

# The Campus Minister as Sexual Evangelist Bibliography

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In choosing such a title for this article I am aware of the risks of connotation. For some it may conjure images of Sinclair Lewis' Elmer Gantry, the golden-tongued evangelist and saver of souls who lives a life of hypocrisy, sensuality, and ruthless self-indulgence behind the front of Christian ministry. Others may recall the more recent "flirty fishing" techniques of the "Children of God," whose leader, David Berg, was quoted in a recent newspaper article:

"People today are terrifically desirous of sex and in need of sex, therefore if you don't satisfy their sexual appetite they have a hard time believing that you really love them. So sometimes we have to satisfy that appetite to prove to them that we really care and we're concerned and that we love them."

My intention in identifying the campus minister as sexual evangelist runs counter to such images. I am concerned about the Christian calling to bring the good news of the gospel to several mistaken and destructive ways of viewing sexuality as I encounter them in the campus community. For the purposes of this article I will focus on the sexual dilemmas of college students, especially those with whom I am brought into contact through the BSU, in counseling situations, or in my role as co-teacher of a course in Human Sexuality offered through the University Studies Division of N. C. State University.

## My Sexual and Vocational Identity

The place to begin is where I am and with who I am. I know of nothing more foundational to my identity as a minister than my own sexuality. My sexuality involves my self-understanding and my way of being in the world as a male person. It is, in fact, who I am as a body-person, and it includes the emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual dimensions of my being. Sexuality is something I am, not simply something I do. The same is true of my identity as minister. The ideal integration of being and doing are still beyond my grasp, but "minister" is increasingly who I am, not just a role or job description in which I function. The movement of my vocational understanding is, I hope, in the direction of "Mr. Tanner," the cleaning shop operator of Harry Chapin's story-song who sang while pressing clothes:

"But music was his life, it was not his livelihood,  
And it made him feel so happy, and it made him  
feel so good.

He sang from his heart and he sang from his soul.  
He did not know how well he sang, it just made  
him whole." 2

True vocation means that doing and being are one in a person's relationship to her/his work. What we have to do is the expression of our unique way of being human. In ministry, ideally at least, one does what one is. Thus it is inevitable and natural that my ministry will be expressed through my sexuality, if at all, for who I am is sexual being and minister.

### Sexuality and Evangelism

This awareness of my identity leads me to reflect upon the relationship between the concepts of sexuality and ministry which my own early experience in the church helped to shape. For me, sexuality and evangelism were the two issues fraught with the most anxiety and the deepest ambivalence as I grew up in the church trying to understand what was required of me as a Christian. In retrospect, I am intrigued by the fact that I heard so little said, beyond silence and vague admonitions, about sexuality, and so much said about evangelism. Interestingly, the two areas about which I felt the most adolescent guilt in relation to the church were my sexual feelings and my unfulfilled "obligation" to be consistently and urgently involved in personal "soul winning." The fact of sexuality sounded mostly like "bad news" while evangelism, usually interpreted narrowly in terms of revivals or one-to-one pressured methods of persuasion, had to do with sharing "good news." Like most of my peers, I was heavily burdened by a nagging guilt about sexual feelings, and concluded early that anything that was too bad even to be talked about by the church surely must be inherently evil. (The traditional fears of conception, infection and detection hung like oppressive clouds over the head of any would-be violator of conventional sexual morality, and for Christian youth like myself these fear-based systems of control were undergirded by theological guarantees of condemnation and judgment.)

The really good news about sexuality was conspicuously absent from the typical admonitions about sexual self-control, and to this reluctant sharer of the gospel it seemed quite logical to measure Christian devotion by degree of sexual repression and to communicate the faith accordingly. I acknowledge that distortions are



the responsibility of both sender and receiver of communications, but the message I heard went something like this: "Your success in the life of Christian discipleship will in large measure depend upon two things — (1) your ability to control (by denial, repression, or sheer willpower) your sexual thoughts, feelings, and behavior, and (2) the devotion and zeal with which you pursue the evangelistic task of "winning" others to the faith.

Thus, to the ever-present uneasiness about being a sexual person was added the sense of guilt over not really wanting to go out trying to sell what appeared to be an antisexual religion. (Long before the "sexual revolution" of recent years, I began my own individual rebellion against the negative, repressive misrepresentations which the church perpetuated about sexuality.) David Mace would later characterize the so-called "sexual revolution" as a grass-roots level revolt against the many half-truths and errors which crept into the thinking of the church down through the years. Fundamentally, it was not a revolt against religion, but a plea for a recovery of a really religious understanding of sex.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent years of study and experience in both the pastorate and campus ministry have convinced me that certain misconceptions of sexuality in the Bible and in Christian traditions have become the "bad news" which has prevented us from gaining a hearing by many to whom we seek to bring the gospel, perhaps especially in the campus community.<sup>4</sup> Because of the apparent antagonism between sexuality and spirituality, there are few if any issues besides sexuality to which the gospel appears to speak with less relevance to many college students. I am acutely aware of how this dualistic dichotomy is perceived and passed on with the Christian community, not to mention its presence among people who have no religious affiliation.

