



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Erotic, but not
Pornographic
(*The Pornographic Culture*,
pp. 70-76)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Song Sung Blue?
(*The Pornographic Culture*,
pp. 61-65)
- 📖 Reeducating Our Desires
(*The Pornographic Culture*,
pp. 77-82)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Erotic, but not Pornographic

Can we produce distinctively Christian art that is really true to the biblical vision of sexual love? Our generation desperately needs that vision. Christian art, for those who will receive it, can be redemptive, rescuing their imagination from the limitations of creatureliness and sin.

Prayer

Responsive Reading†

My beloved speaks and says to me:

“Arise my love, my fair one,
and come away;

for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.

Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.”

**I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the wild does:**

**do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready!**

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;

for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love all the wealth of one’s house,
it would be utterly scorned.

**I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the wild does:**

**do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready!**

Scripture Reading: Song of Songs 4:1-7 and 5:8-16

Reflection

Song of Songs captures the sensuality of sexual love through startlingly frank erotic imagery. As it extols the power and passion of sexual love, the Song weaves its storytelling within the bounds of virtuous love, a commitment to relationship, and a deep respect for mutuality between lovers. Song of Songs is erotic, but not pornographic.

What distinguishes erotic art from pornographic material? “Any Christian erotic art,” notes Peck, “will focus on the relationship between the persons, rather than on the physical experience.” Song of Songs exemplifies this aesthetic; it overflows with carefully crafted expressions of adoration between the lover and the beloved. They sing back and forth the many praises of how they enchant one another. They revel in one another’s physical beauty and attractiveness, though they cherish far more than their partner’s body. The lovers are altogether



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pleased with one another, with the sound of their voices, the smell of their skin, the taste of their mouths, and even with the strength of their character! The latter is a distant cry from what pornography peddles as a sexual relationship.

Pornography, on the other hand, is voyeuristic: it encourages the viewer's self-arousal while eliminating the inconvenient necessity of dealing with another human being. Further, it "tends to rely on digitally-enhanced images of surgically-enhanced bodies," Singleton comments. This standardized artificiality dampens appreciation for the variety of real bodies.

When toned-down versions of pornographic material go mainstream with consumer marketing—think of popular newsstand magazines or prime-time television commercials—their sexual imagery can powerfully and subtly inform our desires. "Our desires should lead us toward the true, the good, and the beautiful that are found in God," writes Dolan-Henderson, "pornography redirects [our desires] toward a fantasy life that refuses all limits."

We can resist pornography's grossly perverted presentations of sexuality and human bodies by putting forward an alternative vision informed by a biblical understanding of sex, exemplified in the Song of Songs. This vision will emphasize the value of all persons, both male and female. It will point to ideals of restraint and chastity, acknowledge the genuine struggle between desire and virtue, and emphasize the seriously intimate nature of the sexual bond.

What the Church and our culture desperately need are writers, artists, filmmakers, musicians, and teachers who invite us to discover for ourselves the distinctively Christian worldview, including its ideal for sexual relationships.

Study Questions

1. What standards for evaluating erotic material are drawn by Singleton from Song of Songs? How well do her standards help us to distinguish erotic art from pornographic material?
2. According to Peck, how is Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) a model work of storytelling (*The Pornographic Culture*, pp. 72-73)? When we study its form and technique, what do we learn that will help us to create and evaluate Christian art?
3. Peck describes a life-size, charcoal drawing that was exhibited at the Tate Gallery in London. Why does he think the drawing of this couple is erotic but not pornographic?
4. Discuss Wendell Berry's comments in "Other Voices" (*The Pornographic Culture*, pp. 58-60). What does the mere voyeur necessarily fail to see? What would the best artistic representations of sexual lovemaking acknowledge?

Departing Hymn: "Sacred the Body"

† Adapted from Song of Songs 2:10-13; 3:5, 8:6-7 (NRSV).

