

The Pornographic Culture

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

BAYLOR
UNIVERSITY

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ISSN 1535-8585

Christian Reflection is the ideal resource for discipleship training in the church. Multiple copies are obtainable for group study at \$2.50 per copy. Worship aids and lesson materials that enrich personal or group study are available free on the website.

Christian Reflection is published quarterly by The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. Contributors express their considered opinions in a responsible manner. The views expressed are not official views of The Center for Christian Ethics or of Baylor University.

The Center expresses its thanks to individuals, churches, and organizations, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, who provided financial support for this publication.

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Contents

Introduction	6
Robert B. Kruschwitz	
Sex and the City (of God)	9
Todd L. Lake	
Turning Dimes into Dollars	17
Rick Martinez	
Simpletons, Fools, and Mockers	24
Jonathan R. Wilson	
Habit's Harsh Bondage	31
Thomas D. Kennedy	
The Voyeur in Art	38
Heidi J. Hornik	
<i>Susanna and the Elders</i>	
Artemisia Gentileschi	
<i>At the Moulin Rouge</i>	
Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec	
<i>Nana</i>	
Edouard Manet	
Worship Service	49
Todd L. Lake	
Sacred the Body	56
Ruth C. Duck and W. Daniel Landes	
Other Voices	58
Song Sung Blue?	61
Laura Singleton	
Body Worship	66
Robert and Mary Darden	

continued

Erotic, but not Pornographic	70
John Peck	
Reeducating Our Desires	77
Susan Dolan-Henderson	
Sexual Authenticity and Character	83
Bradford S. Hadaway	
Avoiding the Mess in Mass Media	88
Carl F. Hoover	
Advertisement	93
Editors	94
Contributors	96

Additional Resources

These study guides are available by free download from our website www.ChristianEthics.ws. They integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in this issue.

NAKED AND NOT ASHAMED

This naked couple, Adam and Eve, living, even cavorting, in Eden is not the stuff of children's Bibles. Yet it forms the necessary beginning for grasping the unblushing approach to human sexuality in Scripture.

SEX AND THE CITY OF GOD

The biblical limitations regarding appropriate sexual behavior result from an awareness of the raw power of sex. Individuals now, like then, are involved in *consensual* sexual relationships that fall short of God's intention. Yet there is hope for our fallen sexual desires if we allow them to be rightly ordered by God.

SIMPLETONS, FOOLS, AND MOCKERS

In three characters delineated in Proverbs we can see an ancient account of the descent into the folly of pornography in our times. Yet biblical wisdom offers hope for redemption, and wisdom incarnate in Jesus Christ extends that hope even further. The simple, the fool, and the mocker can be "born again," not in the facile sense of popular culture, but in the death-denying, life-giving power of the Wisdom of God.

HABIT'S HARSH BONDAGE

How can we understand the powerful lure of sexual imagery that captivates us? If we conclude that obsession with the pornographic image is a sickness, it is a sickness of will for which we are, to some significant degree, responsible.

EROTIC, BUT NOT PORNOGRAPHIC

The amazing new pervasiveness of pornography is enough to make us wonder if there can be erotic art that is not pornographic. Can we still 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.

AVOIDING PORNOGRAPHY'S MESS

With demanding consumers, willing producers, and savvy business executives, the pornography industry has become diverse and pervasive in North America. How can adults and parents discern the commendable while screening out the objectionable in our popular culture?

Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

As pornography's influence becomes pervasive in our society, distorting the dignity of men's and women's bodies in God's plan, how can we understand and engage our pornographic culture with Christ-transformed minds?

Overt sexual imagery saturates our culture, through popular music, movies, and television; in advertising in all media; in books and magazines; and through the ever-present Internet. When this imagery is calculated to arouse sexual desires that are inappropriate to a faithful Christian life, and when it distorts the dignity of men's and women's bodies in God's plan, we call it "pornographic."

Our contributors remind us that pornography's influence is spreading through our culture in many subtle and complicated ways. How has pornography become so pervasive? Part of the answer, of course, lies in the desires of its consumers and proclivities of its high-profile producers. But Rick Martinez, in *Turning Dimes into Dollars* (p. 17), finds another part of the answer in the business aspects of the industry and its concerted drive for cultural legitimacy.

"The only way to get something bad is to take something good and spoil it," J. Budziszewski has written. "Whenever you find a bad thing, look for a good thing somewhere in the ruins." The great good which the inauthentic sexuality portrayed in pornography threatens to engulf, is that male and female, in union together, comprise the image of God. True sexual intimacy goes to the heart of God's character and intention, Todd Lake explains in *Sex and the City (of God)* (p. 9). Yet, just as Genesis is forthright about the goodness of human sexuality in Eden, so the rest of the Bible is clear about the manifold ways in which our sexuality has gone awry.

The Song of Songs (or, Song of Solomon) shows that the original intent

for marriage as passionate faithfulness between a man and a woman for a lifetime is not entirely forgotten by God's people. The Bible's most extensive treatment of erotic love, the Song is so provocative that the rabbis prohibited their pupils from reading it until they turned thirty. In *Song Sung Blue?* (p. 61), Laura Singleton discovers what distinguishes this frankly erotic poetry from pornography: its emphasis on the value of persons, both male and female; its ideals of restraint and premarital chastity; and the serious nature of the sexual bond presumed to seal the marriage covenant. "Whether or not the lovers are historical persons," Singleton concludes, "they have a convincing reality which transcends the shallowness of images invented for our selfish gratification."

The amazing new pervasiveness of pornographic art is enough to make us wonder if there can be erotic art that is not pornographic. John Peck wonders in *Erotic, but not Pornographic* (p. 70), Can we still produce distinctively Christian art that is really true to the biblical vision of sexual love? Our generation desperately needs that vision, for "Christian art..., for those who will receive it, will be redemptive, rescuing the imagination from the limitations of creatureliness and sin."

In the Book of Proverbs, the seduction of desires gone awry is delineated through three characters: the simple, the fool, and the mocker. "The simple one, who has a bent toward folly, follows that natural bent. He becomes a fool whose heart is directed toward folly. The fool becomes the mocker who calls what is evil, 'good,' and mocks those in the way of wisdom," writes Jonathan Wilson in *Simpletons, Fools, and Mockers* (p. 24). "In our day, one name for 'Folly' is 'Pornography.'" Yet biblical wisdom offers hope for redemption along the way, and wisdom incarnate in Jesus Christ extends that hope even further. "The simple, the fool, and the mocker can be 'born again,'" Wilson says, "not in the facile sense of popular culture, but in the death-denying, life-giving power of the Wisdom of God."

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* focuses on another biblical story of distorted sexual desire. Heidi Hornik and Matthew Schobert's *Susanna's Strength* (p. 38) reviews how the Baroque painter, like the early Christian community, drew inspiration for chastity and fidelity from the story of Susanna.

How are we to understand the grip of powerful sexual images from which we cannot free ourselves? asked Augustine, the fourth century theologian who saw deeply into the complex workings of the human self. Thomas Kennedy weighs Augustine's answers in *Habit's Harsh Bondage* (p. 31), and concludes our "obsession with the pornographic image...is a sickness of will for which we are, to some significant degree, responsible." Looking over and again at such images forges chains of habit that "are more likely broken in a community of persons committed to loving and serving God."

Pornography, especially when paired with consumerism, can be a powerful educator of our desires, turning them toward a sexual fantasy life

that refuses all limits. Our sexual desires need education, Susan Dolan-Henderson says in *Reeducating our Desires* (p. 77), but it must be grounded in the Gospel as an authentic source of liberation for women as well as men. "Our biblical faith finds its feminist voice in the fact that only God is our Lord; we humans never are given mastery over one another," she notes. "We are all heirs to God's promise, which is reconciliation to God and freedom from all forms of oppression."

Robert and Mary Darden recount that it was "a journey into the heart of darkness" when they researched an exposé of the silicone breast implant industry in America. Behind our culture's obsession with breasts is a spiritual idolatry, they observe in *Body Worship* (p. 66), and "Christians should have no more part of it than we would of worshipping a golden calf."

In *Isolation* (p. 44) and *Just Watching* (p. 46) Heidi Hornik critically examines Toulouse-Lautrec's *At the Moulin Rouge* (on the cover) and Manet's *Nana*. Each artist thoughtfully and frankly depicted aspects of their pornographic culture, and a century later their art continues to challenge our own voyeuristic tendencies.

"Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues," C. S. Lewis wrote, signaling that "either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it is now, has gone wrong." From this insight begins a service of worship by Todd Lake (p. 49), which calls us to deepen our commitment to chastity. These prayers and readings are also suitable for personal and study-group devotion. Many of the suggested hymns may be found in several hymnals. The service features Ruth Duck's recent hymn, *Sacred the Body* (p. 56), based on the Apostle Paul's instruction that "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit...therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

The biblical vision of human sexual flourishing is described engagingly in Judith and Jack Balswick's *Authentic Human Sexuality: An Integrated Christian Approach* and Marva Dawn's *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy*. And J. Heinrich Arnold's classic *Freedom from Sinful Thoughts* moves the conversation about sexuality into our personal, practical search for sexual wholeness. "If our thinking about sexuality has been marred by the culture's constant flow of unhealthy messages," Brad Hadaway notes in his review essay, *Sexual Authenticity and Character* (p. 83), "we'll find in these books sage advice dispensed with great compassion."

Popular culture's ways of living, which have always been a mixture of good and bad, are promoted powerfully and rapidly by the mass media. "Are we prepared for the challenge of discerning the commendable and praiseworthy in its mix?" wonders media critic Carl Hoover in *Avoiding the Mess in Mass Media* (p. 88). His guide to websites with trustworthy and thoughtful reviews of films, television programs, music, and video games, can help us engage our pop culture with Christ-transformed minds. ✚

Sex and the City (of God)

BY TODD L. LAKE

The Bible's unblushing approach to human sexuality begins by affirming its goodness. Yet our sexuality has gone awry. Though it is no more corrupted than other human desires by our fall into sin, by its very centrality to the nature of being human, corrupted sexuality has far-reaching consequences. But there is hope for our fallen sexual desires if we allow them to be rightly ordered by God.

The Genesis creation accounts end with this surprisingly frank verse: "And the man and his wife were both naked and not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25). This naked couple living, even cavorting, in Eden is not the stuff of children's Bibles. Yet it forms the necessary beginning for grasping the unblushing approach to human sexuality in the Bible.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Human sexuality is not presented in Scripture as an embarrassing facet of earthly life. On the contrary, God intends to show forth the divine nature itself through creating humanity as sexual beings: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,....' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27, NIV)[†]. Note that the race of the first couple is not mentioned, nor the language they speak, but only the fact of their being a man and a woman.

God does not create two distinct orders of humans, but one humanity as an earthly counterpart to the unity of the one God. In the Garden of Eden, the woman is not subservient to the man, but is referred to as a

“helper” (2:20). (Certainly “helper” is not a demeaning term here, for when it is used elsewhere in the Old Testament usually it is God who is called a “helper” in relationship to humanity.) The gender differentiation of human persons within that one humanity bears witness to the fact that God subsists in multiple persons. Note the juxtaposition of “he created *him*” and “he created *them*” (my emphasis added). The pronouns shift between singular and plural to show that the unity does not undo the distinction of

The sexual equality between men and women that God created was undone by the Fall. Thus, we must be on guard so as not to affirm the curse and its aftereffects in a mistaken attempt to affirm “what the Bible teaches.” After Genesis 3, human sexuality is a mix of God’s original good design and humanity’s sinful effacement of that design.

persons, nor does the existence of distinct persons compromise their essential unity. Furthermore, *elohim*, which is the Hebrew term for God used in these verses, is plural. While this plural for God in the Hebrew text should not be overinterpreted, it does point toward the fuller understanding of the unity-in-diversity of the Godhead as fully revealed in the New Testament.

God shows forth the divine image (*imago Dei*)

by creating a relationship between two persons who share in a common humanity. This ensures that the Godhead not be misunderstood as a self-sufficient, monolithic unity. Viewed from the anthropological side, it is significant that relationship, and not independence, characterizes human life from the very beginning. Moreover, this relatedness is rooted in the nature of God. The fact that human beings are not hermaphrodites, but gendered, underscores the mutuality that is part of the human condition as God created it to be.

Human sexuality is part of the crowning glory of creation. The eternal love relationship among the persons of the Godhead is given its fullest earthly expression in the self-giving love between a man and a woman for a lifetime. Indeed, it is only after the creation of humanity that God moves from saying his handiwork is “good” to saying it is “very good.” Any genuinely Christian understanding of sex must begin with the affirmation of its goodness.

SEXUALITY GONE AWRY

Though every aspect of human beings is affected by the fall into sin, sexuality is no more corrupted than other human desires. However, by its very centrality to the nature of being human, corrupted sexuality has con-

sequences that can be much more far-reaching than those of other aspects of our fallenness. The curse pronounced on Eve for her disobedience to God is intimately related to her sexuality: "...yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). It is critical to note that this hierarchical relationship of men over women is part of the curse, not part of the original creation. Nevertheless, even the domination of women by men unleashed by sin will not be sufficient to cool the desire of women for men.

The sexual equality that God created was undone by the Fall. When interpreting everything that follows Genesis 3, we must not mistake what *is* the case for what *should be*. We must be on guard so as not to affirm the curse and its aftereffects in a mistaken attempt to affirm "what the Bible teaches." After Genesis 3, human sexuality is a mix of God's original good design and humanity's sinful effacement of that design. Yet God is at work throughout history to redeem the fallen creation. The God who created us as sexual beings desires to rightly order our sexuality so that we might live as God designed us to live.

Just as Genesis was forthright about the goodness of human sexuality in Eden, so the rest of the Bible is clear about the manifold ways in which sexuality has gone awry. The first perversion of the institution of marriage is that it becomes polygamous. Genesis 2:24 had promised, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh." Yet under the curse, men create a culture in which many wives are the norm. Nevertheless, the original intent for marriage as passionate faithfulness between a man and a woman for a lifetime is not entirely forgotten by God's people. The Song of Songs, the most extended treatment of erotic love in the Bible, is about the relationship of one man and one woman. The Song of Songs is erotic poetry—indeed so erotic that the rabbis prohibited their pupils from reading it until they turned thirty.

SEXUALITY AND OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

The Christian Church has applied the Song of Songs to the relationship between the redeemed and the Redeemer for most of the last two millennia. When some critics charge that this is a result of an anti-sexuality bias among Christians, they get the facts exactly backwards. Christians have an embodied faith that allows them to see in sexual union the best metaphor available for speaking about the union of Christ and the Church. The passion, the love, and the oneness exhibited by marriage point in the direction of the ultimate consummation of the marriage supper of the Lamb. That consummation is foreshadowed in the Old Testament by the frequently used metaphor of Israel as wife and God as husband. In the New Testament, the same imagery is applied to Christ and the Church, most notably in Ephesians 5. Paul calls husbands and wives to practice self-giving love, but concludes by stating that this love ultimately points to the marriage of

Christ and the Church.

Christian mystics in the Middle Ages borrowed and developed erotic biblical images to describe the soul's relationship with God. Some have misinterpreted this spiritualization of sexual images as evidence of a denigration of sex by the mystics. But the opposite is true; Spanish, French, Belgian, and German mystics found in graphic sexual imagery, drawn from faithful married life, the most appropriate terms for delineating the soul's intimacy with God.

The Hebrew word *yada*, to know, means both cognitive knowledge and carnal knowledge, or sex. When Genesis says, "Adam knew Eve" (4:1), it is referring to sexual intercourse. Thus, the very idea of knowing God brings with it a sexual connotation; indeed, to fully know of any person—including God—is never merely a cognitive experience. To know a person is to be passionately involved with them. That is why 1 Corinthians 7 links sexual intimacy and intimacy with God. Married couples are admonished not to refrain from sexual relations "except to devote yourselves to prayer" (7:5). The most passionate and intimate physical way of knowing another person is to be set aside only for the higher possibility of passionately knowing God.

SEX, MARRIAGE, AND SINGLENESS

The goodness of marital sex is not contingent on the production of children. However, even many theologians mistakenly have assumed that procreation is the primary justification for sex. Though the Bible values children as a gift from God, they are notably absent from the major passages that deal with marital erotic love. Sex does result in children in many instances, but that does not begin to exhaust its role in a marriage. In the Song of Songs, for instance, the writer depicts a love affair that glories in the sensual, without ever alluding to the pitter-patter of little feet. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" (1:2) strikes the note of longing for physical intimacy with the beloved that marks the entire book. There is no part of the beloved's body that is viewed as shameful, and no height of passion that is out-of-bounds. Children are simply not part of the picture.

The apostle Paul finds it necessary to write to Christians at Corinth, "If anyone thinks that he is not behaving appropriately toward his fiancée ... let them marry" (1 Corinthians 7:36). This admonition is only necessary if sexual desire is central to the drive to marry. The popular idea that in "Bible times" individuals coolly entered into passionless marriages solely to rear a family is false. This is not to deny that the Bible is replete with stories and Psalms celebrating the blessings of children. But the genuine blessing of children is never presented in Scripture as the primary reason for sex.

Sex itself has a place in the "new creation" of which Christians have become a part. Some Gnostic religions, which competed with Christianity

during its first two centuries, forbade sexual relations for their converts. But orthodox Christianity championed the fact that the Redeemer was also the Creator. Human sexuality had been corrupted in the Fall, but it was essentially good because Christ had created it. However, human sexuality must be sanctified and serve the ends for which it was created in Eden. Its purpose is to allow husbands and wives to intertwine their lives on even the physical level. Becoming “one flesh” is not an airy hope, but a vivid metaphor for the spiritual, emotional, volitional, and sexual union that is the God-given goal for each marriage.

