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THE PORNOGRAPHY PANDEMIC: IMPLICATIONS, SCOPE AND SOLUTIONS FOR THE CHURCH IN THE POST-INTERNET AGE

Dillon A. Diaz
Southeastern University - Lakeland

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THE PORNOGRAPHY PANDEMIC: IMPLICATIONS, SCOPE AND SOLUTIONS FOR THE
CHURCH IN THE POST-INTERNET AGE

by

Dillon Amadeus Diaz

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Dedication

To Dr. Gordon Miller, whose Thesis class I accidentally missed on the 12th of March, 2018. I asked if I missed anything important; he replied, “Of course you missed something important. My class is always important.”

To Dr. Joseph Davis, my thesis advisor and greatest inspiration in the defense of the true faith, whose words still ring true in my ears: “You either worship a God of revelation, or a God of imagination.”

To Abigail Sprinkle, my beautiful bride-to-be, lovely beyond compare. One night, I told her every wicked thing I had ever done, and she looked at me with a smile that betrayed everything I had just confessed. With love written in her eyes, she looked at me and said, “That’s not who you are anymore, and I don’t see you any different. You are a new creation in Christ.” Not many moons later, on the 19th of June, 2017, I bent down on one knee and asked her if she would magnify the Lord with me forever; she gasped, and covered her mouth as her eyes opened wide, with tears streaming down her cheeks. She nodded: “Yes.” I would thank her for seeing every part of my soul and loving it all. She convinced me that I am not a beast, but a prince—though, next to her, I remain a pauper still.

To my dear mother, Nora Rosas, whom I owe my life. She worked three jobs during my entire life to raise me and my brother. She never gave up on me, even when I had given up on myself. She taught me the meaning of sacrificial, unconditional love.

To Pastor Kevin Taylor, my spiritual father in the Lord, who challenged me to give my life fully to Christ and baptized me in the Gulf of Mexico. I owe him my desire to serve Christ through ministry all my days.

To Robert White, my brother in the Lord, who has stood by me as a faithful friend in my darkest hour, and has taught me the meaning of the proverb: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”

To Solomon, whose wisdom was unsurpassed among all the kings of ancient Israel. He taught me the beginning of wisdom, which is the fear of the Lord, as well as the danger of the forbidden woman. His proverbs were the first of the Holy Scriptures I read in earnest; to him I owe my love for God’s Word, my desire for righteousness, and my hatred of sin.

To Christ, whom I owe everything. He saw me in the utter ruin of my transgressions, but had mercy on me. I forsook Him for worldly pleasures, and deserved death for my depravities toward Him and His beloved daughters; but where my wicked hands should have been cut off, He spread His own on the cross to pay the price for my sins and to grant me eternal life. To Jesus belongs all the credit, and all the glory, and all the honor, and all the praise, now and forever! Amen.

To the men who have walked alongside me and have invited me into their lives to aid in the battle against pornography, which every man faces. Keep fighting!

And, finally, to every daughter of God whom I have ever hurt, directly or indirectly. I don’t deserve your forgiveness, but I swear I will spend the rest of my days defending you whom I once exploited.



Abstract

Pornography, recently declared a public health risk, has become an increasingly large problem for society, in particular, the church. The users of pornography span across the board, including men, women, adolescents, children, and even clergy. Pornography has been shown to have detrimental effects in the marriage and family. It also presents a distorted view of sexuality, increasing violent sexual attitudes and other deviancies. As the pornographic industry targets younger audiences, they are more easily hooked due to psychological phenomena and physical changes to the brain that result from pornographic use. All these issues find expression in the life of the church, where believers are ensnared in a sinful lifestyle that causes spiritual, sexual and familial dysfunction, damages their witness, and cripples their effectiveness for the gospel. All the while, pornography continues to degrade and abuse women. In order to mitigate these problems, the church will need to redeem sexuality through discipleship, reclaiming language, counseling, software, spiritual discipline, and accountability.

KEY WORDS: Pornography, church, psychology, sexuality, internet, marriage, family, children, adolescents, men, women, clergy, abuse, masturbation, counseling, accountability, discipline, spirituality, shame.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Some have called it “the drug of the new millennium;”¹ others, today’s “forbidden fruit” of choice.² At this very moment, somewhere in the United States, pornography is being both produced and consumed at literally a nonstop pace, in an industry that makes more money than the combined annual revenue of Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple, and Netflix.³ Notably, in the state of Florida, pornography has just been named a public health crisis, as House Representative Spano comments, “Research has found a correlation between pornography use and mental and physical illnesses, difficulty forming and maintaining intimate relationships, unhealthy brain development and cognitive function, and deviant, problematic or dangerous sexual behavior.”⁴ Like the insidious Serpent of Eden, pornography has stealthily slithered into the homes of hapless Christians across the world. Awad writes, “Half of America’s male congregation attend Sunday morning worship, lead Bible studies, assist in youth and children ministries, and become deacons and leaders while [pornography] grips their hearts and eyes like a deadly python.”⁵ Just as the quintessential temptress Delilah seduced the mighty Samson into revealing the gleaming chink in his armor, an array of appetizing mistresses on a screen have enticed even the strongest-willed Christians, promising pleasure, comfort, and companionship,

¹ Kastleman, Mark. *Internet Pornography: The Drug of the New Millennium*. Orem, UT: Granite Publishing and Distribution, 2002.

² Cannon, Ralph A. “Pornography, Sex and the Church.” *The Christian Century* 80, no. 18 (May 1, 1963): 576–79.

³ Younce, Craig L. “The Significance of Developing Core Counseling Competencies in Pastoral Care Ministry.” D.Min., Liberty University, 2012, 155.

⁴ Darrah, Nicole. “Florida House Declares Porn a Public Health Risk.” Text.Article. Fox News, February 21, 2018. <http://www.foxnews.com/health/2018/02/21/florida-house-declares-pornography-public-health-risk.html>.

⁵ Awad, Farid. “Pornography Addiction: A Cognitive Approach in Combating the Lies Christian Males Believe.” D.Min., Liberty University, 2010.

but delivering death—death to their marriages, families, careers, sexual satisfaction, and motivation for the Gospel of Christ.

“The number one issue that men would seek pastoral counsel for in the church where I pastored was the struggle with pornography. It was so great that all other issues combined for which one might see a pastor did not equal the number of people seeking pastoral guidance for this issue,”⁶ said Dr. Joe Davis, professor of theology at Southeastern University. The cruel irony of the pornography crisis is this: in an alarming reversal of morality, Christians (68% of church-going males and 30% of females)⁷, whom Christ assigned to reach the lost, have instead swallowed the bait of adult filmmakers (read, traffickers) to perpetuate the industry’s success and directly participate in its exploitation. With studies showing that pornography may be more addicting than heroin,⁸ viewers simultaneously and paradoxically become both the captives of sexual addiction as well as the captors and perpetrators of every abuse that occurs to people in the videos they consume, as their clicks, site-visits and memberships feed money into the pockets of sexual slavers. Since the proliferation of the internet, pornography has become the Achilles Heel of the modernized church, upon which the strokes of the enemy cause it to stumble in the heat of the battle for the fate of the world— a problem that can only be overcome when the power of Christ meets the willingness of men and women to be changed.

Still, not all are convinced of the danger of pornography, and some even purport its benefits. Though scholars fall on both sides of the spectrum in the pornography debate, an overwhelming amount of research points to the detriments of pornography, not only to the

⁶ Joseph Davis (Professor, Southeastern University), interviewed by Dillon Diaz at Southeastern University on January 24, 2018.

⁷ Archebelle, Carol. “What the Porn Industry Doesn’t Want the Church to Know.” *Christianity Today* 61, no. 9 (November 2017): 2–2.

⁸ Younce, 162.

sentiments of Christians but to society at large. From a Christian perspective, this widespread problem is part of Satan's insidious plot to subvert the church in the 21st century for his purposes— to kill, steal, and destroy. Pornography's siren song beckons Christian men, women and children to delve deeper and deeper into an inescapable pit, ravaging their own lives as much as the women being ravaged on camera. The silence of pastors, parents, professors, and politicians on this matter is palpable, but the time has now come to expose the unfruitful works of darkness.

II. METHODOLOGY

This thesis will consist of a literature review of what few resources have been published regarding pornography, sexual addiction, maladaptation in the church and home, consequences of the sex trade industry, and more. Relatively little research has been conducted regarding these subjects, particularly regarding the ill fate of women trapped in the pornographic industry. Yet this subject may be the most pertinent, unspoken subject that affects the lives of millions. This thesis will also propose the statement that pornography is the greatest unspoken danger that threatens the church in the age of the internet. This research will suggest several questions:

- Why is pornography such a problem? Just how bad is it?
- Who are the various groups of people affected by the pornographic industry?
- Where can sexual addicts turn for help?
- What can be done to alleviate the problem?
- What can overcoming pornography mean for the Great Commission?

These are the questions that will be considered in this thesis, as the problem is explored and exposed. The goal in this research will be to define the problem, demonstrate the gravity of

the situation, review relevant literature on the subject, and provide practical solutions that can be utilized in the church, home and elsewhere. There will also be appropriate theological reflections included on these topics, based on Scripture.

III. SCOPE—THE PORNOGRAPHIC PANDEMIC

A. The Church and the Sexual Revolution

The church, by and large, is not talking about sex. This has been the rule for centuries, with few exceptions. Too often, when the subject *has* been addressed, the church has implicitly portrayed sex as being dirty, worldly, or unholy, leading to a systemic dysfunction in the church that scholar Laura Nelson deems “sexual anorexia.”⁹ Historically, sex has been seen by the church, at best, as a mere concession by God to humanity to satisfy the animal cravings of the flesh. Common themes in church doctrine (whether spoken or unspoken) have included shaming of sexual relations and applause of self-denial as a virtue. If there is any clerical figure who is most commonly associated with these trends, it is the fourth-century theologian Augustine,¹⁰ who, prior to converting to Christianity, had a committed relationship with a concubine who bore his only son. After his conversion, the saint abandoned his partner and took a vow of celibacy, promising to never again partake of what he deemed to be inherently sinful. His views would prove to be quite influential on the church’s view of sex for nearly two millennia.

