PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUALITY AND GODLY LEADERSHIP

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SEXUAL BOUNDARIES IN MINISTERIAL RELATIONSHIPS

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SEXUAL BOUNDARIES IN MINISTERIAL RELATIONSHIPS

1. Introduction: The Problem

'Excuses for moral delinquency are... usually processes of self-deception. At first they may not be; but at length a man who tries to deceive himself comes into that state in which he can do nothing else but deceive himself. Deceit may not be known to be so at first. It then becomes less and less noticeable and finally the mind is falsified and lives without frankness, openness, purity or truth. And nothing is more common than that men may be in that state and with a certain kind of exterior morality, making them noticeably good in external matters while they have actually lost power of moral discrimination in respect to their own inward habits.'

From a sermon preached by Henry Ward Beecher in 1858, 20 years prior to his public affair with Elizabeth Tilton, a member of his church.

2. Definitions

a. Professional Sexual Misconduct

'It is professional sexual misconduct when any person in a leadership role of clergy, teacher, counselor, or doctor engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a congregant, student, client, patient, etc. (of whatever age) in a professional relationship.'

Fortune

'The forbidden zone is a condition of relationship in which sexual behavior is prohibited because a man holds in trust the intimate, wounded, vulnerable, or undeveloped parts of a woman. The trust derives from the professional role of the man as doctor, therapist, lawyer, clergy, teacher, or mentor, and it creates an expectation that whatever parts of herself the woman entrusts to him (her property, body, mind, or spirit) must be used solely to advance her interests and will not be used to his advantage, sexual or otherwise.'

Rutter

b. Sexual Harassment

'The use of one's authority or power, either explicitly or implicitly, to coerce another into unwanted sexual relations or to punish another for his or her refusal; or the creation of an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment through verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.'

U.S. Federal Employment Opportunity Commission

3. Examples of Sexualized Behaviour

VERBAL BEHAVIOR

- Risqué jokes, sexual humor.
- Revelations of, or inquiries about, the intimate details of one's personal life.
- Inviting someone to share an experience involving nudity, such as a hot-tub, massage, or swimming at a nude beach.
- Sexual innuendo.
- Teasing.
- Bids for sympathy about one's partner's sexual inadequacies.
- Requests (direct or indirect) for active assistance with one's own sexual inadequacies or problems.
- Suggestive comments about appearance, dress, or body shape/size/capacities.
- Tales of sexual exploits/ experiences.

NON-VERBAL (PHYSICAL) BEHAVIOR

- Cornering someone and leaning against him or her.
- A prolonged hug, when hugging is the customary behavior; or pressing up against someone's body during a hug.
- Kissing on the lips, when kissing on the cheeks would be the customary gesture.
- Sending someone a condom in a greeting card.
- Rearranging one's schedule so as to be with someone.
- Dancing sensually with someone.
- Giving someone a gift of lingerie.
- Fondling or caressing.
- Prolonged gazes; insistent visual contact.
- Tickling and playful aggression, e.g., wrestling.
- 'Accidental' contact with sexual areas of body, e.g., reaching across someone and bumping against or brushing his or her breasts, genitals, buttocks, thighs.

Note

- Some of these would be sexualized behavior in some cultures, subcultures, or situations and not in others.
- In order to determine whether a particular behavior is of a sexual nature, one should ask whether a 'reasonable' observer, looking at the behavior in its context, would conclude that it is.
- Exclude normal affectionate behavior such as a handshake or a quick hug; or normal comforting behavior such as a firm hold of the person's hand, a firm touch on the arm or the shoulder, and/or a brief hug.

4. Ethical Analysis

a. Violation of role.
   A 'fiduciary' responsibility for someone is a responsibility for safeguarding the interests and wellbeing of that person, for protecting that person and his/her interest against any danger, threat, or harm. The minister is obliged to act in the best interests of a congregant/client even when this action does not serve the minister's needs or interests.
   Fortune, 1992

b. Misuse of authority and power.

c. Taking advantage of vulnerability.

d. Absence of meaningful consent.

e. Sinful behavior is unethical.

f. The key issues: motivation of person giving; interpretation of person receiving; context in which the behavior is occurring.

5. Crossing the Boundaries

a. Good/bad/confusing touch.

b. Touch Continuum.

