partnerships of men and women co-creating history and each other. If men and women are more intensely in touch with their own sensations as well as those of others, their range and levels of pleasure are enlivened. Malone writes:

Sexuality is “living in the world in good faith,” and most particularly has to do with the pleasure we feel with the world we so live in. It has to do with joy in, satisfaction from and connection with that world. In other words, it is feeling intimate with whatever the other is, whether a woman, a man, a rose, or the brisk air.6

Intimacy is constitutive of good sexuality. Good sexuality is a prototype, a basic drive toward intimacy.

III. BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are equally constitutive of good sexuality. Boundaries are the dimensions of human sexuality which form and channel its purposes. Boundaries are lines marking limits. They are the borders of a person’s being or a community’s existence. They are the points toward which, beyond which speech and behavior must or must not go. As lines of psychic and social demarcation, boundaries define, separate, protect, and direct.

A. Definition

A human being’s core self, made up of their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs, governs the presence, speech, and behavior which define that person to the world. Without this core self and its frames of conscious and unconscious existence, a person fuses and enmeshes, becoming everything—or, disintegrates and fragments, becoming nothing. Wilber’s research led him to the conclusion that “the boundary between self and not self is the first one we draw and lost one we erase. Of all the boundaries we construct, this one is the primary boundary.”7 Fossum and Mason see these identity boundaries as significant determinants in sex roles and behavior:

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7Nelson, 26.
Persons with unclear boundaries lack developed identities and therefore walk through life in search of the “other” to fill themselves up. Often one of the clues to the non-person is seen in highly stereotypic sex-role behaviors—that is, the exaggerated helpless female presentation or the macho tough guy presentation.8

B. Separation

Boundaries differentiate persons from each other enabling them to be free and responsible. Fossum and Mason see this separation particularly lacking in someone who has been “shamed” (for example through incest or rape):

Some shame-bound persons are like sponges—soaking up the feelings of others in a room, and taking on the pain of others as if it were their very own. Confused

about whose feelings are whose, they are unable to control their affective responses and remain victims to others’ feelings. They are set up to pair with someone who has unexpressed pain and will do the feeling work for that person.9

C. Protection

Boundaries are the sensibilities and defenses which guard a person’s inner self from the outside world. One might see them as the barriers which screen out the harmful. These barriers are the decisions one makes to remove oneself from those situations which threaten one’s intellectual, emotional, moral, or spiritual well being. They are the precautions a person takes to provide physical safety. Corporately, the rules and laws of a community define unacceptable behavior; these become the barriers curbing sexual oppression, assault, and abuse. Individual and corporate human sinfulness, with its penchant for destruction of self and others, requires both human and divine, individual and corporate protection of sexual existence.

D. Direction

Divine revelations as well as human dreams, expectations, and aspirations shape the governing values which direct community and personal life. Forged into symbols, statements, and structures, these guidelines become boundaries channeling acceptable behavior. In traditional American Christian religious circles, God figures, sacred language, and religious systems of thought have validated heterosexuality, celibacy, marriage, and families as acceptable expressions of sexuality. As these traditional religious systems fail to address the experience of more and more groups of people meaningfully, they spawn a search for new religious symbols or a return to the past. Communities and individuals seek spiritual boundaries which will guide sexual identity and expression toward life rather than death.
E. Intrapersonal and Corporate

The intrapersonal and the corporate are the two prime arenas of boundary formation. Each of these arenas consists of a variety of boundaries.

Both corporate and intrapersonal boundaries are formed through intellectual, emotional, moral, physical, political, and spiritual development. In this process, the quality of a person’s earliest attachments with a major caretaker or caretakers is a—perhaps the—critical factor. A healthy primary-life relational environment nurtures the growth of these boundaries in both children and adults. A just and safe community is essential to their unfolding and transmission. These multi-leveled dynamics require adult leaders who are clear about their sexual identities and responsible in their sexual behavior.

F. Intellectual Boundaries

Intellectual boundaries are the thoughts, ideas, meanings, and convictions providing the content which forms corporate and personal sexual identity and behavior. They are developed as people learn to think and speak accurately about sex. Permission to have private, secret sexual thoughts facilitates the formation of intellectual boundaries. Expressing one’s ideas and standing up for one’s convictions about sexuality, even if one is in a minority, strengthens them. Because sexuality is defined and, consequently, in part directed by thought, available and accurate information about sexuality is absolutely necessary.

G. Emotional Boundaries

Knowing that sexual feelings are valid is the foundation of emotional boundaries. Accurately discerning the connection of sexual feelings to behavior refines and reinforces them. Giving sexual feelings appropriate expression clarifies emotional boundaries. When properly developed, emotional boundaries enable a community or a person to experience the full range of sexual feelings accurately and to tend to these appropriately. Such boundaries enable a person to discern where her or his sexual feelings leave off and those of others begin. Communities and persons with good emotional boundaries can be compassionate and empathic without crippling and without transforming closeness into romantic or erotic involvement. They can be both critical and accepting of their own sexuality. They can forgive their own sexual imperfections, failures, and mistakes while also holding themselves and each other accountable.