Since then, western culture has effectively re-written all the rules of sexuality, beginning with the sexual revolution of the latter half of the 20th century. Now, in a time when traditional values have been swallowed up in an ocean of sexual novelty, the church’s anti-sexual themes have proved quite unfortunate. Any church-driven efforts to constrain sexuality and/or avoid talk

⁹ Nelson, Laura. “Sexual Addiction versus Sexual Anorexia and the Church’s Impact.” *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 10, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2003): 179.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 186.

on the subject have notably backfired.¹¹ The more negatively sex is viewed, the more Christians experience shame and confusion; yet, the more sexual feelings are denied, the more impulses arise for sexual gratification from any—and every— source.¹² Thus, the church has historically failed to provide Christians with a realistic or healthy perspective on wholesome sex, but has only added to the confusion in a culture saturated with mixed messages. These issues will help explain the explosion of internet pornography usage among Christians during the age of the internet.

Western culture (American culture in particular) has become hyper-sexualized. Reverend Ralph A. Cannon, Doctor of Ministry, comments on the role of the church in the midst of such an over-sexualized society. The average Christian is torn between everything they have heard from the church regarding sex and their own nagging curiosity to explore for themselves.¹³ This creates tension that amplifies and intensifies sexual desires through a cycle of curiosity and repressed feelings. The pornographic industry is quite aware of this struggle, and they capitalize on it,¹⁴ intentionally designing advertisements and content to lure in the sexually starved, designing interactive material to provide a false sense of intimacy via simulated company. This caters to the very real human need for meaning, purpose, and relationship.¹⁵ In this virtual reality, curiosity is satisfied and expectations are met and exceeded through hyper-novelty, an unlimited horizon of new experiences. Cannon deems this profitable enterprise a “massive and

¹¹ Nelson, 187.

¹² Ibid, 186.

¹³ Cannon, Ralph A. “Pornography, Sex and the Church.” *The Christian Century* 80, no. 18 (May 1, 1963): 578.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

inhumane assault on peoples' emotions."¹⁶ This is a fair description of the reality and utter pervasiveness of the problem.

Consequently, pornography has affected social consciousness to no small degree. One of the main threats that the pornographic industry poses to society is the alarmingly rapid undermining of values that it encourages, replacing them with a perverted ideology in which women are mere objects to be used (and abused) for sexual pleasure. In this highly-distorted system of belief, there is no such thing as love, but only erotic desire, which is the highest ideal; sex is not an act of sacrificial, committed love, but merely a visceral expression of biology.¹⁷

B. Psychology

How does the ordinary, heterosexual male progress from a reading a "softcore" magazine to finding himself consuming hardcore videos involving violence, abuse, children, animals, homosexuality, the occult, and more? According to Park, "a 2016 study reported that half of men surveyed had moved to material 'not previously interesting to them or that they considered disgusting.'"¹⁸ The short answer is: dopamine. Just as with any drug addiction, the pornography viewer finds him or herself addicted to surges of dopamine, a pleasure-inducing neurotransmitter released in the brain's hypothalamus¹⁹ upon such highly-rewarding activities as eating, consuming drugs, or having sex. As the brain is flooded with unnatural amounts of neurotransmitters via drugs, binge eating, or the sheer sexual novelty accessible through rapid

¹⁶ Cannon, 578.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Park, Brian Y., Gary Wilson, Jonathan Berger, Matthew Christman, Bryn Reina, Frank Bishop, Warren P. Klam, and Andrew P. Doan. "Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions? A Review with Clinical Reports." *Behavioral Sciences* (2076-328X) 6, no. 3 (September 2016). 13.

¹⁹ Mandal, Ananaya. "What Is Dopamine?" *News-Medical.net*, January 10, 2010. <https://www.news-medical.net/health/What-is-Dopamine.aspx>.

succession of images and videos of fantasy partners found online, the dopamine receptors in the brain are “blunted.”²⁰ Like a dulled axe, these damaged neurotransmitter receptors require doubled force to achieve the same result—thus, the need for higher frequency, higher sensation, and constant novelty. Subsequently, according to Costa, “The idea that dopamine modulates novelty seeking is supported by evidence that novel stimuli excite dopamine neurons and activate brain regions receiving dopaminergic input.”²¹ The result: “dopamine [drives] exploratory behavior in novel environments.”²²

Thus, one of the more frightening trends in the use of pornography is the tendency for users to be gradually drawn into realms that transcend what might be considered normal, where more extreme forms of material are used. This phenomenon is illustrated by James G. Pfaus, Ph.D., who spearheads a scientific study of great proportions relating animal behavior to human sexuality. Pfaus asserts that “sexual behavior [has] similar processes and endpoints for all mammalian species...”²³ Thus, by testing rodents,²⁴ Pfaus makes observations that are highly accurate and notably correspond to human behavior, so much so that “animal models of human sexual response can be used successfully as preclinical tools.”²⁵ This means that findings on animal sexual behavior can be useful in diagnosing unhealthy human sexual behaviors. This will prove highly beneficial in examining psychological processes in pornographic use.

²⁰ Trifilieff, Pierre, Fabien Ducrocq, Suzanne van der Veldt, and Diana Martinez. “Blunted Dopamine Transmission in Addiction: Potential Mechanisms and Implications for Behavior.” *Seminars in Nuclear Medicine* 47, no. 1 (January 2017): 64–74.

²¹ Costa, Vincent D., Valery L. Tran, Janita Turchi, and Bruno B. Averbeck. “Dopamine Modulates Novelty Seeking Behavior during Decision Making.” *Behavioral Neuroscience* 128, no. 5 (October 2014): 556–66.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ PhD, James G. Pfaus, Tod E. Kippin, and Genaro Coria-Avila. “What Can Animal Models Tell Us about Human Sexual Response?” *Annual Review of Sex Research* 14, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

Pfaus demonstrates fascinating occurrences in animal sexual behavior through scientific experiments. One theme addressed at length in these experiments was the concept of Pavlovian conditioning, or forming unnatural mental associations between a neutral stimulus and a negative or positive consequence.²⁶ For example, rats were exposed to a neutral almond scent while simultaneously being injected with a chemical that made them sick—this made them associate the scent with the feeling of sickness, particularly when the conditioning began at an early age.²⁷ Then, when the scientists applied the neutral almond scent to female rats, males were less likely to mate with them.²⁸ Thus, “odors can become ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on their circumstances.”²⁹ This will be useful in extrapolating conclusions about human sexual behavior.

Just how important could implications of such animal studies be? In one particularly shocking experiment, male rats were presented with receptive females coated with a ghastly chemical called cadaverine, which is extracted from decaying animal carcasses, emitting a highly repulsive odor. Having no alternative choices of mates, the male rats copulated with these foul-scented females, and after enough time, they began to show no preference when presented with scented and unscented females.³⁰ By contrast, unconditioned male rats exposed suddenly to a wooden dowel coated with the scent avoided contact with the object at all costs and would even bury the object in bedding simply to avoid the odor.³¹ This experiment was groundbreaking in its implications—by linking what would normally be a highly repulsive odor with sexual gratification, even the vilest of things becomes tolerable and quite unnoticeable after enough

²⁶ Pfaus, 43.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

exposure. This illustrates the horrifying possibility of a human becoming numbed to what would ordinarily be considered repulsive and immoral in viewing pornographic material, if only to achieve sexual gratification. This helps explain how an ordinary person can be conditioned into tolerating the most extreme, revolting forms of pornography, especially as “normal” forms of pornography start to lose their novelty after constant exposure.

“Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body—” This is the strong admonishment of the apostle Paul (I Cor. 6:18). Surely, this is nowhere more clear than physical changes that occur in the brain due to pornography use, which is accompanied by psychological changes and sexual dysfunction. One study showed a link between pornography use and decreased grey matter in the brain in the right caudate of the striatum, “an area of the brain associated with reward processing and motivation.”³² This lines up with anecdotal evidence that pornography desensitizes the brain’s natural sexual response and kills motivation, especially to seek authentic intimacy. Furthermore, “Men who watched more porn also showed less activity in another area of the striatum, called the left putamen, which usually lights up in response to sexual images.”³³ In other words, it took more stimulation to achieve a response in the brain. Finally, “Heavy porn consumers also had a weaker connection between the striatum and the prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain associated with decision-making,”³⁴ which lead to unwise choices such as drug use. Still, it is not proven whether these physical differences were caused by pornography use, or

³² Cooper-White, Macrina. “Watching Porn Linked to Less Gray Matter in the Brain.” *Huffington Post*, June 2, 2014, sec. Science. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/02/porn-less-gray-matter-brain_n_5418607.html.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

whether these characteristics preexisted and caused the individual to be more prone to pornography use.

Still, there is one indisputable change that occurs to the brain as a result of pornography addiction: as extreme, prolonged stimulation causes neurotransmitter receptors to become dulled, described previously, authentic sexuality begins to lose its meaning, to the point where many men are starting to prefer pornography and masturbation to live sex with a human being, as Carvalheira describes, “[self-pleasure] allows the avoidance of a demanding investment in an intimate relationship... a very attractive solution for some men who are pursuing an uncomplicated, uninvolved experience of sexual pleasure...”³⁵ Furthermore, according to Park, these changes create an inseparable link in the brain between sexual arousal and pornography, which “do not readily translate to real-life partner situations.”³⁶ Because pornography allows a person to “maintain high levels of sexual arousal, and concomitant elevated dopamine, for extended periods due to unlimited novel content,”³⁷ the brain is physically rewired, due to “long-lasting neuroplastic changes in the NAc critical for enhanced wanting of [sexual reward].”³⁸ Another mere human being, much less the same human being for years of marriage, simply cannot provide the same “high” as pornography, as sustained psychosexual rewiring “may result in a diminished erectile response during partnered sexual interactions.”³⁹ Park continues, “When high stimulation expectations are not met, partnered sexual stimulation is

³⁵ Carvalheira, Ana, Bente Træen, Aleksandar Stulhofer, and Bente Træen. “Masturbation and Pornography Use among Coupled Heterosexual Men with Decreased Sexual Desire: How Many Roles of Masturbation?” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 41, no. 6 (November 2015): 626–35.

