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The Struggle of the Church over Sexuality and the Task of Practical Theology

Birth, copulation and death.

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks:

Birth, copulation and death.

These cynical words from T.S.Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* have often seemed to me to sum up the church at its worst when it seeks to confront people's moral and pastoral problems. In particular, sexuality is given a prominence as great as the major life events of birth and death, but then is reduced to discussions of copulation — who does what with whom where!

Perhaps I speak too harshly, yet undoubtedly the combative word "struggle" fits this topic area well, both in terms of the history of the debates and in terms of much contemporary discussion. In an audience of this kind I need not labour the point about our history. We must all be aware of the early Hellenisation of Christianity and of the Neo Platonic dualism, with its fear and contempt of bodily matters, which influenced the teachings of the Fathers. Origen likened the opening of the vagina to the gates of hell and castrated himself for the kingdom's sake; Jerome wrote, "I praise marriage and wedlock, but only because they beget celibates". But most significant, perhaps is Augustine's description of prelapsarian sexual intercourse. In the ideal state there would be no spontaneous male erections, rather:

Those members...would be moved by the command of his will, and the husband would be mingled with the loins of the wife without the seductive stimulus of passion ...Thus it would have been possible to inject the semen into the womb through the female genitalia as innocently as the menstrual flow is now ejected.¹

Thus the struggle with sexuality within certain aspects of the tradition has been at a very basic level its spontaneity and power were seen as inevitably corrupting, the epitome of temptation leading to the commission of sin. Allied to this was a powerful gender bias, so well documented now by feminist theologians. Eve the temptress was to be found in every woman. The alleged irrationality of women made them

¹ Augustine, *City of God*, XIV, 26. We have here a remarkable prediction of what is now commonplace in artificial insemination, but condemned in Catholic teaching because of the total absence of the "unitive" aspects of sexual intercourse!

fit to serve and nurture but unfit to lead. When leadership² was taken by followers of Jesus like Mary Magdalene, the tradition soon equated her with an unnamed prostitute. There are evident in the New Testament strong moves to replace the patriarchy of the day with a new emphasis on the ministry of women, as Witherington has carefully documented.³ But these were short lived as the (male) church leadership consolidated in response to thwats of heresy and of the loss of control perceived in prophetic movements like Montanism. It is significant that in later epochs women were let with only one route to church leadership — through the monastic movement — and that route required the renunciation of sexual feelings of any kind and a separation from the more powerful world of male dominance. Throughout its history the church — in all its forms — has remained deeply disturbed by the combination of leadership and female sexuality. The emphasis that "woman has her place in the order of creation", strongly affirmed by Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics III/ 4* is quite consistent with the tradition both before and after the Reformation. Men have never been slow to tell women what their place is, and to find theological justifications for it!

The Struggle Today

I realize that my glance at the negative aspects of the tradition is absurdly simplified and that I have left out much that is of positive value in the attempts of church people and theologians throughout the ages to describe the meaning of the Christian norm of agape when it is applied to personal relationships, including the ideal of lifelong and faithful marriage. Equally, I would accept that the dualistic and ascetic elements of Christianity have not always had the upper hand and that there have been notable attempts to describe the goodness of our created nature and to describe ways of acting, in our sexual experiences as in other aspects of our lives, that will lead to personal fulfilment and to non-exploitative relationships with others.⁴ But the mere fact that we can speak of this topic area as a "struggle" amply illustrates how powerful the negativities of the past are to this day. Carter

² See E. Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus* (SCM Press, 1982), Chp. 3

³ See Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge University Press 1984) and *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge University Press 1988).

⁴ Good surveys can be found in the works of W.G. Cole and of D.S. Bailey.

