

# Sexual Authenticity and Character

BY BRADFORD S. HADAWAY

Our culture pushes to the margins the biblical vision of human sexual flourishing—that it is more than the mere satisfaction of sexual craving. If our thinking about sexuality has been marred by the culture’s constant flow of unhealthy messages, we’ll find in these books sage advice dispensed with great compassion.

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**A**wash in overt and distorted sexuality, our culture greets us at every turn with depictions of sex that bear only the faintest resemblance to the good gift of human sexuality which God bestowed as a cornerstone of intimacy and commitment. At its miserable and trivializing best, this sexually explicit material sells shampoo, generates sitcom laughs, or raises a daytime talk show’s ratings. At its frightening worst, it depicts women as mere objects of pleasure and champions domination, rape, and degradation. In either case, our pornographic culture pushes to the margins any vision of sexual flourishing as being more than mere satisfaction of sexual craving.

The three books reviewed here, by addressing sexuality from a Christian perspective, can help us to respond to the pornographic culture.

Judith and Jack Balswick, in *Authentic Human Sexuality: An Integrated Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999; 306 pp., \$25.00), set out a biblical vision for human sexuality, or “sexual authenticity,” and then evaluate current sexual practices in light of that ideal. The Balswicks’ exploration of homosexuality, marital sexuality, and various forms of sexual abusiveness are enlightening, though I will focus only on their treatment of pornography.

To address these issues of sexuality, Balswick and Balswick distill from the Christian tradition six biblical principles and four theological themes which characterize sexual authenticity. When measured against these principles and themes, the sexual inauthenticity present in our pornographic culture is painfully evident.

Four of the six biblical principles deal with God's creative purpose for sexuality: God created the good gift of sexuality as a means of achieving a fundamental unity between a purposefully differentiated male and female,

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and this gift is meant to "draw us into deeper levels of knowing self, others, and God." God created humans with an "innate capacity for sexual pleasure" that gives birth to a sexual existence best nurtured in the context of an "emotionally caring" family. God created sexu-

ality to be intricately connected to our spirituality. The other principles highlight how humanity's fall into sin has twisted the created order and how Christ's redemptive activity offers hope for sexual restoration (p. 37). Though the Balswicks do not explicitly employ these principles to make plain the inauthenticity of pornographic sexuality, we can easily construct such a case. Pornography, typically, disconnects sexuality from the contexts of our spirituality and families. It draws us away from sexual expressions that promote fundamental unity with and deeper knowledge of the other person; it dissociates sexual pleasure from its created context of interpersonal intimacy and recasts it as mere satisfaction of a sensual craving. In these ways pornographic sexuality reflects the distortions of the created order that occurred in the Fall.

In addition to the six biblical principles, the authors recommend that four themes of authentic Christian *spirituality*, namely covenantal commitment, grace, empowerment, and intimacy, are also markers of authentic *sexuality*. Any sexual expression that fails these ideals is inauthentic. Since pornography, by definition, includes human degradation and "uses subjugation themes for the explicit purpose of sexual arousal" (p. 235), it clearly falls short. Rather than celebrating human intimacy, pornography touts sex as a way to treat people, usually women, as tools for pleasure. It promotes domination and control, instead of self-sacrifice and empowering service.

Since pornography is degrading and dehumanizing by definition, both in the way it depicts human sexuality and the way it molds its consumers' attitudes towards sex (p. 236), the biblical rejection of pornography is relatively straightforward. But what should Christians say about sexually

explicit material that is not inherently degrading or dehumanizing? The Balswicks distinguish between pornography and what they call “erotica.” The latter, they suggest, may celebrate authentic sexuality as a part of God’s good purpose for humanity, since erotica lacks both the degradation and dehumanization that necessarily attaches to pornographic material. Such a distinction, though subtle, is morally significant; it helps us to discern the difference between, for instance, a pornographic *Hustler* magazine pictorial and Michelangelo’s erotic nude sculpture, *David*.

Unfortunately there is a very fine line between celebrating the beauty of God-given sexuality and demeaning that sexuality. Though they illustrate the challenges in drawing a distinction between sexually authentic erotica and pornography, they offer little explicit guidance about where the line should be drawn. Degradation and dehumanization are the two features that make some sexual depiction pornographic, according to the Balswicks, yet they have little to say about *exactly* when a depiction of sex is degrading or dehumanizing. Do they expect us, to paraphrase the words of a judge who issued a famous ruling about indecency, to “know it when we see it”? Is a story about consensual and affectionate sex between two unmarried adults dehumanizing? Is a depiction of masturbation degrading? Is an image dehumanizing or degrading only when it portrays a person as a mere object, or are there other features of the image’s content or presentation which we should consider? Without more guidance, someone could wield these terms, “dehumanizing” and “degrading,” with an arbitrary whim to denounce almost any sexual depiction. Christians who want to articulate a careful prophetic response to pornography, therefore, will have to go beyond the Balswicks’ outline to fill in significant details.