³⁶ Park, Brian Y., Gary Wilson, Jonathan Berger, Matthew Christman, Bryn Reina, Frank Bishop, Warren P. Klam, and Andrew P. Doan. “Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions? A Review with Clinical Reports.” *Behavioral Sciences (2076-328X)* 6, no. 3 (September 2016). 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

ineffective—” thus, the growing number of men who are finding real sex less rewarding than artificial, as live women fail to meet expectations.⁴⁰

Nowhere is all this more apparent than Japan, which makes for an interesting case study on the effects of a technologically-driven society riddled with pornography. In a nation where birth rates have dropped to the point where adult diapers outsell baby diapers, more than 25% of males aged 16-24 live without sex, finding it unappealing, uninteresting or too complicated compared to pornography, whom society has labeled “herbivores,” or, literally, “grass-eaters.”⁴¹ Many of these men find themselves not only satisfied with a sex-free life, but they also grow unable to relate with or even be attracted to live women, such as “one man in his early 30s, a virgin, who can't get sexually aroused unless he watches female robots on a game similar to Power Rangers.”⁴² But there is hope: “Decreasing or extinguishing conditioned responses to artificial stimuli potentially restored attraction and sexual performance with partners.”⁴³ This topic will be explored further in the section below, entitled “Reclaiming Healthy Sexuality.”

C. Children, Adolescents and Young Adults

The implications of the previous section concerning psychology are rather frightening, especially considering how psychological conditioning from an early age increases the effects exponentially, as the brain fixates on pornography while it is still developing. Park notes, “The younger the age at which men first began regular use of Internet pornography, and the greater their preference for it over partnered sex, the less enjoyment they report from partnered sex, and

⁴⁰ Park, 14.

⁴¹ Haworth, Abigail. “Why Have Young People in Japan Stopped Having Sex?” *The Observer*, October 20, 2013, sec. World news. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/20/young-people-japan-stopped-having-sex>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Park, 15.

the higher their current Internet pornography use.”⁴⁴ This makes the occurrence of pornographic addiction among youths even more alarming. Pornography has grown an inescapably widespread presence on the internet, so much so that 90% of children as early as eight years old have been exposed to pornography—and almost always unintentionally.⁴⁵ Dick Thornburgh of the U.S. National Research Council led an exhaustive study on pornography usage among youth in 2002, finding that 16 to 30 percent of traffic on pornography sites was made up of children under the age of 18.⁴⁶ This was attributed in part to the enormous saturation of the internet with sexual images. The study found that 74% of everyday commercial sites had explicit content on the first page of the site in the form of banner ads to other sites, 66% of which did not have any sort of warning about adult content.⁴⁷ These statistics are disturbing, reflecting a totally unsafe atmosphere of the internet world for youth.

These youths are bombarded with sexual images anywhere they access the internet; nowhere is safe for them. Such a high volume of ads leading to adult sites draw in a wide audience of premature viewers in just about any location imaginable. The most common places minors access pornography include the home (73%), school (73%) and another person’s home (68%); other settings include public libraries (32%), internet cafes, after school programs, and even museums.⁴⁸ To make matters worse, the vast majority of these children weren’t looking for pornography; it was looking for them. To elaborate, 71% of adolescents aged 15-17 reported stumbling across pornography accidentally online,⁴⁹ and even 31% of children (ages 10-17)

⁴⁴ Park, 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 155.

⁴⁶ Thornburgh, Dick, Herbert Lin, and National Research Council (U.S.). *Youth, Pornography, and the Internet*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2002. 78.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 128.

⁴⁹ Thornburgh, 133.

reported having unwanted encounters with pornography on the internet. Regrettably, most adolescents do not make it to adulthood without involuntarily being exposed to pornography.

Young adults comprise the single largest demographic of individuals addicted to pornography. According to the Barna Group, “89% of teens, and 95% of young adults say they [talk about pornography] in a neutral, accepting, or encouraging way.”⁵⁰ The statistics on pornography use among even Christian college students at evangelical schools are shocking. Paul O. Chelsen, Ph.D., found that 79.3% of these students accessed pornography at some point during the year,⁵¹ and 61.1% reported accessing pornography regularly during the week.⁵² Other studies have shown figures of anywhere from roughly 30% to 90% of male college students reporting accessing pornography to some degree regularly.⁵³ Chelsen references findings that these students “reported feeling isolated from God and others, as well as... shame and experiencing a negative impact on academic performance.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, upon comparing themselves to the actors seen in pornography, these students developed a poorer view of their own bodies and lower confidence of their own sexual “value.”⁵⁵ These disastrous tendencies demand a response from university leadership.

What influenced these young men to engage in use of pornography? Factors that increased likelihood to access pornography were higher amounts of time spent online in general, higher number of past sexual partners, lower self-identification as “evangelical,” earlier exposure

⁵⁰ “The Porn Phenomenon.” Barna Group, February 5, 2016. <https://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/>.

⁵¹ Chelsen, Paul O. “An Examination of Internet Pornography Usage among Male Students at Evangelical Christian Colleges.” Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago, 2011. 118.

⁵² Ibid, 119.

⁵³ Ibid, 120-121.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 120.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

to pornography, and even higher year in college.⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, higher number of hours spent accessing pornography per week were associated with higher levels of feelings of guilt.⁵⁷ Yet 77.1% of these same men believed that accessing pornography is “never justifiable.”⁵⁸ This explains the feelings of guilt, as students violated an inner moral system as well as an external, institutional one.⁵⁹

Why don't these males simply break free of their addictions by their own willpower? Most of these students have been taught that their actions are wrong and believe it wholeheartedly, yet they struggle immensely. Myles Chisholm and Terry Gall, Ph. D., research the role of shame in pornographic addiction among religious males. These scholars hold that there is a vital difference between mere guilt and full-blown shame: while guilt says, “I've done evil,” by contrast, shame says, “I *am* evil.”⁶⁰ Shame is a maladaptive response that holds men captive in a vicious cycle of self-loathing and relapse. Porn addicts resort to the pleasure of pornography to divert their attention away from their own shame, which then feeds back into their self-loathing. Thus, the men with the most burning hatred for themselves because of their actions have the most difficulty overcoming pornography addiction.

Spirituality plays a paradoxical role in this cycle of shame. While one study related low religiosity with pornography use, another study showed that religiosity, while affecting self-perceptions of porn addicts, “was not predictive of frequency of pornography use.” In other words, while religious men feel worse about their addictions, they score no higher points on the

⁵⁶ Chelsen, 123-127.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 124.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 127.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 129.

⁶⁰ Chisholm, Myles, and Terry Gall. “Shame and the X-Rated Addiction: The Role of Spirituality in Treating Male Pornography Addiction.” *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 22, no. 4 (2015): 261.

purity scale than the rest of society. Still, another study showed that “religious/spiritual beliefs and practices are effective deterrents of pornography use [if] they are practiced for their intrinsic value or meaning rather than extrinsic or social value.”⁶¹ This makes sense, as two further studies indicate that pornography disrupted spirituality and one’s relationship with God.⁶² Thus, spirituality has a complex relationship with shame and pornography use.

D. Pastors

To whom will these young ones turn for guidance on these matters? Their pastors? Unfortunately, the clergy are not immune to these temptations themselves—in fact, some scholars argue that the lure of pornography is particularly poignant for the overworked, underpaid minister. One such scholar is Zeba S. Ahmad, contributing to the renowned *Journal of Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*. According to his work, pornography’s allure can be attributed to the “Triple-A Engine,” including affordability, accessibility, and anonymity.⁶³ This temptation proved to be strong when a study was done on sexual habits of ministers. Upon interviewing a sample population of pastors, 37% reported pornography being a present temptation, and 15% “met the criteria for cybersex addiction.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, “10% of individuals admitted to inpatient treatment for sexual addiction are members of the Christian clergy.” This is particularly frightening simply because of the amount of visibility and influence these leaders have, with the ability to do much good or harm too many people. The confidence and trust of the people in their pastor exerts pressure on them to do what is right.

⁶¹ Chisholm, 263.

⁶² *Ibid.* 261.

⁶³ Ahmad, Zeba S., John Thoburn, Kristen L. Perry, Meghan McBrearty, Sadie Olson, and Ginger Gunn. “Prevalence Rates of Online Sexual Addiction among Christian Clergy.” *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 22, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 344.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

This pressure may add to the problem. According to Ahmad, “pastors seem to be at an increased risk for developing online sexual addiction given the amount of time spent in isolation.” Leadership can be lonely, and many pastors lack not only genuine personal relationships with others, but are also expected to be “self-sufficient” and are often left without anyone to pastor them—not to mention “unstructured work hours [that] can lead to free time to browse the internet.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, the anonymity and availability of internet pornography is particularly tempting for pastors who can use it at any time as a “sexual outlet.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, the affordability of online pornography allows pastors’ appetites to be sated on a budget.⁶⁷ Unhelpfully, the high visibility and pressure for moral integrity makes pastors afraid to confess their struggles to anyone; to do so would mean to face the very real threat of losing their job and being totally disgraced.⁶⁸ In Ahmad’s study, the highest percentage of respondents (50%) admitted to feelings of guilt and desire to change, and yet the lowest percentage of respondents out of any category reported seeking out others for help (23%).⁶⁹ Accordingly, pastors are perhaps one of Satan’s biggest targets and worst victims to this type of sexual addiction.