It is sad indeed to witness some students, frustrated by unguided or misguided attempts to reconcile religious convictions and sexual needs, decide either in favor of sexual expression at the expense of their faith or in favor of their faith at the expense of their sexuality. Unable to withstand the combination of natural desire, the cultural preoccupation with sex, and peer pressure, some students, eschewing what they regard as "hypocrisy," cling tentatively to the relevant fragments of their religious beliefs or indiscriminately discard the whole idea of commitment to a faith which appears to offer little more than a "guilt trip" in relation to sexuality. Although this uninformed caricature of the Christian view of sexuality is hardly justifiable, it is in some measure due to the church's tendency to leave the whole area of growth in sexuality, the meaning of sexual self-discovery, and "premarital experience" in a limbo of

silence or prohibition, as if nothing needed be done except wait until marriage, when sex will be domesticated and all problems will be solved.

However, it may be true that for the majority on campus the issue does not arise in the traditional form, making the question of whether or not to sleep together the central problem. For many students the question is not whether but when, and the decision has very little to do with marriage. As Richard Hettlinger says: "It is not a decision for or against the specific act of intercourse that concerns many men and women, but the problem of establishing the kind of relationship in which sex is appropriate and meaningful." 5 (Often I have used with students a values clarification exercise in which they are asked to choose from among eleven alternatives the one statement which is for them the most important thing a sexual act should be or do. 6 By far the most frequently chosen statement has been one which says, "A sexual act should be based upon, express and/or deepen the participants' commitment to one another." In the subsequent processing of this exercise it is the key word "commitment" which emerges as the rationale for the choice of the statement, and further discussion indicates an identification of the word "commitment" as central to the students' concepts of love. Interestingly, however, another statement which reads, "A sexual act should be consistent with the religious convictions of the person involved" rarely has been the top choice, even though most of the groups I have worked with are identified as Christian organizations. The broader context of my experience with student attitudes suggests that religious orthodoxy regarding sexuality often is viewed as unrealistic, irrelevant, and not a viable basis for contemporary sexual attitudes and behavior.)

### Sexuality and Love

Ministering in the sexual "wilderness" of a university setting moves me to agree with the observation of Daniel Day Williams:

"It is a reflection of the cultural superficiality that in the present discussion about sexual freedom on college campuses, there is so much attention given to sexual intercourse and so little attention to the question of what love for another person means."7

Although many students I relate to sincerely believe in a principle of love as a guide in sexual relationships, they often hold a concept of love which is more romantic than realistic. Their understanding



of Christian love is so vague, idealistic and other-worldly that they recognize very little concrete guidance for specific sexual dilemmas they face. Lacking specific rules for most sexual behaviors, and finding some biblical injunctions "out of touch" with the realities of their world, they are at a loss to identify or formulate ethical principles based on a biblical understanding of love.

It is precisely to this need that I am currently attempting to respond on my campus through a D. Min. project which will focus on a two-fold objective: (1) to help students understand a Christian concept of love as it relates to their own sexual attitudes and behavior, and (2) to help students formulate and/or clarify their own personal ethical principles for sexual decision-making and sexual expression. As James B. Nelson says, our sexuality is the language of love:

"It is God's ingenious way of calling us into communion with others through our need to reach out and touch and embrace — emotionally, intellectually, physically. Sexuality thus is never accidental or peripheral to our possibility of human becoming. It is both the physiological and psychological grounding of our capacity to love."<sup>8</sup>

Love is undeniably the essence of the gospel. Love is, Nelson further observes, "the Bible's way of articulating God's purposes for and actions toward mankind. It has been Christians' paramount description of their experience in meeting the divine presence in Jesus Christ."<sup>9</sup> Since our sexuality is divinely given as a means through which we may develop and express our capacity to love, have we not hindered the gospel by living too much in fear of sexuality's harmful expression and too little in the recognition and proclamation of its essential goodness? By "running from" our sexuality (how can we run from ourselves?) as if that were necessary in order to move toward what God would have us become — loving persons — we deny the very gift which is the grounding of our capacity to love. The Bible does not view our bodies as an impediment to God. The Word became flesh and affirms our flesh. The Christ whom we proclaim is the embodiment of what it means to be human in the sense that we were created to be. As Norman Pittenger puts it:

"...to be human is to be on the way to becoming truly a person, while this purpose in becoming human can itself be summed up in the phrase: 'on the way to becoming a lover.' Love is the criterion of genuine humanity; and whatever negates, denies, or damages love is unnatural and abnormal and in need of what we have been calling the controls exercised by love."