It comes as a surprise to modern ears when the apostle Paul states that it is the sexual relationship itself—not feelings of love—that stands as the unique bond between husband and wife. This does not square with Romantic notions of love, but it is consistent with biblical realism. Paul soberly assesses the advantages of single life for those called to follow Christ with undivided devotion. Yet he recognizes that not everyone has the gift of singleness. For those who have the gift of being married, the apostle writes, “It is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:9).

Erotic love (*eros*) alone is reserved for marriage. The other types of love, friendship (*philia*) and unconditional love (*agape*), are practiced by all Christians, and are appropriate in a variety of contexts. Though friendship and unconditional love are necessary virtues for married Christians, they are not uniquely characteristic of married life. Erotic love stands apart because it so intimately unites two individuals. This is a wonderful reality when that physical union is accompanied by an intention to be united in mind, spirit, and will. However, when the intimate physical union takes place between two people who are not striving for a lifelong union of lives, sex becomes a mockery of marriage. That is why Paul must denounce the visits of Christians to temple prostitutes! This is not because of inhibitions regarding the goodness and joy of sex. The limitations regarding appropriate sexual behavior result from a biblical awareness of the raw power of sex—whether used in licit or illicit ways. In having sex with prostitutes, Paul reveals, Christians were forming a “one

Orthodox Christianity championed the fact that the Redeemer was also the Creator. Human sexuality, though corrupted in the Fall, was essentially good because Christ had created it. However, sexuality must be sanctified and serve the ends for which it was created in Eden, to allow husbands and wives to intertwine their lives on even the physical level.

flesh” bond that should be reserved for marriage. Instead of enacting the one-flesh intention of marriage, non-marital sex was merely the acting out of a natural drive. Yet regardless of what the participants think, pre- and extra-marital sex forges an intimate union between them, however fleeting the encounter (1 Corinthians 6:15-16).

It cannot be stressed enough that all of the prohibitions in the Bible against non-marital sex must be read in light of the positive treatment of marital sex. Far from the Bible being prudish about sex, it deals quite explicitly with a wide range of sexual practices. However, it does condemn those that are inimical to human flourishing. It should also be borne in mind that Scripture is directed not at unbelievers, but to God’s chosen people. This makes the prohibitions against incest of all sorts, pre-marital sex, bestiality, adultery, and homosexual relations all the more striking. Every form of sexual practice was apparently alive and well among the people of God.

The Bible celebrates the beauty of sexual relations, but it does not view an active sex life as a precondition for human happiness. Jesus was born into a world where to be a rabbi or a Roman senator, one had to be married. But Christ demonstrated that one could be a fully integrated human being without benefit of sexual relations. Christ’s singleness does not reflect a denigration of marriage. It does, however, underscore the fact that sex is not necessary for human happiness, but only for the establishment of a marriage.

Some people are called to remain single. Indeed, singleness is viewed in the New Testament as a gift of God that should be embraced as a means of serving the Church and the world. Christians may remain single for a variety of reasons. Jesus spoke of those who make themselves “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12). In other words, a personal commitment to singleness is possible. Other Christians, who might desire to marry, may never find the right person. In addition, those who are sexually attracted only to members of the same sex are unable to marry. All these unmarried Christians are called by God to join that band of believers stretching across all ages and continents who give undivided devotion to serving God and others. This is not an unhealthy repression of one’s sexuality. Even Sigmund Freud agreed that the sublimation (as opposed to the repression) of sexual desire to other ends was healthy.

SEX AND THE CITY OF GOD

Human nature has not changed since the time when the Old and New Testaments were written. Individuals now, like then, are involved in *consensual* sexual relationships that fall short of God’s intention, including adultery, adult incest, prostitution, homosexual sex, and other extra-marital sex. The Bible does not only condemn *exploitative* sexual behaviors; God is no doubt opposed to exploitative relationships—sexual, economic, and

otherwise—but those are not the only type that can harm human beings.

Yet there is hope for our fallen sexual desires if we allow them to be rightly ordered by God. St. Paul wrote two epistles to the church in Corinth, a city known for its sexual license. It appears that the congregation tolerated sexual sin out of a mistaken notion that (a) physical actions cannot harm Christians spiritually, and (b) condemnation of others' sex lives would show spiritual immaturity. The apostle Paul rebukes the Corinthians for not taking sexual sin seriously. He writes: "Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral ... nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ... will inherit the kingdom of God." It sounds like a final judgment, but then he adds, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11 NIV). God is ready to rightly order our sexuality if we are willing to acknowledge that it, like all aspects of our life, is in need of healing.

Christ has assumed our humanity fully. The Book of Hebrews draws this conclusion: he "in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." This means that Jesus was tempted sexually as well. The fact that he never succumbed to temptation does not mean that he "doesn't know what it's really like." Quite the contrary, Christ knows the depth and power of temptation like no one else that ever lived because he resisted it to the very end every time. Because he is fully human, Christ can fully redeem humanity.

Male domination in all spheres of life is replaced by the radically egalitarian command, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). This extends to the marriage bed itself, where a mutual self-giving symmetry replaces the hierarchy of the surrounding culture. In a world where women were viewed legally and socially as men's property, St. Paul writes: "the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Corinthians 7:4). The woman here, like the one in the Song of Songs, is a sexually active partner. She is no sister to the apocryphal Victorian newlywed, who was advised on her wedding night to just close her eyes and think of England. The alleged female lack of interest in sex finds no support in Scripture.

The Bible celebrates the beauty of sexual relations, but it does not view an active sex life as a precondition for human happiness. Jesus was born into a world where to be a rabbi or a Roman senator, one had to be married. But Christ demonstrated that one could be a fully integrated human being without benefit of sexual relations.

The sexual pleasure born of self-giving erotic love points beyond itself to the intimate enjoyment of God that is available to all people, married or not. It is to that end that men and women were created. In the kingdom of God, the promise is not that all the single people will finally get married, but that all will participate in the marriage supper of the Lamb of God. Jesus says that in heaven “they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matthew 22:30), not because marriage is unimportant, but because it is pointing to something beyond itself. Once the true Bridegroom arrives, the ultimate fulfillment of all earthly longing will begin. The pleasure of sex on earth will be subsumed in the reality of union with the Beloved:

“Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
For the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;...”

“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the
Lamb.”

Revelation 19:7, 9b

NOTE

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Turning Dimes into Dollars

BY RICK MARTINEZ

As the dirty picture evolved into “pornography,” then “adult entertainment,” the pornography industry became diverse and pervasive in our culture. Part of the reason for this, beyond its consumers’ desires and proclivities of its high-profile producers, lies in the business aspects of the industry and a concerted drive for legitimacy.

But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil....

1 Timothy 6:9-10a

As our culture turns secular in its guiding values, ‘entertainment’ products that consist primarily of disturbing, sexually explicit content are gaining legitimacy in the marketplace. Just as gambling became “gaming,” the dirty picture has become “pornography” and more recently evolved into “adult entertainment.”

“Agnostic or Anglican, it’s pretty hard to deny the complete cultural victory of pornography in America today,” notes cultural critic Read Mercer Schuchardt. Even Hugh Hefner, an old patriarch of today’s pornography industry, is disturbed about its cozy relationship with the new media technologies. “Everything, including sexual imagery, is out there now,” he worries in a *Salon* magazine interview, “and it’s kind of like Pandora’s box—you can’t close it anymore....”¹

Why is pornography increasingly diverse and pervasive in our culture? Part of the answer, of course, lies in the desires of its consumers and proclivities of its high-profile producers. But I think we find another part of

the answer by looking at the business aspects of the industry.

There are so many pornography suppliers because the demand for pornographic content is strong and their business is lucrative. The demand is strong because its consumers want immediate gratification. Since this demand is “inelastic,” the pornography business is exceptionally profitable. (Demand for a product or service is defined as “inelastic” if consumers desire the product so much

Pornography’s increased legitimacy is due to lax social standards of decency, lobbying efforts, well-attended conventions, and the participation of large, mainstream corporations in its distribution.

that they are relatively insensitive to changes in price. Smokers addicted to nicotine are another classic example of such inelasticity.) A certain sense of urgency, grounded in temptation, is a feature of most pornography purchasing decisions. As a result,

retail and online markups on pornographic products are fairly high. With record sales of more than \$10-12 billion in 2000, it is no wonder that the industry has grown to include many business sectors.²

EXPANDING THE BUSINESS

The pornography industry has become a major revenue producer by successfully marketing its products through traditional media outlets and new retail ventures in North America, and by expanding internationally through the Internet. We immediately think of its vast publications in traditional media—magazines, movies, videos, and the new “soft porn” cable television shows. Adding to the coffers of pornography peddlers are DVD collections of “classic” pornographic movies, comic books, and animated videos. More recently, Internet pornography has become a major source of revenue, bringing in an estimated \$3 billion annually from over 200,000 websites, with more than 23,000 of these dedicated to child pornography.³

Riding the trend of increasing public acceptance of their products, pornography distributors are experimenting with mainstream retail outlets. *Hustler* mogul Larry Flynt entered the novelty store niche by opening two glitzy ‘Hustler Hollywood’ stores, which sell pornographic books, magazines, comics, and videos, along with sex toys, gifts, clothing and of course, coffee. The venture aims to be a comfortable experience for couples and gift-seekers, and a far cry from those dark, secretive ‘XXX’ stores banned to outside the city limits.

Pornography distributors also are going global and using the Internet for international exchange of pornographic products. The size of this international trade is unclear because nations define and track pornography sales differently. However, because tolerance for pornographic content

has increased in the United States in the last decade and now resembles the more tolerant environments of Europe and some Asian and Latin American markets, the American producers have been emboldened to market their productions internationally. Since pornography producers and distributors in Europe often are public corporations, it is perhaps only a matter of time until American pornography producers seek greater legitimacy, and growth, through incorporation. In the meantime, they are seeking cultural, political, and legal legitimacy of the industry in other ways.

LEGITIMIZING THE INDUSTRY

Though much of society has been a willing participant in the legitimization of pornography, key market players are guiding the process. Increased legitimacy is due to many factors, including lax social standards of decency, lobbying efforts, well-attended conferences and conventions, and the participation of large, mainstream corporations in its distribution.

When asked recently about changes in the “adult entertainment” industry, Playboy Enterprises founder Hugh Hefner noted that *Playboy* magazine is positively tame and old-fashioned by today’s standards of decency.⁴

How much have the standards changed? Back in 1971 *The Wall Street Journal* reported blandly, almost apologetically, Playboy Enterprises’ first public stock offering by a firm dedicated solely to producing pornographic products; yet in 1997 it trumpeted with a prominent front-page article the “entrepreneurial opportunities” of pornography on the Internet, as evidenced by the phenomenal financial success of pornography star Danni Ashe’s explicit website.⁵ Even a conservative publication like *The Wall Street Journal* does not blush in touting the money to be made in Internet sex.

The explosion of pornographic content in our culture coincides with relaxed standards of decency seen in television, movies, music, and print. In order to find a replacement for their wildly popular and sexually-suggestive show “Friends,” NBC purchased the rights to a BBC sitcom entitled “Coupling.” The British show’s producer noted that, “NBC said ‘Friends’ was coming to an end and they saw ‘Coupling’ as ‘Friends’ with sex.... They were very enthusiastic about the show and said they didn’t want to tone it down.”⁶ In other words, the gap between outright pornography and the sexual content permeating mainstream media productions has narrowed considerably as entertainment providers sense their viewers’ increasing appetite, or demand, for nudity and explicit material.

The greatest threat to the continued growth of the pornography industry is an activist government that seeks to curtail the production and consumption of pornographic material. *Hustler* magazine founder Larry Flint leads the industry’s legal and political skirmishes with the government.

Flint has taken significant financial, legal, and personal risks over the last four decades, invoking free speech arguments against federal and state anti-pornography efforts. His recent ally in the lobbying and legal process

is the Free Speech Coalition (FSC), a self-described “adult entertainment trade association.” Flint and the FSC have worked hard to legitimize the industry, arguing that pornography is protected free speech and its production is financially significant in the economy of California.

No legitimate industry would be complete these days without an annual convention to promote its products and services. Las Vegas hosts several smaller porn conventions each year, but the largest is the “Erotica” convention in Los Angeles with over 20,000 attendees in 2002. As in other industry conventions, products are sold, meetings held, speeches made, innovations disseminated, and new alliances formed by networking of industry players. Because they are held in popular public arenas, receive relatively benign media attention, and portray the industry as simply another business within a diverse marketplace, these annual conventions are helping to legitimize pornography and portray it as adult entertainment.

The most important piece of the legitimization puzzle for the pornography industry is its burgeoning alliance with Corporate America. The fact has not been lost on corporate executives that pornographic products generate cash flows that are difficult to trace. The largest corporate beneficiary of pornography sales is AT&T’s Broadband and Cable company, which carries the profitable HOT network and generates cash through pay-per-view shows and video-on-demand. The content providers charge very low permission fees for these broadcasts, and AT&T exploits this market imperfection. Naturally, AT&T has not publicized these transactions, and the millions of dollars that AT&T nets from these sales are not identified by name in its annual report. Another major corporate purveyor of pornographic content is General Motors, through its Hughes subsidiary’s Direct-TV. Major hotel corporations, such as Hilton, Westin, and Marriott, take 10% off the top from all pornographic movie rentals in their hotel rooms through agreements with providers LodgeNet and OnCommand. The hotels have no costs, since the providers supply them with all wiring, programming, and software. It is estimated that eighty percent of all movie rentals in hotel rooms are of a pornographic nature. Naturally, hotels are hesitant to dispense with this cash cow.⁷

Web darling Yahoo is the largest clearinghouse of information on pornographic websites, categorizing thousands of sites and, until recently, operating an online store for pornography and sex products. Its decision to become a major seller of pornography products was clearly money-driven, notes *The Los Angeles Times*, “reflecting the desperation of Internet companies to find new sources of revenue amid a slowing economy. It also underscores a long-standing truism about porn and the Net—sex sells.” Furthermore, Yahoo’s online store “essentially gives a virtual Good Housekeeping seal of approval to porn, by virtue of both Yahoo’s size and its long-standing corporate mantra that its service is more than a digital white pages.” Larry Lux, president of Playboy.com, agrees: “Clearly, having a

Yahoo in this space furthers the trend of mainstream acceptance of adult content.”⁸ Pornography’s alliance with big business reflects the increasing sophistication of the business model driving the industry’s production.

BUSINESS MODEL

As pornographic enterprises become more profitable, they gather more business allies and increase their legitimacy, staying power, and influence on our lives. A sophisticated business model is emerging with the entrance of well-educated business graduates, the employment of a network model similar to that of Hollywood, leading edge technology, and increased marketing of the industry’s “stars.”

The most important factor in porn’s new business model is the arrival of highly educated business people from the nation’s top business schools. They are drawn by large amounts of cash to be attained quickly with minimal investment and low risk, and have no moral qualms about *how* their money is made. Their training is bringing to the pornography industry a more global outlook, and the use of joint ventures, strategic alliances (e.g. Vivid Entertainment and Playboy), and other strategic tools aimed at increasing the efficiency and profitability of operations.

After the “big studio” era came to a close in Hollywood in the 1960’s, the larger entertainment industry reorganized into networks of firms based on the various competencies at which each firm excels. Pornographers adopted this networking model, with small firms contracting with one another to develop the explicit content that is then sold to a network of small distributors. Most companies have fewer than ten employees.

Freelance actors go to job sites for short periods of time, where a photographer or camera operator works with the actors to generate the images called for by a director. Then other small firms reproduce the explicit content in its various media forms. Another small firm, typically a middleman with a cell phone, brokers the final product to distributors, such as video stores, magazine publishers, and Internet site operators. These firms also tend to be small and operate on small budgets.

As a result, producers and developers of pornographic content have not benefited from the economies of scale, or the cost savings that come to larger organizations. Given the “artistic” nature of the product and the fact that players in this industry have had to hide in the shadows of more legitimate commerce, this is not surprising. What is perhaps somewhat surprising is that consolidation has been so slow to materialize. This is likely to change as large, legitimate corporations continue to build a presence in the pornography industry.

Pornography entrepreneurs have encouraged technological innovations. Much of the development and explosion of VCRs, for instance, can be traced to both the supply and demand sides of the pornography industry. Pornography producers wanted to move their content from the film reels

in 'XXX' movie houses to a more accessible medium, so they provided opportunities for engineers to develop VCR technology for their specific needs. The allure of at-home viewing of explicit material played no small role in VCR sales in the 1980's. Recently, pornography website producers have spurred the development of technology to satisfy the appetite for a more "realistic" web sexual encounter. Internet pornography distributors

Anonymous actors, Harvard-trained business people, small production companies, large Internet firms, major corporations, and distributors are drawn to pornography's flame fueled by large amounts of easy cash. They disperse an "adolescent fantasy of false desire and technological gratification, a legacy that amounts to our generation's toxic dump."

are pioneering real-time video and audio through advances that eventually will be available in mainstream venues.⁹ This innovation is not surprising, because hundreds of experienced dot-com technicians and engineers flocked to the profitable online pornography businesses after the dot-com crash of 2000.

Naturally, any business or industry thrives on the marketing of its product or services.