E. Women, Marriage and Family

Perhaps the greatest myth concerning pornography is that it is a “man’s problem”—but this is simply not true, as the ones who suffer most are often the wives and children of addicted men. Pornography’s effects on marriage and family have been repeatedly shown to be nothing but destructive. Manning writes an exhaustive work on the detrimental effects of pornography on marriage, using empirical studies to list various trends and correlations. She relates the use of

⁶⁵ Ahmad, 346-347.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 347.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 351.

internet pornography to negative consequences in marriage and the home. These trends apply not only to the members of the marital union, but also their children, and society at large. One area in which these affects can be seen is divorce: her research showed that pornography caused or at least exacerbated preexisting factors contributing to marital breakdown. These factors included decreased sexual satisfaction, decreased sexual intimacy, and infidelity.⁷⁰ Furthermore, individuals who viewed pornography were likelier to form distorted perceptions about relationships and sexuality; devalue marriage, monogamy, and child rearing; display aggression and trivialization of rape; and more.⁷¹ Marital relationships were threatened by pornography, with weakened economic, emotional, and relational stability; further problems were underlined with regards to the children of couples affected by pornography.⁷² These children were threatened by family instability, divorce, and exposure to sexually explicit content, which led to myriad other problems.⁷³ Manning's conclusion was that pornography is rapidly changing or at least catalyzing a pre-existing change occurring in society, as its use has been associated with numerous undesirable trends.

Telling the story of Christian couples struggling with this issue, White illustrates a point: "Christian couples are relatively undereducated about healthy sexuality."⁷⁴ What little education they have may be from pornography itself, which does not accurately depict authentic sexuality. Men try to emulate what they see on a screen, thinking that this is the norm for sexuality, and they receive from other men the implicit message that pornography is acceptable.⁷⁵ This then

⁷⁰ Manning, Jill C. "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Marriage and the Family: A Review of the Research." *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 13, no. 2-3 (September 1, 2006): 139.

⁷¹ Ibid, 135.

⁷² Ibid, 156.

⁷³ Ibid, 157.

⁷⁴ White, Mark A, and Thomas G Kimball. 2009. "Attributes of Christian Couples with a Sexual Addiction to Internet Pornography." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 28 (4): 355.

⁷⁵ White, 355.

generates an equal but opposite response from their partners, who are forced to compete with a series of sexual experiences that the man has participated in through a screen; thinking, “if only I were good enough,” women see themselves as the problem.⁷⁶

This was reinforced by men having sexually conditioned responses due to psychosexual conditioning. In other words, men become highly desensitized to authentic sexuality the more they become conditioned to derive sexual pleasure from a screen, as one study showed that “sexual satisfaction with partners, as measured by affection, physical appearance, sexual curiosity, and sexual performance, was inversely related to pornography use.”⁷⁷ Thus, pornography decreased partner’s satisfaction with each other in areas across the board.

Relational attachment in romantic relationships was also moderated by pornography use. As opposed to men with healthy styles of relational attachment, men who demonstrated avoidant or anxious attachment were shown to have a greater likelihood of using pornography as a pleasurable means of escapism.⁷⁸ To make matters worse, the study demonstrated that gender role conflict and avoidant/anxious attachment operated in a positive-feedback loop, as one problem exacerbated the other, and vice versa; these two problems, in turn, contributed to decreased “relationship quality and sexual satisfaction.”⁷⁹

These trends are compounded by further problems. In relationships affected by pornography use, both men and women experience isolation. Not only does pornography destroy marital intimacy, but it also causes an emotional rift to open up between partners, leaving both

⁷⁶ White, 355.

⁷⁷ Park, 13.

⁷⁸ Szymanski, Dawn M., and Destin N. Stewart-Richardson. “Psychological, Relational, and Sexual Correlates of Pornography Use on Young Adult Heterosexual Men in Romantic Relationships.” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 65-66.

⁷⁹ Szymanski, 76.

sides estranged from the other across a wide chasm of regret. Men, feeling unable to confess their problems without being seen as perverts or sinners, felt it impossible to become vulnerable with their partners; women, if they knew about the problem, felt unable to share their struggles with outsiders because of their unwillingness to “expose” their husbands’ sin.⁸⁰ Thus, pornography has been shown to have devastating effects on intimate relationships for both men and women.

Yet out of the two, women are the greater victims. This is because, more often than not, the males in society have participated in some degree with the aggressive sexual acts demonstrated by the pornographic industry. The all-too-common trend in the pornographic industry is the unfortunate, degrading depiction of women as sex objects, sending viewers the message that women, as their basic role, are little more than slaves.⁸¹ Men who viewed pornography were found to have greater gender role conflict, characterized by aggression, rape-myth acceptance, and more.⁸² If all the collective minds of males in the modernized world were to be united into one, that mind would have attitudes shaped by a long history of sexual experiences in the fantasy world of pornography where one has the vicarious power to do anything, any time, to anyone—particularly females.

Furthermore, pornography was clearly shown to have a negative effect on sexual perceptions and attitudes, having real consequences for families. Individuals who view pornography are likelier to form unhealthy beliefs regarding relationships and sexuality. These include devaluing marriage in general, devaluing monogamy, and devaluing child rearing; also, there is an increased tendency among pornography users to display aggression, to trivialize rape,

⁸⁰ White, 356.

⁸¹ Szymanski, 65.

⁸² Ibid.

and more.⁸³ Marital relationships are severely threatened by pornography, with weakened economic, emotional, and relational stability, and even further problems related to children of couples being affected by pornography.⁸⁴ These children are threatened by family instability, divorce, and exposure to sexually explicit content, which leads to myriad other problems in their psychosexual/emotional development.⁸⁵ Manning's conclusion is that pornography is rapidly changing or at least catalyzing a pre-existing change occurring in our world, as its use has been associated with numerous undesirable trends. Her work is very useful in identifying these problems that arise in marriage as a direct result of pornography use.

Another false assumption is that men are the only ones consuming pornography. The Barna Group identifies that “more than half of women 25 and under ... seek out porn [at some point in their lives] ... and one-third seek it out at least monthly...”⁸⁶ Furthermore, Washington Times reports that 1 out of 6 women, including Christian women, confessed being addicted to pornography; in addition, it was estimated that 30% of internet porn traffic was attributed to women.⁸⁷ These women face the unique shame of struggling with an issue so commonly attributed only to the opposite sex; porn is deemed a “male problem,” compounding the embarrassment and feelings of failure or abnormality for the women who are addicted and feel that they have nowhere to turn for help. To make matters worse, women who view pornography are also more prone to being victims of nonconsensual sex.⁸⁸

⁸³ Manning, 135.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 156.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 157.

⁸⁶ “The Porn Phenomenon.” Barna Group, February 5, 2016. <https://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/>.

⁸⁷ Duke, Rachel B. “More Women Lured to Pornography Addiction.” *The Washington Times*. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/jul/11/more-women-lured-to-pornography-addiction/>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

F. Pornography's Victims and Vindicators

After the pornography industry exploded, the pornographic industry began demanding more extreme and violent sex acts to satiate consumers' thirst for novelty at the expense of women involved.⁸⁹ Testimonies of women who were abused during the making of pornographic films are scandalous. On set, women were involuntarily choked, hair ripped, beaten across the floor, crying hysterically and begging cameramen to stop filming, while male actors were encouraged to hit harder and "hurt the women for the effect of the video."⁹⁰ These stories are disturbingly common, leaving women with no power to do anything about it, being shamed by other actresses if they speak out publicly against the abuse they suffered in the industry.⁹¹ Tyler argues that, if anything, pornography is an even more wicked form of prostitution, as women are demanded to suffer actions that damage their health, being penetrated for long periods of time, performing acts that would not be typical of traditional prostitution such as double and triple penetration, being verbally degraded and psychologically broken down for the mere novelty of the film, and exacting a heavy physical toll on their bodies.⁹² Furthermore, their devastation is all immortalized through film, opening "new dimensions of pain" as evidence of their utter humiliation is forever exposed and replayed.

Sadly, the overwhelming majority of academic work and interest has focused on the viewers of pornography and their families, but few have ever stopped to consider the women themselves who have resigned themselves to filmed sexual exploitation.⁹³ Tyler argues that

⁸⁹ Tyler, Meagan. "Harms of Production: Theorising Pornography as a Form of Prostitution." *Women's Studies International Forum* 48 (February 1, 2015): 115.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 119.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, 120.

⁹³ Ibid, 114.

pornography is prostitution,⁹⁴ an unpopular stance in all of academia. Classical feminism, she points out, has made two claims: pornography harms the women involved in its production, and it harms the overall status of women in society.⁹⁵ New-wave feminists, on the other hand, ignore the perpetuation of inequality and sexual violence that results from pornography and instead claim that it empowers women and liberates their sexuality—⁹⁶ but, it could be argued, any purported benefits as they relate to sexual education and “liberation” could be achieved through less destructive measures. Pornography does not liberate—it holds women captive. Yet, while U.S. law nearly universally prohibits prostitution,⁹⁷ rather paradoxically, pornography also has a privileged legal status and is protected as freedom of speech/expression.⁹⁸ Regrettably, the law does not see pornography for what it is—money exchanged for sex acts, where actors are paid per sex act, whose actions are dictated by a producer.⁹⁹

Tyler systematically addresses the arguments from the new-wave feminist position, including ones from even the most prominent studies on the subject, and decisively debunks them, one by one. The most influential study in academia on this subject, “The Damaged-Goods Hypothesis,” arguing in favor of pornography, was shown to have been influenced heavily by adult industry profiteers, fraudulently concluding that prostitutes are happy individuals, despite their dramatic increased likelihood for drug abuse.¹⁰⁰ Tyler rebukes these phony studies, and points instead to the massive harms that female porn actresses endure, the most predominant being violent abuse (by pimps, actors, other prostituted women, intimate partners, and even

⁹⁴ Tyler, 114.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 115.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 116.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 117-118.

police).¹⁰¹ Furthermore, these women's stories are riddled with STI's, psychological harm (including post-traumatic stress and dissociation), self-harm, rape, and suicide.¹⁰² 85% of women in one study reported being raped in these settings, 90% physically assaulted, and 50% being beaten on a monthly basis or more.¹⁰³ Multiple studies showed similar findings.¹⁰⁴ These findings constitute a moral outrage of grand proportions that can no longer be ignored.

