

Sexuality and the Church (Editorial Introduction)

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When did the church decide to *cop out* on the subject of human sexuality? As though we could deal with the creation but not procreation. Or, marital fidelity without addressing sexual passion, intimacy, misconduct, sexual healing and sexual orientation. Sexuality is a much deeper mystery than mere sexual behavior. Human sexuality is interwoven biologically, psychologically, socially and spiritually. And it is too important to the Christian community to allow the entertainment world to define it for our children.

Some readers may find shocking the notion that an entire issue is given to sexuality and the church. Some may find the content itself unsettling. The writers, four females and three males, represent a wide spectrum of academic, clinical, theological and even geographical differences. We do not necessarily agree nor do we endorse each other's viewpoints on sexuality or the church. The diversity was intentional. As the articles arrived and I began to immerse myself in their messages I could not help but become passionate about our opportunities as Christians in the 21st century.

The *Review and Expositor* board took a bold step when it determined to undertake this controversial task. Few topics are so personal, so basic to human health, so important to our relationships with each other, so important to the stability of our culture, so important to our intimacy with God. Our object for this issue is not to provide a comprehensive sex education, nor to propose a "correct" theological position, and it is certainly not to be politically correct. Our goal is to challenge church leaders to be assertive rather than timid about the church's responsibility to parishioners and the public, to look at what is being done in the community of faith to address these issues so critical to our survival as a nation. We would like to challenge churches to take action to reclaim sexuality as an integral part of life, faith and relationships.

Never has our nation needed the church more than now. In times of war, famine and natural calamity, the church has historically been a rallying point for nations. Today the threat is not external. America is in danger of losing its soul from its own trivialization of marriage, romanticizing of violence and normalization of sexual irresponsibility. We tend to work so hard at being doctrinally correct and making abundantly clear what sin is, that we slumber through a war that may very well determine our own survival. In most communities we have the expertise to teach children and adolescents the beauty and function of our bodies, as well as the life-threatening danger of sexual irresponsibility. Educational resources exist for all stages of development. Every church should make premarital education and counseling a requirement before giving attention to the ceremony. Every church should have a plan for marriage enrichment. A part of that plan should be a program of sexual enrichment for married couples. Every church should have a plan for teaching parenting skills as well as sex education for their children.

Survey results of sexual abuse in 21 different countries published in 1998 reveal percentages as high as 36% of women and 29% of men that have been sexually abused.¹ For a large number of these the abuse will impact their marriages and family members in serious ways. For some it will mean life-long depression or even suicide. To ignore such an epidemic is sinful. Every church should have a plan to address abuse with either a treatment program or referral network of trusted and trained mental health providers.

Much to your dismay, you will learn from a national expert, Mark Laaser, that we face a serious problem of sexual misconduct by ministers themselves. We can get angry about it or we can address the problem. Pastoral search committees must know what to look for in a healthy shepherd. Sexual misconduct by a minister has the potential of destroying not only a ministry, but also a congregation and its credibility in the community. What are the early signs of such behavior? What can seminaries do to address the issue? What do we know about the etiology of sexual misconduct? And, what do we owe our clergy caught in this cycle? How can we be redemptive to the abuser and the abused?

Finally, perhaps the most controversial of all topics, what ought to be the response to the church to homosexuality within and outside of the membership? Must we replicate the “military service” model with “Don’t ask. Don’t tell.” Current national surveys estimate that approximately 1-3% of American males are homosexual (gay) and approximately 1.4% of American females are homosexual (lesbian).² While the majority of gays and lesbians in Baptist churches are not likely to announce their sexual orientation, you can be certain that they are there in significant numbers. Some churches welcome them as members, but not as leaders. Some are outright hostile to them. Some have adopted an attitude of, “You’re welcome if you will change your orientation.” Or, “Regardless of the origin of sexual orientation, sexual behavior with anyone outside of marriage is wrong.” These Christians may accept the “given” of sexual preference, but not the behavior. Some churches have adopted “sexual reorientation therapy” for those who have “come out.” Others have concluded that sexual preference is determined from birth, or soon afterwards, with no conscious choice made. These may accept gays and lesbians, granting them membership and occasionally leadership positions within the congregation.

The etiology of sexual orientation remains confusing, even to the experts. Whatever the church’s response to homosexuality it ought to be based on the best research and knowledge available, the best biblical investigation and inquiry, and the best of what Jesus expects of his followers. While the first two will be debated for years to come, the latter issue is a clear and simple one. Some people appear to be threatened by anyone different. Other Christians, while not threatened, believe that homosexuality is clearly sinful and unacceptable.

Once again, we do not claim to know all of the answers, but we urge churches to deal with these issues honestly, with integrity and love. We believe it is helpful to know what our brothers and sisters in Christ are doing elsewhere, and that we can benefit from their experience. There is so much at stake here. Whether we are dealing with the theology of sexuality, sex education for our families, sexual enrichment for our married couples, clergy or members in trouble or suffering from abuse, or homosexuals seeking a community of love, we cannot stick our heads in the sand. The price of ignorance and apathy is deadly.

¹R. E. Emery, & L. Laumann-Billings, “An overview of the Nature, Causes, and Consequences of Abusive Family Relationships,” *American Psychologist* 53 (1998) 121-35.

²R. Plotnik, *Introduction to Psychology*, 5th ed (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999).

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*During his final year as Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of the Family Psychology Graduate Program at Hardin-Simmons University, Dr. McGee was asked to serve as issue editor for this edition of *Review & Expositor*. By the publication date in the spring of 2001 he had accepted the position of Director of Counseling & Psychological Services for the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT).

This issue of the journal became a highly controversial one within the national religious news media, resulting in the withdrawal from the journal’s consortium by one of the journal’s largest sponsoring universities as well as withdrawal of Dr. McGee’s invitation to teach there as an adjunct professor. He was later invited to teach there again and accepted the invitation. The controversy did not involve his own article submitted to the journal, “The Inti-Mate Marriage,” published in this issue and included elsewhere on this website. That article was a more academic version of the book co-authored by McGee and his wife, Sandra McGee, titled *Celebrating Sex in Your Marriage*. Both the article and book have been broadly received and widely distributed in the years since. The book is also available for purchase on his website.

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