

Session 1.5 – The Sexual Self

Objectives:

- To make the participants appreciate the meaning of their sexuality
- To help the participants affirm their own sexuality and not deny it
- To make them aware of the need to respect boundaries in intimate relationships with each other

Introduction:

“Human sexuality” is far more than “sex” (popularly used to refer to sexual intercourse), although it includes that. Sexuality cannot be reduced to certain acts, urges, or drives. It is an aspect of who we are as human beings, whether or not we engage in activity that is considered “sexual.” Our sexuality is our way of living in the world as male and female persons. We are bodies created by God, sensual human beings who yearn for relationships with others. Physiological, genetic, spiritual, emotional, social, economic, political, and cultural factors are interwoven in our sexuality and what it means to us. Sexuality can involve intimacy and warmth, erotic energy and creativity, sensuality and pleasure, as well as procreation. Our sexuality plays an important role in our life-long experience as human beings in relationship with one another. This session deals with the sexual aspect of our being.

Understanding Sexuality as God intended

According to the Book of Genesis, God created all human beings in the divine image, male and female they were created. And God saw this man and woman, the crown of the sixth day of creation, as indeed very good. So too the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God becoming fully human, “adds even greater dignity or divine approbation” to the incarnate goodness of our being embodied as sexual beings (*Human Sexuality*, 10). Thus, the mystery and meaning of being human—embodied, incarnate, and therefore sexual—is intimately bound up in the mystery and life of God as Creator, Redeemer and life-giving Spirit.

Just as God is a Trinity, a mystery of mutual love within Godself, so too are we, created in God's image, called to this same universal vocation, “to love” and “to be loved.” And our sexuality seems to be a core dimension of our experience of relating to others, our desire to move out from isolation to encounter, the first step toward true love. “Sexuality is a fundamental component of personality in and through which we, as male or female, experience our relatedness to self, others, the world and even God” (*Human Sexuality*, 9).

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). The suggestion here is that it is impossible to come to know the significance of our humanity without reference to the sexual differentiation between male and female. To be human simply is to exist in this male-female duality. Consequently, it will be insufficient to say that God has created two kinds of human beings, male and female.

Rather, we should say that God has created human beings for fellowship and that the male- female polarity is a basic form of this fellowship. To stress that human beings are created for community as male and female necessarily involves an equally firm insistence that they are male or female. We are created not for life in isolation but for community, a community which binds those who are different. We are not simply "persons," however important that claim may on occasion be as a protest against inequities.

When the Scriptures deal with human beings as man and woman, created to realize not themselves but their fellowship as a harmonious union of those who are different, they view man and woman as embodied creatures. Men and women are not mere persons who meet in a purely spiritual union. On the contrary, the body has its own integrity. What we do in our bodies is done by us; there is no inner, purely spiritual self which remains untouched by our physical commitments (1 Cor 6:18). We are, quite simply, created as embodied creatures: as male and female. Thus we do not find in the other simply an image of ourselves, an alter ego; rather, the fellowship for which we are created is a fellowship of those who are different and who yet are joined in a personal community of love.

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?

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." 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. Sexuality 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.

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 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 reverie. 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. 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.

Love and Human Sexuality

Man is called to love and to self-giving in the unity of body and spirit. Femininity and masculinity are complementary gifts, through which human sexuality is an integrating part of the concrete capacity for love which God has inscribed in man and woman. "Sexuality is a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of communicating with others, of feeling, of expressing and of living human love". This capacity for love as self-giving is thus "incarnated" in the nuptial meaning of the body, which bears the imprint of the person's masculinity and femininity. "The human body, with its sex, and its masculinity and femininity, seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order, but includes right from the beginning' the nuptial' attribute, that is, the capacity of expressing love: that love precisely in which the man-person becomes a gift and — by means of this gift — fulfils the very meaning of his being and existence". Every form of love will always bear this masculine and feminine character.