Weinberg echoes the chorus of new-wave feminists endorsing pornography, claiming that there has been no conclusive evidence for any negative effects resulting from the use of pornography.¹⁰⁵ Dismissing conservative views and mainstream feminist views, Weinberg appeals to the new-wave feministic view, whereby women are empowered by pornography to "express their sexuality."¹⁰⁶ In further defense of pornography, Weinberg suggests that such material is educational and "allows individuals to explore in a safe way new forms of sex, especially for women, whose sexual expression historically has been discouraged."¹⁰⁷ Both men and women, he states, find pornography to be quite beneficial, as a "broadening of sexual horizons, such as learning new forms of sexual behavior or finding new resources for fantasy construction."¹⁰⁸

Notably, Weinberg seems to advocate behaviors that might appear eccentric or even harmful. In his research, a survey is carried out that illustrates the effects of pornography use on

¹⁰¹ Tyler, 118.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 118-119.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 119.

¹⁰⁵ Weinberg, Martin S., Colin J. Williams, Sibyl Kleiner, and Yasmiyn Irizarry. "Pornography, Normalization, and Empowerment." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39, no. 6 (December 2010): 1390.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Weinberg, 1390.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

individuals' sexual tendencies: greater pornography use leads to more sexual partners¹⁰⁹ and willingness to perform a wider variety of sexual acts, "what were considered appealing acts"¹¹⁰ (some of which may be deemed medically unsafe by others). Later, these effects are described as inducing a person "to experiment a few times with unconventional sexualities,"¹¹¹ such as sadism/masochism,¹¹² and other fringe and/or dangerous behaviors. Depending on one's interpretation, Weinberg's findings show that pornography is either a beneficial resource for sexual liberation, or a dangerous precursor to strange and/or medically unsafe behaviors. Common sense might suggest the latter interpretation.

One such medically unsafe behavior that appears to be moderated by pornography use is abortion—medically unsafe, specifically, for the aborted child. The conservative scholar Tokunaga's findings conclude that "pornography may lead to increased support for abortion."¹¹³ This is likely due to "abstract scripts that can be activated by pornography."¹¹⁴ He explains, "Sexually explicit media affects viewers' attitudes,"¹¹⁵ especially towards norms including sexual scripts, the social roles of women, and moral issues such as abortion.¹¹⁶ Scripts are defined as constructs that "guide attitudes and social behavior by indicating responses considered normal and appropriate."¹¹⁷ Tokunaga contrasts the traditional understanding of sexuality to nontraditional scripts. To him, traditionally, sex is "vaginal intercourse in a monogamous marital

¹⁰⁹ Weinberg, 1390.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 1394.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 1399.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Tokunaga, Robert S., Paul J. Wright, and Christopher J. McKinley. "U.S. Adults' Pornography Viewing and Support for Abortion: A Three-Wave Panel Study." *Health Communication* 30, no. 6 (June 3, 2015): 578.

¹¹⁴ Tokunaga, 578.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 577.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 578.

relationship, often for procreative purposes,”¹¹⁸ while nontraditional scripts “exposes consumers to a wide range of nontraditional sexual behaviors and relationships.”¹¹⁹ This “encourages... more liberal attitudes toward sexual and reproductive actions...”¹²⁰ These actions include “premarital sex, extramarital sex, and same-sex sex.”¹²¹ These actions are linked with increased risk of STI’s and other dangers. Ultimately, his study reinforced previous studies that showed a positive relationship between pornography use and support of nontraditional sexual and reproductive actions, including abortion.¹²²

IV. SOLUTIONS: REDEEMING SEX

A. Redeeming Language/Breaking the Silence

Why has the church been silent about sexuality and pornography? The struggle is summed up precisely in an interview with a Baptist faith leader: “Give us the words, give us the outline, because we are inept or we feel that we are inept... but we are absolutely able to have these discussions.”¹²³ It is the first part of this statement that is particularly telling: “*Give us the words.*” For centuries, the church has lacked the vocabulary to address sexual topics, largely due to the undue shame projected onto sexuality itself. Since the fall of humanity, nothing but embarrassment has been attributed to the sexual organs themselves, parts of the body that were created by God as part of His perfect creation: “In the image of God he created [humanity]; male and female he created them.”¹²⁴ Indeed, when the apostle Paul relates the physical body’s

¹¹⁸ Tokunaga, 578.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 579.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid, 585.

¹²³ Hach, Alexa, and Susan Roberts-Dobie. “‘Give Us the Words’: Protestant Faith Leaders and Sexuality Education in Their Churches.” *Sex Education* 16, no. 6 (November 1, 2016): 619–33.

¹²⁴ Genesis 1:27

anatomy to the importance of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ, he says “those parts of the body that we think less honorable, we bestow the greater honor...”¹²⁵ implying that all parts of the body are useful and valuable, even those that we tend to view as “dirty.” Yet, the more common response is to act otherwise; as soon as Adam and Eve’s eyes were “opened”¹²⁶ in the garden, realizing they were naked, the first thing they did was sew fig leaves as a covering for themselves. People, as such, have been attributing shame to sexuality since the fall of mankind.

One study cited the words of a Lutheran faith leader, saying, “Sex was God’s idea ... For this reason, it’s as appropriate as talking about any other behavior in life.”¹²⁷ But often, parents are afraid of teaching their children about sexuality, for fear that even bringing up the subject will open the possibility of temptation to go out and try it.¹²⁸ How are churches to break the silence? Hoffman suggests that pornography use ought not to be seen as a “discipline issue,” involving punishment, but rather a “discipleship issue,” involving intentional curriculum and instruction. The church, however, too commonly provides little or no teaching on these issues, partly because sex is seen as “dirty” even within the marriage context,¹²⁹ and pastors are bashful to address the subject.¹³⁰

But there is copious evidence from the Bible that sex is neither sinful nor undesirable by God’s standards, as the apostle Paul urges couples to have sex, lest they fall into temptation.¹³¹ Sex, according to the Bible, is wholesome and life-giving. The renowned medieval scholar Nahmanides, in his *Holy Letter*, defines sex as a mystical “meeting with God,” writing,

¹²⁵ I Corinthians 12:23

¹²⁶ Genesis 3:7

¹²⁷ Hach, 619–33.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Awad, 9.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 85.

¹³¹ Ibid, 85.

“Through the act of sex, they become partners with God in the gift of creation.”¹³² Hoffman’s solution to the tragic distortion of sexuality in the modern day begins with “an open discussion of internet pornography and discipleship strategies to confront it.”¹³³ These strategies will involve a structured accountability partner system on either an assigned or volunteer basis, as well as partnering with existing ministries that address the problem.¹³⁴ Further opportunities to open the conversation at the earliest possible age include church sex-education initiatives, such as weekend retreats, ongoing meetings, and more.¹³⁵

B. Reclaiming Healthy Sexuality

Restoring healthy sexuality will require continuing the conversation on the psychological effects of pornography. Previously, the impact of neuroplasticity on psychosexuality as it relates to pornography use was demonstrated. The good news is that whatever damage pornography does to the brain can be reversed, and understanding how pornography changes the brain is essential for developing strategies for psychosexual healing. The U.S. National Institute of Health illustrates the process of cognitive association and learning, as “brain changes do not seem to arise from the birth of new neurons, called *neurogenesis*... Instead, learning appears to occur primarily because of changes in the strength and number of the connections between existing neurons, a process called *synaptic plasticity*.”¹³⁶ Owens continues, “Coactivation of two neurons leads to a stronger connection between those neurons...”¹³⁷ In essence, “*neurons that*

¹³² Awad, 84.

¹³³ Ibid, 148.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 149.

¹³⁵ Hach, 619-33.

¹³⁶ Owens, Melinda T., and Kimberly D. Tanner. “Teaching as Brain Changing: Exploring Connections between Neuroscience and Innovative Teaching.” *CBE Life Sciences Education* 16, no. 2 (2017).

¹³⁷ Ibid.

fire together wire together.”¹³⁸ Thus, as new synaptic connections are formed and strengthened in the brain, strong neural pathways are formed that are not easily forgotten, causing the brain to rewire itself to inseparably connect sexual gratification with pornography and masturbation, rather than authentic sexuality.

Neurons that fire together wire together—but, if this is true, is the opposite is true as well? Can unused synaptic connections be “unwired,” by slowly weakening and disappearing over time, explaining why “extinguishing conditioned responses to artificial stimuli potentially restore[s] attraction and sexual performance with partners [?]”¹³⁹ To answer that question, the idea of “synaptic pruning” will be explored. Popular authors Pollack and Cabane use an analogy to illustrate the idea:

“Imagine your brain is a garden, except instead of growing flowers, fruits, and vegetables, you grow synaptic connections between neurons...Glial cells are the gardeners of your brain...other glial cells are the waste removers, pulling up weeds, killing pests, raking up dead leaves...the synaptic connections that get used less get marked by a protein, C1q (as well as others). When the microglial cells detect that mark, they bond to the protein and destroy— or prune—the synapse.”¹⁴⁰

This analogy could be very helpful in visualizing the process by which psychosexual healing might occur through neural rewiring.

Is there any scientific credence to these notions? The data suggests: “maybe.” Wang affirms that “glial cells indeed affect long-term synaptic changes,” and that “potentiation and depression of synaptic connections are critical for learning, memory formation, and emotions,” processes that “are triggered by patterned and repeated synaptic activities—”¹⁴¹ i.e. repeated

¹³⁸ Owens.

¹³⁹ Park, 15.

¹⁴⁰ Wiles, Tiana. “How to Delete Porn from Your Brain.” *Christianity Today* 61, no. 3 (April 2017): 11–11.

