Sexual Ethics and Christian Community

"Gender"—a lamentable colloquialism for sex—has obviously been an issue of concern across generations. It was there, one might say, from the very beginning of human existence: "Male and female created he them" (Gen 1:27). Not all generations have had the same degree of concern, however, nor the same kind. The questions regarding sexuality have changed no less than have the answers, in response to the social, cultural and political development of human communities.

Christians have participated vigorously in the ongoing discussion concerning sex. Although eschatological expectations led early Christians towards a radical transformation of relations between men and women, the community readily moved to accommodate Hebrew, Greek, Roman and then North European cultural norms into the church's sexual ethic. The value of celibacy, the purposes of marriage, the quality of erotic love, the nature and structure of family organization, and the appropriate means for control of coitus are topics commonly raised in the long history of Christian teaching on sexuality. In this area as in others, the historically informed person will be aware of the diversity and responsiveness to particular social contexts characteristic of Christian doctrine.

From this perspective one might be led to ask, why then do the questions of sexual ethics appear to have such great urgency today, and why do the churches appear to be having such grave difficulty in answering them? For surely that is the case. The list of controversial topics is easily developed: women's rights, abortion, homosexuality, conservation of the family, sexual permissiveness, conception control, male and female identity, divorce, etc. With each of these issues we encounter sharp divisions within the Christian community. The dissension threatens the success of the ecumenical movement while creating such strange new alliances as that between fundamentalist Protestants and Roman Catholics on the abortion question. What is the explanation for the deep disquiet about sexual ethics in this generation? Why are we so at odds with each other?

Good answers to these questions will not come easily, but they must be found. Neither jeremiads against hedonistic materialism nor laments over the "breakdown of the family" do much to clarify the situation. A sound approach will seek to understand the function of our churches as systems of social control within a culture infused with the modern ethos of personal freedom from both social and natural determinations. With others, Ann Douglas has shown (in _The Feminization of American Culture)_ how clergy and women conspired to construct the cultural means for conserving family values and redefining sexual identities in the rapidly industrializing social order of nineteenth century America. The church's societally approved role within this "Victorian" response to relentless social change was to defend values threatened by

the new democratic, free enterprise society.

Do we not now have to ask whether this response, so doggedly maintained by Christian communities in the long transition from a rural to an urban culture over the last hundred years, has now become exceedingly problematic? Churches whose very existence as communities is structured around images of family life and sexual identity of a particular era should expect to feel the constant pressure of changing patterns of human relationship. The problems of sexual ethics go to the heart of what it is to be a Christian community in American society. The challenge of these questions is therefore immense: needed is an understanding of the sexual dimension of human community capable of engendering new attitudes and new structures, and this new understanding must be developed in the highly competitive and exposed arena of public discourse.

The articles in this issue of the journal manifest the increasing awareness of this central challenge at both practical and theoretical levels of engagement with Christian ministry .*Lowell and Carol Erdahl* introduce the issue with their joint letter to hypothetical grandchildren. Readers will note, appreciatively we hope, that issues of gender are crowded by others in this particular cross-generational communication; the Erdahls sturdily resist the tendency of Christian parents to stress matters of personal morality. *Douglas Anderson* next brings forward a Christian understanding of marriage which escapes both the authoritarianism of the traditional patriarchal pattern and the individualism of the contemporary mythos of personal fulfillment by developing the concept of marriage as a means of grace for both persons and communities. *Roland Martinson* addresses the central challenge we have described somewhat more squarely in his discussion of current cultural understandings of sexual roles. Then *Randy Nelson*'s article on homosexuality, *Mel Kimble*'s examination of the sexual differential in the process of aging, and *Jerie Smith*'s plea for the recognition of the importance of "singles" within the church, develop in separate areas of concern some different dimensions of the relation between our understanding of sexuality and our practice of Christian community: Can the Christian community include persons of homosexual orientation? Will people without the traditionally emphasized marital and family connections feel at home in our churches? How can the churches respond to the needs of increasing numbers of socially marginalized older women? In each instance the need is clear: the churches must come to terms with the relation between gender differentiations and patterns of

community, and then reassess our behavior in light of new possibilities inspired by reinterpretation of Christian tradition.

In our Resources section, *Roy Enquist* surveys and interprets teaching on abortion drawn from denominational position statements. This informative essay is followed by the Texts in Context feature written by *Stan Olson,* on lessons taken from Hebrews for the Sundays after Pentecost falling in October and November.

D.H.O.