

The Seduction of Pornography and the Integrity of Christian Marriage

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Delivered to the Men of Boyce College
March 13, 2004

*“I have made a covenant with my eyes;
How then could I gaze at a virgin?”
Job 31:1*

The intersection of pornography and marriage is one of the most problematic issues among many couples today—including Christian couples. The pervasive plague of pornography represents one of the greatest moral challenges faced by the Christian church in the postmodern age. With eroticism woven into the very heart of the culture, celebrated in its entertainment, and advertised as a commodity, it is virtually impossible to escape the pervasive influence of pornography in our culture and in our lives.

At the same time, the problem of human sinfulness is fundamentally unchanged from the time of the Fall until the present. There is no theological basis for assuming that human beings are more lustful, more defenseless before sexual temptation, or more susceptible to the corruption of sexual desire than was the case in any previous generation.

Two distinctions mark the present age from previous eras. First, pornography has been so mainstreamed through advertising, commercial images, entertainment, and everyday life, that what would have been illegal just a few decades ago is now taken as common dress, common entertainment, and unremarkable sensuality. Second, explicit eroticism—complete with pornographic images, narrative, and symbolism—is now celebrated as a cultural good in some sectors of the society. Pornography, now reported to be the seventh-largest business in America, claims its own icons and public figures. Hugh Hefner, founder of *Playboy*, is considered by many Americans to be a model of entrepreneurial success, sexual pleasure, and a liberated lifestyle. The use of Hugh Hefner as a spokesman by a family-based hamburger chain in California indicates something of how pornography itself has been mainstreamed in the culture.

Growing out of those two developments is a third reality—namely, that increased exposure to erotic stimulation creates the need for ever-increased stimulation in order to demand notice, arouse sexual interest, and retain attention. In an odd twist, hyper-exposure to pornography leads to a lower net return on investment—which is to say that the more pornography one sees the more explicit the images must be in order to excite interest. As the postmodernist would explain, in order to “transgress,” pornographers must continue to press the envelope.

One further qualification must be added to this picture. Pornography is mainly, though not exclusively, a *male* phenomenon. That is to say, the users and consumers of pornography are overwhelmingly male—boys and men. In the name of women’s liberation, some pornography directed towards a female market has emerged in recent years. Nevertheless, this is decidedly a “niche” market in the larger pornographic

economy. The fact remains that many men pay a great deal of money and spend a great deal of time looking *at* and looking *for* pornographic images in order to arouse themselves sexually.

What's Going On Here?

Why is pornography such a big business? The answer to that question lies in two fundamental realities. First, the most fundamental answer to the question must be rooted in a biblical understanding of human beings as sinners. We must take into full account the fact that sin has corrupted every good thing in creation, and the effects of sin extend to every dimension of life. The sex drive, which should point toward covenant fidelity in marriage and all the goods associated with that most basic institution, has instead been corrupted to devastating effects. Rather than directed toward fidelity, covenantal commitment, procreation, and the wonder of a one-flesh relationship, the sex drive has been degraded into a passion that robs God of His glory, celebrating the sensual at the expense of the spiritual, and setting what God had intended for good on a path that leads to destruction in the name of personal fulfillment. The most important answer we can give to pornography's rise in popularity is rooted in the Christian doctrine of sin. As sinners, we corrupt what God has perfectly designed for the good of His creatures and we have turned sex into a carnival of orgiastic pleasures. Not only have we severed sex from marriage, but as a society, we now look at marriage as an imposition, chastity as an embarrassment, and sexual restraint as a psychological hang-up. The doctrine of sin explains why we have exchanged the glory of God for Sigmund Freud's concept of polymorphous perversity.

In addition to this, we must recognize that a capitalist free-market economy rewards those who produce a product that is both attractive and appetitive. The purveyors of pornography know that they succeed by directing their product to the lowest common denominator of humanity—a depraved sexual mind. Without the legal restraints common in previous generations, pornographers are now free to sell their goods virtually without restriction. Beyond this, they base their marketing plan on the assumption that an individual can be seduced into the use of pornography and then will be “hooked” into a pattern of dependence upon pornographic images and the need for ever-more explicit sexual material as a means towards sexual arousal.

The bottom line is that, in our sinfulness, men are drawn toward pornography and a frighteningly large percentage of men develop a dependence upon pornographic images for their own sexual arousal and for their concept of the good life, sexual fulfillment, and even meaning in life. Medical research can document the increased flow of endorphins, hormones that create pleasure in the brain, when sexual images are viewed. Given the law of reduced effect, greater stimulation is needed to keep a constant flow of endorphins to the brain’s pleasure centers. Without conscious awareness of what is happening, men are drawn into a pattern of deeper and deeper sin, more and more explicit pornography, and never-ending rationalizing, and all this started when the eye first began its perusal of the pornographic image and sexual arousal was its product.