Heyward in her radical re-evaluation of Christian sexual ethics sums up the degree of struggle as follows:

Organized religion in general, the christian church in particular, is not simply unhelpful in shaping sexual ethics. Given the misogynist, erotophobic weight of its sexual baggage, which even the most progressive churches have not discarded entirely, christianity is a largely damaging/damaged participant in explorations of sexual ethics.⁵

Heyward's description of the continuing problems that churches create for themselves can be illustrated by two bits of "baggage" from the past. One is the continuing gender bias in both debates about, and the realities of, church leadership. Even in those churches which have ordained women for some years, the power remains quite firmly in male hands, and with the resurgence of fundamentalism strong moves are afoot to restore women "to their rightful place" in many churches. (An example is the Presbyterian Church in Australia.) The sheer virulence of the debate in some quarters strongly suggests a dread of sexual confusion and a powerful "fear of the feminine". How else do we explain the extraordinary ructions in the Church of England, since their decision on the ordination of women? A second continuing inheritance from the past is a confusion of sexuality with male genitality and a distrust of the loss of control associated with sexual arousal, ejaculation and orgasm (as males experience it). No doubt this confusion is compounded by the fact that ejaculation is necessary for procreation, but the root of the confusion goes back to Augustine's dislike of post-lapsarian sex — some natural features of male sexuality are distasteful, in need of redemption. Luther, among others, could find its redemption in the marriage bed — that "hospital for incurables" as he put it. But that feeling of being lessened by the sheer physicality and loss of conscious control in the male climax seems to dominate Christian thought still — how else do we explain the very different reactions to male as opposed to female homosexuality? And how can intercourse between males, which can never bring about the pain of an unwanted pregnancy be viewed with so much less tolerance than heterosexual intercourse in any circumstances? The answer is related not to reasoned argument, but to an ancient (and perhaps quite primitive) male emotional reaction to his own genitality. Christianity, among other religions, has given this male obsession with his own sexual functions a religious sanction. But the confusion is profound, for, as I shall argue in the next section, this focus on male genitality leads to the impoverishment and potential perversion of human sexuality as a whole. The experience of half of humanity (those who are female) is

⁵ *Touching our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1989), p.124.

not even considered, and the assertion of or loss of male power becomes the hidden agenda of sexual ethics.

In addition to these factors coming from an inheritance we could do without, there are some distinctive features of our own time, which complicate the struggle. The first and perhaps most obvious is the advent of AIDS, the "dread disease" of our time. The effects of the fear which this epidemic has caused are almost too obvious to mention: a new Puritanism has seen in the disease God's revenge on the ungodly, giving a fresh impetus to a sexual morality based on fear. Dislike for male homosexuality has found a fresh justification (people easily forget the range and virulence of STDs in the heterosexual community and the dramatic spread of AIDS among women in many countries) and old "merit theories" of rights to health care have begun to reassert themselves. Easily overlooked has been the dramatic change in modes of sexual behaviour within the gay community. Even further from sight is the theological significance of the gay and lesbian community's realisation that sexuality need not be confined to specific sexual acts.

A second notable feature of our times is the ever increasing gap between sexual intercourse and procreation. With the advent of effective contraception and sterilisation for both males and females and with the dramatic expansion in assisted reproductive technology, the "natural law" account of sexual intercourse as being by its very nature inseparably both unitive and procreative seems increasingly divorced from reality — except among the poorer nations where overpopulation and starvation go hand in hand. Nor only can conception be prevented or planned at intervals, but it can be achieved with only partial or with no genetic relationship to the parents. Virtually anything is now possible and technically not particularly difficult: one's child could be genetically related to oneself and partner but born of another, or conversely born of the female partner but genetically related to others in whole or in part. Donors and birth mothers can be strangers or relatives of any degree of closeness. Grandmothers or aunts can be the birth mothers of their own grandchildren, nieces or nephews; uncles or grandfathers (perhaps long dead and their semen cryopreserved) can be the genetic fathers. Women who have never had intercourse with a man can give birth to children partially or totally unrelated to them genetically. All of this has, of course, been deplored by official Roman Catholic teaching, with the foundations for criticism laid in *Humanae*

Vitae, and the applications to new birth technology made in *Donam Vitae*.⁶

But what technology has brought to possibility is merely the outcome of what may be regarded as a fundamental feature of human sexuality: sexual attraction has never been restricted to the fertile period in the woman's cycle (as it is in other animals) and sexual intimacy has — so far as we can tell — always carried a much wider range of meanings for humans than merely its relationship to bearing humans. The advent of new birth technology merely forces us to think more carefully of the moral implications of this human diversity and freedom. It also allows us to separate considerations of the morality of sexuality from considerations of the morality of parenthood, and to look in each case at the potential for exploitation of the vulnerable. The failure to make these distinctions in the past has resulted in grave injustices to both women and children. Such injustices undoubtedly continue in our age — but the blame should not be placed on the separation of procreation from sexual intercourse.⁷