While the great majority of pornographic actors remain anonymous and marginalized, technological advances of the last decade have led to the development of some marketable "talent." Internet, video, and DVD productions are developing recurring characters and popular actors. ABC's *Nightline* recently chronicled the astounding popularity of male pornography actor Ron Jeremy, who can't walk the streets of any major city without being hounded by fans.¹⁰ Vivid Entertainment markets its popular star Jenna Jamison through dolls in her image, including a talking version.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, participants in the pornography industry—be they anonymous actors, global stars, Harvard-trained business people, small production companies, large Internet firms, major corporations, or middleman brokers and distributors—are drawn to the flame fueled by large amounts of relatively easy cash. They are trapped by "senseless and harmful desires," but more importantly, they are entrapping others. Collectively they disperse what Schuchardt calls an "adolescent fantasy of false desire and technological gratification, a legacy which amounts to our generation's toxic dump."¹¹

As the industry's profits continue to grow, it is likely that its lobbying efforts will seek out and find new political and cultural allies. The quest

for the legitimacy that is the most important source of sustenance for any industry will then be complete for pornography. Its toxic mess of distorted desire, no longer contained to a few business sectors, increasingly will seep through to other businesses such as hotels, mainstream publishing, television networks, entertainment venues, and the Internet.

As Christians who oppose pornography and its detrimental effects on society and culture, we would do well to resist vigorously all attempts at legitimization by the pornography industry and its advocates, however benign they may seem. So myriad and subtle will be these attempts, they will require of us the thoughtful wisdom of serpents and innocence of doves that Jesus commended to his first disciples (Matthew 10:16).

NOTES

1 Quoted in Read Mercer Schuchardt, "Play Boy! The Cultural Victory of Hugh Hefner," *re:generation quarterly* 7:3 (Fall 2001), online at regenerator.com/7.3/schuchardt.html.

2 Compare this to the robust Christian retail industry, which also had a record setting year in 2000 at just over \$4 billion. It is astounding that these two very different industries are booming at the same time in our culture.

3 The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) estimates are available online at (www.safexplorer.com/dangers/index.asp).

4 "Too Much Sex?" episode of CBS News' *48 Hours* (online at www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/05/22/48hours/main198124.shtml).

5 Frederick S. Lane III, *Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age* (New York: Routledge, 2000), xiii-xiv.

6 CNN Online (2002). "Report: NBC Finds Next 'Friends'" (online at www.cnn.com/2002/SHOWBIZ/TV/06/18/bbc.nbc.deal.ap/index.html).

7 ABC News' *Nightline* (March 25, 2002). *Nightline* observes that a notable exception is Omni hotels, which took a \$4 million annual hit recently by removing all pornographic movies from its television offerings. The decision was based on moral grounds.

8 P.J. Huffstutter, "Yahoo's search for profit leads to pornography," *The Los Angeles Times* (Wednesday, April 11, 2001), A1. Only days after this article was published, Yahoo scuttled almost two years of effort, negotiations, and planning to become a major player in the online pornography industry. It dropped all direct online sales of sex-related products from its shopping sites.

9 "Internet's Dirty Little Secret," CBSNews.com (1999) (online at www.cbsnews.com/stories/1999/02/08/eveningnews/printable32030.shtml).

10 ABC News' *Nightline* (March 25, 2002).

11 Schuchardt, "Play Boy!"



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Simpletons, Fools, and Mockers

BY JONATHAN R. WILSON

In three characters delineated in Proverbs—the simple, the fool, and the mocker—we can see an ancient account of the descent into the folly of pornography in our times. Yet biblical wisdom offers hope for redemption along the way, and wisdom incarnate in Jesus Christ extends that hope even further.

Many years ago, an ancient Israelite teacher described in his day the same seduction and destruction of many in our day. Proverbs 7:6-27, by narrating an event in the life of one of the “simple ones,” illuminates for us how Folly seduces and destroys lives:

For at the window of my house
I looked out through my lattice,
and I saw among the simple ones,
I observed among the youths,
a young man without sense,
passing along the street near her corner,
taking the road to her house
in the twilight, in the evening,
at the time of night and darkness.

Then a woman comes toward him,
decked out like a prostitute, wily of heart.
She is loud and wayward;
her feet do not stay at home;

now in the street, now in the squares,
and at every corner she lies in wait.
She seizes and kisses him,
and with impudent face she says to him:
"I had to offer sacrifices,
and today I have paid my vows;
so now I have come out to meet you,
to seek you eagerly, and I have found you!
I have decked my couch with coverings,
colored spreads of Egyptian linen;
I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon.
Come, let us take our fill of love until morning;
let us delight ourselves with love.
For my husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey.
He took a bag of money with him;
he will not come home until full moon."

With much seductive speech she persuades him;
with her smooth talk she compels him.
Right away he follows her,
and goes like an ox to the slaughter,
or bounds like a stag toward the trap
until an arrow pierces its entrails.
He is like a bird rushing into a snare,
not knowing that it will cost him his life.

And now, my children, listen to me,
and be attentive to the words of my mouth.
Do not let your hearts turn aside to her ways;
do not stray into her paths,
for many are those she has laid low,
and numerous are her victims.
Her house is the way to Sheol,
going down to the chambers of death.

Following the instruction of Proverbs, we may gain insight into the destruction worked in our day by the Folly of Pornography (capitalized here to represent its status as an idol, as Jesus uses "Mammon" in the New Testament). This insight is not an exhaustive description of Pornography. Nor is this an exhaustive account of why people are seduced by pornographic Folly. But Proverbs does provide a powerful biblical description of what is at stake in the competing invitations of Folly (9:13-18) and Wisdom (9:1-6).

The book of Proverbs often makes its teaching concrete and vivid through the use of characters: the wise and the righteous, of course; but

also the sluggard, the wayward, the greedy, the poor, and the rich. Some of these have clear value, good or bad, assigned to them on the scale of Israelite common wisdom. Others may be devalued by society, but valued by Yahweh. (See, for example, the poor in 19:4 and 19:17.)

Three proverbial characters that illuminate the teaching of the wise and our own topic are the simple (*peti*), the fool (*kesil*), and the mocker (*lets*; I prefer the power of the NIV “mocker” to the NRSV “scoffer”). Proverbs does not observe a rigid distinction among these three, but the distinction and characterization is sufficient to be instructive. All three appear together in Proverbs 1:22:

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?”

In these three—the simple, the fool, and the scoffer—we can see an ancient account of the descent into the folly of pornography in our times.

The simple are those who lack sense (7:7), are naive (14:15) and have no perception of consequences (22:3). In everyday terms, the “simple ones” are goofy. Most of the time in Proverbs the simple are not wicked. They have not rejected the way of wisdom. Yet they lack the ability to perceive the way of wisdom. They lack judgment; they need prudence. Though the simple are not condemned by proverbial wisdom, their waywardness, if not corrected, will destroy them (1:32). Since they cannot judge between good and evil, folly and wisdom, they fall prey to the wicked.

This is the very process so vividly narrated in Proverbs 7. The naive, unperceiving, goofy, simple person believes the seductress. Lacking judgment and foresight, he willingly and eagerly rushes to his own destruction. But there is a hint, or perhaps more than a hint of some previous moral lapse by the simple. After all, he is walking on the road to *her* house, in the evening. The repetition in verse 9 reinforces the impression that the simple one may not be quite so naive. Perhaps he told himself that he was just going for a walk. Perhaps he told himself he would just try out this street. Perhaps he told himself that he would just listen and observe, just take a quick look. And in his simple, imprudent way, he walks into his own destruction. As Folly calls out in another passage (9:16-18):

“You who are simple, turn in here!”
And to those without sense she says,
“Stolen water is sweet,
And bread eaten in secret is pleasant.”
But they do not know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

The simple are vulnerable to folly; indeed, they are on their way to

destruction if they do not turn to embrace wisdom. But the simple are also at a crossroad. If they leave their “simple ways” and turn to wisdom, then they will live. The instruction of wisdom is vital to the simple being saved from destruction (1:4; 9:6).

If the simple do not turn back to wisdom, then in the next step further along the path of folly, the simple ones become fools. While the simpleton is at the crossroad, vulnerable from lack of judgment and on the way to destruction if wisdom does not intervene, the fool is beyond the crossroad and well along the way of folly, having rejected the way of

“Wisdom” is the only way to life and “folly” is only the way to death. But Folly masquerades as a way of life filled with pleasures.

wisdom. The fool delights in ignorance (1:7, 22), scorns the advice of others (15:5; 23:9), trusts his own insight (18:2; 28:26), and lacks self-control (14:16). In contrast to the simple, whose desires are not yet formed, the fool cultivates a taste for ignorance and evil. His heart is not vulnerable; it is committed—to folly.

The fool does not casually wander onto the street where the prostitute lives; the fool deliberately arrives there with a clear plan in mind—indeed, he has been there before, when he was one of the simple ones. And he had such a good time that he is back for more. The fool is not lacking in foresight, he uses his foresight to plot evil.

But the “foresight” of the fool falls short of true vision, because he has mistaken the way of folly as a way of life. Here we can only make sense of the fool if we understand with biblical wisdom that there are only two ways: the way of wisdom and the way of folly. These are not two ways to live; rather, “wisdom” is the only way to life and “folly” is only the way to death. Folly, however, masquerades as a way of life filled with pleasures: its “stolen water is sweet” (9:17).

The book of Proverbs holds out little hope for the fool (27:22):

Crush a fool in a mortar with a pestle
along with crushed grain,
but the folly will not be driven out.

Having made his choice, the direction of his heart’s desire has been set. He has been seduced by folly and has developed a taste for the counterfeit pleasures of the way of death. As folly sucks life out of the fool, he reaches the point where his only company is other fools.

At this point, the fool moves inexorably to become the third character in the way of folly, the mocker (NIV) or scoffer (NRSV). The mocker is not only committed to the way of folly, but he has also embraced folly as the

way of wisdom. “*This is the way of wisdom and life,*” the mocker says, as he cheats, lies, steals, and bribes his way through life. He is lazy in all aspects of his life except pursuing folly. To this pursuit he devotes all of his energies, because he has become convinced that this is the way to live.

The mocker is the simple one who has walked down the path of folly to the point that he now regards the way of wisdom as folly. “Look at

The simple one, who has a bent toward folly, follows that natural bent. He becomes a fool whose heart is directed toward folly. The fool becomes the mocker who calls what is evil, “good,” and mocks those in the way of wisdom. And in our day, one name for “Folly” is “Pornography.”

those people who refuse the bribe and tell the truth and care for the poor and fear Yahweh. What fools they are. Don’t they know how the world works? They’re missing out on all the good things in life.” Those are, in effect, the words by which the mocker “lives.”

The fool delights in folly, the mocker delights in others’ folly. The fool is committed to the way of

folly, the mocker is committed to drawing others into the way of folly. The mocker is the fool who was seduced by folly, and now has become the one who seduces others in the way of folly. The mocker celebrates folly and eagerly “bears witness” to folly. The mocker testifies that folly, which he calls “wisdom,” is the way to live. He joins with Folly to invite the simple into her trap. Not recognizing in his folly that he is already dead, he draws others into the same death trap, all the time mocking those who bear witness to the way of life (9:7-8).

This, then, is the history of sin as it is embodied in the way of folly. The simple one, who has a bent toward folly, follows that natural bent. He becomes a fool whose heart is set on folly, whose purpose and energy is directed toward folly. The fool becomes the mocker who calls what is good, “evil,” and what is evil, “good.” He perceives death as life and mocks those in the way of wisdom as those who don’t know how to live.

Today, one of the specific names of “Folly” is “Pornography.” The teaching of biblical wisdom for our day should be clear. The simple one of ancient days is the person today who lingers over his computer screen late at night, just “curious,” just “browsing,” just checking out something that he’s heard about. He’s the one today browsing at the newsstand where certain magazines aren’t wrapped in plastic, “just taking a peek.” He’s the one taking a quick look at the “adult” section of the video store or checking out the “uncut, unedited version” of a theatrical release. He’s the one

surfing cable channels late at night, “just checking out what’s on.”

The simple in every culture have a bent toward folly. If not turned toward wisdom, the simple will perish from lack of judgment. Their naiveté will kill them. And our culture does very little to warn them of their danger. Instead, we enable the seduction and destruction of the simple by the Folly of Pornography.

As a result, we live largely in a society of fools. The number of proverbs addressed to fools makes it clear that they make up a majority of those who live in the way of folly. Almost no one remains simple for long and few “progress” to the status of mocker. So there are many fools. The fool in today’s pornographic culture is the one who has hidden downloaded images on his computer, who has an adult I.D. for access to pornographic websites. The fool keeps a stash of magazines to peruse at leisure. The fool subscribes to cable channels devoted to pornographic images. The fool is in the process of being consumed—eaten alive—by his folly and he eagerly rushes toward it, “like an ox to the slaughter, like a stag toward the trap until an arrow pierces its entrails, like a bird rushing into a snare, not knowing that it will cost him his life.” The fool has committed his heart to folly, the direction of his desires has been established. His life is planned around his pursuit of pornographic Folly. And like the Pit, the eye is never satisfied, never filled.

So the fool deludes himself as he is being consumed, “This is the way to live.” Thus, in some cases, the fool becomes the mocker. In today’s pornographic culture, the mocker is the purveyor of pornographic images. He is the one who introduces others to the deadly “pleasures” of pornography. He may be in the business of pornography or he may be the neighbor inviting others into his home to watch a video. The mocker makes fun of those who oppose his pursuits: “They are intolerant, puritans, censors. They don’t know what healthy sexuality looks like. They want to deny others’ legitimate, harmless pleasures. They want to take away my freedom of speech and freedom of expression. They want to destroy my life, just because they don’t know how to live.”

Thus, the history of pornographic Folly according to biblical wisdom moves from the simple to the fool to the mocker. Is there hope for redemption along the way? Yes, biblical wisdom holds out some hope, and wisdom incarnate in Jesus Christ extends that hope even further.

For biblical wisdom, the best hope lies in calling the simple into the way of wisdom. Although the simple have a natural bent toward folly, biblical wisdom recognizes that this is the crucial stage in anyone’s life. Here, we must be passionate in countering the seductive voice of Folly with the clear, pure voice of Wisdom. We must be deeply convicted by biblical wisdom that there are not different ways to live, different lifestyle choices to make. Rather, there are only two ways, one leading to death and one lead-

ing to life. Are we intolerant? Yes, we are intolerant of everything that destroys human life. One biblical name for all that destroys life is “Folly.” And in our day, one name for “Folly” is “Pornography.”

The book of Proverbs, our primary guide in this study, holds very little hope for fools. Once the simple have taken that fateful, deliberate step into the way of folly, little, if anything, can be done to restore them (27:22). And this is even more true of the mocker. But, staying with another insight from Proverbs, this doesn't mean that we should simply ignore the fool or the mocker, having given up on them. For Proverbs, the instruction and correction of the fool and mocker have little effect in their lives, but it does instruct the simple. We need, following this teaching, to expose the consumption of the fool and the mocker by pornographic Folly so that some of the simple may learn, gain prudence, and turn to wisdom (1:4; 19:25).

How do the simple learn wisdom? It begins, famously, with the fear of Yahweh (1:7; 9:10). I noted earlier that the simple lack foresight; they cannot imagine the consequences of their behavior. In the absence of foresight and prudence, the first step is simply to fear Yahweh, to recognize that Yahweh is the Creator of life and to live is to follow the way of Yahweh.

Learning wisdom continues with heeding the teaching of the wise—perhaps one's parents and other elders in the community. The teachers of wisdom need to learn from Proverbs the skills necessary to counter the seductive words and promises of Folly. The book of Proverbs represents an enormous effort on the part of the followers of the way of Wisdom to persuade and command the simple. Each saying is a gem labored over and polished to the perfection proper to its literary form. We must expend the same effort in our instruction today.

Finally, the way of Wisdom is the way of the Spirit of wisdom. Here the incarnate wisdom of God extends the hope for wisdom even to the fool and the mocker. The promise of the new covenant is that God will change our hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Even hearts deformed by folly and producing mockery may be transformed. The simple, the fool, the mocker—each one can be “born again,” not in the facile sense of popular culture, but in the death-denying, life-giving power of the Wisdom of God. Those being consumed by pornographic Folly may be wakened from their drugged captivity to death and set on the way of Wisdom that is life.



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Habit's Harsh Bondage

BY THOMAS D. KENNEDY

How can we understand the powerful lure of sexual imagery that captivates us? asked Augustine, the fourth century theologian who saw deeply into the complex workings of the human self. If we conclude that obsession with the pornographic image is a sickness, it is a sickness of will for which we are, to some significant degree, responsible.

The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links, as it were, connected one to another (hence my term a chain), a harsh bondage held me under restraint.¹

Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.5.10

The examples come all too readily to mind. The dean of a prestigious divinity school is discovered to have downloaded to his computer several hundred pornographic pictures of women. It costs him his job, public respect, and, we may surmise, a good deal of self-respect. The pastor at a large evangelical church is arrested for using a chat-room on the Internet to make contact with a thirteen-year-old and to solicit sex from her. Apparently happily married and the father of several children, including a one-year-old, this pastor had been responsible for teaching the church's marriage class. How do you count the cost? Each man, captive to images, traded his goodness for gratification. How are we to make sense of their actions? How can we understand the powerful lure of these sexual images etched upon their minds and their monitors? We are in the presence of something deeply mysterious and perplexing.