6. Professional Vs. Personal Roles: The Relationship Continuum

7. Risk Factors and Self-Assessment

'It is not the things of this world that either occupy the soul or cause it harm, since they enter it not, but rather the will and desire for them.'
St. John of the Cross, The Ascent of Mt. Carmel

'Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the Reign of Heaven'.
Abba Anthony

'Take away temptations and no one will be saved.'
Evagrius

a. Risk Factors in Clergy Infidelity (Thoburn & Balswick, 1994)

   1. Personal adjustment factors.

   2. Marital adjustment.

   3. Ministerial role.

b. Vulnerability
   These ministerial behaviors can lead to vulnerability, and are significant warning symptoms of approaching marital unfaithfulness (Brock & Lukens, 1989):
   - Working late to avoid going home to one's spouse and children.
   - Making calls on the way home and having unpredictable arrival times, frequently missing dinner.
   - Not taking days off. When days are taken off, the spouse is not included in plans.
   - Seeking intellectual or social stimulation outside one's marriage.
   - Unless counseling is a full-time assignment, the tendency to counsel more than ten hours a week while trying to keep up with the other tasks of ministry.
   - Beginning to dream about colleagues or counselees.
   - Finding oneself lusting after other women or men.
   - Needing the excitement of public exposure (the limelight) and congregational response to compensate for the lack of personal and family fulfillment.
   - Failing to maintain a personal devotional life beyond pulpit preparation.

c. Risk factors related to an increased risk of misusing power in counsel and other relationships:
   - Isolation or tendency to be a 'loner'.
   - Denial of vulnerability.
   - The desire to maintain an 'impeccable' image.
   - An unhappy marriage.

- Increasing interpersonal conflict.
- Unfulfilled sexual needs.
- Unresolved addictions: romance, sexual, pornography.
- Over-involvement in work.
- Narcissistic tendency and constant need to be affirmed.
- Chronic tiredness and depression.

d. Affairs: Secrets, Proximity, and Attraction.

8. Cross-Gender Friendships

Five assertions about 'Cross gender friendships'(Smedes, 1983, pp. 169-172)

- Cross gender friendships are inevitable. 'Furthermore, we need them… None of us is able to meet all our partner's needs for interpersonal relationships… They are more to be commended than suspected.'

- Cross gender friendships are not necessarily innocent. 'A friendship may be free and clear of sexual touch, but could in fact be an emotional seduction away from one's commitment to the love of a dull spouse.'

- Cross gender friendships are risky. A morally responsible person will weigh all odds in sharing the mystery of personhood with another, and 'take the risk only if he can be sure their spouse will not be the loser either way.'

- Cross gender friendships are tested by what they do to our covenant relationship. The primary marital covenant is violated when a friendship robs a spouse of prime time and interest and high level energy.

- Cross gender friendships can be consistent with fidelity. 'A covenant-keeper does not have to worry much or moralize a great deal about the proprieties of relationships outside of marriage. Loyalty is limiting but not constricting.'

9. Guidelines for Maintaining Clear Ministerial Boundaries

'Boundaries define who we are – where we leave off and the rest of the world begins, what is ours and what is not ours, what is intimate and what is separate… Unless we have been taught how to recognize and control these boundaries, other people can psychologically invade us. Such invasions can be damaging in themselves, and they can make us vulnerable to subsequent sexual invasion. In general, men are taught to challenge sexual boundaries in our culture, and women are taught to accept masculine boundary-challenging as a matter of course.'
Rutter

Premise: Ministry includes some degree of intimacy with congregants and clients. Ministry does not include mutual intimacy, or sexualized behavior. Mutual intimacy or sexualized behavior in a ministerial relationship is crossing the boundaries and a violation of the ministry relationship.

a. **Counseling**. Do not attempt counseling for which you are not prepared or trained. Every minister needs to do short-term, crisis or spiritual direction counseling. Be especially careful of prayer counseling (inner healing), regression type therapies, and marriage counseling where you see only the partner of the opposite sex. Do not attempt to counsel victims, survivors or abusers without special training and regular supervision by a competent professional.

   Use caution when working with people diagnosed with 'Borderline Personality Disorder.' These constitute the greatest number of lawsuits and misconduct problems.

b. **Counseling Ethics**. There are clear ethics codes that have been developed by a number of professional groups (e.g. APA, NBCC, and CAPS). If you counsel, conform to the very best ethical practices. Work above and beyond what most denominations require.

c. **Follow Denominational/Organizational Policies**.

d. **Sexual Feelings**. Expect and beware of sexual feelings with clients or 'protégés' (one who is protected by someone older or more powerful). Acknowledge these feelings to your supervisor and/or in consultation, but do not express the feelings to your client (or even to another ministry peer). Do not sexualize the relationship with the client by talking about sexual feelings.

e. **Sexualized behavior**. Do not sexualize your professional relationships with another or permit another (e.g. client, fellow worker) to sexualize your professional relationships with him or her. When sexual approaches are experienced: maintain your ministerial focus, responsibilities and role; reaffirm to yourself and your client the pastoral relationship you have; consult immediately and explicitly with a colleague, consultant or supervisor.

f. **Self-care**. Avoid the 'have others do unto me as I do unto them' trap. The pastor needs to provide for his or her own 'R & R' and unwind time. As a check to see whether you are doing this, list activities you engage in outside your ministry setting.

g. **Dual relationships**. Avoid dual relationships in which you are both minister and best friend to a congregant, client, intern, staff member, or other protégé. Avoid dual relationships in which you are both minister to the family and counselor/friend to the wife; supervisor of the intern and where she is your personal confidant; priest/counselor to a needy single parent family while hosting them for Thanksgiving.