¹⁴¹ Wang, Fushun, Tifei Yuan, Alfredo Pereira, Alexei Verkhratsky, and Jason H. Huang. “Glial Cells and Synaptic Plasticity.” *Neural Plasticity*, May 17, 2016, 1–3.

exposure to pornography, or repeated abstinence from pornography coupled with wholesome expressions of sexuality. Bialas builds on this, saying:

Recent work revealed that *microglia-mediated pruning is regulated by neuronal activity*. During the retinogeniculate pruning period, *microglia preferentially engulf less active RGC inputs in the dLGN7*, suggesting that *microglia can sense or read out local changes in synaptic activity*. The engulfment defects observed in complement-deficient mice and the role for complement in the immune system suggest the intriguing possibility that *complement proteins could be one cue guiding microglia to engulf less active synapses*.¹⁴² (Emphases added)

The cueing role of these complement proteins is affirmed by Stephan, who writes, “Synapses tagged with complement proteins may be eliminated by microglial cells expressing complement receptors.”¹⁴³ Thus, whether arbitrarily or not, complement proteins are “tagged” to synapses for removal by glial cells. When these processes function improperly, synapses are lost too rapidly, possibly causing autism or neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer’s.¹⁴⁴ But the essential question remains: how do glia choose which synapses to eliminate/prune? Stephan continues,

Synapse elimination is thought to result from competition between neighboring axons for postsynaptic territory based on differences in patterns or levels of neuronal activity ... Based on classic studies of the neuromuscular junction, the punishment model proposes that *strong synapses, which are effective in driving postsynaptic responses, actively punish and eliminate nearby weaker, less-effective synapses* by inducing two postsynaptic signals: a local protective signal and a longer-range elimination, or punishment, signal.¹⁴⁵ (Emphasis added)

While technically unproven, the punishment-model illustrates how the brain is rewired based on cumulative experiences, as Lewis describes, “Repeated experiences establish patterns, forming habits, and those habits link with other habits that also evolve with repeated

¹⁴² Bialas, Allison R., and Beth Stevens. “TGF- β Signaling Regulates Neuronal C1q Expression and Developmental Synaptic Refinement.” *Nature Neuroscience* 16, no. 12 (December 2013): 1773–82.

¹⁴³ Stephan, Alexander H., Ben A. Barres, and Beth Stevens. “The Complement System: An Unexpected Role in Synaptic Pruning during Development and Disease.” *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 35 (July 2012): 369–89.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Stephan, 369-89

experiences.”¹⁴⁶ Whichever neural pathways are used more and strengthened, according to this model, are those that escape pruning and survive—this is neuroplasticity in action. The good news, once again, is that whatever damage pornography does to the brain *can be reversed*. If healthy sexual behaviors can be unlearned, so can unhealthy ones. The “garden” illustration of how glial cells prune synaptic connections through the punishment-model, while not proven, is a plausible explanation that provides a powerful visualization of how the brain’s ability to rewire itself. This is further demonstrated by findings that,

Reduction of grey matter volume in specific regions of the prefrontal cortex (and the anterior cingulate, a closely related structure), induced by years of addiction, *can reverse over several months of abstinence*. These authors reported that grey matter volume returned to a normal (population) baseline level within six months to a year of abstinence (from heroin, cocaine, and alcohol), and similar results have been found by others.¹⁴⁷ (Emphasis added)

C. Accountability, Software and Support

Studies show that pornography addiction may be harder to break than heroin addiction.¹⁴⁸

One problem in opening up honest dialogue about these struggles is the intense stigma attached to pornographic use among Christians.¹⁴⁹ A missing ingredient in the recipe for change is a “confidential healing program,” providing care and counseling with easy access to church members.¹⁵⁰ Younce recommends that such confidential pastoral care be carried out in regular one-on-one sessions, where the counselor and counselee might engage in “discussing blueprints for change,” identifying strategies for “fleeing temptation,” “identifying emotional triggers” (such as Alcoholics Anonymous’ HALT—hunger, anger, loneliness, and being tired), “see it as

¹⁴⁶ Lewis, Marc. “Addiction and the Brain: Development, Not Disease.” *Neuroethics* 10, no. 1 (2017): 7–18.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Younce, 162.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 165.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 166.

sin,” “refocus on Christ,” and “moving upward.”¹⁵¹ Furthermore, building a support group of 12 people might be effective.¹⁵²

There are several support groups that help pornography addicts, following an adaptation of the same 12-step program as Alcoholics Anonymous—these include Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), Sexaholics Anonymous (SA), Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA), Celebrate Recovery, and more. While there is little data regarding the effectiveness of these particular groups, there is data to support the effectiveness of 12-step programs as a whole, based on the first and most well-known program, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). One study found that 31% of AA member remained sober for less than a year, 24% for one to five years, 12% for five to 10 years, and 33% for more than 10 years.¹⁵³ In other words, out of every addict who walked into an AA meeting, 45% remained sober from five to 10 years or more. Thus, the 12-step program that is at the core of AA may be quite effective for some, though not all. In theory, the principle carries over to other addiction support groups, such as those of a sexual nature, though there are no direct studies to confirm this yet. It is worth noting that there are differences between the various sexual addiction groups, as SA regards marriage as between one man and one woman, and expects unmarried persons to practice abstinence, whereas other groups might not.¹⁵⁴ A step further, Celebrate Recovery is the only known 12-step addiction support group that is explicitly

¹⁵¹ Younce, 172-174.

¹⁵² Ibid, 175.

¹⁵³ “About the Sexaholics Anonymous 12-Step Recovery Program.” Recovery.org, May 6, 2013. <https://www.recovery.org/topics/about-the-sexaholics-anonymous-12-step-recovery-program/>.

¹⁵⁴ “12-Step Behavioral Addiction Support Groups.” Project Know, February 26, 2013. <https://www.projectknow.com/research/12-step-behavioral-addiction-support-groups/>.

Christ-centered and gospel-oriented, whereas others vaguely refer to a “higher power” as God, despite encouraging prayer and repentance to Him.¹⁵⁵

Since “90% of pornography addiction begins at home,”¹⁵⁶ it is essential for parents to act on their responsibility to protect their children. While web filtering programs are useful, they can “leave a lot to be desired.”¹⁵⁷ There are several key assumptions that parents would be wise to adopt while taking protective measures: First, children are generally smarter and more tech-savvy than their parents. Secondly, the pornographic industry may be smarter than the most advanced filtering software. Furger adds, “Internet-blocking software is neither as easy to use nor as foolproof as parents and developers would like.”¹⁵⁸ Why? “The programs are shooting at moving targets. With new sites being added daily—and existing sites moving from one Internet service provider to another—it’s a battle to keep Web address lists up to date.”¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, in selecting a web filtering program, parents must know that “the [filtering] programs employ a value system.” For example, one program might block Planned Parenthood sexual education material, where another may not.¹⁶⁰ In the future, internet filtering software may become more effective through technological advances, such as filtering systems that utilize digital image processing technology to determine whether sites are safe or unsafe, with up to 92% accuracy with as low as 4.7% false positives.¹⁶¹ Until this technological trend gains more momentum and

¹⁵⁵ “Message from Rick Warren.” Accessed November 15, 2017.

<http://www.celebraterecovery.com/index.php/about-us/message-from-rick-warren>.

¹⁵⁶ Duke

¹⁵⁷ Furger, Roberta, and Charles Piller. “Internet Filters: The Smut Stops Here. Or Does It? Screening Five Top Web Filters.” *PCWorld* 15, no. 10 (October 1997): 78.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Furger, 78.

¹⁶¹ Colmenares-Guillén, Luis Enrique, and Francisco Javier Albores Velasco. “Filter for Web Pornographic Contents Based on Digital Image Processing.” *International Journal of Combinatorial Optimization Problems & Informatics* 7, no. 2 (May 2016): 13–21.

affordability, it will likely be a less viable option for most families compared to mainstream filters that use keyword and URL filtering systems. The highest ranked web filtering program across the board is Net Nanny, which has a category-blocking system.¹⁶² Another great resource, this one from a Christian background (which is of great value for those who are concerned with the implicit moral codes embedded in such programs), is CovenantEyes, which is the only major web filtering program that operates based on six levels of maturity with specific content blocked for various age groups.¹⁶³ A good free resource is K9 Safe Search, perhaps the best software that is available without a having to pay a monthly fee, followed by Quostodio and other programs.¹⁶⁴

D. Counseling

Once again, we have seen how pornography addiction may be harder to break than heroin addiction.¹⁶⁵ How will addicts cope? Few studies have been published regarding the effectiveness of counseling in overcoming pornography addiction. The only research published has been regarding the broader topic of sexual addiction, and even here, we find that “the vast majority of clinicians in the helping professions are not systematically prepared to recognize and treat this disorder.”¹⁶⁶ This may be because few men are motivated to seek out help for pornography addiction, given that it is widely accepted as “normal,” and thus, few counselors have had to deal with it. Another problem in opening up honest dialogue about these topics is the intense stigma attached to pornographic use among Christians.¹⁶⁷ What the church needs is a

¹⁶² “The Best Internet Filter Software | Top Ten Reviews.” TopTenReviews. Accessed November 9, 2017. <http://www.toptenreviews.com/software/security/best-internet-filter-software/>.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ “Top 10 Best Free Parental Controls Software of 2017.” Accessed November 9, 2017.

<https://www.spyzie.com/parental-controls/free-parental-control-software.html>.

¹⁶⁵ Younce, 162.

¹⁶⁶ Hagedorn, W. Bryce. “Sexual Addiction Counseling Competencies: Empirically-Based Tools for Preparing Clinicians to Recognize, Assess, and Treat Sexual Addiction.” *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 16, no. 3 (July 2009): 205.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 165.

“confidential healing program,” providing care and counseling with easy access.¹⁶⁸ Younce argues that “a new culture must be created,”¹⁶⁹ one of “imitating Jesus.”¹⁷⁰ This will involve creating safe spaces for people to get help, especially those who are in church leadership positions and fear what might happen should their secrets come out in public.