It would be too easy to shrug off these and similar cases with the suggestion that such behavior is really no big deal, especially if no one is harmed in the process; that it is somehow natural for individuals with especially strong sex drives to use contemporary technology to satisfy their desires. It was not only ten, or twenty, or even a hundred pornographic images that were discovered on the dean's computer. They were not the

In rejecting the rule of God, we invite disorder into our lives. "Man has called for anarchy," C. S. Lewis wrote, "God lets him have it." Our sexual passions provide one of the clearest displays of distorted and disordered human nature after the Fall.

result of only an idle half hour of foolishness. Nor was the attempt to arrange a sexual liaison made on the pastor's first visit to the chat-room. No, there were repeat visits, a pattern of well established behavior. Their actions were the result of habits they had developed, habits of looking, lingering, and looking again. These men were

captivated by something they would not let go, or that would not let them go. How are we to make sense of this?

We might conclude that we are dealing with hypocrites of the highest order, with men whose faith was fraudulent. But this assessment is uncharitable and too easy for us. Why should we doubt their sincerity? These men are clergy with a powerful vision, who preached the Gospel with eloquence, counseled the hurting, and prayed with the despairing. No doubt, there are those whose religion is merely a sham, but that need not be the case here. These two men, and others like them, are profoundly flawed, but we dare not dismiss them merely as fakes. Somehow, images from which they could not escape gained occasional control over their lives.

Shall we conclude, then, that obsession with the pornographic image is a sickness, an illness for which they ought not to be blamed? Cure them if we can, care for them if we cannot cure them? This analysis also is too easy. The wrongs that undid these men were choices they made. These were men who rose to the top of their fields and wielded great influence, due in no small part to the excellent choices they made, not once or twice, but consistently, throughout their lives. Their actions in these cases were clearly matters of choice, not the result of a solitary lapse of judgment, but an abandonment of judgment, a forswearing of their ability to say "No." These men were present as agents in their own downfalls in a way unlike when disease overtakes us. If they are ill, it is a sickness of will for which they are, to some significant degree, responsible.

So what are we to make of such cases? How are we to understand men

(and women) in the grip of powerful images from which they cannot free themselves? Surprisingly, perhaps, invaluable help and insight comes from the fourth century, from one who saw deeply into the complex workings of the human self.

AUGUSTINE'S "CONFESSIONS"

Augustine was born in North Africa in 354, the son of a middle class couple who wanted few things more than to see their son rise in social rank. He was sent to the best schools his parents could afford as he trained to become a teacher of rhetoric. A brilliant student, along the way he made his way through several non-Christian religions and philosophies, discovering their shortcomings, until his conversion to Christianity in 386. Following his conversion, he had hoped to establish a monastery where he and several friends could pursue a life of reflection upon Christian faith. Instead, he was called to serve the church at Hippo, a people whom he served for the next forty years, as priest and then, at their insistence, as bishop.

In his mid-forties, he began writing *Confessions*. Based on the title and the popular notion of Augustine's obsessive preoccupation with sex, modern readers might expect an explicit and lurid account of endless sexual trysts, a Christian "tell-all" sex romp. But that is not what they find. Garry Wills suggests a better title for the book is *The Testimony*, for Augustine's aim is not to confess, but rather to give testimony and praise to the God he encountered.² Although Augustine is profoundly concerned about his own sexual history and is explicit in recounting his past, his exploits leave modern readers unimpressed. His sexual sins strike us as mere peccadilloes, hardly worthy of record by modern standards. Yet, Augustine's insight into the sway his sexual appetites held over him becomes central to his testimony to the goodness and power of God to liberate him from participating in his culture's distorted sexuality.

"MAN HAS CALLED FOR ANARCHY"

In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, C. S. Lewis recounts John Milton's indebtedness to Augustine's view on humanity's fall into sin. Before their sin, Adam and Eve were obedient to God, their true and rightful superior. Their individual natures (like all things in the world) were properly ordered and their loves appropriately directed to valuing one another as persons and respecting the goodness of creation. In rejecting the rule of God, however, they invited disorder into their lives. In Lewis' words, "Man has called for anarchy: God lets him have it."³

Prior to their fall into sin, there was a unity and an order to the internal workings of the self, to its willing, thinking, feeling, and doing. The Fall changed all that. Now, our passions are no longer obedient to our reason, just as our reason is no longer obedient to God. For Augustine, our

sexual passions provide one of the clearest displays of distorted and disordered human nature after the Fall, hence, Augustine's "preoccupation" with sex.

When we examine our sexual desires, we discover our now conflicted characters. With great frequency, reason tilts in one direction while sexual desire tugs in another. Thus, we turn to gaze when we think we shouldn't; we find erotic and sexually stimulating things we believe we ought not to find pleasurable at all. We discover that sexual arousal often escapes our control; at times we are unable to function sexually when we want to; at other times we find ourselves sexually aroused when we would rather not be. Our other appetites, of course, are also disordered, for example, the gluttonous desire for food or the sluggardly desire for sleep. Sin leaves us disordered, malfunctioning, and unable to will and to do as God intends.

In this light, Augustine's deep concern about his sexual activity takes on new import. His analysis of his own sexual behavior forms part of a testimony to the disordered love that characterized his life, which is the same disordered love that characterizes our lives as well. His reflections upon his sex life are integral to a story that moves from internal dividedness to unity, from disorder to integration. Augustine looked inward and found that the self willing to serve God was identical with the self unwilling to serve God. He was "neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling," he writes. "So I was in conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself. The dissociation came about against my will. Yet this was not a manifestation of an alien mind but the punishment suffered in my own mind" (8.10.22). But that fragmentation is not the end of the story. Book Two of *Confessions*, in which he begins to detail the formation of his sexual habits, opens with a testimony to what God has accomplished in him: "You gathered me together from the state of disintegration in which I had been fruitlessly divided" (2.1.1). He was brought from fragmentation to unity, by God's grace.

Augustine had a concubine, as it were a common law wife, from the age of sixteen until he was thirty-one. He was faithful to her, he tells us. She was the mother of his son and he was terribly distraught when, soon after his conversion, she was forced to leave him and return to her home in Africa so that he might marry someone appropriate to his social status. Why did Augustine think of such a relatively chaste relationship as morally problematic? It was because he did not love her "in God." "With her I learnt by direct experience how wide a difference there is between the partnership of marriage entered into for the sake of having a family and the mutual consent of those whose love is a matter of physical sex" (4.2.2). Augustine did not love her as a woman created in God's image; instead he desired her merely as a source of his sexual gratification.

Following the practice of the day, Augustine's mother, Monica, arranged a marriage for him to a young girl who was suitable for a

prominent Roman leader. Augustine, however, could not embrace chastity during their two-year courtship. He succumbed to “the disease of my soul” (6.15.25) and began a liaison with another woman. This reinforced his belief that he had not loved his first partner rightly. In fact, the many years of satisfying his physical pleasures with her had cultivated habits inimical to the Christian life. In following the lead of his sexual desires and taking up with a new woman, rather than controlling his physical appetite for sex, he recognized that he was chained by the sexual habits of years and enslaved by his disordered passions.

“THE LUST OF THE EYES”

By his disobedience Augustine had called for anarchy in his life, and God had granted it. His life seemed out of his control, and in the control of his passions and desires. Where self-control is absent, “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16, NASB) are irresistible.⁴ These are our temptations, too, as the prevalence of pornography in our culture makes clear.

Perhaps it is most helpful in thinking about pornography to view these three—the lusts of the flesh and the eyes and the pride of life—not as three distinct temptations, but as one temptation, powerfully drawing individuals into the clutches of pornography. To be sure, the lust of the flesh is the guiding desire, but pornography satisfies the flesh by means of the eye, and then, with the assistance of the proud and misguided confidence that we can handle things by ourselves, habits that enslave us are formed.

Augustine understands the lust of the eyes to be a type of curiosity, a “vain inquisitiveness” into the look of things, and an intense desire merely to see something provocative or shocking. This desire, which is rarely satisfied, is fueled by the

promise of new and ever more stimulating views. In his time, the theatre was a primary draw to the curious. Lest the spectator become satiated and jaded with what was offered, ever more outrageous events were staged to sat-

isfy the desire to visually experience something new. Augustine, who had overcome his interest in the theatre by his forties, still recognized that a visual “buzz of distraction” was tugging at his attention to come and have a look (10.35.56).

So it is with us. The visual temptation might start with a billboard ad, a magazine cover, a movie scene, or a webpage. Perhaps it started innocently enough when one was a teenager. A quick look was held a little longer

“The lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” are our temptations, too, as the prevalence of pornography in our culture makes clear.

than necessary. Then, with the realization that there is more to see, and the curiosity about what more can be seen, there's a second look, and then a third. Fourth looks are easy, and almost irresistible. The Internet, especially, provides one with anonymity and the images are readily available at apparently low risk. A fifth look, and one says, "I'm only curious. No problem here." Soon, what began as a passion to view the titillating has become a habit. When one has a few free moments, one repeats the habit—again and again. Then comes the harsh bondage of habit, and with it the self-deception: "Why say no to something that is private, something that hurts no one? I can handle this myself. I'm in control." Through lust of the eyes, one develops lust of the flesh, justified by the pride of life. Now there is no longer one self, but two or more. There is fragmentation, anarchy. Disordered desires now rule, if not all of the time, then much of it.

"GRANT WHAT YOU COMMAND"

By God's severe mercy, Augustine's manacles of habit were broken. He learned that one "who together with you loves something which he does not love for your sake" loves well neither God nor the object loved. We live, and love, divided. Unity of self can be restored, but only through the love of God. "O charity, my God, set me on fire. You command continence; grant what you command, and command what you will" (10.29.40).

This self-control that Augustine achieved was a gift from God, even as it was a command of God. It required the acknowledgement that Augustine was not in control of his life, that he was a slave to his desires, and that only God could deliver him from this bondage. It required an awareness of God's love for him and a new desire to love God in return. It required a willingness to abandon activities and fixed habits at odds with the love of God. There was a time, prior to his conversion, when Augustine thought such control over his sexual desires was impossible. But God granted to Augustine that gift and restored his will that he might obey God.

Augustine was not naïve. Habits die hard, and he realized that the chains of habit are more likely broken in a community of persons committed to loving and serving God. Augustine could confess that he had achieved control over his sexual desires before he began exercising his priestly duties. The example and support of his friends, no doubt, played no small role in this accomplishment.

Even when habits have died, however, they leave their traces. More than a decade after his conversion, though Augustine could confess that God had granted him control over his sexual desires, he was still subject to temptation. Images, "fixed by sexual habit," were stored in his memory, and attacked him, sometimes when he was awake, more often when he was asleep. Awake, he was the master of the images; but asleep, they tumbled forth unencumbered. Habit's harsh bondage lingered. But God could, and would, someday, deliver him from even these traces of habit.

To learn from Augustine is to recognize that a first glance may be harmless enough, but that the lust of the flesh, the eyes, and pride are powerful. A second look, and soon, acting upon our sinful desires will all too readily lead us to habits and the bondage that comes with sinful habits. To be sure, God can and will deliver us from these chains, should we but love him enough to ask his deliverance without delay. As Christians, we live in hope of that final and complete deliverance from the chains of sinful habit. Until then, prayer and watchfulness must be the order of the day. "O charity, set us on fire. Grant what you command and command what you will."

NOTES

1 All quotations from Augustine's *Confessions* are from Henry Chadwick's translation, (Oxford University Press, 1991).

2 Garry Wills, *Saint Augustine* (Viking, 1999). Wills' splendid, brief life of Augustine may be complemented with Peter Brown's magisterial *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, revised edition with a new epilogue, (University of California Press, 2000). Brown's *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (Columbia University Press, 1988) is also helpful in accessing Augustine's views about sex.

3 C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford University Press, 1961), 69-70.

4 Scripture marked NASB is taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.



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This photo is available in the print version
of *The Pornographic Culture*.

*Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-c.1653), SUSANNA AND THE ELDERS, 1610. Oil on panel, 170 x 119 cm.
Schönborn Collection, Schloss Weissenstein, Pommersfelden, Germany.
© Foto Marburg / Art Resource, NY.*

Susanna's Strength

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK AND
F. MATTHEW SCHOBERT, JR.

Artemisia Gentileschi empathized with the figure of Susanna, for she, too, was the target of voyeurism and unwanted sexual advances by the men in her life. A victim of rape by her father's assistant, Artemisia understood and depicted the psychological aspects of the story of Susanna.

The story of Susanna is not in the Hebrew scroll of Daniel, but is in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of scripture prepared in the third century B.C. for Jewish readers dispersed throughout the Greek empire. Just as the Jewish tradition was of two minds about this story's placement, so has been the Christian movement. In the *New Jerusalem Bible*, a modern translation within the Roman Catholic Church, the story of Susanna appears as chapter 13 of the book of Daniel. In other translations, which follow the Protestant tradition of returning to the Hebrew text, it is placed in the Apocrypha.

Susanna, according to the story, is "a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord" in Babylon during the Jewish exile (Susanna 2). She is falsely accused of adultery by two elderly Jewish judges, or elders, after she deflected their sexual advances. The young Daniel, inspired by God, must rescue Susanna by cleverly exposing the elders' false testimony.

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652/3), a female Baroque painter in a man's profession, empathized with the figure of Susanna. She painted *Susanna and the Elders* when she was seventeen years old and working in the painting studio of her father, Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639). Artemisia, like Susanna, became the target of voyeurism and sexual advances by the

men in her life. One year after Artemisia painted this work, she was raped by her father's assistant, Agostino Tassi, and her father brought the incident to trial. Artemisia stated that Tassi had made repeated sexual overtures towards her prior to the physical assault. These advances and the emotions brought forth from them, may have led Artemisia to this depiction of Susanna. She understood the psychological aspects of her story. Artemisia paints the elders much like the text describes:

Every day the two elders used to see her [for they held court in her husband Joakim's home], going in and walking about, and they began to lust for her. They suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice. Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did not tell each other of their distress, for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to seduce her. Day after day they watched eagerly to see her.

One day they said to each other, "Let us go home, for it is time for lunch." So they both left and parted from each other. But turning back, they met again; and when each pressed the other for the reason, they confessed their lust. Then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone (8-14).

Susanna has the custom of visiting her garden after the court adjourns, for afternoon walks and, on occasion, to bathe. One day the elders hide in the garden and watch her:

When the maids had gone out [to get Susanna's bathing oils], the two elders got up and ran to her. They said, "Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away."

Susanna groaned and said, "I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord" (19-23).

The elders in the baroque painting are leaning over a marble wall and motioning to Susanna to be silent. The younger of the two men whispers into the ear of his companion from a shadow. In contrast, Susanna's nude body is seen in a white light that accentuates the blush in her face. Though typically in the history of art Susanna is depicted as a seductress or at least a willing victim, in this composition as well as the story she exemplifies the

virtue of chastity. Too shocked initially to further cover her body, she fends off the two voyeurs with her hand gestures and by turning her head away from them.

The story of Susanna continues as the elders accuse Susanna of adultery with a young man and call her to appear before their court the next morning. Everyone is stunned, "for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna" (27). She comes to court accompanied by her parents, children, and all her relatives, but not by her husband, Joakim. Still filled with lust for her, the two elders order her to remove her veil "so that they might feast their eyes on her beauty" (32); then they deliver their trumped up charges. Because of the elders' status, the assembled people accept their testimony and condemn Susanna to death.

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, "O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me. And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!"

The Lord heard her cry. Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, "I want no part in shedding this woman's blood!" (42-46).

Daniel's outburst brings the people to an abrupt stop, and he convinces them to return to court in order to cross-examine the witnesses. But how will they uncover the truth about the matter? The plot has been called "the first detective story" because of what happens next in Susanna 50-59. Daniel separates the two elders and summons them individually before the assembly. "You old relic of wicked days," Daniel addresses the first elder, if you really saw Susanna commit adultery, under which tree was she intimate with the young man? He answers, "Under a mastic tree." Then Daniel orders the second elder to appear before the assembly. "You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah, beauty has beguiled you and lust has perverted your heart," Daniel charges; "under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?" The second elder responds, "Under an evergreen oak."

Typically in the history of art Susanna is depicted as a seductress or at least a willing victim; in this composition as well as the story, however, she exemplifies the virtue of chastity.

Then the whole assembly raised a great shout and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. And they took action against the two elders, because out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbor. Acting in accordance with the law of Moses, they put them to death (60-62).

The story of Susanna has much to teach us about God: that God vindicates virtue over villainy, protects the innocent, and delivers those who

The early Christians, in the sexually distorted Roman culture in which fertility cults, temple prostitutes, and religious orgies abounded, drew inspiration for chastity and fidelity from Susanna.

trust in him. But it also communicates a lesson about human sexuality and moral living. In revealing the source of Susanna's and the elders' character, the story suggests that preserving Godly virtues or yielding to evil begins in the heart.

The elders first "suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice" (9), and their wicked actions flow from their deformed hearts. When the elders threaten Susanna, she by contrast "looked up toward Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord" (35). In these instances, looking to Heaven is a metonym for one's heart being rightly tuned to God. The two elders, who avert their eyes from Heaven, set themselves on a path to moral bankruptcy. Susanna, who ever fixes her eyes on Heaven, lives a morally virtuous life; she resists sexual harassment, endures a humiliating public trial, and sees the triumph of justice.

Perhaps this insight is what attracted the young Artemisia to paint this story. The young artist, though living under the presumed care of her father, was betrayed by the father's trusted assistant. As she struggled with Tassi's inappropriate advances, she was trying not only to maintain her reputation and career as a painter, but also to maintain her love of God and dignity as a woman.

Artemisia, like Susanna and many victims of rape today, was forced to prove her innocence rather than her assailant's guilt. Scholars still debate just how well things turned out personally for her. After a public trial, Tassi was banished from Rome. The next day, Artemisia was married; she had four children with her Florentine husband, though one of their daughters died as a child. Her artistic career flourished and she became one of the first women to join the Accademia del Disegno, an academic and professional organization of artists in Florence. However, her husband left her

in 1623 after eleven years of marriage. Artemisia continued to work and live with her daughter, in Florence, Venice, Rome, Naples, and London. Her empathizing with Susanna never ended. She painted at least three other versions of the Susanna and the Elders theme, and one of these is thought to have been her last painting before her death in 1652 or 1653.