The Balswicks warn that even though there is nothing *intrinsically* wrong with erotica, it may still be harmful for some people to view it, given their specific arousal habits. To illustrate this point, consider how scantily clad models in certain advertisements might inflame some viewers with lustful desires while leaving others totally unmoved. This type of moral ambiguity suggests that we should evaluate our individual responses to erotic depictions rather than develop universal rules about which erotic material would be wrong for all people to consume. To this end, the Balswicks provide excellent guidelines for assessing the potential for the person-relative harm of erotic material.

In *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993; 172 pp., \$12.99 paperback), Marva J. Dawn explores the biblical meaning of sexuality as an antidote to our culture’s infatuation with a sexuality robbed of significance. She examines friendship, premarital sexuality, homosexuality, marital sexuality, and parenting in light of the requirements of biblical sexuality, highlighting ways in which our human sexual experience has been diminished.

Why are so many driven to their sexual vices, she wonders, and what Christian virtues would check their march towards sexual disintegration?

Our sexual mess results from our deep human hunger for care and affection being inappropriately channeled towards sexual satisfaction, Dawn contends, because normal avenues for community have been choked off.

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The technological and industrial character of our society often fractures us from one another rather than brings us together. Starved for affection and feeling ever more isolated, we run into the willing arms of others, who are similarly starved, seeking the intimacy we

need in order to thrive. As a result, an empty and misguided sexuality saturates our culture.

Though Dawn identifies an important cause of our culture’s sexual quagmire, I suspect that the reason for the prevalence of pornography is much more complex. It is unlikely that people use pornography mainly to address unmet intimacy needs, because its consumption is usually an intensely private affair, and as we have already seen, the content of pornography often celebrates distance from a sexual object rather than intimacy with a person. Some baser set of instincts must be involved in the magnetic pull of pornography and the other forms of sexual immorality in our culture, and Dawn fails to address these sordid motivations.

If our problem involves a lack of intimacy and affection, then pornography, infidelity, and fornication cannot help us. Instead, we must welcome the biblical model for flourishing sexuality. The primary strength of Dawn’s book is its fresh look at this biblical model through the lens of an “ethics of character.” She focuses on character traits, or virtues, which are necessary to achieve a good life in general, and in this case, a flourishing sexuality. Since Christ is the paradigm human being, she recommends that the fruits of the Spirit of Christ (Galatians 5:22-23) are the traits we should cultivate in order to realize the Bible’s vision of sexual flourishing. She does not draw these specific implications for us, but we can see how this rightly-ordered sexual character would reject pornography: with the virtue of agapic love, we would feel revulsion, not sexual desire, at depictions of human degradation; and with self-control, we could master the sexual passions that constantly seek to usurp control. Dawn carefully accounts for the bearing of each virtue, or fruit, upon sexuality. We can benefit from her atypical focus on the constructive project of developing strong Christian character, rather than merely reciting the moral failings of pornography.

J. Heinrich Arnold moves the conversation about sexuality out of the arena of ethical analysis and into our personal, practical search for sexual wholeness in his classic, *Freedom from Sinful Thoughts* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1997; 111 pp., \$8.00 paperback). Whether we are battling the addictive power of pornography, or our thinking about sexuality simply has been marred by the culture's constant flow of unhealthy messages, we'll find sage advice dispensed here with great compassion.

A life freed from the chains of pornography or addictive sexual misconduct begins with a controlled *mental* life, Arnold observes. Yet we cannot "fix" our own mental sinfulness. With a keen understanding of the habits of the mind, Arnold rejects several proposed self-medicating solutions to the problem. For example, we cannot rely on willpower to eradicate sinful sexual thoughts, because the will is a partner in the very wickedness we seek to avoid. Why should we expect the will, which is a culprit, also to be the rescuer? Indeed, if we attempt to "will away" sinful thoughts, desires for pornographic material, or mistaken messages about sexuality, we actually bring those thoughts, desires, and messages into sharper mental focus. This, in turn, makes us feel powerless and that the liberation we seek is out of reach. If we've *struggled* unsuccessfully to control sinful thoughts, we can find some solace in Arnold's insight that our failed struggle is not necessarily evidence of a weak character but rather of a misguided strategy.

True liberation from sinful thoughts, Arnold counsels, occurs only through Christ's redemptive work in our lives. In faithfulness, we must surrender to the assistance that Jesus has promised. Arnold acknowledges that this faithfulness, which will be evidenced in confession, prayer, detachment, and repentance, is a paradoxical mystery: it must be a gift from God rather than another act of will (p. 41). (If Christian faith were an act of will, then it could only be another misguided strategy.)

Should we be disappointed with this advice? From a book that purports to explain how to achieve freedom from sinful thoughts, we probably expect more guidance on what to do, on how to fight! Nevertheless, Arnold is wise to steer us away from misguided "self-help" schemes, to point us away from "struggle" models and toward "surrender." This is an essential first reflective step on the long road towards liberation from sinful habits of thought that bind us.



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