A third feature of our time is an ever growing awareness of the prevalence of sexual abuse, both of children and of persons in vulnerable relationships to others, such as the relationship between patient and doctor. For the church the realisation has dawned that such abuse of the vulnerable is also to be found within its own life. We are all aware of the growing evidence of child abuse in church institutions run by celibate orders. (The Christian Brothers in Australia have recently published a detailed and unreserved apology in the press for abuses occurring in the past in their child care institutions. The major cases in the USA and Canada will also be well known.) However, this is by no means a problem only of the avowedly celibate. All the churches are becoming aware of a hitherto concealed problem in their midst, with numerous examples of a crossing of the boundary between pastoral concern and a sexually exploitative relationship. The problem is well described by the title of P. Rutter's authoritative study: *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*. But the significance of this problem for the church's

⁶ In this later document all forms of artificial conception are excluded on the grounds of splitting the two purposes of sexual intercourse; thus not even use exclusively of the couples own gametes is permitted.

⁷ This is not to deny that new birth technologies, rather than freeing women, may be a new form of exploitation. This point has been strongly argued by a number of feminist writers who point to the foisting of treatments of dubious efficacy and safety on women driven by a societal pressure to have child. Male power has often been evident too in the proprietorial attitude of the doctors towards "their" achievements, instance the headline in a British newspaper: "1,000th IVF Baby born to Steptoe-Edwards Team!"

whole approach to sexuality has been little discussed. It has been seen as an unfortunate aberration, rather than a fundamental challenge to the church's ability to cope adequately with the sexual aspect of our human nature. In the next section I shall look at this "challenge from within", as well as the external challenges already described.

The task of Practical Theology

In the second academic article I ever published I described the task of Practical Theology as follows:

Practical theology is concerned with the study of specific structures in which God's continuing work in the world may be manifest. These may occur either inside or outside the life of the church.⁸

Twenty-one years later I would still adhere to this description of our work, but perhaps I am wiser to the extent that I am now acutely aware of how difficult it is and how little we often achieve by way of a creative interchange between church and society. In this chastened spirit I shall not claim too much for this section of my paper. I don't know if we are equal to the struggle we experience in the church's attempts to come to terms with sexuality. Yet I believe the continuing attempt is important, for, for all our inherited blind spots, fears and prejudices, I think that Christian theologians have access to a rich source of understanding — that source is the courageous vulnerability which lies at the heart of the Christian Gospel. (What I mean by this may become clearer as my argument progresses.) The task is two-fold: first, we must try to sort out our theology of human sexuality, at least in a tentative way; then we must ask how well this answers the questions of our age, and what it might mean in terms of practical outcomes. But now I shall add another caveat. I shall not claim to speak of human sexuality as though I could gain some unbiassed comprehensive view. I write (as anyone must) from the perspective of my gender, my sexual orientation and my sexual experience. The phrase "*human sexuality*" is distinctly grandiose!

a) Towards a Theology of Sexuality

The first problem which confronts us is that, in common with most other intellectual disciplines, theology must be seen as a form of eva-

⁸ Is practical theology possible? *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 25, May 1972, p.224. A modified form of this paper was republished in D.B.Forrester (ed.) *Theology and Practice* (London: Epworth 1990).

sion: by imposing categories upon a human experience and seeking to analyse logically we protect ourselves from its emotional impact. How can we avoid a theology of sexuality becoming emotionally evasive in this manner? The truth is, we cannot. Only poets catch the force of human emotion in words, and even so, erratically. But we can at least watch for the grosser forms of evasion in our theorising about sexuality. The first is a common mechanism of defence when anxiety runs high-splitting off the emotionally charged area. Much theological writing uses this device to neutralise sexuality. I have already commented upon the concentration upon male genitality, as though this were the epitome of human sexuality. Only if we wish to discuss a mechanism for fertilisation can sexuality be thus discussed — the erect penis is the soft equivalent of a syringe — the physiology of ejaculation the biological equivalent of the syringe plunger. The female is penetrated as the syringe pierces skin to deliver its contents and once delivered the act is complete. Of course, no theologian has written in these terms about sexual intercourse, but I have merely taken the tendency to splitting to a logical conclusion. It is less obvious, but nonetheless present, when sexuality is reduced to sexual activities of specific kinds, all clustered around male genitality, with the female as shadowy inciter, receptor or victim. The grossest offences of sexuality are related to this male genital mode, thus illustrating the grave dangers we run into when we split off an emotionally charged area in this manner.