In seventeenth century Italy, Artemisia Gentileschi drew upon Susanna's strength to live a full and prosperous life. In this she followed the lead of early Christians; in the sexually-distorted Roman culture in which fertility cults, temple prostitutes, and religious orgies abounded, they too drew inspiration for chastity and fidelity from Susanna. Adrift as we are in another highly sexualized culture, perhaps Susanna's example will stir us to personal faithfulness in the face of sexual temptation.



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This photo is available in the print version
of *The Pornographic Culture*.

**Sadness, melancholy, and loneliness, even in a room
filled with people, are the emotions that we see in
Toulouse-Lautrec's voyeuristic world of people watching
one another merely for entertainment.**

*Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec, French (1864-1901), AT THE MOULIN ROUGE, 1892-95.
Oil on canvas, 123 x 141 cm. Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1928.610 The Art Institute
of Chicago.*

Isolation

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The Moulin Rouge (which is French for “red mill,” for it was marked by a huge red windmill on its roof) was a famous nightclub just outside Paris in Montmartre. Poorer Parisian citizens moved to this district when Napoleon III reserved the city center for his friends and financiers. Being free from city taxes, Montmartre became a place to drink cheaply, and soon more decadent forms of entertainment arrived.

Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, born an aristocrat, was only 4½ feet tall. Both of his legs had been broken before the age of fifteen, and a genetic condition prevented the bones from healing and growing properly. As a young adult he was the brunt of jokes and scorn; but finding an ‘uninhibited’ life in the art, alcohol, and cabaret culture in Montmartre, he refused to hide from being in public. When the Moulin Rouge opened on October 5, 1889, the artist was one of the invited patrons and he became famous for posters and paintings depicting its theatre, dance hall, concert area, and bar.

At the Moulin Rouge, with its asymmetrical composition—organized by strong diagonals (the bar on the left, the floor line in the upper right), mirrors in the back area, and flat areas of color—captures the spirit, emotion, and isolation of the cabaret culture and lifestyle. The people at the table look in different directions and do not interact with one another. Likewise the two women in the background (one adjusts her hat while the other stands with her hands on her hips) do not have any exchange. The masked woman in the right foreground, probably one of the actors for a theatre performance, looks eerily out at the viewer. Sadness, melancholy, and loneliness, even in a room filled with people, are the emotions that we see in this “slice of life” from the Parisian culture. With psychological insight the artist vividly portrays his voyeuristic world of people watching other people merely for entertainment.

Toulouse-Lautrec frankly and critically depicts the society in which he lived, with its cancan dancers, prostitutes, racetracks, and circuses. How honestly is our turn-of-the-century culture portrayed in art? Are the decadent and voyeuristic elements in our culture being represented and judged truthfully for the next century’s viewers? Do we, as Christians, reflect carefully on our culture and attempt to change elements that we find are distortions of God’s plan, or do we just ignore that they exist?

This photo is available in the print version
of *The Pornographic Culture*.

**This very frank and maybe even humorous scene is
hardly scandalous today. Yet in another way, it makes us
a bit uncomfortable, for it causes us to realize that too
often we are also just voyeurs.**

*Edouard Manet (1832-83), NANA, 1877. Oil on canvas, 60 3/4 x 45 1/4 in. © Hamburger
Kunsthalle. Photographer: Elke Walford, Hamburg.*

Just Watching

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Manet's *Nana* assembled all the elements for scandal in the Parisian art world of the late nineteenth century: theme; disproportionate size for an everyday subject; an easily recognizable model who was the talk of Paris; and, for good measure, a free technique and a clear and violent palette that associated him directly with the scandal of Impressionism.

The jury of the Paris Salon rejected this painting for their prestigious 1877 exhibition. So, instead, Manet displayed it in the window of a shop on a major boulevard in Paris. Contemporary observers wrote, "From morning to night, crowds gathered before this canvas, and...it draws screams of indignation and derision." Only one critic in the Paris press defended *Nana*: "The great condition for surviving is to *be of one's own time*.... Manet's high crime is not so much that he paints modern life as that he paints it life size...only the [ancient] Romans are allowed that."[†]

Manet was brought up in a middle-class family and was one of the last great French painters to receive an academic training. His adult life was discreetly bohemian; he lived with a woman for years before marrying her but did not tell even his closest friends. He shared his life in Paris with the literary greats Mallarmé, Zola, Baudelaire, and Balzac and the Impressionist painters Cezanne, Renoir, and Caillebotte. Zola's novel *Nana* was not yet published in 1877 (although Zola did publish a series in a journal that had a character named Nana), but it is agreed that Manet's title for this painting did come from a suggestion by the novelist.

Though *Nana* shows a scene typically reserved for pornographic photography and caricature in his time, Manet's aim was not to make pornography, but to comment upon the pornographic culture of which he was a part. He paints in a very frank and maybe even humorous manner this scene of a young woman dressing not just before a man, but also before us, the spectators studying the work. In the early twenty-first century this painting is hardly scandalous; far more provocative underwear ads are displayed on television for even the youngest of our children to see. Yet in another way, *Nana* makes us a bit uncomfortable, for it causes us to realize that too often we are also just voyeurs.

A "painting from life" methodology is characteristic of the Impression-

ist painters. But rather than haystacks or still-life objects, Manet paints a *cocotte*, or prostitute. The Nana we see in the painting is in her undergarments, but she does not reveal anything to the viewer or the half figure of a man seated and waiting for her to be finished primping. (Manet's sources for the flat and incomplete male figure are Japanese prints that he studied and enjoyed.) Nana unabashedly looks out at us between puffing her face and finishing the application of her lipstick. The curves of her plump body are echoed by the lines of the furniture behind her.

Interestingly, Nana stands before a mirror with two extinguished candles—a symbol of St. Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris. The saint, a life-long virgin, is frequently shown with an extinguished candle that, according to legend, she could ignite by making the sign of the cross. She would then use the lit candle to lead herself and her sisters back to safety. Could Manet be reminding us that God's watchcare extends to Nana?

When we watch ads on television or see fashion magazine layouts, either we can watch uncritically and voyeuristically, or we can develop a discerning eye for what they are saying about our popular culture and about us, the viewers. We must "be of one's own time" in our culture, rather than remaining naïve regarding those aspects of culture that offend us; yet we need to develop a discriminating Christian comprehension and concern about the visual material that bombards us daily. Manet's painting might awaken us both to recognize elements of our own pornographic culture and to resist its temptation to mere voyeurism.

NOTE

[†]Quotations from primary source material are from *Manet 1832-1883*, edited by F. Cachin and C. Moffett (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1983), 392-396.

Worship Service

BY TODD L. LAKE

Quiet Reflection:

Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it: the old Christian rule is, "Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence." Now this is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts, that obviously either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it is now, has gone wrong. One or the other. Of course, being a Christian, I think it is the instinct which has gone wrong.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Prelude:

"Be Thou My Vision"
(verses 1, 2a, 4b, and 5)

Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art—
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my Wisdom, and thou my true Word,
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
thou and thou only, first in my heart,
high King of heaven, my Treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

*Call to Worship:*¹

My soul's desire is to see the face of God, and to rest in his house.
My soul's desire is to study the Scriptures,
and to learn the ways of God.
My soul's desire is to be freed from all fear and sadness,
and to share Christ's risen life.
My soul's desire is to imitate my King, and to sing his praises always.
My soul's desire is to enter the gates of heaven,
and to gaze upon the light that shines forever.
Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires,
and you alone can satisfy those desires. Amen.

Hymn:

(George Matheson wrote the text of the hymn, "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go," on the day of his sister's marriage. He was undergoing, by his own admission, "the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering." It turns out that twenty years earlier, he had been engaged to be married. But his fiancée broke the engagement when she learned that he was going completely blind.)

"O Love That Will Not Let Me Go"

O Love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O Light that followest all my way, I yield my flickering torch to thee;
my heart restores its borrowed ray, that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain
that morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head, I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead, and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be.

The Old Testament Reading: Genesis 2:18-25

Epistle Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:1-8

Prayer of Confession (from Psalm 51):

(A Psalm of David,
when the prophet Nathan came to him,
after he had gone in to Bathsheba.)

O God,
I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
And done what is evil in your sight,
So that you are justified in your sentence and blameless
When you pass judgment.

Assurance of Pardon (from John 8:7-11):

Listen to the words of Jesus: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.... Has no one condemned you?... Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again."

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer:

People may stand and offer their sentence prayers and words of praise to God. We will close by reciting the Lord's Prayer together.

Hymn:

"Sacred the Body"

Sacred the body God has created,
temple of Spirit that dwells deep inside.
Cherish each person; nurture creation.
Treat flesh as holy, that love may abide.

Bodies are varied, made in all sizes,
pale, full of color, both fragile and strong.
Holy the difference, gift of the Maker,
so let us honor each story and song.

Love respects persons, bodies and boundaries.
Love does not batter, neglect, or abuse.
Love touches gently, never coercing.
Love leaves the other with power to choose.

Holy of holies, God ever loving,
make us your temples; indwell all we do.
May we be careful, tender and caring,
so may our bodies give honor to you.

Ruth Duck (text with tune pp. 56-57 this volume)

The Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:27-32

Sermon:

“Sex and the City (of God)”

Hymn:

“O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus”

O the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me!
Underneath me, all around me, is the current of thy love—
leading onward, leading homeward to thy glorious rest above!

O the deep, deep love of Jesus—spread his praise from shore to shore!
He who loves us, ever loves us, changes never, nevermore!
How he watches o’er his loved ones, died to call them all his own;
how for them he’s interceding, watching o’er them from the throne!

O the deep, deep love of Jesus, love of every love the best!
‘Tis an ocean vast of blessing, ‘tis a haven sweet of rest!
O the deep, deep love of Jesus—‘tis a heaven of heavens to me;
and it lifts me up to glory, for it lifts me up to thee!

Responsive Prayer of Commitment:

Leader:

We gather as women and men, single and married, to affirm that we are not our own, for we have been bought with a price that we might glorify God in our bodies. We have received, as members of Christ's body, the gifts of both singleness and marriage.

People:

Lord, teach us to talk openly and pray often about the challenges and rewards of married and single life.

We pray for all who are single, that they might take full advantage of serving Christ with undivided loyalty.

Grant them the grace, in the midst of a faithless world, to be faithful in mind and body to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord, grant those who are married the willingness to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Help them strive for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Knit their hearts together in love.

Grant them the grace, in the midst of a faithless world, to be faithful in mind and body to our Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray for those who are struggling against sexual temptation and desire chastity, that we might welcome them as sisters and brothers in Christ.

Grant them the grace, in the midst of a faithless world, to be faithful in mind and body to our Lord Jesus Christ.

All:

May we, as a family of faith and the household of God, learn to strengthen marriages, celebrate fidelity in singleness, and strive together to present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to you.

For we ask it in the name of your Son our Lord, who both celebrated the wedding at Cana and lived in singleness during his time on earth. Amen.

*Offering**Doxology**Dramatic Reading:*²

“Laying Siege to Love,” Hadewijch (13th Century)

He who wishes to become Love performs excellent works,
For nothing can make him give way;
He is unconquered, and equal in strength
To the task of winning the love of Love,
Whether he serves the sick or the well,
The blind, the crippled or the wounded—
He will accept this as his debt to Love.

To serve strangers, to give to the poor,
To comfort the sorrowful as best he can,
To live in the faithful service of God’s friends—
Saints or men on earth—night and day,
With all his might, beyond possibility—
If he thinks his strength will fail,
Let him trust henceforth in reliance on Love.

By valiant confidence in Love
We attain all that is needful for us:
Love gives counsel to the sorrowing.
And comforts those who are sorrowing.
If anyone places his reliance in Love alone
And wishes to trust no other,
That is a sign that he contents Love.* [*pleases, makes Love content]

He who wishes to serve Love alone,
With all his heart and all his powers,
Has wisely laid out the whole siege,
So that he may wholly capture Love.

Invitation

Hymn:

“My Jesus, I Love Thee”

My Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art mine,
for thee all the follies of sin I resign;
my gracious Redeemer, my Savior art thou;
if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

I love thee because thou hast first loved me,
and purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree;
I love thee for wearing the thorns on thy brow;
if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

In mansions of glory and endless delight,
I'll ever adore thee in heaven so bright;
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow:
if ever I loved thee, my Jesus 'tis now.

*Choral Benediction:*³

“And Can It Be”

Amazing love! how can it be
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

*Postlude***NOTES**

1 Robert van de Weyer, *Celtic Prayers*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 37. Used with permission of Hunt and Thorpe/Thorpe Publishing.

2 “Laying Siege to Love,” from *Hadewijch*, trans. by Mother Columba Hart, Copyright © 1980 by The Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle in the State of New York. Used with permission of Paulist Press, www.paulistpress.com.

3 “And Can it Be?” (SATB with keyboard), Campbell-Whitworth, published by Carl Fischer, Inc., SG 141.



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Sacred the Body

RUTH C. DUCK

W. DANIEL LANDES

1. Sac - red the bod - y God has cre a - ted, tem - ple of
 2. Bod - ies are var - ied, made in all siz - es, pale, full of

Spir - it that dwells deep in - side. Cher - ish each
 col - or, both frag - ile and strong. Ho - ly the

per - son; nur - ture cre a - tion. Treat flesh as
 dif - ference, gift of the Mak - er, so let us

Tune: RUDDLE
 10.10.10.10.

Text, "Sacred the Body," *Circles of Care: Hymns and Songs*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998), 39. Copyright © 1998. Used by permission. Words: Ruth C. Duck, 1997; Copyright © 1997 The Pilgrim Press

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ho - ly, that love may a - bide.
hon - or each sto - ry and song.

3. Love respects persons, bodies and boundaries.
Love does not batter, neglect, or abuse.
Love touches gently, never coercing.
Love leaves the other with power to choose.

4. Holy of holies, God ever loving,
make us your temples; indwell all we do.
May we be careful, tender and caring,
so may our bodies give honor to you.

Ruth Duck, who is Professor of Worship at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL, reflects on the Apostle Paul's instruction to "Shun fornication!...Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). As Christians we refuse to objectify our bodies, comparing some unfavorably to others, and we respect one another, "persons, bodies and boundaries." The final verse voices a prayer that "God ever loving" will indwell our bodies, making us "careful, tender and caring" in all that we do.

W. Daniel Landes, Professor of Piano and Theory at Belmont University, Nashville, TN, wrote the flowing tune RUDDLE for this text, and Donald Balmos, Director of the Fine Arts Division of McLennan Community College in Waco, TX, provided this harmonization.

❖ Other Voices ❖

We are what we think. This is why we should never underestimate what we allow to enter our minds. It is by means of thoughts that the spirits of evil wage a secret war on the soul. Thus the fifth-century bishop Maximus warns us, “Just as it is easier to sin in the mind than in action, so warfare through our impassioned conceptual images of things is harder than warfare through things themselves.”

JOHN MICHAEL TALBOT, “Forward” to J. Heinrich Arnold, *Freedom from Sinful Thoughts*

Paul is not attacking the nature of the body but the unbridled license of the mind, which abuses the body. The body was not made for the purpose of fornication, nor was it created for gluttony. It was meant to have Christ as its head, so that it might follow him. We should be overcome with shame and horror-struck if we defile ourselves with such great evils, once we have been accounted worthy of the great honor of being members of him who sits on high.

CHRYSOSTOM (347-407), *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, commenting on 1 Corinthians 6:13

In the Platonic view, the body is a prison; in that of Paul, it is the temple of God because it is in Christ.

TERTULLIAN (160-220), *On the Soul*

Men and women can find real intimacy in loving, committed marriages with open communication. The temptation everyone faces, however, is the desire to take a shortcut—to settle for what [Dr. Harry] Schaumburg calls “false intimacy.” Instead of going through the effort required for real intimacy, people often settle for an illusion—an airbrushed image, a virtual reality, a cyberaffair—something that seems to give a high without hurt, ecstasy without expectations, fulfillment without faults.

STEPHEN O. WATTERS, *Real Solutions for Overcoming Internet Addictions*

One of the boasts of our century is that its artists—not to mention its psychologists, therapists, anthropologists, sociologists, statisticians, and pornographers—have pried open the bedroom door at last and shown us sexual love for what it “really” is. We have, we assume, cracked the shell of sexual privacy. The resulting implication that the shell is easily cracked

disguises the probability that the shell is, in fact, not crackable at all and that what we have seen displayed is not private or intimate sex, not sexual love, but sex reduced, degraded, oversimplified, and misrepresented by the very intention to display it. Sex publicly displayed is public sex. Sex observed is not private or intimate and cannot be.

Could a voyeur conceivably crack the shell? No, for voyeurs are the most handicapped of all the sexual observers; they know only what they see.... The intimacy, the union itself, remains unobserved. One cannot enter into this intimacy and watch it at the same time, any more than the mind can think about itself while it thinks about something else.

W E N D E L L B E R R Y , *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*

Porn erodes intimacy because [as Gary Brooks says] it “pays scant attention to men’s needs for sensuality and intimacy while exalting their sexual needs.” In other words, porn ruins men’s appetites—their healthy sexual hunger for their wives (or future wives). C. S. Lewis once wrote, “You must not isolate the sexual pleasure and try to get it by itself, any more than you ought to try to get the pleasures of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again.” By offering arousal without intimacy, pornography feeds men’s sexual cravings with the equivalent of sticky sweets loaded with empty calories....

