



Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community
by Wendell Berry
Book Review by Paul Doerksen

Wendell Berry's *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* consists of a collection of eight essays which deal with a range of issues including conservation, the nature of work, peace, and the relationship of Christianity to creation. Yet this seemingly eclectic collection is coherent: in the notable opening sentence of the preface, Berry declares that "this is a book about sales resistance." We are collectively being sold a bill of goods that offers a distorted and distorting vision of globalism, technology, the free market, unlimited possibilities of growth and so on. Berry attempts to "resist the language, the ideas, and the categories of this ubiquitous sales talk, no matter from whose mouth it issues."

Of particular relevance and interest for CCMBC's preparation for the BFL Study Conference on sexuality is the titular essay which anchors the collection. A true community can lose its way or begin to disintegrate when it is assailed by the triumph of the industrial economy, the loss of freedom because of the grip of various kinds of determinisms, and the reduction of love to sex. The strength of this essay, and indeed the entire collection of essays, is to bring to view these often unnoticed connections between economics, sex, and freedom within the life of a community, both in the possible disintegration of that community, or, properly pursued, as constructive elements in the building and flourishing of that community and its people.

Berry cannot easily be categorized using common political, economic, or religious abstract terms such as liberal or conservative. Rather, he puts forward a constructive vision of Christian community which resists an economy of profit and replaces it with an economy of gift, wherein giving love functions as the heart of the community. While this essay--which appears last in the collection— most explicitly deals with sexuality, the reader should take care not to move to this essay too quickly to avoid missing the often unnoticed connections within which sexuality is embedded.

Although Berry draws on St. Paul's notion of the body of Christ as a resource for understanding the bonds of community, the community which interests Berry is not restricted to the church. Community, for Berry, means "the commonwealth and common interests, commonly understood, of people living together in a place and wishing to continue to do so. To put it another way, community is a locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local economy, and local nature." The connection of this kind of community to economy is central to Berry's argument – but by economy, he does not strictly mean 'economics.' Rather, economy for Berry refers to "the ways of human housekeeping, the ways by which the human household is situated and maintained within the household of nature. To be uninterested in economy is to be uninterested in the practice of religion; it is to be uninterested in culture and in character." Berry is also concerned with the understanding and function of freedom within this matrix of community and economy, being especially wary of a notion of freedom which is defined strictly in an individual sense, thus seeing itself as an escape from the constraints of community, and constant consideration of the needs of neighbors, of kindness to strangers, and so on.

With these kinds of understandings in mind, Berry argues that today's communities are facing the problem of disintegration; incoherent discourse and confusion regarding sexuality being one

of the symptoms of this disintegration. Nevertheless, such disorder cannot be understood apart from a recognition of and resistance to internal disaffection and external exploitation of communities from sources such as technological determinism, the fiction of global economics, the rejection of local economies, disrespect of local communities, the commodification of everything, including our bodies and their constituent parts. When we buy the bill of goods that's being sold, when we 'liberate' economy (as Berry understands it) from community because of a distortion of community, freedom, and economy, it is no surprise that our understanding and practice of sexuality is also 'liberated' from community, and love is easily reduced to sex and sex reduced to puppetry. This is especially obvious in discussions of 'sexual freedom,' which have threatened to become the "public prostitution of sex in guises of freedom from the clinical to the commercial, from the artistic to the statistical." Berry believes that a Christian understanding of community must be centered on love, that the heart of flourishing community is self-giving love, which ushers in trust and fidelity – all of these are practices which are very difficult to sustain if we are incapable of 'sales resistance.'

This book is a valuable resource for the CCMBC; nonetheless I also want to highlight one area of criticism. I find that Berry's view of community, while generated in part by biblical images, offers a rather thin ecclesiology. While he is provocatively critical of parts of the institutional church, and as insightful as his work on community life may be, in this collection of essays at least, the church as the church plays a minor role, and often that is as a target of Berry's criticism.

To conclude, as I have noted above, the strength of Berry's work is to bring to view these often unnoticed connections between economics, sex, and freedom within the life of a community. Sexuality cannot be understood properly, cannot be practiced freely and faithfully as a private matter, without acknowledging in what ways sexuality is inextricably embedded within other dimensions of our lives, of our faith. To begin to recognize this is crucial to the life of the church, in my view, since it helps us to resist our treatment of sexual issues as though they can be extracted, lifted clean from the stream to be examined and then pronounced upon in isolation from other dimensions of life, and not just those we might usually consider in our church-centered discussion. Berry's work can inform and can be used to discipline Christian dialogue about human sexuality.