

INTRODUCTION

In the early days of the Church, members were at odds with the larger society over sex norms related to the practice of polygamy. After the Manifesto, Mormon mores grew to be more compatible with American middle-class values. But, in recent years, as American society has become more permissive and more openly occupied with sex, Mormon culture has become more restrictive, and once again there is a major gap between the views of Mormons and their contemporaries. At the same time, we as Mormons are less secluded from American culture. We are no longer so heavily concentrated in Utah, and are increasingly influenced by the secular mass media. Thus we feel—perhaps more keenly than ever before—the conflict between our values and those of “the world.”

During the past two years, we have been asked many times why we were editing a special issue of *Dialogue* on sexuality in Mormon culture, and our answer has always been the same: Sex in Mormon culture, even more than in the broader American culture, is a significant stress point, a serious source of personal conflict. We sense a compelling need, therefore, not only to understand sexuality, but to bring the discussion into the open where it can be dealt with constructively.

One researcher has pointed out that it is important to distinguish between *inhibition* and *discrimination* in sexual decisions. Inhibition is currently denigrated (and often ridiculed) in contemporary American culture; but a good case can be made for being discriminating—that is, knowingly and intelligently choosing to control sexual behavior within meaningful bounds. If, however, our standards appear to be nothing more than inhibitions, can they have a positive effect on the larger society? And, can they act as effective safeguards against the permissiveness of that society? We must develop a positive and well-articulated philosophy of sex.

Sex is also a stress point *within* Mormon culture. While our socialization works well for most members, it is strong enough to make significant deviation almost unbearable. Individuals who do not fit the mold are made to feel so guilty that they may even become alienated from the circle of the Saints. While “black and white” positions may keep many people in line, they may also cause unnecessary anguish. An effective way to deal with such problems is to talk about them.

Sadly, the conflict within Mormon culture is probably most intensely felt within the individual. Many comments received in the preparation of this issue testified of the pain and heartache of unresolved sexual problems. We firmly believe that as individuals we can and should make sex a positive force, integrated within a righteous life, rather than a source of frustration and guilt. There is a world of difference between the naive person whose only knowledge of sex is a list of forbidden fruits, and the person who faces his own sexuality intelligently and realistically, learning to express *and* control it.

It is commonly argued that sex is strictly a personal or family matter, and that simply “living the gospel” will take care of all problems. While we fully agree with the need for personal and marital privacy, we feel that this privacy is not diminished—in fact may be enhanced—by honest inquiry and responsible discussion. Indeed, “living the gospel” requires intelligence as well as obedience. The Lord has said he expects us to grow in knowledge and understanding, and by so doing to gain control over our impulses and ultimately our own destinies. Too many people are unprepared for this challenging growth.

Thus we approach this special issue confident that a responsible discussion of sexual issues will neither destroy faith, lead to immorality, nor discredit gospel principles, but rather, that it will help to clarify principles and lead to happier living. We firmly believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers the most positive, indeed the correct view of sexuality—one that brings joy. We also believe that Mormons as a people can make an important contribution to American sexual attitudes if only they prepare for the battle. To confront the “new morality” with worn-out and discredited Victorian platitudes does no justice to our cause. As Truman Madsen observed, the best way to “overcome fake fires that are omnipresent in our culture is neither with wet blankets nor cold water, but to burn with a brighter, richer flame.”

In seeking manuscripts for this issue, we did not seek contributors with any pre-selected perspective. We asked only that they approach their topics responsibly, with thoughtful, honest expression. It was our intention to avoid the sensational potential of the subject, and to produce a balanced and comprehensive treatment. The response to our call was overwhelming. We received material enough to fill several issues, and there was simply not enough space for many fine articles, essays, stories and poems. Among those not included:

- an LDS bishop and his wife commenting on their experience with an unwed, pregnant teenager who lived with them under the sponsorship of the Church Social Services program;
- a young man pleading for understanding on the subject of masturbation and its accompanying guilt;
- excerpts from a missionary journal reflecting the stress for both missionaries and local young women while living “an arm’s length away,” yet preaching a gospel of love;

- a turn of the century memoir on learning the “facts of life” as a youth in Ferron, Utah.
- a young woman’s description of the sexual pressures and personal conflicts faced by divorcees in the Church;
- the frustrated voice of a professional counselor witnessing the attitudes of family, friends or Church leaders who discourage troubled families from obtaining effective counseling; and
- a letter from a “sensuous grandmother” on the beauty of marital sex in later years.

We read an historical article relating the modern sexual attitudes to early Hellenistic influences on Christianity and another presenting the intriguing argument that our current negative Church rhetoric was traceable to the polygamy period, with its charges of Mormon licentiousness. Other articles dealt with transexualism and other sexual miscues; sexuality in literature; abortion; the advantages of polygamy; and there was even one on “sex-ways in the hereafter”!

It was only with great difficulty that we—together with the regular editor and his associates—reduced this abundance to the space limitations of this issue and selected from among many fine articles, those which we felt should open our discussion of sexuality in Mormon culture. Those selected, as will be seen, represent a variety of exceptional scholarly, scientific and personal experience. Still, they only introduce the multitude of important facets of sexual life in our culture.

So, let the dialogue begin. . . .

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