The postmodern age has brought many wonders as well as incredible moral challenges. Often, technological achievement and moral complexity come hand in hand. This is most explicitly the case with the development of the Internet. For the first time in human history, a teenager in his bedroom has access to an innumerable array of

pornographic websites, catering to every imaginable sexual passion, perversion, and pleasure. Today's teenager, if not stranded on some desert island, is likely to know more about sex and its complexities than his father knew when he got married. Furthermore, what most generations have known only in the imagination--if at all--is now there for the viewing on websites, both commercial and free. The Internet has brought an interstate highway of pornography into every community, with exit ramps at every terminal or personal computer.

Pornography and Marriage

The Christian worldview must direct all consideration of sexuality to the institution of marriage. Marriage is not merely the arena for sexual activity, it is presented in Scripture as the divinely-designed arena for the display of God's glory on earth as a man and a wife come together in a one-flesh relationship within the marriage covenant. Rightly understood and rightly ordered, marriage is a picture of God's own covenantal faithfulness. Marriage is to display God's glory, reveal God's good gifts to His creatures, and protect human beings from the inevitable disaster that follows when sexual passions are divorced from their rightful place.

The marginalization of marriage, and the open antipathy with which many in the culture elite approach the question of marriage, produces a context in which Christians committed to a marriage ethic appear hopelessly out of step with the larger culture. Whereas marriage is seen as a privatized contract to be made and unmade at will in the larger society, Christians must see marriage as an inviolable covenant made before God and man, that establishes both temporal and eternal realities.

Christians have no right to be embarrassed when it comes to talking about sex and sexuality. An unhealthy reticence or embarrassment in dealing with these issues is a form of disrespect to God's creation. Whatever God made is good, and every good thing God made has an intended purpose that ultimately reveals His own glory. When conservative Christians respond to sex with ambivalence or embarrassment, we slander the goodness of God and hide God's glory which is intended to be revealed in the right use of creation's gifts.

Therefore, our first responsibility is to point all persons toward the right use of God's good gifts and the legitimacy of sex in marriage as one vital aspect of God's intention in marriage from the beginning.

That said, pornography represents one of the most insidious attacks upon the sanctity of marriage and the goodness of sex within the one-flesh relationship. The celebration of debauchery rather than purity, the elevation of genital pleasure over all other considerations, and the corruption of sexual energy through an inversion of the self, corrupts the idea of marriage, leads to incalculable harm, and subverts marriage and the marital bond.

The Realities of Marital Sex

Many individuals—especially young men—hold a false expectation of what sex represents within the marriage relationship. Since the male sex drive is largely directed towards genital pleasure, men often assume that women are just the same. While physical pleasure is certainly an essential part of the female experience of sex, it is not as focused on the solitary goal of genital fulfillment as is the case with many men.

A biblical worldview understands that God has demonstrated His glory in both the sameness and the differences that mark men and women, male and female. Alike made in the image of God, men and women are literally made *for* each other. The physicality of the male and female bodies cries out for fulfillment in the other. The sex drive calls both men and women out of themselves and toward a covenantal relationship which is consummated in a one-flesh union.

By definition, sex within marriage is not merely the accomplishment of sexual fulfillment on the part of two individuals who happen to share the same bed. Rather, it is the mutual self-giving that reaches pleasures both physical and spiritual. The emotional aspect of sex cannot be divorced from the physical dimension of the sex act. Though men are often tempted to forget this, women possess more and less gentle means of making that need clear.

Consider the fact that a woman has every right to expect that her husband will earn access to the marriage bed. As the Apostle Paul states, the husband and wife no longer own their own bodies, but each now belongs to the other. At the same time, Paul instructed men to love their wives even as Christ has loved the church. Even as wives are commanded to submit to the authority of their husbands, the husband is called to a far higher standard of Christ-like love and devotion toward the wife.

Therefore, when I say that a husband must regularly “earn” privileged access to the marital bed, I mean that a husband owes his wife the confidence, affection, and emotional support that would lead her to freely give herself to her husband in the act of sex.

God's gift of sexuality is inherently designed to pull us out of ourselves and toward our spouse. For men, this means that marriage calls us out of our self-focused concern for genital pleasure and toward the totality of the sex act within the marital relationship.

The requirements for the achievement of male sexual passion and satisfaction are minimal. By contrast, the level of intimacy required for female sexual fulfillment and emotional satisfaction are far higher.

Put most bluntly, I believe that God means for a man to be civilized, directed, and stimulated toward marital faithfulness by the fact that his wife will freely give herself to him sexually only when he presents himself as worthy of her attention and desire.

Perhaps specificity will help to illustrate this point. I am confident that God's glory is seen in the fact that a married man, faithful to his wife, who loves her genuinely, will wake up in the morning driven by ambition and passion in order to make his wife proud, confident, and assured in her devotion to her husband.

Believe it or not, guys, your wife is not likely to see you first and foremost as a sex object. When you awaken in the morning with hair unkempt, bad breath, a day's growth of beard on your face, and desperately in need of a shower, your wife is not likely to look at you and be filled with sexual passion to start your morning together in sexual union. A husband who looks forward to sex with his wife will aim his life toward those things that will bring rightful pride to her heart, will direct himself to her with love as the foundation of their relationship, and will present himself to her as a man in whom she can take both pride and satisfaction.