The moral chaos and sexual confusion on our campuses is reflected in real-life students whose situations sound familiar:

- the freshman who describes her first experience of coitus as a resignation of will in the face of relentless pressure from peers: "I was so tired of the hassle; I just wanted to go on and get it over with."
- the male student who is plagued with guilt about masturbation and ironically, fearing that it might become an "obsession," actually turns it into one by devoting endless hours of energy to avoidance activities designed to deny himself an essentially harmless release of sexual tensions.
- the gay student, deeply hurt by the nonacceptance of fellow Christians and their prejudgment on the basis of his sexual orientation, who speaks of his desire to be lovingly responsible in a committed one-sex relationship.
- the graduate student who feels caught between her sexual needs and the possibility of an untimely, inappropriate marriage which appears to be her only legitimate sexual outlet, given the traditional moral condemnation of all sexual relations outside of marriage.
- the sophomore woman who wonders whether it is appropriate for her to take some initiative not only in asking guys for dates, but also in expressing physical affection in close relationships.
- the engaged couple, compelled by education and economic circumstances to postpone their formal marriage and homemaking, who strongly feel that in spirit they are pledged to each other in marriage, and believe they could have full sexual relations with no sense of guilt.

The list could go on, but it sufficiently illustrates the challenge to campus ministers to respond to the chaos with the gospel of love which is both intelligent and compassionate.

### **The Task of the Sexual Evangelist**

As a campus minister I will undertake the painstaking task of trying to faithfully interpret, apply and embody a gospel of love which will communicate forgiveness, acceptance, enlightenment, and new power for the re-direction of sexual life toward wholeness and fulfillment. The task is awesome in the same way that sexuality is awe-ful in its mystery and complexity. The gospel is not good news



in the sense that it gives us simplistic answers which free us from the agonizing struggle of dealing with the "shades of gray" in each sexual dilemma. We will be required to look not simply at sexual activity itself, but to the intention and motivation of the participants. Even as we wrestle with particular applications of Christian love we will live with the sobering fact that everything hinges on what love means and is called to do in each sexual situation. As ministers we err if we think we have solved the whole moral problem by speaking up for love. The question that always remains is: How does Christian love express itself?

When I am faced by those students who seek me out in the hope of finding an authoritarian figure who will dispense neatly packaged answers to their sexual problems I recall the little-remembered statement of Jesus: "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (Luke 12:57, RSV). Such sovereign freedom strikes terror in the heart of the student who would rather be told what is right. My task, as I understand it, is to guide students to understand that, approached from the point of view of love, the issue is transformed. The questions of sexuality would not dwell simply on "What is permitted?" but rather "What does it mean to love in a Christian understanding of that concept?" Still, after I have proclaimed love as the central principle for a sexual ethic, I am not excused from the discipline of helping students determine what rules of action are most love-embodiment in their situations. To be sure, authentic morality requires that their decisions be made by them. But authentic ministry requires that we stand alongside them as minister-enablers of that process. It is not required that we be in the role of infallible "answer persons" or like the immune helping the diseased. Rather we are called to be honest searchers and sharers, body-persons who in our own lives seek Christian integrity in the quest for a more wholistic integration of love with our own sexual expression.

As a campus minister, then, I am a sexual evangelist, called to communicate and embody a gospel of love which offers "release to the captives" and to "set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18, RSV). For example, to unnumbered masses who have been shamed into a false guilt about having sexual feelings, or fantasizing, or just feeling sexy, I would like to communicate the truth that sets them free from unnecessarily burdened consciences. Sometimes we (the church) have helped them to hate themselves, thus damaging the very capacity to love which could be their greatest moral guide through their sexual lives. To the lonely and pressured virgin I want to say a liberating word about deliverance from the fatalistic sense of inevitability about "getting initiated." The gospel of love may inform or remind them that their sense of worth may

be founded on their inherent value as persons created in the image of God rather than the approval of peers whose mindless conformity denies the reality of free choice and the uniqueness of individuals. To the male student who is caught in the web of a cultural script which finds him ambivalently involved in the aggressive role of sexual conqueror, I want to say, "You are free to put aside the macho sexual self-image and relate to others out of your own uniqueness as a person who just happens to be of the male gender." To the married male student who is frightened almost into impotence by "performance anxiety," I want to offer a gospel which will challenge him away from his "genital legalism" and toward the grace of caring, sensitivity, and responsiveness which can characterize sexual loving. To the student who sees sex as just another form of recreation, a pleasurable activity which supposedly "doesn't hurt anyone else," I want to interpret a gospel which calls us to effect actively the good of the other. To the student who feels guilty of the "lustful look" I want to point out the difference between the joyous, delight of the eye which affirms God's creatures, and the dehumanization of persons by viewing them as mere objects for sexual gratification. The good news needs to reach those who think sex is "dirty" and anti-spiritual, or a kind of panacea, or a weapon.

Proponents of some simplistic forms of evangelism, shallow in theology and manipulative in method, will assume that such sexual complexities need only be approached by some pre-packaged set of "spiritual laws" or some neat prescription by which confused sexual beings suddenly get the "good news" about sexuality as an automatic by-product of "believing and professing." My experience tells me clearly that even among Christians the really good news about love and sexuality has been seldom heard and even less often understood. That is why, as a campus minister, I am a sexual evangelist.



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