Any minimally adequate theology of sexuality must place it within its full human context, recognising it as an aspect of the very complex relationship between physiological arousal, cognition and emotion. Think of the mysterious relationship between hunger and thirst and a fellowship meal and you get closer to the required complexity. We human animals have virtually no instinctive pathways left — our bodies respond to internal chemical changes and to external stimuli with a range of physiological signals, but these patterns of arousal are endlessly malleable. Our bodies don't deliver unambiguous messages about whether we are hungry or anxious, angry or afraid, sexually aroused or frightened or ready to attack. We must learn to interpret the meaning of the changes in our body, and often these interpretations are context dependent and socially determined. Forbidden sexual attraction can be experienced as irritation at the other, forbidden anger as a sense of guilt and inadequacy. Thus there is a very narrow sense in which sexuality is quite specific and related to the anatomical and physiological differences between males and females and to the

various response patterns connected with sexual intercourse.⁹ This narrow area constantly overlaps into cognitively mediated reactions, i.e. interpretations of our physical sexual characteristics, whether these are anatomical features or physiological changes. In his classic text, *Embodiment: An approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*¹⁰, James B. Nelson helpfully suggests that we use "sex" to describe the narrow range circumscribed by anatomy and physiology, but "sexuality" to describe our understanding of ourselves as sexual beings with all the range of interpretation which that implies. Theologically, "sexuality" is much more important, for, it is here that the potential for both good and ill are found. Here lie the roots of gender stereotyping and sexual violence and physical and emotional exploitation. Here too lie the roots of creativity and tenderness and the wish to understand and care for that which differs from us, yet strangely is also us. Thus an adequate theology of sexuality must not isolate and fragment our sexual natures, rather it must show how our sexuality can enlarge our understanding of ourselves and others and open pathways of love as diverse as friendship and shared endeavours, sexual intimacy and ecstasy, and the closeness and the mutual learning of parent and child.

But now we must beware a second method of evasion often used in theological accounts of sexuality — the mechanism of idealisation. Here I must plead guilty — and over many years! I know I have a fondness for writing poetic, somewhat "purple", passages about sexuality, which conceal the tougher questions. Take this passage from *Rediscovering Pastoral Care*¹¹:

The gracefulness of sexuality consists in discovering the rich complexity which a blend of maleness and femaleness offers us. We can rejoice in the differences and rejoice in the sameness, not afraid of the "sexual revolution" of our time, since it offers to men and women alike an amazing range of self-expression. Sexuality is graceful because it helps us to trust God's creation, venturing forth...to a place of music.

Such idealisation is another form of defence against the emotional and moral dangers of our sexuality. How old-fashioned, how redolent of the 60s that passage sounds as we now contemplate all that we know

⁹ However even these biological differences are far from absolute, as illustrated by hormonal changes leading to changes in secondary sexual characteristics and by the ambiguous sexual differentiation of some individuals, for whom the process appears to have been only partly completed during fetal development. Male characteristics are changes wrought on a substratum which is basically female in its earlier cellular development.

¹⁰ London: SPCK, 1979.

¹¹ London: Danon Longman & Todd. 1986 (2nd edition), p.76.

of sexual violence and exploitation. My writing is especially irresponsible in a book to read by pastors or future pastors, for, it makes merely passing reference to the possibility that we might use the intimacy of the pastoral relationship to assuage our own hurts, at the expense of the person dependent upon us.

