

*“In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. (Romans 14.13-14)<sup>2</sup>*

## **Black Faith and Sexuality Best Practices**

As black church leaders, lay and clergy, we have a critically important role to play in the task of breaking silences about sexuality. The following are some key guidelines that should help us begin this task of silence breaking for the sake of personal and social liberation and empowerment:

**(1) Acknowledge the Complexity of “Sexuality.”** Our willingness to open dialogue with respect to sexuality is *not* tantamount to saying that all expressions of sexuality are permissible, equally valuable, and/or to be affirmed. All matters that intersect with questions of sexuality are not co-equal. Though we may be progressively minded Christians, still we have to be able to discern and articulate standards according to which our sexuality should aspire. Specifically, it may be helpful to differentiate between three categories into which expressions of our sexuality may fall:

- a. ***Dominant.*** oppressive-domination-power-oriented (i.e. rape, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, willfully/irresponsibly infecting)
- b. ***Transactional.*** capitalistically or mutually transactionally-oriented
- c. ***Mutual.*** mutuality-oriented (i.e. adequately conscious (i.e. age & sobriety), mutual capacity to consent, mutual consent itself, mutually beneficial, equality engendering, safe, responsible)

One of the things that *always* distinguishes the “dominant” category of sexual interactions and *can* distinguish the “transactional” category of sexual interactions is the fact that these two forms of sexual expression are often predicated upon, always exacerbate, and definitively create the privileged and oppressed statuses of “unequals.” In contrast, expressions of sexuality, gender relations, and relationships (in general) that are mutuality-oriented are predicated on the participation of equals and – at their best – nurture equality.

**(2) Develop Black Culturally Astute Sexual Ethics *for yourself and with your community.*** Commit to Sexual-Gender Ethics<sup>3</sup> that affirm and promote *mutuality* and *equality* – privately and publicly, personally and communally. Resist urges to define “black culture” according to myths of respectability *or* hypersexuality *or* anti-homosexuality. Develop these ethics in a balanced way, considering sources such as those identified in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral:

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<sup>1</sup> Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” 43.

<sup>2</sup> Kee, *The Cambridge Annotated Study Bible*; Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Marcia Riggs writes: “Sexual-gender ethics refers to the morality governing the relations between women and men who are biologically different being (sexual) with socially constructed meanings of being female and male (gender) that they bring to both their private and public interactions.” Riggs, *Plenty Good Room*, 21.

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scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.<sup>4</sup> These must, necessarily, be reconsidered and recalibrated as “new” knowledge (re)populates these areas.

- (3) Fight Against Sexual Oppression.** Oppose Sexual-Gender Ethics and expressions of sexuality that OPPRESS – *without further subjugating those who have survived such oppression!*<sup>5</sup> This opposition should be expressed in terms of various public and private interventions.
  - a. Which silences must we break? How do we discern these?
  - b. What is the value of breaking these silences?
  - c. What is at stake when we break silences?
  
- (4) Affirm Mutual Expressions of Sexuality.** Unequivocally affirm expressions of sexuality that engender mutuality and equality – privately and publicly, personally and communally. We will be blessed as this virtue transforms our communities’ capacity to resist oppression *everywhere*.
  
- (5) Affirm the Moral Arc of our Faith and its Scripture that Liberates Us!**
  - a. **Mark 12.30-31:** [Y]ou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”
  - b. **Galatians 3.28:** There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
  
- (6) De/Resacralize Scripture.** *Know* the texts our communities hold (and do not hold) sacred – and desacralize and resacralize according to the moral arc that liberates us!
  - a. “Slaves, obey your masters”? (Colossians 3.22, Ephesians 6.5, I Peter 2.18)
  - b. “Women be silent”? (I Corinthians 14.34)
  - c. “An abomination”? (Leviticus 18.22, 20.13)
  
- (7) Speak Out!** Allow this form of sexual freedom to inform our approaches to discussions on sexuality within our black churches *and* other matters of social import (i.e. our policy recommendations with respect to marriage, food and housing subsidies, incarceration, drug policies, etc.).

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>5</sup> Riggs writes: “Oppression refers to the processes by which relationships of imbalanced power between social groups are maintained, thus privileging one group over another and thereby limiting, injuring, and or controlling the less privileged group. These processes are ‘embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules.’” Ibid., 22.