Human sexuality is thus a good, part of that created gift which God saw as being "very good", when he created the human person in his image and likeness, and "male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Insofar as it is a way of relating and being open to others, sexuality has love as its intrinsic end, more precisely, love as donation and acceptance, love as giving and receiving. The relationship between a man and a woman is essentially a relationship of love: "Sexuality, oriented, elevated and integrated by love acquires truly human quality". When such love exists in marriage, self-giving expresses, through the body, the complementarity and totality of the gift. Married love thus becomes a power which enriches persons and makes them grow and, at the same time, it contributes to building up the civilization of love. But when the sense and meaning of gift is lacking in sexuality, a "civilization of things and not of persons" takes over, "a civilization in which persons are used in the same way as things are used. In the context of a civilization of use, woman can become an object for man, children a hindrance to parents...".

To be authentic is to be real, genuine, believable and trustworthy.

While it is appropriate to speak of normal, functional sexuality or healthy sexuality our focus is on authentic sexuality. We define and describe sexuality as something that is authentic, as opposed to something inauthentic (a counterfeit version of the real thing). Due to the complex factors contributing to and barriers

hindering the development of sexuality, our task of defining authentic sexuality is far from simple. Human sexuality must be understood in light of a variety of influences, including biological, sociological, psychological, theological, as well as gender, emotions, behaviors, attitudes and values.

We begin with the presupposition that authentic sexuality is meant to be a congruent, integral part of one's total being. Further, we believe that God intends for our sexuality to be a real, genuine, believable and trustworthy part of ourselves. In this way we embrace what God has created and declare with God, "It is very good!" Human sexuality is created as God's perfect design but is also affected by the consequences of sin, fallen nature and deviation from God's original design. This good "gift of sex" can be perverted and warped in many ways. Inauthentic sexuality, a consequence of our fallen condition, leaves us open to unreal, false, convoluted and unreliable expressions of sexual behavior. This happens through an interplay of societal attitudes and beliefs, sociocultural structures and biological and psychological factors. Authentic sexuality has to do with human beings seeking to live as sexual beings according to God's design and purpose.

OUR STEWARDSHIP OF SEXUALITY TODAY

The people of God in previous eras ordered their sexual lives to reflect their understanding of God's creative, redemptive purposes in relation to the situations and challenges of their day. They faced these challenges and struggled, with the help of God's Spirit, to determine which of the prevailing sexual views and practices they should accept, which they should reject, and what would be new. Their dilemma was to discover what it meant to be "in" but not "from" the world. This is also our challenge.

Some of the answers God's people came up with in the past seem strange to us today. Some answers have compounded certain sexual problems we confront today. Some were based on secular knowledge that today is quite different. Most of their answers assumed a communal focus that is markedly different from today's Western focus on the individual or the couple by themselves.

Yet in the midst of the variability of history God's purposes are revealed. This is the central truth of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, the authoritative heart of Scripture. We see, hear, and experience God's righteousness and compassion revealed in Jesus Christ, and we respond to his example and call to do what is needed to serve human well-being and further God's mission. We respond to today's voices, issues, and challenges of sexuality. The particular answers we come up with may not be the same. But our pivotal starting point is. We are God's people "in Christ," living in the interim between the old and the new in ways that seek to witness to God's activity.

Sexuality requires careful stewardship because of the sinful tendencies which can distort and exploit it and because it expresses a most sensitive relationship between God and creation, and between God's creatures. In its fullest and most

beautiful expression, sexuality embodies, a communion and commitment that reflects the covenant between God and God's people. Because of this, we need to care for our sexuality with imagination and discipline.

Appropriate boundaries allow God's gift of sexuality to flourish. Our human vulnerability, especially evident in sexual activity, needs to be protected by boundaries that are safe and reliable. Within these boundaries we can live out our freedom responsibly. At the same time, compassion sometimes pulls us beyond established boundaries. A sexual ethic must give attention to the need for order (boundaries) and for compassion. Sexual relationships, rightly ordered as expressions of God's compassion and justice, witness to the grace of Christ.