H. Physical Boundaries

Physical sexual boundaries determine levels of comfort with touch and bodily distance or proximity to another. These boundaries are strengthened by appropriate nurturing of self and others. Knowledge and acceptance of the body, including its sexual functioning, enhances physical boundaries. The development of clear, flexible physical boundaries is critical to sexual identity, experience, and behavior. Violations of those boundaries through incest, abuse, or rape devastate a person’s, a family’s, or a community’s existence. Therapists often see the results in those who sit with them:
Consequences of physical boundary violations are frequently seen in couples seeking sex therapy. Often the past physical invasions (many of which are repressed) have left scars and fears that are not necessarily presented with obvious clues....It appears that many women and men become emotionally arrested at the time of physical boundary breaking and many have almost given up hope. For many, sex has become a commodity: a pattern of sex for barter or for power or revenge has developed. Some treat others as well as themselves as objects.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{I. Moral Boundaries}

Moral boundaries are the governing values which guide sexual behavior. They are internalized truths which give both the self and others confidence that the community or the person will speak and act sexually in ways that are respectful, appropriate, and just. If moral boundaries hold under pressure and are consistently wholesome, they establish the kind of trustworthy character essential for personal sexual satisfaction and public sexual leadership.

\textbf{J. Spiritual Boundaries}

Beliefs and their practice form a community’s or a person’s spiritual boundaries. They are made up of the meanings and rituals through which sexuality is validated. This sexual validation is reflected in the language used to speak of God and humankind as well as God’s views of sexuality, the genders, orientation, and sexual expression. Belief in God’s creative and redemptive presence and activity in

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., 79.

and through sexual experience—even when it is broken and painful—strengthens both spiritual and sexual boundaries. Healthy spiritual boundaries fortify the resolve to do that which is sexually good and give worth to sexually abused spirits. Unhealthy spiritual boundaries can further alienate one who has been sexually abused by one's father, the fundamental image one has of God.

\textbf{K. Political Boundaries}

Political boundaries are those community and societal structures which give expression and order to corporate sexual existence. Authority and power are forged into philosophies, roles, institutions, systems, laws, and organizational structures designed to legitimize and protect. These philosophies include basic conceptions of men and women, which can either establish equal opportunity for both sexes and for persons of differing orientations or can perpetuate sexism. Political boundaries validate roles which channel authority and power in patriarchal, matriarchal, or equalitarian systems. The place of sexuality in friendship and families is expressed and legitimized through community mores, the legal system, and law enforcement. These same political boundaries deter and restrain the human penchant to do sexual harm to self or others.

Integrated into a functioning whole, intellectual, emotional, physical, moral, spiritual, and political boundaries form sexual screens which protect, guide toward life-giving behavior, and heal deepest wounds.
IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

Approaching sexuality from the question of its purposes and their realization suggests five major foci for ministry.

A. Full-fledged Debate

The church and her people can participate in full-fledged, multi-leveled debate of these primary questions. From churchwide offices and seminary classrooms to synodical committees, from congregational forums and small group Bible studies to personal conversations, Christians can pray, think, and debate to arrive at clear, meaningful positions and then take constructive action. Sexuality can be put on the table as a subject for full discussion and tough decision-making. Two immediate sexual issues might well focus the discussion. The first, homosexuality, is already visible and engaged; the second, sexual intercourse outside of marriage, is less visible, and while the church has not been forced to take it up, it is no less an issue among her people. Three critical questions might well guide this debate. The first has been introduced: “What are the purposes of sexuality, and how are they best realized?” The second: “How does sexuality build community as well as enhance personhood?” The third: “What authorities inform sexual existence and when are they trustworthy?”

B. Thoroughgoing Education

The church can participate in breaking the sexual ignorance cycle. Like no other institution, the church has access to persons at critical times throughout their lives. The church can be a major philosophical and moral agent in society, providing significant guidance through these transitions. Christian beliefs and values have fundamental contributions to make to both intimacy and boundaries; the church can inform the attitudes and teach the skills which engender communion and foster discipline. Together with colleagues in other institutions, Christian leaders have learned much. Because human sexuality is intellectually, morally, and spiritually shaped and directed, the church can faithfully contribute what she knows.

C. Systemic Reform

Evil continues to pervade both ecclesiastical and secular powers and principalities. Because sin is corporate, church and society are caught in its web of bias, abuse, oppression, and violence. Christian ministry can address these, both within the church’s own structures and those of the world. The focus of this activity in both church and society might well be equal access for all to contribute to and enjoy life together in primary-life, societal, and faith communities.

D. Sexual Integrity

Evil continues to pervade both personal and professional individual existence. Because sin is personal, individuals are both the locus and agents of its destruction. The church can be a major force in shaping the human conscience according to the precepts of truth. She can hold her own leaders to sexual responsibility in their personal and professional lives. The spiritual and temporal resources of the Christian community are necessary elements in humankind’s search for
clear, safe, and vital boundaries.

The church can be a major force in facilitating significant connection with God, self, nature, and others. The attitudes and skills of intimacy are grounded in humankind’s relationship with the living God. The Christian community can be a major source of hospitality, friendship, solitude, integration, and communion with God. Elements of the church most interested in intimacy often see those interested in boundaries as enemies, and vice versa. Those interested in personal boundaries or righteousness don’t talk to those interested in corporate boundaries or justice, and vice versa. But the role of intimacy and boundaries in sexuality suggests that all these aspects are necessary if humankind is to have life.

E. Healing Woundedness

The trail of human brokenness left in the wake of distorted sexuality is universal, painful, and immediate. The categories of people experiencing sexual oppression, powerlessness, and abuse escalate in a society driven by the adversarial brokering of power; these include children, women, gays and lesbians, minorities, rural folk, inner city residents, and white males over 50. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit can heal, reconcile, and sustain humankind in its sexual malaise. Christian ministry, as immediate and universal as the congregation on the corner and the whole church on earth, can be the embodied power of liberation, truth, and healing.