The fundamental weakness of such idealisation is that it treats sexuality as though it were a single form of experience, a kind of emotional constant, as it were, through all life's changes. Thus it is really another version of the "splitting" discussed in the previous section. The reality is quite other. If there is a constant, it is the need for the deep security offered by a safe physical closeness with another human body. That is arguably a constant from birth to death and across all varieties of heterosexual and homosexual intimacy. Moreover, this foundational, pregenital intimacy is profoundly expressed in numerous Biblical passages about the closeness and dependability of God (of which the most striking is "underneath are the everlasting arms"); and about the intimacy between Jesus and his followers (the perfidious kiss of Judas, the attempted embrace by Mary outside the tomb reveal the norm to which his disciples were accustomed). But all else changes, and if we seek to make our sexuality fill a single mould or suit a single purpose we soon lose all sight of the other in the relationship that our needy self insists we get and keep forever. It is in this needy insistence that the origins of much exploitation of the pastoral relationship will be found. Rutter describes brilliantly the way male helpers turn to needy women in order to assuage their own confusion and uncertainty about their masculinity. Thus, although the sexual actions are adult in appearance, the relationship for both people is a regression to early childhood and the hurts experienced then. How does the professional helper allow this to happen? It appears at the time to be irresistible, because of the idealisation of what, viewed from without, is clearly an exploitative relationship. As Rutter puts it:

...nearly all men share the ability to idealize, even deify, the radiant, magical power of the feminine. In this way it can at any moment seem to be the sole object of value worth pursuing in life — regardless of the consequences.¹²

Thus beneath the problem of idealisation there lies the fundamental issue of gender. Few theologians have attempted to confront the way in which the sexual agenda has been consistently dominated by male pre-occupations. Of course I do not overlook at all the fundamental challenge which has come from feminist theology as well as from feminist writing generally, but it remains unclear to me how the move is

¹² Sex in the Forbidden Zone (London: Unwin, 1990), p.66.

to be made from the identification of the extreme gender bias in traditional theology to a reconstructed theology of sexuality that truly serves men and women alike. However, as a male and as a practical theologian I must at least try to work as best I can to repair the damage people of my gender have done. (I am conscious that what I say is tentative and I look forward to criticism and debate.)

Our starting point will be important. Typically theologians — especially those in the Natural Law tradition — have started with the question, What is sexuality for? The answer (often expressed in the words of the marriage service) has been that it serves the ends of procreation and of uniting the man and the woman in the bonds of love, so that children can be nurtured and cared for in a stable relationship. No one could deny that sexuality can serve these worthy ends, though equally in a relationship blighted by sexual exploitation and violence it can do the very opposite. However, where does such an approach leave the single person, or the person with a homosexual orientation, or the single parent, or the elderly couple whose children are long gone from home, or those physically incapable of sexual intercourse who wish to marry and adopt children? The problem lies in insisting that our sexuality must have a purpose, instead of seeing it simply as part of the way we are as humans, recognising the complexity of our responses to our sexual nature and our need to adapt it and make it part of our choices throughout our lives. This may become clearer by the use of an analogy: the infant cries when it is hungry, so we can say that the purpose of its cry is to attract the mother's attention in order to be fed and so survive and grow. Equally we might say that we have sexual natures so that intercourse takes place and the species survives. But is the infant cry all that is to be said about the human voice — is that what an aria sung by Kiri Te Kanawa "really" is? — just a cry for attention? The problem lies in confusing use with purpose. There are many uses to which our human capacities can be put. We do not solve our moral dilemmas by describing one of these uses as a purpose. This is not to say that Natural Law theory has no contribution to make to a theology of human sexuality. But the only form of it that is at all adequate to the task is that which includes within the "natural" our capacities as interpreters of experience and moral agents who must choose how they use that which is given in the material world.¹³

A second false starting point is of the biblicist type. Biblical texts are used to establish norms for sexual behaviour. This demands consi-

¹³ I have in mind here criticisms of the "biologism" in traditional natural law theory by writers like Bernard Haering and Richard McCormick, and their attempts to improve on it.

derable ingenuity and selective reading of Scripture in order to gain a picture that does not reduce women to the status of mere chattels and producers of a blood line for the males. Premarital intercourse, rape and adultery are treated as property offences in the Decalogue. There is no consistent view of monogamy and divorce, and what there is clearly favours the male. Of course things lighten up in the reported teachings of Jesus, especially in Luke's Gospel. But the Pauline Epistles we seem to have (as Thielicke puts it) "a blind man talking about colour". We can choose to go for everything (as some sects do) and have hatted silent women in church who obey their husbands absolutely, feel unclean when they menstruate and don't quarrel with concubines. The alternative is to be willing to see the cultural relativity of the biblical material and to opt for a normative theological interpretation which is based on the central features of the Gospel as the New Testament proclaims it. Of course our claims to describe such a Gospel norm will reveal our own value preferences — no-one approaches this question with a totally open mind. But let me at least lay my cards on the table, reveal my own prejudices, so that we can have a discussion of the alternatives.