   'The forbidden zone is a condition of relationship, not a geographical happenstance (my italics). The degree of trust that a woman has in a man, and the amount of power he has over her and his emotional importance to her, do not disappear if they meet somewhere else.'
   Rutter 147

h. **Personal relationships and intimacy needs**. Attend to and nurture your own personal and familial relationships. As a check, list the relationships you have with people who are not members of your church family.

i. **Avoid workaholism and burnout**. A workaholic is a person who gradually becomes emotionally crippled and addicted to control and power in a compulsive drive to gain approval and success.

j. **Supervision, consultation and evaluation**. Every worker has the right to receive supervision, peer consultation and periodic evaluation. Insist upon keeping yourself honest.

k. **Avoid isolation**. Be in relationship with colleagues, fellow ministers and your school, and consult regularly.

10. Guidelines for Intervention

a. Individuals. The Sexual Impulse Scale (SIS)

b. What To Do When You Find Yourself Sexually Attracted To Another Person (Hart, 1994, p. 146)

   1. Avoid being alone with her/him. Ensure that your spouse is with you whenever you must be with this person.

   2. Stop fantasizing about being with her/him romantically or sexually.

   3. Don't open Pandora's box by telling her/him that you are attracted to her/him. It will only complicate matters more. She/he may turn around and accuse you of harassment.

   4. Share your feelings of attraction with a close friend who can hold you accountable.

   5. Take responsibility for all your actions. You are not to blame for your feelings. But you are responsible for the actions that follow your feelings.

   6. Try to look at the whole picture. A moment of passion can lead to a lifetime of regret and hurt.

c. Congregations

1. Two approaches, two outcomes.

2. Principles of congregational intervention.

3. Elements of healing

   - Trauma debriefing.

   - A process of grief and loss.

   - Sexual abuse recovery concepts.

   - Pastoral care and applied theology.

‘Confess your faults one to another’ (James 5:16). He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final breakthrough to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 1954, p. 110

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APPENDIX 1

Self Assessment Questionnaire

Self-Assessment (adapted from Fortune, 1992). The following questions may be used to assess your own 'at riskness' in violating ministerial boundaries. An answer of 'NO' to any area (except question #1) indicates an area where self-monitoring is essential.

1. PERSONAL HISTORY

- Does my personal or family history include physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, or other major family dysfunction?
- (If 'yes') Am I coming to terms with the issues and feelings involved in my personal history? Am I able to identify areas in my history where I need healing?
- Do I deal effectively with my various depressions and let downs? What do I do?
- Am I taking steps to address these areas where I need healing?

2. PSYCHOSEXUAL INTEGRATION

- Have I discussed my sexual history with someone (a professional or a friend)?
- Am I comfortable with my sexual orientation/identity?
- Do I ensure that whatever sexual fantasies I have are not exploitive and immoral (e.g. sex with congregants, clients, and children)?
- Are my personal relationships and friendships wholesome? That is, do I welcome and invite the presence of Christ into the whole relationship without hidden places 'just for me'?
- Am I able to identify my emotional/sexual needs and meet them appropriately (e.g. within the covenant of marriage)?

3. PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL SELF

- Am I meeting my personal needs outside of my work setting?
- Do I ensure that my professional needs are met by taking courses, obtaining outside consultation, etc.?
- Do I accept and affirm the power inherent in my professional role?
- Am I aware of the effects of that power on those with whom I interact – for example, the attraction that power holds for some people?
- Do I remain alert to my potential for violating boundaries due to that power?
- Am I aware of the consequences to me of my violating the boundaries of my ministerial relationships?
- Do I have a consultation or supervision setting in which I can discuss these questions?

4. MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

- Do I have the kind of friendship with my spouse that I can talk about my emotional needs?
- Do I have the kind of friendship with my spouse that I can talk about my sexual needs?
- Do we have the kind of marriage where we grow and change after we talk? Do we do what we commit ourselves to do?
- Do we obtain outside help for our marriage before we need to?
- Do we model 'perfection' to our congregation Or do we model 'doing the best we can' under the hand of God?
- Do we have a pastor to pastor us?