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Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish erotic art from pornographic material.
2. To explore Song of Songs as a biblical example of erotic art.
3. To encourage Christian artists to produce erotic art that reflects a Christian worldview.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Pornographic Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a story

Share the story John Peck tells about an experience he and his wife had as foster parents for a teenage girl (*The Pornographic Culture*, p. 74). This incident illustrates how the attitudes about recreational sex that are current in our culture can slip into our thinking.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close with a prayer thanking God for the gifts of creativity and artistic expression. Ask God to help us reclaim the capacity to produce art that celebrates the beauty of sexual relationships.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a two group members (male and female, respectively) to read Song of Songs 4:1-7 and 5:8-16 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The evaluation of erotic art, Peck notes, prompts us “to go back to the basics” and acquire a biblically informed Christian attitude toward sex. Only then will we be free to appreciate and create erotic art that initiates us into a world where sexuality and lovemaking are imbued with the mystery and awe that is proper to intimacy.

Art is powerfully communicative. “Poetry can initiate us into emotions and desires beyond our normal experience, drama into experiences of social interaction, music to provisional moods, painting to fresh ways of seeing the world,” Peck observes. He urges Christian artists to produce art that invites our generation to explore and receive a biblical view of sexuality.

The Song of Songs can serve as a model for such art, according to both Peck and Singleton. By studying it as erotic art that is not pornographic, we can begin to contrast the biblical vision of sexuality with

the one we find in pornography. The Song celebrates the uncontainable fullness of God's gift of gender and sex; pornography offers a pitifully shallow view of humanity and intercourse. While the Song invites us to see how marvelous and wonderfully God has made men and women, pornography debases humans as divine image bearers.

After sketching the outlines of these two very different construals of sexuality, invite members to consider the redemptive contribution of distinctively Christian art.

Study Questions

1. Singleton identifies four biblical standards about erotic art from Song of Songs: (1) the Songs' eroticism glorifies the normal rather than the extreme, (2) it portrays the many dimensions of the lovers' admirable qualities, (3) both lovers have powerful voices throughout the story, and (4) their sexual relationship is linked to commitment and consequences. Members might contrast each of these standards with other views of sexuality commonly expressed in popular culture. To contrast these to pornographic material, ask members to explore the comments by Stephen Watters, Catherine Itzin, Mary Pellauer, and the Balswicks in "Other Voices" (*The Pornographic Culture*, pp. 58-60).
2. Storytelling is the most commonly found art form in the Bible, though it contains or refers positively to many forms of art, including music, poetry, sculpture, dance, and drama. When a story is skillfully told, its method of communication is indirect. Jesus slips his message past the mental guards put up by the prejudice, pride, and even logic of the lawyer. Peck recommends three criteria for evaluating art: (1) art must maintain the illusion of an imaginary world that is analogous to the real one, (2) the clues to art's meaning must be discoverable, and (3) the art's values should remain implicit, inviting discovery by the listener or viewer. Encourage members to discuss each of these criteria in relation to the story of the Good Samaritan.
3. Sheer adoration, awe, and wonder radiate from the man's face as he kneels beside the bed and looks upon the woman. His facial expression, much more than the woman's nude body, dominates the picture. The intended effect of this portrait on the viewer is not sexual arousal, but the realization of sexual self-giving, a quality unique to erotic love that we never discover in pornography. Members may connect this observation, as Peck does, to the intended effect of Song of Songs.
4. Members may want to develop several themes within these two quotations. The first quote mentions the impossibility of observing sexual love, for we cannot "crack the shell" of sexual privacy. A sexual voyeur mistakenly believes he is observing sexual love, but he necessarily fails to see the intimacy of sexual union. In the second quote Berry builds on this theme. Since sexual intimacy is essentially private and mysterious, good erotic art must make the viewer aware of what he or she is *not* seeing: namely, the two lives, with their shared history and mutual trust, which are involved in lovemaking.

Departing Hymn

"Sacred the Body" is on pp. 56-57 of *The Pornographic Culture*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.