Consider these two pictures. The first picture is of a man who has set himself toward a commitment to sexual purity, and is living in sexual integrity with his wife. In order to fulfill his wife's rightful expectations and to maximize their mutual pleasure in the marriage bed, he is careful to live, to talk, to lead, and to love in such a way that his wife finds her fulfillment in giving herself to him in love. The sex act then becomes a fulfillment of their entire relationship, not an isolated physical act that is merely incidental to their love for each other. Neither uses sex as means of manipulation, neither is inordinately focused merely on self-centered personal pleasure, and both give themselves to each other in unapologetic and unhindered sexual passion. In this picture, there is no shame. Before God, this man can be confident that he is fulfilling his responsibilities both as a *male* and as a *man*. He is directing his sexuality, his sex drive, and his physical embodiment toward the one-flesh relationship that is the perfect paradigm of God's intention in creation.

By contrast, consider another man. This man lives alone, or at least in a context other than holy marriage. Directed inwardly rather than outwardly, his sex drive has become an engine for lust and self-gratification. Pornography is the essence of his sexual interest and arousal. Rather than taking satisfaction in his wife, he looks at dirty pictures in order to be rewarded with sexual arousal that comes without responsibility, expectation, or demand. Arrayed before him are a seemingly endless variety of naked women, sexual images of explicit carnality, and a cornucopia of perversions intended to seduce the imagination and corrupt the soul.

This man need not be concerned with his physical appearance, his personal hygiene, or his moral character in the eyes of a wife. Without this structure and

accountability, he is free to take his sexual pleasure without regard for his unshaved face, his slothfulness, his halitosis, his body odor, and his physical appearance. He faces no requirement of personal respect, and no eyes gaze upon him in order to evaluate the seriousness and worthiness of his sexual desire. Instead, his eyes roam across the images of unblinking faces, leering at women who make no demands upon him, who never speak back, and who can never say no. There is no exchange of respect, no exchange of love, and nothing more than the using of women as sex objects for his individual and inverted sexual pleasure.

By logical consequence, he achieves sexual gratification at the expense of women who have been used and abused as commodified sex objects. He may imagine a sex act as he fulfills his physical pleasure, but he almost certainly does not imagine what it would mean to be *responsible* for this woman as husband and *accountable* to her as mate. He can sit in his soiled underwear, belching the remnants of last night's pizza, and engage in a pattern of one-handed sexual satisfaction while he "surfs the net" and forfeits his soul.

These two pictures of male sexuality are deliberately intended to drive home the point that every man must decide who he will be, whom he will serve, and how he will love. In the end, a man's decision about pornography is a decision about his soul, a decision about his marriage, a decision about his wife, and a decision about God.

Pornography is a slander against the goodness of God's creation and a corruption of this good gift God has given his creatures out of his own self-giving love. To abuse this gift is to weaken, not only the institution of marriage, but the fabric of civilization itself. To choose lust over love is to debase humanity and to worship the false god Priapus in the most brazen form of modern idolatry.

Just in case any of you have missed the point, let me conclude by making this issue perfectly clear. If you have been given the gift of celibacy, God intends that you never look upon a woman with sexual passion. The very essence of this gift is a freedom from lust and freedom from sexual sin. It is, we must all admit, a rare gift.

Guys, if you have not been given the gift of celibacy, then mark this truth, write it down, and engrave it in your hearts: God intends for you to see one and only one woman naked. You should approach your wedding night as the great unwrapping of a package both mysterious and precious. You are to arrive at your marriage bed with no pictures in your mind that instruct you sexually or stimulate you carnally. The picture of moral purity is of a man who knows only one woman until they are separated by death and receives her as both covenant partner, complement, and lover.

In reality, few men are likely to arrive at the marriage bed in such a state of moral innocence. Surrounded by a festival of erotic images and opportunities for lust, almost all men will bring illicit and ill-gotten images to the marital relationship. I'm speaking here, not just of the intentional use of pornography, but of the realities of living in postmodern America amidst such sexual explicitness and lasciviousness. This means that every man, young and old, must struggle against the tenor of the times and the temptations of the age. By God's grace, we must aim ourselves toward purity and claim the grace and power of Christ as our protection and only assurance.

The deliberate use of pornography is nothing less than the willful invitation of illicit lovers and objectified sex objects and forbidden knowledge into a man's heart, mind, and soul. The damage to the man's heart is beyond measure, and the cost in human misery will only be made clear on the Day of Judgment. From the moment a boy reaches

puberty until the day he is lowered into the ground, every man will struggle with lust.

Let us follow the biblical example and scriptural command that we make a covenant with our eyes lest we sin. In this society, we are called to be nothing less than a corps of the mutually accountable amidst a world that lives as if it will never be called to account.