S T E P H E N O . W A T T E R S , *Real Solutions for Overcoming Internet Addictions*

[Pornography is] a powerful symptom of injustice and alienation in human society. Through words and images, pornography debases God’s intended gifts of love and dignity in human sexuality. Although humankind was created male and female, equally and fully in the image of God, the history of humanity reveals a fundamental pattern of dominance and subjugation.

C A T H E R I N E I T Z I N , *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*

Human laws demand that women be chaste and if they are not they are punished for it, but they do not demand the same for men. Since it was men who made the laws, they did not make themselves equal with women but allowed themselves extra indulgence. The holy apostle, however, inspired by divine grace, was the first one who made the law of chastity apply to men as well.

T H E O D O R E T O F C Y R U S (393-457), *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, commenting on 1 Corinthians 7:3*

Though its primary harms may be to women and children, pornography affects all of us, for it makes serious statements about our world and human life. It asserts that some people are legitimate victims and others legitimate victimizers; it reinforces the worst of our society’s hierarchies of

inequality and injustice. It asserts that sexual pleasure comes from de-meaning, exploiting, objectifying and degrading our partners in the most intimate ways, rather than from an eager and passionate cherishing of the wholeness of that partner. Good theology can be helpful in clarifying what is at stake in porn....

If the churches are to deal responsibly with porn, they must also affirm and celebrate healthy human sexuality.... And if we in the churches are concerned that porn provides serious misinformation about sexuality and sexual violence, then we must also take very serious steps to provide accurate and sensitive alternatives—such as supporting rape centers, sex education, and genuine artists who may depict sex in their work.

MARY D. PELLAUER, “Pornography: An Agenda for the Churches”

Both erotic and pornographic material can be sexually stimulating; however, pornography is used to degrade others, while erotica celebrates human sexual experience. Although erotica is sexually arousing material, it is not meant to degrade women, men or children. Pornography, on the other hand, uses subjugation themes for the explicit purpose of sexual arousal. Pornography *always* dehumanizes, and we believe dehumanization is a violation of the value God places on human life and sexuality.

JUDITH K. & JACK O. BALSWICK, *Authentic Human Sexuality*

From Homer to Shakespeare, from the Bible to Jane Austin, we have many imaginings of the intimacy and power of sexual love that have respected absolutely its essential privacy and thus have preserved its intimacy and honored its dignity....

The danger [in explicit artistic representation of sexual lovemaking], I would suggest, is not in the representation but in the reductiveness that is the risk of representation and that is involved in most representations. What is so fearfully arrogant and destructive is the implication that what is represented, or representable, is all there is. In the best representations, I think, there would be a stylization or incompleteness that would convey the artist’s honest acknowledgement that this is not all.

The best representations are surrounded and imbued with the light of imagination, so that they make one aware, with profound sympathy, of the two lives, not just the two bodies, that are involved; they make one aware also of the difficulty of full and open sexual consent between two people and of the history and the trust that are necessary to make possible that consent. Without such history and trust, sex is brutal, no matter what species is involved.

WENDELL BERRY, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*

Song Sung Blue?

BY LAURA SINGLETON

The best comeback to the stereotype of the sexually repressed born-again Christian (the only way they know to deal with a naked body is to cover it up!) can be found right in the pages of the Bible: the Song of Songs. It's certainly erotic, but hardly the script for a "blue movie."

When Attorney General John Ashcroft, the most publicly-identified Christian in the U.S. Cabinet, last February ordered a backdrop of draperies to conceal a monumentally-bare-bosomed Art Deco statue during official occasions in the Great Hall of the Justice Department, surely I was only one of many evangelicals who winced at the report. Though one spokesperson suggested the reason was the metallic statue's reflective background in photographic lighting, the consensus interpretation in the news media and on late-night talk shows invited guffaws over the presumably prudish sentiments behind Ashcroft's gesture. Soon he will be putting pantaloons on piano legs, right? There go those unhealthy, sexually repressed born-again Christians—the only way they know to deal with a naked body is to cover it up!

The best comeback to this derisive stereotype is found right in the pages of the Bible between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah. The Song of Songs, also called Song of Solomon, with its frankly sensual and erotic imagery, offers enough titillation to make even *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw blush. Its provocative content was implicitly acknowledged by rabbinical teachers, who only allowed students over the age of thirty to read it. "That it is in Scripture at all is an elegant testimony to the Hebrew refusal to chop life into things sacred and things secular," notes Richard Foster.¹ Jews and Christians alike would claim, however, that it's far from pornographic, which prompts the question of how we tell the difference. Merely citing divine inspiration (an argument simplified along the lines of: "The Holy

Spirit don't write no porn!") is more a dodge than a rationale, as it excuses us from exploring the issue further. It also misses an opportunity to discover principles that can be applied more broadly in considering the nature of secular artwork and writings.

Another dodge, quite popular throughout the history of Judeo-Christian thought but a dodge nonetheless, is to view the book solely as an allegory of the love of God for His people Israel, or of Christ for the Church. So entrenched is this viewpoint that parents smile dotingly as their preschoolers warble in Sunday School, "I'm my beloved's and he is mine—his banner over me is love." In the original context, these praises hardly seem ordained for the mouths of babes! While Jesus of course does love the little children, leaving Song of Songs with this assessment misses the point that even an allegory must be convincing in its first meaning if it is to be helpful. Only because we can identify with the prodigal or the elder son, for example, does that parable of Christ's convict us, and likewise, only if the passion between Solomon and the Shulammite is believable can it adequately mirror the passion of Christ for the Church. So it may be viewed as an allegory, yes, but not at the expense of dealing with its erotic material at face value.

One potential argument to separate Song of Songs from pornography is that it's not pictorial. Too often we reduce our definition of porn to Internet photo spreads, pulp magazines, or adult videos. In this case, however, even our sexually-liberated pop culture has seen the truth. On an episode of the sitcom *Friends*, Joey finds a dog-eared novel tucked under the mattress of his roommate Rachel's bed. Its plotline, he quickly discovers, involves a lusty maid, an overheated blacksmith, and other participants of a similar stripe. Joey, generally not the sharpest arrow in the quiver, in this case knows something when he sees it. "You've got porn!" he exclaims, first with astonishment and then with glee as he confronts a chagrined Rachel, who tries frantically but unsuccessfully to re-characterize the genre of her "literature." Indeed, for my gender, steamy romance novels or magazine serials, with a veneer of character development between explicitly-detailed sexual romps, are by far the favored form of pornographic consumption. Being a written expression of sensuality by no means excludes the Song of Songs from that category.

A final reason I find inadequate for dismissing this work from the pornographic category is its use of figurative and euphemistic language rather than explicit anatomical terms. First of all, time and translation have distanced us from knowing exactly how "graphic" the words may have seemed to contemporary Hebrew eyes. To today's reader, though, however delicate the expression seems, the implication is clear when the lover declares, "You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches" (7:7-8). If

anything, the mystery hidden in the metaphor makes the message more sensual and arousing than had he simply proclaimed, “I want to grab your breasts!” It definitely invokes the imagination. But since the path into sexual imagination is not necessarily a safe one, why is the Song of Songs not pornographic? Perhaps we should take a close look at the book’s content and how it differs from popular pornography in order to develop biblical standards for evaluating erotic material.

In the first place, a virtue of the Song of Songs is that it glorifies the normal rather than the extreme. As a pastor friend of mine once highlighted, praising teeth “like a flock of shorn ewes...all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved” (4:2) rejoices in the rather prosaic quality of fortunate dental hygiene! Though herbal scents and cosmetics were certainly not unknown in ancient times, the “nectar” or “liquid myrrh” of the lips (4:11, 5:13) or the “mixed wine” of the navel (7:2) seem more closely linked to natural breath and body aromas than the latest mouthwash or perfume. This stands in direct contrast to typical pornographic material, which tends to rely on digitally-enhanced images of surgically-enhanced bodies that dampen appreciation for the real thing. C. S. Lewis has his fictional demon, Screwtape, suggest that this is all part of a diabolical strategy: “We [demons] are more and more directing the desires of men to something which does not exist—making the role of the eye in sexuality more and more important and at the same time making its demands more and more impossible. What follows you can easily forecast!”² For women, this finds its analogue in the romance novels depicting unceasing passion and exotic adventures which may be not merely an escape, but become a cause for dissatisfaction in the everyday. In either case, the outcome undermines healthy marital relationships.

Another distinguishing feature is the book’s multi-dimensional portrayal of the admirable qualities in both male and female lovers. Not just visual beauty is extolled, but voice, smell, taste, and, most strikingly, virtue. I contrast this with a comment from a friend of

mine who once worked on the website of a popular men’s magazine. Part of his job was creating photo captions, and he noted the challenge of coming up with “creative ways of saying, ‘This girl is sexy!’” When the observations are limited to the visual, and these attributes have been systematically reduced (or, more likely, augmented!) to a cookie-cutter definition of physical perfection, even the most gifted writer is stumped.

**Song of Songs differs from pornography
in that not only visual beauty is extolled,
but also voice, smell, taste, and, most strikingly,
virtue.**

At the same time, I suspect this man, who recently became engaged, would have no problem filling pages with the ways his fiancée enchants him. Real love finds an infinite variety of things to enjoy in its object, and these go beyond the aspects that sag or broaden with time.

A third and particularly noteworthy quality of the Song of Songs is that both participants in the love story have voices. With the possible exception

A particularly noteworthy quality of the Song of Songs is that both participants in the love story have voices. With the possible exception of Miriam or Deborah in their songs, the Shulammitte maiden gets more airtime than any other woman in Scripture, and her voice is a powerful one.

of Miriam or Deborah in their songs, the Shulammitte maiden gets more airtime than any other woman in Scripture! Her voice is a powerful one, of such similar character to Solomon's that commentators sometimes differ in their division of phrases between the speakers. "My vineyard, my very own, is for myself," she says in 8:12, and whether she is speaking about her chastity

or her property, her authority to command it is clear. Contrast this to the passive faces in most pornographic photos, supporting a viewer's self-arousal while eliminating the inconvenient necessity of dealing with a lover's emotions. Then consider that behind at least some of those faces are stories like the one told by Linda Boreman, the star of "Deep Throat," better known by her stage name, Linda Lovelace. Boreman, who was essentially broke when she died after an auto accident last spring,³ claimed she had been coerced and manipulated into participating in the pornographic films that made her famous. Witnesses disputed Boreman's stories of intimidation at gunpoint, but whether the guns were real, threatened, or just images woven from deep-seated shame and regret, clearly the experience was anything but empowering for her.

Finally, and most importantly, the Song of Songs differs from pornography because it portrays sexual expression linked to commitment and consequences. "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," (8:6) says the Shulammitte. The bond being described shares with death and the grave an essential quality of permanence. Again, this contrasts starkly with perspectives such as that of the prophetess of sexual liberation, Helen Gurley Brown, whose philosophy still greets us on each cover of *Cosmopolitan*, the magazine she edited for more than 30 years. A woman's role, it's clear from the stories featured there, is to figure out the best sexual techniques

to keep her man captivated. Revealingly, in a 1997 interview, Brown commented on her own marriage, "I've kept him faithful all these years."⁴ Ms. Brown, who personally dismisses any moral arguments for monogamy, places responsibility on the woman to stimulate her husband's continued interest, so the wife of a philanderer somehow deserves what she gets. How ironic that a message purporting to offer women "power" instead robs them of the right to expect fidelity!

In the end, the Song of Songs, even with its frankly erotic poetry, distinguishes itself from pornography with its emphasis on the value of persons, both male and female. It also points to ideals of restraint and premarital chastity, highlighting the genuine struggle between desire and virtue, and it emphasizes the serious nature of the sexual bond, presumed to seal the marriage covenant. Whether or not the lovers are historical persons, they have a convincing and particularized reality which transcends the shallowness of images invented for our selfish gratification.

NOTES

1 Richard Foster, *Money, Sex & Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 95. Foster's helpful discussion of Song of Songs in this work offered important insights to my own analysis.

2 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone Edition, 1996), 77.

3 "Linda Lovelace died with no money; father scraping up money for funeral," Scripps Howard News Service, April 25, 2002.

4 Helen Gurley Brown, interview by Becky Garrison, *The Women's Quarterly*, Fall 1997, available online at www.iwf.org/pubs/twq/fa97g.shtml.



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Body Worship

BY ROBERT AND MARY DARDEN

Behind the silicone breast implant industry and America's obsession with breasts, behind the dying women and industry cover up, is spiritual idolatry. Many men and women worship the false idol of an artificial sense of female beauty and a need for a culturally-mandated desirability. Christians should have no more part of it than we would of worshipping a golden calf.

In "I Sing the Body Electric" Walt Whitman writes, "If anything is sacred the human body is sacred. "Perhaps if someone today were to write such a poem it would be titled "I Sing of the Body Silicone."

A few years ago, we undertook a journey into the heart of darkness—to write an exposé of the silicone breast implant industry and America's obsession with breasts. Our agent soon found a publisher and we went to work.

We went places where we shouldn't have gone and talked to people we shouldn't have talked to. We discovered a 40-year cover-up of a very simple fact: silicone causes a long list of horrific problems when implanted in the human body. We also discovered how far some corporations will go to protect that information. Every doctor who reluctantly agreed to be interviewed by us was fired or forced to leave within six months—with one exception, and to this day that person is picked up each morning in a bullet-proof car. Our primary interviewee was twice driven off the road by unmarked cars, her house ransacked, her phone tapped, her children followed and videotaped.

We talked with dozens of dying women, each cursing their implants, their bodies wracked with silicone-induced Multiple Sclerosis, ALS, Lupus,

extreme chemical sensitivity, migraines, memory loss, behavior changes, scleroderma, and more.

We saw plastic surgeons made enormously wealthy by implanting silicone-filled bags into the chests of 16-year-old girls for birthday presents from their families. With his money, one surgeon built a giant swimming pool in the shape of a breast, with a Jacuzzi for the nipple.

We saw the ferocious backlash against the few organizations daring to speak out against this mad practice. Chemical companies spent billions in lawsuits and funding bogus studies. Major American medical journals abruptly quit printing articles on the harmful effects of silicone. Legitimate researchers, understandably, began to steer clear of the subject. No one was willing to fund additional studies in the face of such determined opposition. While many manufacturers were willing to fund “research” that indicated positive results, no one was standing in line to expose the truth about implants, silicone or “saline.” The truth that had first been exposed within the companies themselves was covered up again and again.

In the end, just weeks before publication, our book was scuttled, the victim of lawyers and multi-national corporations and that most basic of all human frailties, greed.

In trying to get the book printed, we spent seven years in litigation. We felt we owed it to the two million women in this country desperate for someone to believe them. We failed.

When it was all said and done, this is what we learned: America’s obsession with the size of the female breast is a corporate sin that damages and demeans not just a woman’s self-esteem, but often destroys her health as well.

If, as Christians, we are supporting even in the smallest way this preoccupation with one portion of the female anatomy, then we are part of a national problem.

Each time a Christian man comments admiringly on the size of woman’s breasts—whether she is walking down the street, appearing in a film or modeling in a Victoria’s Secret advertisement—he places unrelenting pressure on the women and girls in his life to aspire to an unreachable ideal. Each time a Christian woman buys an unrealistic doll for her daughter, she creates a subtle shame in the 99.99% of all women who don’t look like adult Barbies. The obsession negates terrific minds, wonderful personalities, and life-affirming senses of humor.

In short, we have fallen prey to a cult that worships a false idol.

The female breast is a wonderful thing. The worship of it in the popular culture is idolatry.

A Christian should have no more part of it than he or she would of worshipping a golden calf. And yet somehow we manage to force this practice to fit into the “acceptable” column. In doing so, we unconsciously

align ourselves with the few remaining cultures of the world who mutilate the female body for some perverted sense of power or control.

During the course of writing our book, we saw things we wished we'd never seen. We saw photos of surgeons extracting deflated implants (100% will leak within nine to eleven years) from chests covered with a powdery

“He has made everything beautiful in its time.” EVERYTHING. If men would remember this, they would not support women having their bodies mutilated. If women would remember this, they would not succumb to the pressure to tamper with God’s beautiful creation. We must teach our children well—boys and girls alike—so they will not become victims of this mad, obsessive idolatry.

green mold. We saw women with their fingertips amputated because the leaking silicone migrates to the extremities and causes gangrene. We saw shattered women refuse to talk to men because it was a husband who shamed her into getting implants, a male doctor who inserted the flimsy bags of silicone and ignored the pain and disease caused by the silicone, and a male doctor who eventually took them out, all at great cost.

witty, wise women fall into a state of chronic illness, paranoia and depression, *all because of breast size.*

Time and time again we asked ourselves how this could happen. In an educated, supposedly compassionate society, why is this allowed? Obviously, many people are still unaware of the profound health impact of silicone in the blood stream.

And as long as the chemical companies wield so much influence, this (and many other such insidious threats) will continue to tempt people.

Fortunately, the defense against such exploitation is in the Bible. Psalm 139:14 says, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Hear this: YOU are fearfully and wonderfully made. Every part of you.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, “He has made everything beautiful in its time” (NIV).[†]

EVERYTHING.

If men would remember this, they would not support women having their bodies mutilated for some artificial sense of beauty or need for a culturally-mandated desirability. If women would remember this, they would not be ashamed of their bodies and not succumb to the pressure to tamper with God’s beautiful creation. We must teach our children well—boys and

girls alike—so they will not become victims of this mad, obsessive idolatry.