Still, therapy has been shown to be effective for the spouses of addicts. In one study, the questions were posed: “How do women cope with their spouse’s sexually addictive behavior,” and, secondly, “how can approaches to therapy be informed by these women?”¹⁷¹ Women were found to go through three stages: ignorance/denial, discovery, and problem solving.¹⁷² There were positive and negative ways of coping with the discovery; the single most common negative response was isolation, followed closely by avoidance and self-blame, and eventually trailing off into rarer extremes like drinking and suicide.¹⁷³

Positive coping methods included “recreational, relational, professional, spiritual, and conceptual.”¹⁷⁴ The most common recreational technique was reading (77.27%); the most common relational coping methods were turning to immediate family members (68.18%), followed by friends (59.09%) and spouse (54.55%).¹⁷⁵ The most common source of professional coping was group therapy (45.45%), followed by individual therapy (36.36%), and then couple therapy (31.82%).¹⁷⁶ Next, in terms of spiritual support, women most often turned to clergy (72.73%) before turning to a specific belief/doctrine (59.09%) or prayer, scripture reading,

¹⁶⁸ Younce, 166.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 168.

¹⁷¹ Manning, 338-339.

¹⁷² Ibid, 343.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 344.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 345.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 346.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

and/or God (50.00%).¹⁷⁷ Most women cited having a conceptual support, including “ideas, metaphors, or perspectives” that were helpful to them (81.82%).

E. Spiritual Discipline

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.”¹⁷⁸ From a theological perspective, it is no secret that the key to overcoming sin in one’s life is through the power and study of God’s Word, which is the only offensive weapon among the “Armor of God” listed in the sixth chapter of Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus. To be sure, this study should be accompanied by prayer, which is listed immediately after the “sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”¹⁷⁹ The apostle Paul also notes in his letter to the Galatians: “But I say walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”¹⁸⁰ It is this Spirit that gives the believer strength to resist temptation, and also illuminates and brings to remembrance the Holy Scriptures. It is also worth noting that when the Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he responded by quoting scripture, prompted by the Holy Spirit. “It is written,”¹⁸¹ he responded, each time the adversary dangled temptation in front of him. There was none more spiritually disciplined than the Lord, none who relied more heavily on the Spirit than on his fallible humanity, spending entire nights in prayer seeking intimacy with God. By age 12, the Lord Jesus could teach the scriptures with astonishing expertise, revealing his devoted study of the Word.

Hoffman, in his analysis of the issue of pornography, points out the lack of emphasis on spiritual discipline in the American church, which boasts of increasing numbers yet fails to

¹⁷⁷ Manning, 346-347

¹⁷⁸ Psalm 119:9

¹⁷⁹ Ephesians 6:17

¹⁸⁰ Galatians 5:16

¹⁸¹ Luke 4:4, 8, 12

influence culture.¹⁸² Scholars have investigated the correlation between use of pornography and the practice of spiritual discipline among Christian college-age males, attempting to find an inverse relationship between the two.¹⁸³ Several studies were done analyzing a variety of spiritual disciplines, including prayer, service, worship, stewardship, and more.¹⁸⁴ Mere church attendance alone, when increased by only one point on the seven-point Likert scale, resulted in a 26% decrease in likelihood of using internet pornography.¹⁸⁵ Part of this may have been able to be attributed to the social pressure and accountability of the church context,¹⁸⁶ but this would only be true of cases where the individual made their secretive act known to others, which may be unlikely.¹⁸⁷ One of the most interesting disciplines studied was stewardship— one of the lowest scoring spiritual disciplines, stewardship is comprised of the practice of managing and leveraging resources for the Kingdom. This is largely an anonymous act, demonstrating self-control and internal motivation. It would make sense that a group of people of whom the majority struggle with pornography would also struggle with stewardship, as both acts involve an element of secrecy, where only the eyes of God see the works of the hands, and life-and-death decisions are made behind closed doors.

As many researchers have observed, pornography is often used not only for sexual gratification but also as a coping mechanism for emotional trauma and life stresses.¹⁸⁸ Yet, people who go to church were “30 percent less likely to experience depression in their lives.”¹⁸⁹ Thus, church attendance and its associated spiritual disciplines (worship, prayer, fellowship, etc.)

¹⁸² Hoffman, 149-150.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 131

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 140.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 141.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 142.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

satisfies the individual's spiritual and emotional needs, giving them less of a reason to revert to their pornographic addiction.¹⁹⁰ Not only that, but “spiritual discipline facilitates spiritual transformation and conformity to Christ-likeness,”¹⁹¹ and “are a way to unleash the power of God... power [that] can free people from the bondage of sin in their lives.”¹⁹²

F. The Power of Christ: Toward a Theology of Change

Until now, the solutions that have been discussed only address the symptoms of a raging disease inside—but true change can only be found in the person of Jesus Christ, through faith and trust in Him as one's personal Savior and Lord. Awad draws heavily from both scientific data and biblical texts to outline the lies Christian men believe that ensnare them to pornography. This addiction is simply an expression of a problem that lies deep within men's hearts,¹⁹³ and is “both a sin and a disease.”¹⁹⁴ Only by addressing the inner problem can true healing occur, and not merely attempting to regulate behavior.¹⁹⁵ Any attempts to solve the problem otherwise are “outward-inward” approaches, which often end up simply replacing one addiction with another.¹⁹⁶ The good news is this: that “though your sins are scarlet, they shall be white as snow.”¹⁹⁷ This is possible because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to receive by faith.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁰ Hoffman, 142.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid, 143.

¹⁹³ Awad, 57.

¹⁹⁴ Awad, 21.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 67.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Isaiah 1:18

¹⁹⁸ Romans 3:23-25

Awad proposes that this inward healing can only take place through repentance and “holy dissatisfaction,”¹⁹⁹ as well as surrender to Christ as one’s personal Savior and Lord.²⁰⁰ This will provide cleansing from sin as well as a restored sexuality, one that can and should be enjoyed with one’s spouse—only this type of wholesome sexual life can truly satisfy, as “a ‘junk food’ sexual experience will never satisfy the soul nor meet the desire for a gourmet meal created by God.”²⁰¹ Thus, Awad’s first solution to the problem is an inward heart change through faith in Christ, which also opens the door for restored sexuality per God’s intended design. Then, he proposes additional helps, including spousal awareness and support,²⁰² biblical pastoral counseling,²⁰³ and community support/accountability.²⁰⁴

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the gravity of the pornography pandemic has been demonstrated from a number of perspectives. The sexual revolution in the United States has redefined sexuality and what is acceptable and unacceptable, while the church has avoided such topics like the plague. The psychological motivations and effects of pornography have been explored, revealing rather shocking findings about its addictive and damaging nature. The largest consumers of pornography have been exposed, which are the ones most susceptible to the intentional targeting of the pornographic industry: children, adolescents and young adults. Not even clergy are immune to pornography, and have their own uniquely dangerous proclivity to such temptations. Some of the greatest victims of the trade have been women: the wives of addicts, the women

¹⁹⁹ Awad, 67.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, iv.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 88.

²⁰² Ibid, 52.

²⁰³ Ibid, 89.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

involved and abused during production, and the female population as a whole, whom society is sexualizing and objectifying more and more. The victims of abuse on set are some of the last ones considered by the proponents of the pornographic industry, who purport false benefits while turning a blind eye to the bad.

The solutions to the problem have been underscored, ones that are, by and large, not entirely novel ideas; rather, they reflect the wisdom that has long been understood by humanity, concerning matters both practical and spiritual. The first step is breaking the silence and redeeming appropriate sexual language in the church; then, redeeming healthy sexuality, including sexual attitudes among Christians. Next, practical aids such as accountability, software, and other support are of great service. Counseling is also an effective help. Finally, spiritual concerns are of utmost importance: the disciplines of prayer and study of God's word, among others, and the power of Christ to transform the heart.

Thus, the pornography pandemic has grown to massive proportions, a beast of many heads whose breath leaves a burning trail of brokenness and destruction in the lives of individuals, marriages, homes, and nations. Its greatest victim is the ravaged damsel held in its claw, whom it threatens to devour for greed and lust. Meanwhile, the church, who wields the only weapon with the power to vanquish the beast, has been duped into feeding the very thing it was meant to destroy. The people who hate the beast most are, ironically, those who are most strongly held captive by its power, but with each blow they attempt in their own strength, two more heads grow in the place of one. The beast, whether called by pornography or any of its other names, lies within every person, causing a spiritual plague to grow in the heart, a cancer which, if left unchecked, will ultimately give birth to eternal death. But in God's wrath poured out on Jesus on the cross, the healing elixir for mankind's sin was produced, which is the blood

of Christ that cleanses the soul of all filth, expunges the record of all wrong, and, decidedly, “clears the history” of every evil search; if any person drinks this elixir, and allows Jesus to penetrate into the deepest, darkest places of their heart, He has the power to prune away each of the beast’s heads with the Word of God and burn each stump with the fire of the Holy Spirit, until the original head, which whispered the first lie into mankind’s ear, is silenced forever. Only then can the church rescue the host of men, women and children who are held captive in the beast’s lair, so that the praise of God’s glory may resound more voluminously in the mouths of mankind across the earth and in heaven. With stronger men, stronger women, stronger marriages, and stronger churches, the pornography-free Bride of Christ will be stripped of all her guilt and shame and clothed in pure garments of snow-white; she will be made ready for her Bridegroom to betroth her to Him in righteousness forever, to return to her and consummate their wedding, and to enjoy perfect, unspoiled intimacy of love in everlasting faithfulness and splendor.

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Appendix I— A Theology of Masturbation: Black and White, or Fifty Shades?