Our starting point should be the description of "union with Christ" through Baptism in Galatians 3:26ff. Here Paul offers us the vision of what all humanity may be if we are brought to completion "in Christ": So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus." We should remember that this statement comes at the culmination of a powerful section of the epistle stressing freedom from the Jewish law and the inheritance open to us all as God's children. We know also that Paul opposed anti-nomianism. There is no support in his teaching for the sexual libertinism that some took "freedom from the law" to mean. But here he is describing the spirit of unity and freedom which is open to all who live in Christ. This seems to capture the new way of being which Jesus brought through his open, vulnerable and loving ministry leading to his death. This overcame the divisions between people of different races, sexes and social classes. It broke the old boundaries of prejudices (against "sinful women" for example); it questioned traditional family ties and religious practices; and it forged a new community where all were equally loved and respected. It was, in the words of Vanstone, the "precarious endeavour of love"¹⁴.

But it lead to such new wine, that the old wineskins burst. The authorities could not allow Jesus to live, and the community which arose after his resurrection was caught in strife of all kinds, soon returning to old

¹⁴ *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977).

patriarchal ways. Still the vision remains. It is one in which gender bias is a total denial of the Gospel, and in which the whole being of men and women equally has gifts to offer to preserve the fragility of love in a world of greed, prejudice and heartless violence.

Having set this broad theological context, I must now fill in some detail in respect of specific sexual relationships and behaviours. I shall do this in only the sketchiest manner and my perspective will be that of confronting the problems which males create in allowing sexuality its rightful place. (I do not wish to perpetuate the arrogance of so many male writers in this field, by telling women how they should feel and where they have to fit in my little scheme of things!) The main priority here is to confront the violence associated with male sexuality. Earlier in this paper I referred to the malleability of our emotional responses. We learn to read ambiguous physiological signals in specific ways, partly determined by our upbringing and culture. The impetus to action of male sexual desire is a close cousin of the impetus to violent attack and if aggression is equated with masculinity the fatal link is forged. In *The Intimate Connection*¹⁵ James B. Nelson explores the connections men make between their sexual potency and their worth as males. He traces the fear of loss of vigour (and so of worth as a man) associated with the difference between the erect penis (phallus) and the flaccid penis. Men have learned to value the phallus, but feel embarrassed by the flaccidity and reduced size of the penis when not erect. The connections between violent penetrative sex and this self-image are all too obvious. Moreover, the woman or other partner in this scenario has no value except as a receptacle. The partner should express pleasure and satisfaction, but only because this provides reassurance to the man of his virility. Where the man fails, the woman is often blamed and the flaccid penis is associated with the weakness and softness of femininity, despised in this stereotype of masculine worth. As many writers have pointed out¹⁶, such pathological behaviour in men's expression of their sexuality stems from a basic insecurity about their sexual identity — a fear of the feminine in themselves, as though somehow it would overwhelm them and prevent them from being men. We need not go into the various theories (psychoanalytic or otherwise) that seek to explain this. The point is that so long this persists, men's sexuality becomes a source of pain and danger to themselves and others, and it cannot serve to further kingdom of

¹⁵ Westminster Press, 1988.

¹⁶ e.g. Alan Watts, *Nature, Man and Woman* (Abacus 1976), E.&G. Strachan, *Freeing the Feminine* (Labarum Publications Ltd., Dunbar, Scotland, 1985).

freedom and love proclaimed by Christ. (In this context the passivity of Jesus in the face of violent confrontation is striking.)