On *Still on the Journey*, Sweet Honey in the Rock recorded a spiritual titled “No Mirrors in Nana’s House.” Our favorite lines tell how the singer felt beautiful in Nana’s house and saw beauty in all of God’s creations because she was beautiful to Nana. She didn’t need flawless skin, perfect teeth, or bleached blonde hair.

Perhaps there are too many mirrors in our society.

But more than likely, it’s not the mirrors that are the problem. The problem lies within us. Because we have focused on one aspect of the female frame, we have been caught in Satan’s oldest and craftiest snare. We have obsessed on a lesser good and let the greater good pass unnoticed.

The female breast is a wondrous thing. But so is every other part of the woman and the female anatomy—every part of the person—just as she was created.

Celebrate the breast, yes. But it is far more important to celebrate the heart that beats behind it and the person, chosen for eternal life, whom God loves more than life itself.

Sing the “body electric.”

But sing the *whole* body, the whole person, as it is fearfully and wonderfully made—the temple of the Holy Spirit, of God Almighty.

NOTE

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Erotic, but not Pornographic

BY JOHN PECK

The amazing new pervasiveness of pornographic art is enough to make us wonder if there can be erotic art that is not pornographic. Can we still produce distinctively Christian art that is true to the biblical vision of sexual love? Our generation desperately needs that vision.

Our culture is fairly saturated with art products—not only pictorial images, but also art in literature, dance, and even music as well—that deal with sex in ways that assault our moral sense as Christians. Distressingly, we are becoming used to this; but in our more lucid moments we recognize these products to be “pornographic.” The mass media (a phenomenon specific to our age) has raised the public availability of this pornographic art to new levels worldwide. Its allure and amazing new pervasiveness are enough to make us wonder if there can be erotic art that is not pornographic.

A tragic result is that most contemporary Christians, and especially evangelical Christians of the western world, are not capable any longer of producing erotic art. We would be frightened. Maybe I’m wrong, but certainly we have problems producing erotic art for our generation that is really true to the biblical vision of sexual love. Yet our generation desperately needs that vision.

Among Christians, sex has always been an unruly animal in our backyard, frighteningly powerful, horrifyingly pleasurable, and yet unavoidably necessary. But at least we knew the rules of sexual activity, even if their rationale was unclear. Art, on the other hand, was uncharted territory. In a life committed to saving souls from a lost world, art was at best a worldly distraction, justified only by being used as religious or moral propaganda. With no clear aesthetic criteria, much of our religious art was unbearably kitschy and inept; amongst aficionados we were a laughing-

stock. And any art having sexual implications has been automatically taboo.

This might be regarded as rather strange since we are committed to a foundational text, the Bible, that is saturated with positive references to art forms, including music, song, storytelling, the plastic arts in the sanctuary, and even poetry that is often quite secular in content. Specially relevant here is the Song of Solomon, an erotic poem in the heart of Scripture, with virtually no religious language in it—no mention of prayer, sacrifice, worship, temple, or priest, with but one reference to the Sacred Name, abbreviated, as a sort of adjective! Perhaps even worse still, some of the language is uncomfortably explicit. If it were not in Scripture, it would be difficult, by common Christian criteria, to regard this as “acceptable to the LORD”!

DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN ART

Our modern global culture, reflected in its artwork, is fragmented, alienated from historical precedents, and lacking agreed symbols, even among Christians. “Onward, Christian soldiers,” for instance, which to past saints was a proclamation of allegiance, sounds to a later generation like mindless triumphalism. We are confronted with a smorgasbord of artistic styles—cubist, surrealist, constructivist, abstract, and primitive—which are often experimental, and all are struggling to achieve something that may be called “pure” or “authentic.” The question arises, of all these, is there anything *distinctively Christian*, or not?

I’m convinced that there can be distinctively Christian art, even when it has no obvious religious or moral content. This is not to say that religion and morality are unimportant, simply that they are not adequate as defining criteria for Christian art. I have seen religious pictures that portray Jesus more like a film star than a homeless rabbi.

Other qualities will be characteristic of typically Christian artwork. To begin with, Christian art will express a distinctively Christian worldview. This will have at least two implications for our purpose: a distinctively Christian conception of art and a distinctively Christian understanding of sex.

For a Christian worldview, it is surely necessary to go back to our founding literature. We have in Scripture the literature of a people that, as a special means of divine revelation, provides an authoritative sample of God’s dealings with human beings in a particular cultural environment. Some features will stand out clearly.

First, Scripture affirms the reality of our physical existence, a reality derived from the will of God. Though spoiled, the physical world is good, not evil. Typically Christian art will recognize this; it will tend to be “incarnational.” While it may use abstract styles, it will not despise representational art; nor will it distort the physical world in ways that make it fundamentally sinister. But because creation *is* spoiled, the artist will be

wary of idealizing it. Indeed Christian art will be prophetically critical of any sentimental optimism that glorifies the rose with no awareness of the thorn.

The hope of divine redemption is the second salient feature of the Christian view. I have and treasure a painting of downtown Detroit, a street with low, drab monochrome houses, with flat, horizontally lined frontages. Yet in one corner there is a green shrub, which is just enough to offer the hope of new life. And above, some of the clouds have a vague, subtle angelic shape.

Third, Scripture views humanity as imaging a transcendent Reality, and as capable of making moral self-commitment to either good or evil. Flowing from these three key features come distinctive views of history, work, social relationships, nature, truth, authority, and, of course, sex.

TOWARD A CHRISTIAN AESTHETIC

If we are to develop this so badly needed critical sense, we shall of course learn from current discussions of art, but we cannot rest there. We need an aesthetic, or conception of art, that corresponds with the way Scripture uses art. An outstanding biblical art form is that of story telling. We might, as a sample, start with the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. The context is a query about the most important one of the 613 commandments of the Law. The questioner was probably expecting to engage in a rabbinic debate on the meaning of “neighbor;” instead, he gets a story. Everybody relaxes; we all love a good story. Art is thus akin to play, with an initial offer of pleasure.

Jesus sets the scene with a formalized vagueness, “a certain man” (KJV)—almost, “once upon a time.” This arouses a particular kind of expectation by introducing the hearer to a “let’s pretend” world, which is imaginary, but analogous to this real one. It is an enjoyable world, a world that you can enter into, make decisions, play a part, or just watch, without facing any of the usual consequences. A war film may take you into a war scene quite vividly, but you will never get shot; or listening to a stirring military march you may feel the disciplined pride of the soldier, but never have to fire the gun. Now any “let’s pretend” world must have its own self-consistency to make it credible. An actor forgetting his lines can be bearable, but letting the audience notice it is unforgivable.

So here, in a typical triad of events, the lawyer is initiated into a moral dilemma. He initially appears secure: he can pass judgments freely because he doesn’t have to walk the road, meet the Samaritan, and so on. The power of the art then becomes clear: “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Jesus asks, and our moral character is located by our response. The lawyer is trapped; refusing to use the hated name, he mutters, “The one who showed him mercy.” The method of communication is indirect, slipping past the mental guards put up by

prejudice, pride, and even logic. The truth is left implicit in the story, for the lawyer to *work it out for himself*. Christian art then, for those who will receive it, will be redemptive, rescuing the imagination from the limitations of creatureliness and sin.

Not all art is so obvious in its effect, of course. It is often more subliminal, simply giving a sense of discovery, satisfaction, hope, or whatever. But always a work of art *initiates the recipient into an experience that carries a meaning or value significant enough for the artist to want someone to share it*. Thus 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, and so on. Art does this by providing clues, using what Calvin Seerveld calls “allusiveness,” to enable us to see for ourselves. The simplest example of this process is in a good joke. Of course the artist takes a considerable risk of being misunderstood, ignored, or rejected—the sort of risk that Christ took in becoming human.

All this suggests some important criteria for evaluating art. One criterion is that good art must maintain the illusion; the outside world must not intrude. Another is that the clues must be adequate, but not too obvious. A third is about the values implicit in the experience into which the recipient is being drawn. Imagine Jesus telling the story with the Samaritan going over to the wounded man, laughing, and giving him a kick in the ribs! A revealing example for applying this third criterion is a comparison of Fagin’s fate in Dickens’ novel *Oliver Twist* with that in the musical *Oliver*. In the first, Fagin, that procurer and master of young thieves, is hung; in the other, he meets his child thief protégée and they go off laughing together. We might ask the question, how could that second ending, unthinkable a century ago, give us pleasurable feelings today? Why, given the modern preoccupation with the evils of child abuse, wouldn’t we want to change it? Such questions show how a work of art can unmask hidden, unconscious attitudes to life that develop in us through interaction with our social environment, even as Christians. And this is not merely a matter of content; style also comes to bear. On the one

A work of art initiates the recipient into an experience that carries a meaning or value significant enough for the artist to want someone to share it. Christian art then, for those who will receive it, will be redemptive, rescuing the imagination from the limitations of creatureliness and sin.

hand, abstract art may wrongly divorce meaning from sense experience; yet on the other, representational art may suggest that sense experience is all there is. Employing explicit Christian symbols may not help, for they also can be too obvious.

CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF SEX

Clearly, if art initiates us into a world where values are implicit and powerfully operative, developing our sensitivity to erotic art demands a consideration of a biblical Christian attitude toward sex. Some years back, my wife and I were foster parenting a teenage girl who had run away from home. One afternoon Carol happened to be in the room as I was listening to a tape of a talk I had given about sex. Apparently she must have heard some of it, because later in the day she questioned me in a tiny voice, fraught with shocked disbelief, "Aren't you supposed to have sex, then, if you're not married?" Recreational sex is a norm now for many people, and even among Christians, marriage as an institution has come under challenge. We are aware that other cultures have different forms of sexual relationship. So in this, as in so many other issues today, we have to go back to basics.

We are dealing here with a human activity, which is to say, the activity of beings made in the image of God. To function as an image means that our lives, all our activities, point beyond ourselves. They are never *merely* actions. So, like everything else, sex is body language. So, what does sexual intercourse *mean*? Clearly, the bans on adultery and fornication demand that sexual expression has to take place within a relationship of mutual commitment. But equally clearly, the form of commitment is particularly significant, since it has the potential for reproduction. All of this adds up to intercourse meaning, on the part of both partners, "*I surrender control of myself to you.*" Paul, with stunning egalitarianism, expresses this in terms of authority (1 Corinthians 7:4). Sex is also an appetite, that can be checked, directed, or stimulated, and because of its special character, it can be stimulated to a point when control is weakened and finally lost altogether.

EROTIC, BUT NOT PORNOGRAPHIC

This enables us to gain some understanding of the difference between pornography and eroticism. If intercourse means surrender to another, then obviously the dominant interest and value is in the other person. Of course our instinct is satisfied, and pleasurably, for God has made us that we might meet life's needs in pleasure rather than pain. But pleasure is not the main purpose. It follows that any Christian erotic art will focus on the relationship between the persons, rather than on the physical experience. One of the clearest expressions of this I know is in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, where part of the marriage vows has the words, "With my body I thee worship." That our physicality will be present is inevitable, but it will be subservient to that sort of vision.

Some years ago the Tate Gallery in London, which is well known for its avant-garde exhibitions, displayed a large, virtually life-size charcoal drawing. It portrayed a naked woman lying on a bed; on the other side (to the viewer) of the bed, on his knees, was a naked man, looking down at the woman. But what dominated the scene was the look on the man's face—of sheer adoration. Hardly even a smile, more a look of wonder, awe, and worship. Erotic it was, certainly, but not pornographic; the picture had no interest in sexual arousal. To put it another way, erotic love is about self-giving; porn is about possession. It is this that preserves the integrity of the erotic, but not pornographic language of the Song of Solomon.

This example highlights another aspect of our subject. Intercourse is not something that is normally done in public! It is essentially a private matter. (In our culture, unfortunately, this is allied to our intense individualism; we assert that the entire relationship within which it takes place is private, so the public ceremony of marriage becomes a superfluous institution. This reasoning is faulty because if sex symbolizes a total earthly commitment, then it will involve more public things, like common ownership, legal obligations, possible responsibility of children, and so on.) Privacy is an important aspect of our humanity. We sometimes complain of people "who wear their hearts on their sleeves," meaning they reveal the secrets of their inner life too easily, so that they and their relationships are devalued. An implication of a total commitment is its exclusivity; it cannot be shared with more than one person at a time. Two people consolidate their marital relationship by sharing their privacy together. A significant side effect of the Tate Gallery picture is that the viewer gets a sense that the two figures share something that is not for others to know. By contrast, pornography is a deliberate exposure, implying an invitation to the viewer—or viewers, it doesn't matter—to enjoy the secrets of the body of someone who is not properly theirs to know, and hence to invade her (or less commonly, his) privacy indiscriminately.

Sex is a human activity, which is to say, the activity of beings made in the image of God. To function as an image means that our lives, all our activities, point beyond ourselves. They are never "merely" actions. So, like everything else, sex is body language.

The significance of this deepens on theological reflection, making us aware that privacy is the equivalent in human beings of what holiness is in God. Hence the Song of Solomon is punctuated by language of restraint. The lovers repeat invitations to "come away" and for love not to be aroused "till it please." The final assertion of the beloved, "my own

vineyard is mine to give" (8:12 NIV)[†], makes what follows so precious. "Keep your money, Solomon," she is saying, "I give myself away."

The nature of art itself, however, offers a final distinction between the erotic and pornographic. We have seen that art involves a kind of illusion, which Konrad von Lange calls *bewusste selbsttauschung* (willing self-deception): the offer of a convincing imaginary world within which we can live for a time, but which, in the knowledge that it is not 'real,' allows us freedom to enter into new modes of experience. What is essential to this is that however close the real and imaginary worlds may be, they must not directly interact. (We may watch a battle occurring in a play, for instance, but not at the risk of our lives! And close to this confusion is the use of art as propaganda, in which the real world is manipulatively associated with that of the imaginary.) By the same token, erotic art may introduce us to new dimensions of sexual attraction and commitment, but if there is a focus on sexual arousal, then the illusion has been abused and the art has become pornographic. Such a production is not only non-Christian; it is also, quite simply, bad art.

NOTE

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Reeducating Our Desires

BY SUSAN DOLAN-HENDERSON

Pornography, especially when paired with consumerism, can be a powerful educator of our desires, turning them toward a sexual fantasy life that refuses all limits. Our desires need education, but it must be grounded in a comprehensive view of freedom and equality in Christ. Among contemporary feminists we find both interesting encouragement and surprising objections to this biblical education of desire.

The expansion of the pornographic culture can be painfully obvious to us when we are surfing the Internet. Many of us have experienced searching for a seemingly innocuous website, but suddenly finding pornographic images inches from our face. This is why some companies are striving to make “family filters” for the Internet. We read about sexual predators that seek out young people and others in online pornographic chat rooms, and then lure them into more dangerous personal contacts.

But pornography’s influence is spreading through our culture in many more subtle and complicated ways. We are constantly barraged with objectionable sexual images, from our clothes catalogues (those of The Gap and Abercrombie and Fitch come immediately to mind) to our pop-stars. For instance, the persona of pop singer Brittany Spears intentionally was sexualized while she was still a young teenager. Her unbelievably revealing clothes then had an immediate impact on girls, so that their clothing emphasizes their sexuality at an ever younger age. In an appalling Pepsi commercial Spears dances suggestively while wearing a skimpy outfit; then in a living room former Senator Bob Dole watches this Spears ‘commercial’

with a dog next to him; “Down boy!” he tells the dog. These images promote a limited range of “desirable” body types, and set a standard which is often unattainable or at least unsustainable for the average woman. More subtly, the commercial teases us with the sexual image of the “grandpa child molester” and women being in pornographic scenes with animals.¹

Some people excuse much of this sexualizing trend in our culture as harmless, or even therapeutic. These images help us release inappropriate sexual desires, they claim, and therefore restrain us from sexually abusing others. Just the opposite is true, however. Marketing trains the desires of the body to want more and more stimulation, and pornography extends abusive ideas, rather than extinguishes them.

Pornography, especially when it is paired with consumerism, can be a powerful educator of our desires. In this way, theologian T. J. Gorringer notes, pornography “gets close to the heart of the human condition, something that both the desert Fathers and Augustine realized.” Our desires should lead us toward the true, the good, and the beautiful that are found in God; pornography redirects them toward a fantasy life that refuses all limits. The Bible, fortunately, offers a remedy. “To turn from the Song of Songs to Deuteronomy, and all the prophetic writing influenced by it, we can understand God as educating and disciplining us,” Gorringer notes. “Desire needs education and Christianity is an alternative education of desire.” Gorringer sees secular feminism as instructive to this alternative biblical education of desire.²

THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF PORNOGRAPHY

We can find allies among some anti-pornography feminists like University of Michigan law professor Catherine A. MacKinnon.³ She defines pornography as:

the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or words, that also includes one or more of the following: (i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience pleasure in being raped; or (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or (v) women are presented in postures of sexual submission, servility or display; or (vi) women’s body parts—including but not limited to vaginas, breasts and buttocks—are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts; or (vii) women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or (ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual. Pornography

also includes the use of men, children or transsexuals in the place of women. Pornography thus defined, is discrimination on the basis of sex and, as such, a civil rights violation.⁴

MacKinnon forcefully argues that pornography, even “soft porn” like *Playboy*, spreads discrimination against women. In hundreds of interviews with abuse victims, she also traces a link between pornography and sexual abuse, especially of women and children. She notes that the pleasure of women depicted in pornographic imagery makes it seem as though women really welcome rape and sexual abuse. Women’s “no” no longer means no, it secretly means yes; thus, the legal concept of consent becomes meaningless. Furthermore, since pornography is about the individual reaching maximum orgasmic potentials, it encourages non-relational sex. Women are presented as masturbatory objects, and the goods of human relationship are absent.