In all this discussion about pornography, it is easy to overlook the somewhat more basic issue of masturbation, apart from pornography. Some might ask the question: “Is masturbation truly wrong, when it is not even mentioned in scripture by name?” While this is an important consideration, it is worthwhile to note that there are several blatant sins not mentioned by name in scripture: suicide, abortion, polygamy, pornography, and sex with children, to name a few. These practices are labelled “sin” because they violate underlying biblical principles, despite their not being mentioned by name in scripture. Despite the importance of the particular subject of masturbation, there is very little widespread, biblical teaching on the issue. This is due, in part, to the social awkwardness of using the very word “masturbation,” when it is easier to go after the target of pornography, which is more “known” to be wrong. But, while the issue is not mentioned specifically by name in the bible, after a thorough consideration of the whole of scripture and its derived principles, it becomes clear that masturbation is impossible to justify based on scripture, and if it is not condemned by name, it is condemned in principle. Still, the subject must be treated with some measure of grace, since there is so much confusion on the topic, and the thing itself is not explicitly named in scripture. “How then,” one might ask, “might masturbation be treated like sin, based on biblical principles?”

In the bible, the metaphor of a body is often used when describing the church, as Paul says, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”²⁰⁵ If Christians, then, as the body of Christ, are to reflect God in our person and actions, including sexual actions, then masturbation presents a false picture of God. In Henderson’s words, “Self-serving masturbation

²⁰⁵ I Corinthians 12:27

is false worship...It says to the universe, ‘Jesus is primarily concerned with gratifying himself!’” Pornography, then, is only one step further; “[Pornography] says, ‘Jesus uses other people to pleasure Himself without having to love or sacrifice.’”²⁰⁶

It is no coincidence that at the precise moment of temptation to masturbate, the human heart is least satisfied in God. Why? Masturbation is contrary to the very nature of God. In the Trinity, we find a community of persons who find satisfaction in each other. God did not need to create humanity to have company; He always had community. The Trinity has existed for all time and is the model by which God created the human institutions of marriage, family, and the church. Indeed, every human societal construct is, at best, a mere metaphor of the divine community found in the Trinity. God is not inherently selfish, but selfless—this is found in His Trinitarian nature. God instructs us to be selfless as well, saying, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others as more significant to yourself. Let each look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” In the same passage of scripture, Christ is used as an example of humility, whereupon the Father glorifies Christ. Notice that Jesus never glorifies himself—only the other members of the Trinity glorify Him. In John 8:50, Jesus also says, “I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it, and He is the judge.” Solomon echoes this, saying, “It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one’s own glory” (Proverbs 25:27).

Masturbation, by contrast, whether intentionally or not, always seeks one’s own glory. That is, it never seeks God’s glory; its only goal is to please oneself. I Corinthians 10:31 says “So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” To quote John

²⁰⁶ Henderson, John. *Catching Foxes: A Gospel-guided Journey to Marriage*. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2018. 164.

Piper, “God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him.”²⁰⁷ Whatever satisfies a person is what gets the glory in his or her life. Masturbation, by contrast, trains the individual to find satisfaction not in God or in their spouse, but in themselves. Still, this alone might not be evidence enough for the sinfulness of masturbation, if not for the host of scriptures that speak to sexual immorality.

For this, one must turn back to the 10 Commandments; namely, number six: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines adultery as “voluntary sexual activity (as sexual intercourse) between a married man and someone other than his wife or between a married woman and someone other than her husband.”²⁰⁸ In short, adultery is any voluntary sexual activity with anyone other than one’s spouse. This idea is biblical: Paul says, “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (I Cor. 7:4) In other words, their bodies are exclusively for each other—no one else. But this is where the key consideration lies: if the sexual parts of one’s body belongs exclusively to one’s spouse, then, according to the dictionary definition of adultery, where sex with anyone other than one’s spouse constitutes as adultery, is it possible that the word “anyone” could include *oneself*? Yes.

This is the key: Masturbation is auto-sexuality— that is, having sex with oneself. If masturbation can be understood in such a way, it makes it clear why masturbation might be incompatible with a Christian view of marriage. As such, one’s spouse is understood to be the only rightful source of sexual satisfaction. Every sexual experience prior to the first night with

²⁰⁷ “God Is Most Glorified in Us When We Are Most Satisfied in Him.” Desiring God, October 13, 2012. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-is-most-glorified-in-us-when-we-are-most-satisfied-in-him>.

²⁰⁸ “Definition of ADULTERY.” Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adultery>.

one's spouse creates a reservoir of memories and expectations by which to compare the rightful experience to; in other words, every sexual act outside of marriage puts the future or current spouse in competition with someone or something other than themselves. It forces them to compete. This is the unhappy reversal: suddenly, the rightful object of satisfaction and pleasure is robbed of its glory, as satisfaction is found somewhere else.

The reason why masturbation may in fact be heartbreaking to God is this: He created sex to be enjoyed only within the confines of marriage. All sexual activity prior to and outside of marriage is detrimental. This idea is quite beautiful, however realistic it may be; One might imagine, for a moment, the fanciful idea of a couple who would completely and utterly save themselves for 20 or more years, never having tasted the pleasures of sex, and then finally, after years of sheer discipline and extreme abstinence, discover and explore with each other an amazing new world of pleasure together. One might imagine a pleasure so special, so sacred, so pure, so holy, and so unmatched, that it could only be enjoyed in the most intimate expression of a husband and wife, partners for life. One might imagine the satisfaction and wonder of being able to experience something for the very first time with another human being, an experience that can only occur when they are physically and emotionally present with each other. It is the difference between selfish and selfless sex, as the marriage bed is just another area in life that humans are to serve one another—not for their own pleasure, but finding pleasure in meeting someone else's needs and giving them pleasure. This is a Trinitarian concept: Jesus did not seek his own glory, but glorified the Father; and, in turn, the Father glorified Jesus.

Sex is about community—that is, “co-unity” with one's partner. This is why some might believe that masturbation is not acceptable even in marital relationships when spouses are separated by distance. Paul's instructions to spouses is “Do not deprive one another, except

perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”²⁰⁹

Spouses, ideally, should not put themselves in situations where they are not being sexually satisfied by each other’s physical bodies; still, if necessity dictates this, such as a time of war, then each spouse still should not sexually stimulate themselves. Why? Each time that they do, they dull the pain of being sexually deprived from one another and rob their spouse of their rightful place of sole proprietor of the other’s body. It is possible to wait. To be sure, no human being ever died from lack of sex; Jesus went 33 years on earth without it. But for each orgasm experienced apart, their long-awaited reuniting is robbed of its glory.

Some might ask: What if they are fantasizing about each other, or looking at an image of each other? Could masturbation be acceptable in that case? The answer, likely, is still “no,” because of the psychological and physical changes that occur in the brain during masturbation. Masturbation trains the individual to please themselves, always at the expense of another person’s ability to please them. This why many men who are addicted to masturbation find that when they attempt real sex with a human being, they prefer the feeling of their own hand to the feeling of vaginal intercourse. The danger is that, suddenly, when the spouse returns, they might find that they can’t please their spouse quite the same way as they used to. In short, the masturbator just gets too good at it. Suddenly, sex becomes “on demand,” just the way one wants it, with no emotional commitment or effort maintaining a relationship involved. It becomes selfish. Why bother meeting one’s spouse’s needs in and outside of the bedroom when one can just please his or herself? It’s easier and even better, according to some.

²⁰⁹ I Cor. 7:5

This is another important consideration that, if anything, puts the nail in the coffin: masturbation is extremely addictive. The dopamine release found in sex and orgasm is proven by science to be as addictive as cocaine; it forms habits that are hard to break. Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, “I will not be dominated by anything” (I Cor. 6:12) He continues, “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a man can commit is outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body....” (I Cor. 6:18-20). The addictive nature of masturbation makes it impossible to glorify God with our body, but rather, abuses the temple of the Holy Spirit. If this doesn’t prove the sinfulness of masturbation, nothing does.

Masturbation, in each and every case, opens a door for addiction. It is never the result of self-control, but rather, unbridled passion; thus, it is always contrary to the Holy Spirit. Why? The fruit of the Spirit is “self-control” (Gal. 5:23). Thus, it appears impossible for a person obeying the Holy Spirit to masturbate. In fact, masturbation robs the Holy Spirit of His rightful role of being “paraclete,” our comforter—He will never lead a believer to find release in a solitary sexual act, but rather, in Himself, through prayer. Never does a believer seek satisfaction in God while masturbating. No, their time and energy would be better spent in prayer, giving thanks and praise to God. Furthermore, the fruit of the Spirit is also “faith” (Gal. 5:22)—and “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). Masturbation never expresses faith in God to meet one’s needs through His chosen means: that is, one’s spouse, or Himself. Masturbation only expresses faith in oneself to satisfy the urge. It is no coincidence that masturbation occurs when we are most tired, stressed, or unsatisfied; perhaps, if we were

continually filled with the Spirit, we would bear such Fruit of the Spirit as “joy,” “peace,” and “patience” that we would feel no need to masturbate (Galatians 5:22).

For one last analogy helpful in understanding the sinfulness of masturbation, it is beneficial to visualize the “root” and the “fruit” of the act, especially when compared to biblical sex. The root of biblical sex (between one man and one woman in marriage) is trust in God, chastity, thankfulness for one’s rightful spouse, and satisfaction in them alone. The fruit: loving relationship, the creation of new life through childbirth, self-sacrifice, service to one’s spouse, and mutual satisfaction. By contrast, picture the root of masturbation: lust, lack of self-control, and dissatisfaction with God and/or one’s spouse. The fruit: addiction, selfish attitudes toward sex, decreased marital satisfaction, open doors to unbridled fantasy, impulsive behavior, and eroded self-control. After all these considerations, it is impossible to justify masturbation based on Scripture; if Jesus could resist, so can his church.

What might be at stake here? Nothing less than eternal life. Paul says in I Corinthians 1:9. “Don’t be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor extortionists, will inherit God’s Kingdom.” If sexual immorality is to be defined at all, it should be understood as any sexual activity outside of biblical marriage; anything else is a slippery slope. Thus, masturbators, as persons who may be sexually immoral, could fall under the category of persons not inheriting eternal life. But the good news is, because of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus, we can be forgiven of sin and granted eternal life, as Paul

continues, “Some of you were like this, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”²¹⁰

²¹⁰ I Corinthians 6:11

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