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Book Review: *No Stones: Women Redeemed from Sexual Addiction*

By Marnie C. Ferree (InterVarsity, 2010)

REVIEWED BY MARGARET ENGLISH DE ALMINANA

Marnie Ferree presents a deeply moving and sometimes disturbing investigation of sexual abuse from the perspective of the injured, as one who was deeply wounded through sexual victimization; and the healer, as an actively working counselor and minister to those who have experienced similar abuse. And, as if such revelatory investigations from the first-person perspective were not difficult enough, Ferree takes the discussion to an entirely new depth of difficulty: she presents herself as the perpetrator as well.

Those who might benefit from this tangled complication of wounds and wounding, hurt and healing, through the investigation of these diversely difficult and painful perspectives are others who have been similarly wounded as well as other healers. These are the brave souls who dive into the depths of human darkness in order to provide some much-needed restoration and relief.

Part 1 begins with an exposé of the secret sin of sexual addiction. In her introduction to the subject, Ferree informs the reader that she, as a once-divorced and remarried woman, received a diagnosis of cervical cancer caused by a sexually transmitted disease. The event forced this wife and mother of two young children to admit that she'd been a sex addict since the age of fourteen—a sex addict involved in a long chain of illicit, adulterous affairs. Ferree paints a picture of her spouse as a good and loving husband who was completely unaware of this circumstance, victimized by the infidelity and bruised by the revelation.

Ferree began a journey of self-discovery that eventually led to a better understanding of herself as a sex addict, a pathway that would eventually permit enough healing in her life to allow her to bring healing into the lives of others. She unravels for the reader a painful story of sexual abuse and emotional abandonment by her father, a pastor who never remarried following her mother's death early in her life. Instead of ministering to his young daughter's needs, he shut himself off in increasing isolation that made it impossible for him to notice that a young man who had taken an interest in his ten-year-old female child did so for the purpose of sexual abuse. This misadventure and the brokenness it caused over many years fueled Ferree's lifetime of duplicity and promiscuity.

Ferree paints a vivid picture in part 1 of the secret life of a female sex addict. As with other addictions, such as alcoholism, Ferree describes the behavior in terms of a sickness, a disease from which one must be cured. She says, "Perhaps a helpful illustration is to compare sexual addiction to the disease of diabetes. While no one denies the clear biomedical nature of diabetes, we also understand the patient's responsibility to implement life-long choices in managing the disease" (32).

Ferree explores the many sexual messages absorbed by females throughout their lives through culture. Power, body image, subtle inducements to exhibitionism, love seeking—social and peer pressures all accost young females, molding self-images and behavior. She also investigates conflicting religious messages that are often equally inappropriate. For instance, the religious community sends a message that women are inferior: "The religious world also sends mixed messages about female sexuality. It encourages women to look sexy but condemns them for having sex. The church teaches it's positive to be feminine, frilly and flirtatious, but it's wrong to be sexually active" (38–39). Such messages lead to a culture of "technical virginity," a "setup for sexual failure" (39).

In part 2, Ferree continues to untangle the knot by addressing unhealthy families, the trauma of abandonment, the continuing pernicious impact of abuse and trauma, and the addict's core beliefs. In parts 3 and 4, Ferree presents the well-traveled tools of recovery, including understanding one's own feelings of abandonment, pain, and addictive history, as well as the benefits of counseling, twelve-step programs, and the like.

While I appreciated Ferree's compelling and stirring perspective, I must admit that I disagreed with several of her conclusions, which I felt were rooted in her deep pain and ongoing recovery. She said, "Sexual addiction is clearly more than simply sin. Addressing the problem through only religious solutions is incomplete and doomed to failure. All the prayer, Bible study, church attendance and repentance in the world won't change the course of a life-threatening disease" (53). "When we use prayer, Bible study or other religious acts as the only weapons against complex life problems like addiction, I believe we're using these spiritual tools as impotent religious Band-Aids" (54). "God intended them to be expressions of devotion and vehicles of intimacy with him. They're not meant to be punch-tickets for removing pain" (54).

Although I respect her position and understand what she intended to communicate, I also sense the unhealed remnants of her early spiritual disconnection and personal disappointment, which must have been considerable. My own work with prostitutes and addicts at a large inner-city jail in Orlando, Florida, do not bear out her conclusions.

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In fact, having walked alongside innumerable addicts and prostitutes with the rare opportunity of witnessing many who found recovery and many others who did not, I made some observations. I witnessed that a sexually broken and addicted inmate might recover in one of two ways: either with a genuine spiritual conversion experience coupled with a strong recovery plan, or solely with a genuine spiritual conversion experience coupled with the introduction of a strong church network, even when little or no formal recovery work was undertaken.

The common denominator in recovery, in my observation, was a genuine spiritual commitment. What I also noted was that, when a deeply sexually broken and addicted woman attempted to work through the recovery process without the concomitant spiritual experience, this pathway appeared more likely to fail. In fact, so common was this observation throughout the jail administration that it was noted by the highest ranking administrators. This broadly held, long-term observation of recovery success provided the chaplaincy with the systemic credibility to create and launch faith-based, in-jail recovery dorms.

At the same time, Ferree's experiences of sexual abuse and ongoing rejection by the church are a reproach that believers must come to terms with and address. I deeply regret her experiences with the church. Nevertheless, in my work in the trenches with deeply broken prostitutes and female addicts of all kinds, I also discovered no dearth of willing and eager souls ready to jump into the trenches alongside the chaplaincy to attempt to make a difference in the lives of the hurting. One might even say that this seemingly endless source of love and goodwill, backed up by faithful service to the very least among us, was a bright testimony to balance Ferree's story—what is truly good about the church.


Ferree writes, "Addressing the problem of addiction requires a dual approach: using every spiritual tool available and using every medical, behavioral and psychological tool, as well" (55). I fully agree with this evaluation. However, she also assessed that "the church has failed miserably, however, to encourage Christians to use other, more worldly tools to fight sinful behavior and addictive diseases. In fact, the church has often shamed those who used resources like therapy or medication or Twelve Step programs as treatment for their addictions" (55).

I must provide a statement of balance here again, using my own observations from the trenches, and rejoin that I did not experience this attitude. In fact, many of the individuals in all programs of recovery, counseling, and education were other believers who joined together with other professionals as a team to create a sometimes seamless network of help. Perhaps one of the great benefits of working in such a dark and difficult environment that, at times, those genuinely decent souls called to help are able to lay aside their personal differences for the benefit of others.

Ferree writes, "It's time (actually, it's way past time) for the church to stop throwing stones at women who are sexually addicted and instead, to encourage them toward informed ap-

proaches that are proven to help" (55). I couldn't agree with her more, and I would also add that it is also time for all of us to put away our burden of disappointment, competition, and shame and to stop throwing stones back at each other. The church has failed in ways far too numerous to count, but it has also risen up, at times, to shine a beacon of hope and light.

In conclusion, I believe Ferree is making an important statement regarding the need for greater help, healing, and acceptance by the church for women broken by sexual abuse. The church at its noblest and best, at its most forgiving and compassionate, is a force for great good. Christ alone, working through the hearts and minds of a skilled and caring network of faith, can offer genuine and full recovery to even the most broken and rejected among us. This is the miracle of the cross, a living reality at work through God's people.



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