Because she believes that pornography demeans women by reinforcing the widespread view of women as depersonalized objects for the pleasure of men, MacKinnon promotes legislation to restrict distribution of all pornography, not just pornography involving children.

Christians believe that the human body and sexuality are good, for God declared them good along with the rest of the created order. So, we can agree with MacKinnon that the objectification of women and children into sexual tools for the pleasure of some is terribly wrong. Furthermore, we can agree that toleration of the various enterprises that engage in such objectification invites the dissemination of these ideas throughout the

culture. For the perusal of a pornographic magazine, as Henrys Chlor warns, “is in some sense, like entering a world unto itself; one gets an introduction to the world of pornography.”⁵ Pornography creates a certain kind of world, and it is a world out of harmony with the Gospel. It is not a world where the truth will set us free, rather it oppresses women as it pollutes the general cultural landscape.

Law professor Catherine A. MacKinnon defines pornography as “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or words,” and believes that it demeans women by reinforcing the widespread view that women are depersonalized objects for the pleasure of men. It is “discrimination on the basis of sex,” she argues, “and, as such, a civil rights violation.”

LOOKING FOR FREEDOM IN THE WRONG PLACES

Surprisingly, secular feminists are divided on how to respond to the pornographic world. Some, like MacKinnon above, actively oppose the distribution of pornographic products. Yet, other secular feminists, such as performance artist Annie Sprinkle and philosopher Judith Butler, are pro-pornography. They think that limiting pornography is yet another example of men controlling women's sexual expression and desire. They view any restrictions on pornography as attacks upon women's freedom and the First Amendment.

Even a brief look at the pro-pornography feminists' arguments can remind us how complicated the attraction to pornography has become in our culture. First, they doubt that pornography is as harmful as its opponents believe; otherwise they would not promote it as liberation for women. They point out that much of the evidence (such as MacKinnon's interviews) linking pornography to violence against women or children is anecdotal, and the few controlled scientific studies are not definitive.

What about the objection that pornography exploits women? Here the pro-pornography view takes a strange turn. They answer that women need to own the production of pornography themselves. When women make the money and use pornography as a vehicle of self-expression, this counters male domination. Since it is women's sexuality that has been culturally and legally restricted, total freedom is the only way to ensure women's true liberation.

Sex, opines Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, is always a form of power *over* someone, never power *with*. Mutuality between men and women is a myth for her. Furthermore, she argues, there is nothing natural about sex or gender; what it means to be a man or woman is highly determined by society. Being defined like this by society is very oppressive, but, ironically, this oppression seems to allow for moments of "transgression" against any and all rules concerning sexuality and gender. Creating or using pornography, she thinks, can be a type of transgression for oppressed women. Their transgression of norms helps to disrupt oppressive power. Furthermore, by thumbing their noses at society's expectations, women can be, for just a moment, really free.

What a painfully convoluted argument Butler offers: when men make pornography, it is a form of domination, but when women create pornography, it is a 'freeing' moment! Pro-pornography feminists seem to be seeking the power to be as bad as they claim men have always been. Butler says that she wants bodies to "matter," but they don't matter much: their ultimate value is to be a tool for gaining power over other's sexual desires.

Butler's argument will be ultimately unacceptable to Christians with feminist concerns. We cannot accept the pro-pornography feminists' view of sexual freedom for women for many reasons. It has not worked to se-

cure women's true freedom. It mistakenly sees freedom as a zero-sum game, so that one group (women) gains freedom only by stealing it from another group (men). Rather, we can offer a comprehensive view of freedom and equality in Christ, with both sexes being held morally accountable and neither exploited as objects, sexual or otherwise. Since Christ came to reconcile the world, we must seek reconciliation between the genders that enables women and men to grow to full stature and freedom that is their inheritance in Christ.

This gospel vision of freedom for both sexes can be the seedbed for positive change in our culture. From it grew the women's temperance movement in the nineteenth century, which in turn was the fertile soil for the development of today's feminist movement.

Yet many feminists, including those in the pro-pornography camp, remind us of some subtle ways that cultural patterns and institutions can control women. We must confess that sometimes even our Christian faith has been distorted in ways that oppress women.⁶

We must proclaim the Gospel accurately, for it is an authentic source of liberation for women as well as men. Our biblical faith finds its feminist voice in the fact that only God is our Lord; we humans never are given mastery over one another. It finds its voice in its compassion for the out-cast. It finds its voice in the story of Jesus Christ, in the manner in which he treated and protected women, and in the important roles they played as Jesus' disciples. The Apostle Paul encouraged women working independently to spread the Gospel, in which there is "no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). We are all heirs to God's promise, which is reconciliation to God and freedom from all forms of oppression.

The Gospel is an authentic source of liberation for women as well as men. Our biblical faith finds its feminist voice in the fact that only God is our Lord; we humans never are given mastery over one another. We are all heirs to God's promise—reconciliation to God and freedom from all forms of oppression.

GOD'S WORLD IS DIFFERENT

Let's borrow the concept of "transgression" as an instrument for resisting power. In this sense, Christians should transgress against all cultural worlds that conflict with the Gospel's message of dignity for all people, regardless of whether these cultural worlds represent the political left or

right. We ‘transgress’ pornography’s world when we allow the Christian story to form our sexuality and develop in us respect, modesty, and fidelity. This means positively that we can enjoy God’s ordained gift of sensuality and pleasure through marriage. The church can become what theologian Alejandro Garcia-Rivera calls the “the Community of the Beautiful,” and offer to our world the gift of sensual art.⁷ (Of course, we will continue to reflect on how to draw the line between the sensual and beautiful versus the pornographic. John Peck offers helpful guidance in his article, “Erotic, but not Pornographic,” in this issue.)

In these ways we can be witnesses that God’s world is different—more beautiful, free, and exciting—than the world that pornography is so powerfully inviting us to enter.

NOTES

1 Surely Mr. Dole was not aware of these associations. No doubt he was manipulated, as we all are manipulated, to accept certain images as authorized. Yet they are authorized by the overall culture of pornography that can hide its real power and intent. On this theme see Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture’s Revenge against Nature* (Harper and Row Publishers, 1981).

2 Timothy Gorringer, *The Education of Desire: Towards a Theology of the Senses* (Trinity Press International, 2002), 58 and 92.

3 See, for example, Catherine A. MacKinnon, “The Roar on the Other Side of Silence,” in Drucilla Cornell, ed., *Feminism and Pornography* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 130-153.

4 MacKinnon, “Not a Moral Issue,” in Cornell, 185-186. This is slightly modified from a definition approved by the Minneapolis City Council in 1983.

5 Henrys Chlor, *Public Morality and Liberal Society: Essays on Decency, Law, and Pornography* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 190.

6 No Christian who is serious about spreading the Gospel should ignore that Christians have done great evil in the name of Christ. For example, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a handbook used during the witchhunts in Europe that resulted in the deaths of millions of women, is filled with pornographic images. Thus, at times the institutions of Christianity have contributed to a culture of pornography. (See Susan Griffin, 8-81.) We must repudiate this past and state explicitly that Christians sinned and misused Christ in these cases.

7 See Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (The Liturgical Press, 1999).



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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.

Awash 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,

The Balswicks distinguish between pornography and "erotica." This subtle distinction is morally significant; it helps us discern the difference, for instance, between HUSTLER magazine and Michelangelo's DAVID.

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.

Dawn takes a fresh look at the biblical model of sexuality through the lens of an “ethics of character.” She focuses on character traits which are necessary to achieve the Bible’s vision of sexual flourishing.

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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Avoiding the Mess in Mass Media

BY CARL F. HOOVER

Searching for the commendable and praiseworthy in our culture, while screening out the bad, has never been more difficult. Internet resources help Christians find the good in films, TV programs, music, and video games.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Philippians 4:8

Searching for the commendable and praiseworthy in our culture, while screening out the bad, must have been easier in another day and time. When salacious images existed in tangible form, music was live rather than recorded, performers and their audience occupied the same space, culture had no “pop” prefix, and “media” referred only to an artist’s means of expression, rather than to myriad modes of distribution.

If we connect selective dots in our current entertainment environment, we can draw a lurid picture of a society rotting from within. *Spider-Man* and *Star Wars: Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, two record-breaking films, exposed our pre-teens this summer to characters being impaled and decapitated. When Eminem, the popular and controversial rapper, released a somewhat tempered album, both media critics and fans wistfully longed for more tunes from his virulently misogynistic and homophobic alter ego, Slim Shady. Network television shows now speak a language that would have startled viewers of a generation ago and stunned their parents.

Connect another set of dots, though, and the picture reveals the cultural contradictions of a complex, diverse society. The large audience turnout for family-friendly movies has caused Hollywood studios to shift

the majority of their product to PG and PG-13 rated films, not limited to adult viewers. Parental and political pressure has led to voluntary rating systems or warning labels not only for movies, but also for television programs, music CDs, video games, and computer software. Retail giant Wal-Mart and video/DVD rental chain Blockbuster refuse to sell music or videos with adult content, and their market impact is forcing film studios and national recording labels to listen. Hundreds of websites are devoted to entertainment reviews and commentaries, many examining their subjects through the prism of Scriptural principles and Christian values.

We have several tools at hand, then, to find the commendable and praiseworthy in pop culture. Ratings provide an initial, general level of screening. The Motion Picture Association of America led the way in 1968 with their film rating system. When a film is submitted to the MPAA, a private panel of parents rates its suitability for different age levels due to profanity, violence, nudity, and adult themes. This is a voluntary system with no criminal penalties for violations.

Though flawed, this MPAA system has served as a model for other entertainment industries. In 1985 the Recording Industry Association of America, pushed by the Parents Music Resource Center and the National Parents Teachers Association (PTA), agreed to put black-and-white parental advisory stickers on the covers of music CDs or albums with overly profane or vulgar lyrics. Television followed suit in 1997 with its own voluntary ratings system;

then, national legislation required that televisions sold after January 1, 2000, include a "V-chip," or computer chip that allows owners to filter out programming rated too violent for children. A 2001 Kaiser Family Foundation survey found, however, that only one out of every six Americans with a V-

chipped television set actually used it in guiding their viewing. The Entertainment Software Ratings Board is the newest addition in entertainment ratings, targeting computer and video games.

Ratings can be too generic to provide specific guidance. Mild profanity to some adults may be blasphemy to others. Some parents approve nudity in certain circumstances, but abhor violence, while others react in the opposite manner. Furthermore, most ratings systems evaluate only levels of sex, violence, and profanity, rarely addressing moral issues of lying, greed, self-centeredness, excessive consumerism, or prejudice.

The media's voluntary ratings are too generic for parents and adults who need specific guidance. And they may evaluate only levels of sex, violence, and profanity, rarely addressing moral issues of lying, self-centeredness, greed, excessive consumerism, or prejudice.

Before the Internet, parents often relied on word-of-mouth from trusted friends, the judgment of authorities, or on media critics' reviews for additional information on content and values in pop culture. The explosion of the globe-spanning Net now adds a wide range of readily available sources of evaluation. Admittedly, the thoughtfulness and reliability of some of these new websites are spotty. Yet the immediacy of Internet reviews and critiques can be valuable in offsetting the considerable pressure of multi-million-dollar marketing campaigns urging us to purchase on impulse a ticket for the all-important (to film studios) first weekend showing.

The Internet expands our Christian community beyond the local church in some interesting ways. Faith-oriented discussion forums and Web rings allow us to share ideas, questions, and beliefs about pop culture. Some Christian websites hawk high-tech solutions to problems of bad language: Clean Cut Cinemas, a company that splices profanity and adult scenes out of customers' videotapes; and TV Guardian™, a device that automatically deletes profanity from television broadcasts. Others advocate in-church media literacy programs that give young people the spiritual tools to discern the overt and hidden messages of television, music, and film.

Here is my list of online resources that can help Christians, young and old, find the good and screen the bad in our popular culture.

First, let's talk about going to a movie or renting a video. Do you want to know a film's rating by the MPAA and the reasons why? Just type in the film's name at *Motion Picture Association of America Movie Ratings* (www.filmratings.com) and its rating, plus a general explanation, pops up.

Rotten Tomatoes (www.rotten-tomatoes.com) provides a quick consensus opinion from among many of the leading print and Internet film reviewers. You can see whether a new movie is rated good (green tomato) or rotten (red, splattered tomato), while you enjoy pithy quotes from the reviews.

Like Rotten Tomatoes, *Movie Review Query Engine* (www.mrqe.com) allows you to sample the range of critics' opinions. Though it is not as quick to post reviews as Rotten Tomatoes, MRQE is more comprehensive. Its extensive database comes in handy when checking titles for video rentals.

Despite its goofy name, *Hollywood Jesus* (www.hollywoodjesus.com) is a serious effort at finding Biblical themes in contemporary films. Evangelical minister David Bruce and a panel of contributors gently introduce secular visitors to Christian spiritual issues. The *Hollywood Jesus* reviews are good discussion starters, since they emphasize a movie's artistry and themes over whatever questionable content it might contain.

Affiliated with *Christianity Today's* comprehensive website, *The Film Forum* (www.thefilmforum.com) offers a variety of Christian views, presenting both theological and artistic considerations in healthy dialogue. Of special interest is the conversation board, a joint effort by *The Film Forum* with *Chiascuro* (www.chiafilm.com) and *Looking Closer* (promontoryartists.org/lookingcloser/movies.htm), two other websites that explore the interplay

between the creative and Christian spirituality.

You will find movie and video reviews from a Catholic perspective at www.nccbuscc.org/movies, the *United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops* webpage. Top films are recommended for each year since 1965; all past reviews are archived.

Ted Baehr's Movieguide (www.movieguide.org) reviews films from a conservative Christian viewpoint. The reviews detail any profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol or drug use, and other moral lapses. Evangelical theology is emphasized over artistic considerations. Likewise *ScreenIt.com* (www.screenit.com) offers detailed content analysis of the major movie releases, with each graded in fifteen categories, but not on artistic merit.

For parents who worry about how films affect their children, movie critic and "mother of two teenagers" Nell Minow hosts *Movie Mom* (www.moviemom.com). She provides commonsense reviews of current films, identifying material that might be unsuitable for younger viewers, along with tips for parents on handling media usage with kids. Another source for detailed content examination of major film releases is *Kids-In-Mind* (www.kids-in-mind.com).

Popular syndicated newspaper column, *Grading the Movies*, developed an Internet presence, www.gradingthemovies.com. Identified reviewers grade films from a parent's perspective, often suggesting alternative movies.

The whipping boy of Christian movie review sites is *ChildCare Action Project* (www.capalert.org), due to its hypercritical judgment of almost all films. This site evaluates movies according to Wanton Violence, Impudence/Hate, Sex/Homosexuality, Drugs/Alcohol, Offense to God, and Murder/Suicide, resulting in a composite W.I.S.D.O.M. rating.

Several websites review popular culture in several media, including the games that we play. *Parental Guide* (www.parentalguide.org) is a handy

Web Resources At A Glance



Film industry ratings

www.filmratings.com



Overviews of film critics' reviews

www.rotten-tomatoes.com

www.mrqe.com



Theological and artistic analysis of films

www.hollywoodjesus.com

www.thefilmforum.com



Moral content summary of films

www.nccbuscc.org/movies

www.movieguide.org

www.screenit.com



Films' suitability for families

www.moviemom.com

www.gradingthemovies.com

www.kids-in-mind.com

www.capalert.org



Other media and kids

www.parentalguide.org

www.mediafamily.org

www.entertainment.crosswalk.com

www.dove.org

website because it provides links to the home pages for each of the film, television, video game, and music rating systems discussed in this article.

National Institute on Media and the Family (www.mediafamily.org) is a good clearinghouse of information concerning the suitability of all sorts of popular entertainment aimed at kids. Movies, television programs, and video games are rated on levels of profanity, sex, and violence. This website also contains sensible guidelines for parents on television watching, video games, and Internet use by children and teens.

The Christian lifestyle website, *Crosswalk.com*, features reviews of movies and Christian music on their webpage, www.entertainment.crosswalk.com.

With its approval seals awarded to qualifying movies, *Dove Foundation* (www.dove.org) is a non-profit organization that encourages family film production and recommends "family-edited versions" of worthy PG, PG-13, and R-rated movies. The site critiques films, television programs, video-cassettes, and video games with an eye to content.

Morality in Media, Inc. (www.moralityinmedia.org) is a conservative inter-faith watchdog organization that evaluates television and radio programming for children and families. Another advocacy group that monitors television programming and lobbies against increased levels of profanity, sex, and violence is *Parents Television Council* (www.parentstv.org).

One of the few Christian-oriented websites to review computer and video games is *Christian Answers*. Teens through forty-somethings post reviews at www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/games/home.html, allowing for broad swings in discretion, context, and theological depth! Nevertheless, you should come away with at least a sense of a game's content.

The Lion & Lamb Project lobbies against violent toys for children. Its website, www.lionlamb.org, lists recommended and non-recommended toys as well as suggested reading for adults and children.

Pop culture tends to squeeze our lives into its mold of ideas and manners precisely because they are *popular*. Its ways of living, which are always a mixture of good and bad, are promoted to us today powerfully and rapidly by the mass media. Are we prepared for the challenge of discerning the commendable and praiseworthy in its mix? When we are confronted with objectionable material in popular culture, with the help of trustworthy and thoughtful reviews we can engage it with Christ-transformed minds.



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