The Distortion of Sexuality in Our Society

We live in the new creation in Christ; we also live in a fallen creation. What God has created has been distorted by sin. Sexuality should not be targeted as the special locus of sin in a way that makes it more suspect than other aspects of life. However, we cannot overlook how sin affects sexuality.

At its deepest level, sin is the desire to take God's place (Gen. 3:5). It is "serving the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25). As sinners we are turned away from God in a condition of bondage from which we cannot free ourselves. This disruption of our relationship with God distorts our other relationships—with persons, the wider human community, and all of creation. Sometimes this is exhibited in domination over others, in other cases, in submission to such domination. We are caught up in a web of sin in which we both sin and are sinned against. The just relationships and mutual trust that God intends for creation are disrupted. Sin deceives us into thinking that our moral actions make us right or good before God. In sexual matters, this can become clothed in a moralism that identifies specific moral rules with the unchangeable order of God. Our sinful condition results in attitudes and practices that either make too much or too little of what God has created. We become obsessed with sexuality as if it were our god, or we demean it as if it were not truly God's creation. In either case, we do not rightly value what is created.

This results in different symptoms of the same sickness. We know of sexuality's power to bring joy and delight. People yearn for fulfilling sexual relationships, causing them to search desperately for them. But in searching for ever "better sex," that illusive joy and delight can become even more remote. By seeking to gain happiness or meaning through sexual activity, we can easily destroy the vulnerability that is at the heart of our sexuality. We can also become obsessed with trying to limit certain sexual expressions in order to "protect" sexuality, but in the process demean sexuality by reducing it to certain genital acts. Giving too much attention to sexuality in our lives and in society does not result in a greater cherishing of this gift of God. Instead it is de-valued. When sexuality is devalued, it is trivialized or treated as "nothing special."

Sexuality is future-oriented and relational. It becomes distorted when immediate self-gratification becomes the primary motive for sexual activity. The individualism rampant in our culture influences individuals to enter relationships primarily for their own benefit. When the relationship is no longer personally fulfilling according to the individual's criteria, commitments are broken. On the other hand, self-effacing love, which allows one to be used for another's self-gratification and manipulation, is just as serious a distortion.

Sexuality is a means by which we can more fully and intimately enjoy what God has created. But it easily becomes captive to other values and ends. In our society, sexuality has become intertwined with money, power, and social acceptance. These become ends which sexuality serves, and in the process human beings are used and abused. Pornography (which has become a more than \$8 billion a year industry) and prostitution are blatant examples of how sexuality becomes linked with money. The commercialization of sexuality is so pervasive today that it has become a normal part of our culture. Advertising uses sexual images to sell cars, perfumes, and clothing. "Sex" sells. Appeals to sexuality generate bigger profits. Advertisers promise popularity or social acceptance to those who buy their products, made more attractive by their sexual allure. Our culture is permeated with explicit sexual references and behavior. Sexually explicit episodes are commonplace on prime-time network television. In appropriate circumstance, sexually explicit media can affirm and celebrate a healthy sense of sexuality. But when sexuality is exploited it becomes distorted and its created intent is violated.

Affirming Ourselves as Sexual Beings

Recent societal influences and trends have not been all negative. Greater openness about sexuality has been an important, positive development. We have become more aware of the importance of affirming ourselves as sexual beings through social, psychological, and sexological studies, as well as from experience. Many sexual problems today (including compulsions and abuse) can be related to a lack of such affirmation.

God creates us as sexual beings who yearn for relationships with others. However, we cannot love others without an appropriate sense of self-affirmation or self-esteem. Self-esteem is not the same as selfishness, self-centeredness, conceit, or self-absorption. It is not possible to love the neighbor as ourselves if we do not love ourselves in healthy ways. Restoring health and wholeness to people was a significant part of Jesus' ministry. Because God loves us, we are able to care for ourselves. These emphases can be important in countering the effects of some extreme tendencies toward self-denial within the Christian tradition.

