

98. HUMAN SEXUALITY:

Definitions and Actions

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In 1975 the General Synod stated, "The United Church of Christ has not faced in depth the issue of human sexuality. Changing morality and ethics within American society present both problems and challenges to the church." It requested the Executive Council "to commission a study concerning the dynamics of human sexuality and to recommend postures for the church." In response the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (UCBHM) was asked to do the study.

A UCBHM staff team, headed by Edward A. Powers (b. 1927), worked with a diverse group of consultants to explore definitions, provide biblical interpretation, point toward principles of ethical behavior, examine psychosexual development, define public policy issues, and describe the church as a community of grace where human sexuality is acknowledged, judged, and celebrated. Its brief two-page definition of sexuality stands at the core of its study and its 250 pages of information and interpretation are challenging.

Human Sexuality: A Preliminary Study was presented to the 1977 General Synod, received with appreciation and commended to the congregations, associations, conferences, and instrumentalities of the United Church of Christ for study and response. A study guide was provided.

Toward a Definition of Sexuality

One's sexuality involves the total sense of self as male and female, man and woman, as well as perceptions of what it is for others to be female and male. It includes attitudes about one's body and others' bodies. It expresses one's definition of gender identity. Sexuality is emotional, physical, cognitive, value-laden, and spiritual. Its dimensions are both personal and social.

How remarkable it is to think that we are called the *body* of Christ. Jesus is called "the Word made flesh." For ancient Hebrews or for modern Christians, to speak of ourselves as Jesus' body is startling but invigorating! We are to embody the being of Jesus. That says two things: We need to understand the person of Jesus and we need to learn embodiment.

John A. T. Robinson, a New Testament scholar, is fascinated with Paul's use of the image of the body. Paul is struck by the nature of human boundedness. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Paul asks, in Romans 7:24. Robinson contends that "Paul saw that the Christian gospel . . . [is] very different. For the body is not simply evil: it is made by God and for God. Solidarity is the divinely ordained structure in which personal life is to be lived."³

Robinson sees the body as the central concept in Paul's thought about God and humanity. The great themes of the letters are bound together through the use of the body motif:

It is from the body of sin and death that we are delivered; it is from the body of Christ on the Cross that we are saved; it is into His body the Church that we are incorporated; it is by His body the Eucharist that this Community is sustained; it is in our body that its new life has to be manifested; it is to the resurrection of this body to the likeness of His glorious body that we are destined.⁴

The whole life of the congregation is judged by the ideal of the Word made flesh. How do we embody the truth of the gospel that in Christ we are all one? How do we demonstrate that we are members one of another? How does the foot know that it has any relationship to the elbow or the knee of Christ's body? How does the body work when some of its members are missing? How is bread broken and life shared in ways that all persons—regardless of orientation, marital status, or life-style—feel they belong? How are the gifts of each person's uniqueness given and received in such a way that we, though many, become one?

In the final analysis the church is both gift and the bearer of gift. All that we are, including our sexuality, is a gift of God. God loves the world in a way that is fleshly, loving, faithful—forever and ever. In Jesus we are participants in a new covenant of life, of hope, of love, of justice.

We as sexual creatures are created free to use the gifts of life and of sexuality in ways that ennoble and endear—or betray and demean. That freedom is a gift to have, to hold, to express, to share.

We as sexual creatures are made for relationship, for community. The church is that special form of community through which we experience the fullness of grace, God's presence in trial and rejoicing, and the promise of hope, power, and love in its forms of *agape*, *philia*, and *eros*.

Stewards of the gift of sexuality: that is who we are. Pray God for faithful stewardship!