

Perspectives



Talking about Sex

FOR THE SECOND TIME NOW IN MY TENURE AS EDITOR OF THIS JOURNAL, WE HAVE received an angry letter of complaint about an issue *before its publication*. Both times the issue in question focused on human sexuality (this one and “Sex, Intimacy, and Limits” [10/2]). What does it mean that people are mad in advance—either because they are sure they know what you’re going to say even before you say it or because you shouldn’t be writing about these things at all?

I suppose this could serve as evidence for the argument that the heart of the problem is the church’s long-term suppression of conversation about sex. The letter writers simply stand in a long line of ecclesiastical tradition shaming people about their sexuality. Certainly, our collective experience recognizes a measure of truth in this assertion. On the other hand, I have been among the critics of those who claim that all we need do is talk (or act) openly about sex and all (at least most) of our problems in this arena would go away. That has always seemed to me naive about human nature and gnostic in worldview. Besides, it is hardly the problem now that western culture talks too *little* about sex. Is this another instance where the church today is responding to yesterday’s cultural realities?

Nor is it true that the church has not talked about sex. The Bible has been read and taught, with all its frank sexual commentary. (True, sometimes it has been bowdlerized, but young people over the ages have discovered the Song of Songs anyway.) Marriages have been blessed, celebrating our creation and the joy males and females find in one another. Births have been occasions for prayers of thanksgiving. Confirmands have been instructed in the first article and the fourth, sixth, and tenth commandments. All of this has profoundly to do with sex—though, to be sure, in a particular context of meaning shaped by the Bible’s concern for fidelity and community and its de-idolization of sex. The concern of some of my colleagues (wrongly accused, I think, of trying to keep the church’s head in the sand) is not to avoid talking about sex, but to avoid talking about sex in ways that imply moral and theological neutrality for all viewpoints, that give pride of place to the challenger rather than to the tradition—a fair concern, I think.

At the same time, we cannot be dissuaded from this conversation by our angry letter writers. The issues will not go away, and we need to discuss them for the sake of developing a sound Christian apologetic witness to the world and of discerning from the world what God might have to teach us through human beings in the responsible exercise of their vocation. That is the reason for this issue of *Word & World*, right in the middle of the ELCA’s controversy. Here we are—not, of course, with the last word on these matters, but with some words, some helps (we hope) for an informed, if controversial, conversation.

Disputing the title of this issue, *James H. Burtness* argues that, for Christian ethics, sexual orientation is not the issue, sexual behavior is. He pleads for “serious conversation” about these matters in an essay that, like most of those in this issue, will no doubt provoke some (we trust, serious) response.

Roland D. Martinson introduces the notion of sexual orientation, providing a historical review, some key definitions, and a survey of Christian responses.

B. R. Simon Rosser speaks of sexual orientation from a scientific perspective. We solicited this article so our readers, whatever their theological or moral judgments, could be informed by and in conversation with the scientific community.

David K. Switzer provides insights for pastors called upon to minister to people who learn that a friend or family member is lesbian or gay. Both knowledge and sensitivity are required to work toward reconciliation in these situations.

Marie A. Failinger is a lawyer who argues that even Christians who regard homosexual behavior as sinful should not deny civil rights to homosexual citizens. She presents both a civic and a moral case to support her position.

In an earlier *Word & World* article (Spring 1990) *Frederick J. Gaiser* argued that the Old Testament passages relating to homosexual behavior do have continued relevance and authority in the present debate. Now he looks at Isaiah 56:1-8 to see how, in biblical tradition, the church *might* move with integrity to speak (and judge) a new word without dismissing the concerns of the tradition.

Patricia Beattie Jung provides a helpful resource: a profile of denominational teachings about homosexuality. Her use of categories enables the reader to see more clearly the continuum of thought the various positions represent.

The Luther Seminary community has been involved in public debate of the ELCA’s draft statement on human sexuality. In that forum: *Gerhard O. Forde* encourages us to listen to Romans 1, arguing that scripture interprets us, not vice versa. *Christ* is the end of the law, he asserts, not modern teachers or task forces. *Arland J. Hultgren* wants to be faithful to Romans 1 by carefully exegeting the text. He concludes that Paul condemns practices in the ancient Greco-Roman world that are quite unlike contemporary committed relationships between homosexually oriented persons. *Michael Rogness* tries to “define the playing field” on which Lutherans do moral deliberation. For him, discussions of human sexuality are occasions for the exercise of patience in a conversation seeking consensus. *Mary Knutsen* argues that a notion of justification by grace through faith opens a new space for public discourse. Freed from a soteriological need to be right, we are able to enter the discussion in all seriousness.

Anita C. Hill and *Dottie Ludwig* speak Face to Face on how they, as Christians, understand their lesbian experience and their relationship to the church. Outside the theme, *Kent L. Johnson* suggests that people interested in contemporary American religious life could do worse than reading best-selling novels. In *Texts in Context*, *Donald H. Juel* interprets texts for late Pentecost from Mark’s Gospel, inviting preachers to school their hearers in Christian discipleship.

F.J.G.