Loving ourselves includes appreciating our physical body-image, the beauty

of the human body, no matter what its condition. We need to affirm that our bodies and our capacities for sexual expression are good – as God created them. This is especially important for those with physical or mental conditions that limit their possibilities for sexual gratification.

The central biblical directive for all our relationships – to do what is loving and just for one another – becomes especially central in our sexual loving. We need to take seriously all the “givens” – both personal and communal that constitute who that person is and what she or he will become. This includes a person’s gender and how he or she lives out being male or female; his or her sexual orientation; physical and emotional strengths and weaknesses; various social, psychological, political, economic, and spiritual realities that have affected who a person is; his or her cultural or ethnic background and the related customs and taboos; the family dynamics within which he or she was raised; a person’s sexual history; and other relationships and commitments to vocation, family, friends, and the wider world.

In other words, in our commitment to love another we begin with and continually encounter certain factors that are a part of who the other is. We cannot set these aside. The multifaceted reality of who that person is provides a kind of otherness that cannot be ignored. We cannot be guided only by our feelings. We discover how different the other person is from us, no matter how much we might seem to be alike on the surface. This confounds our tendencies to define or control the relationship on our own terms.

The reality of who each of us is gives shape and substance to this commitment within which we live out our vocation as sexual beings. When we become “one flesh” with another, a new “we” is created. Together we are called to a mission not just for our own sake, but for the sake of others. Such commitments make a difference in God’s world.

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.

A. Innermost Being

Intimacy is an intra- and inter-relational 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. 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. 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. We 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. 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. Intimacy is constitutive of good sexuality. Good sexuality is a prototype, a basic drive toward intimacy.

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. The boundary between self and not self is the first one we draw and last one we erase. Of all the boundaries we construct, this one is the primary boundary. These identity boundaries are significant determinants in sex roles and behavior: 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.

B. Separation

Boundaries differentiate persons from each other enabling them to be free and responsible. 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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

The Mystery of Sexuality

What does it mean to understand human sexuality as a locus of spirituality? The definition of sexuality helps us understand this question. Sexuality is not only about physicality and sexual activity. Sexuality is “a sign, a symbol, and a means of our call to communication and communion. ... The mystery of our sexuality is the mystery of our need to reach out to embrace others both physically and spiritually. Sexuality thus expresses God’s intention that we find our authentic humanness in relationship. ...

Sexuality, we must also say, is intrinsic to our relationship with God. ... Sexuality is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion—human and divine. This broad definition of sexuality emphasizes the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual relationship with human beings and the divine. Relationality is an important attribute frequently discussed today in the doctrine of God. Relationships are everything. God is relational in Godself as Trinity. God took the form of relationship in the incarnation of Jesus. God is also experienced in human relationships. Human sexuality represents the most intimate relationship, which serves as a means for union with others, that is, humans and God. Because of these positive implications of sexuality, mystics favored erotic imagery to describe their mystical experience. Mystical experience described in erotic language represents a return of bodily pleasure in our lives. As long as Christian theologians continue to identify human sexuality with darkness, sin, and woundedness in the soul, the ethics of sexuality will continue to be used to foster the idea of abnormal sexual activities/identities and to condemn them. Once, however, we clear away the association of sexuality with sin and construct a positive meaning for sexuality in relationship to spirituality, we are able to create an ethics of sexuality that deals justly with the sexually abused and marginalized. We ought to bring erotic pleasures back into our faith and lives. Spirituality cannot be distinguishable from sexuality, as the body is not separable from the spirit. As the philosopher Michel Foucault envisions the following, “We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, and new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality; it is a possibility for creative life.” Human sexuality can be a place where a new relationship and a creative life can take place.