A consequence of our need to break the cycle of violence and exploitation perpetrated by male sexuality is that traditional teachings about sexual differentiation must be radically questioned. Among modern theologians Karl Barth is a major offender here. His discussion of sexuality in *Church Dogmatics III/4* proceeds, on the basis of a very dubious exegesis of Genesis I, to insist on a clear distinction between males and females and also on the "priority but not superiority" of the male. This, Barth asserts, is part of the created order of things. A lot of detailed research has shown these alleged differences to be quite elusive — there are much greater within gender variations than between gender variations on virtually all capacities and personality characteristics. If Barth is referring merely to biological differences, then (for reasons given earlier in this paper) the distinction is relatively trivial and irrelevant to most of what we mean by sexuality in a broad sense. Moreover, Barth's emphasis on the "priority" of the male seems to give sanction to a sexuality dominated by male preoccupations and to the perpetuation of social roles determined by a male view of the "proper" ordering of society¹⁷.

Barth's highly socially relative account of the "order of creation" leads me to the second priority in constructing an adequate theological account of sexuality. We need to question whether the "nuclear family" is to be equated with the "Christian family", and in particular whether we can escape from the gender role stereotyping of our recent past. We should note that the so-called "hard sayings" of Jesus about the powerful family ties of his day indicate that we need not make a given social arrangement for child-bearing and child rearing into an absolute. Jesus saw children as of value in their own right not merely as possessions of their parents, and he recognized in sexual union a more powerful bond than filial piety. But all these personal relationships were also relativised by the call of the Kingdom. We should add to this our realisation that the idealised "Christian family" of modern times has often held dark secrets of domestic violence and child abuse; and, at a less dramatic but nonetheless damaging level, a loss of tenderness and closeness from the father and a constant stress and demand on the mother. By what criterion do we judge these families better for the nurture of children than those where there is a single parent or where a homosexual couple care for a child? If our criteria

¹⁷ His argument from priority is also very strange — does the rest of creation have priority over humans because it was created first? — or, should woman be seen as the pinnacle of creation since she was created last?

are freedom for all to develop lives of service and love toward others on the basis of tenderness and respect in the home, there is no obvious arrangement that can be guaranteed to nurture, in this rich sense.

Finally, then, what would such a theology of sexuality have to say about specific sexual behaviours and attitudes? If we view sexuality as part of our wholeness as persons, which if allowed its proper place, enable us to care more fully for others, then we need to put what I have called "pre-genital sexuality" into a normative place. A safe intimacy is something which most people treasure throughout their lives. The loss of it is one of the cruellest aspects of bereavement when a partner dies. In a private and tender contact with the body of another we can know ourselves again as embodied selves and can overcome some of the dislocations of mind and body created in the stress of daily living. In such moments of tender closeness we need not prove anything to the other or to ourselves; we can know both activity and receptivity and value them equally. Again the other is seen as a person in all their complexity and difference and not merely an extension of ourselves. It is here that the differences (whether biological or culturally conditioned) between men and women do become important. Respect for the other entails being willing to see, honour and nurture her or his different sexual response. In this way adult sexuality differs in a very significant respect from the dreaming innocence of the infant at the mother's breast: confusion of the two (common among men fixated on the female breast) leads to a demanding and self-centred form of adult sexuality.

The specifics of sexual behaviour must be seen always against the background of these foundational requirements for non-exploitative caring sex. Specific areas of concern focus around penetration and procreation, for reasons which may be evident from the earlier discussion. So far as the former is concerned, issues of mutual desire, mutual respect and safety all arise and these can be resolved only where there is trust and open communication — a marriage does not provide any sanction for intrusion by the male, as court decisions have amply demonstrated recently — phallic aggression is something to be morally deplored in all circumstances. Equally, the decision to use our sexuality to bring about a pregnancy is, at the current stage of human development, a special area which needs to be treated separately from sexuality as a whole. To make procreation normative re-opens the door to sexual exploitation of women. Rather, parenthood is a choice, possible but increasingly not the norm, which men and women should take together. We should also consider whether such a choice could also be made by single women or lesbian couples, using donor inse-

mination. The arguments for or against are not to do with our sexuality as such, but with our understanding of the nature of parenthood and the appropriate nurturing of children.

In conclusion to this section, perhaps I should observe that traditional Christian sexual mores obviously do not equate with all that I have said about acceptable behaviours. I do not believe that we can exclude homosexual love from our theology of sexuality and I do not see marriage as the one bulwark for sexual morality. But these differences aside, what I have suggested as norms may be equally, or indeed more, demanding than those of the past. I have tried to relate my theology of sexuality to the "courageous vulnerability" of Jesus. I see this as especially significant for men as they consider how they may interpret their own sexuality. Courage of this kind is in total contradiction to the sexual idolatry and gender stereotyping of our modern Western culture, where courage is linked to male aggressiveness and tenderness is equated with a contemptible weakness. In our day the gun and the phallus equally symbolise the power to intimidate, invade and dominate; men become empty shells using those who are weaker to try to fill the emptiness. In *Rediscovering Pastoral Care* I wrote of the integrity of Jesus as that of steadfastness and inner wholeness. Applying this to what I have described as the foundational aspect of all sexuality, safe intimacy, I see demands for fidelity to, and respect for, the other as strong as any coming from the traditional emphasis on monogamy and lifelong marriage — indeed stronger, for, they are to do with the spirit and not merely the external form of the relationship.

b) The Practical Task

My description of Practical Theology back in 1972 required us to develop specific proposals for action (in the church or more widely in society) and then to subject these to further theological critique. So what proposals emerge from this approach to our understanding of sexuality? I can describe them quite briefly, leaving it to our further discussion to see the applications and limitations of what I suggest.

First, the church must be willing to hear the questions people are asking. At times I feel overwhelmed by the sheer arrogance and hypocrisy of the pronouncements of the churches in this area (there are always of course a few honourable exceptions.) What has struck me with particular force, as I have been writing this paper, has been the effrontery of male theologians (I don't mean just a succession of Popes) who know what to tell women about their "true" sexual ful-

filment! I discovered this tendency in myself, as I have sought to describe sexuality as though it were a single experience, instead of something rich and complex, much of which is hidden from me by my gender. Our hypocrisy is equally strong. The majority of us here will have children or grandchildren whose experience of fulfilling sexual partnerships is wholly unlike the official church account of moral behaviour. Many of us will know from our own friends or family the power and lovingness of homosexual partnerships. The questions the church most easily listens to and seeks to satisfy are those coming from its members who panic at these changes in social mores and demand strong answers of the traditional kind. No wonder most young people don't bother to ask their questions of us, and take their standards from the culture around them. Ironically that culture is much more destructive of their sexual fulfilment than anything even the extreme puritanism of the church has had to offer — but we have become so obsessed with arguments among ourselves that we don't hear the questions in the society around us.

Second, the church must put its own house in order before offering advice to those outside the church. Here I have especially in mind the growing evidence of abuse of the pastoral relationships, and the "dark secrets" of child abuse and domestic violence within church families. This problem must be confronted head on, in theological education first and foremost. It is all too obvious that our selection, training and supervision of those who will hold pastoral office has failed to recognize how easily the boundaries can be crossed by even the most experienced of pastors. (It was depressing to read recently of a statement from Rome blaming, at least in part, societal mores for the child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions, as though the church had no responsibility to perceive the dangers and prepare its workers for them.) Dealing with this issue means a radical look at how pastoral training is done at present. Indeed it raises more basic questions about whether the whole emphasis in training is still too intellectualist for the real issues which most pastors will face.

Third, we must shift the emphasis in our public statements about sexuality from issues of private behaviour to issues of social justice. I can take an illustration of this from the New Zealand church scene. In successive General Assemblies the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand has caught the headlines with debates about whether gay clergy should be ordained. In these same years evidence has been mounting of an increasing "sex tourism" trade from New Zealand to Thailand and of such an increase of families in NZ needing to be investigated for child abuse that the social services can't cope. These matters have of course been discussed by the Public Questions

Committee, but have been paid minimal attention either by those inside or outside the church. We must learn to apply the insights of liberation theology to this whole area of sexuality, moving alongside the vulnerable, offering voice to the voiceless and hearing the cry of the oppressed. How long will it be that only a minority in the church think that these are the important sexual issues, while the majority remain fixated on the bedroom behaviours of consenting adults? I wait for the day — but not with great hope — when at least one church will say publicly that such matters are none of our business, but that sexual exploitation in every context, including marriage, is a deep offence to Christ.

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