

THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING

MUST READS

On Sexuality

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Must Reads from
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Sex, Truth, and Scripture

By David Powlison

Christianity opposes sexual immorality.

For many people, that pretty much exhausts what the Bible has to say about sex. Granted, they've heard one thing rightly. Christianity does oppose sexual immorality as something inimical to life: "On account of these things the wrath of God is coming."

But this one proposition doesn't come close to exhausting what Christianity has to say about sexual morality and immorality. The Bible makes at least three other major points about sex.

Candid about Immorality

First, Christianity is utterly frank about sexual immorality. The notion that opposition necessarily drives honesty underground is without warrant. Prudish? Not Scripture. Squeamish about the sordid details of human life? The biblical authors may frequently (though not always) eschew photographic description and gory details when they speak of sex and sexual organs. They often model a certain delicacy of generic description. But nonetheless they speak openly, sometimes even graphically, of rape, homosexuality, pornographic fantasies, voyeurism, seduction, bestiality, incest, prostitution, and the like. When David played the voyeur from the palace walls, we

are not given a blow-by-blow description of his thought processes. But we know exactly what he did.

When Christians complain about “sex and violence” in the mass media it is, strictly speaking, the glorification of such evils that we complain about, not the fact that such things are portrayed. The Word of God does not stint in describing sex and violence. Genesis, Judges, and 2 Samuel capture some sordid moments on the video camera. But God labels sin accurately, rather than titillating us with lies. The immoral are immoral—deceitful, shameful, and damned if they persist. They are not portrayed as attractive role models. God freely speaks of the sordid ... as sordid. God freely speaks of how alluring the sordid can be—Proverbs 7 is classic—not to allure us but to protect us from that allure. To oppose immorality is not to oppose honesty. Christianity teaches candor, the opposite of euphemism and Victorian evasiveness. It teaches accuracy, the opposite of titillation and brazen exhibitionism.

Joyful within Fidelity

Second, Christianity revels in sexual fidelity. The Bible is frank about sexual joy within the circle of faithfulness, faithfulness first to God and second to one’s husband or wife. God made sex. Adam and Eve went unclothed and celebrated a unity that was frankly physical. The blessing, “Be fruitful and multiply,” would be realized by “knowing” one another “in the biblical sense,” as it used to be said. The wise father encourages his son, “Be drunk with delight at your wife’s breasts rather than straying into immorality.” The Song of Solomon spends entire chapters gazing in delight at the human anatomy, and sings the rhythms and images of sensual pleasure. Felicity and fidelity are made one flesh.

When husband and wife join in intercourse, the One who sees in the dark sees exactly what they are doing and says, “It is very

good.” The intimacy that is private between persons is public before the God who made it good. Sexual intimacy is intended to give great pleasure, to express love: generosity, kindness, gladness at giving. The “one flesh” of marriage is such a good thing that it serves as a central metaphor for the relationship between Jesus Christ and His Bride. To oppose immorality is not to oppose sexuality. Christianity teaches sexual joy before the eyes of the holy God, the opposite of both amorality and asceticism.

Offering the Hope of Transformation

Third, Christianity is about forgiving the immoral and transforming them into the faithful. Christ bridges the chasm between the sordid and the glorious, and invites us to cross over. What was perverted can be converted. To oppose immorality is not simply to condemn the immoral, but to identify particular forms of lostness that need finding. Christianity worships a seeking and finding God, a Savior who came to seek and save the lost from both the penalty and power of sins. “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”

What is the dynamic by which the sexually immoral are transformed? The Christian life is a “race of repentance,” as John Calvin put it, a race in the daylight of the grace of God. The maturation of faith, repentance, obedience, love, joy, integrity, self-denial, hope, humility, and every other good fruit describes also the maturation of sexual purity. Sexual evil, like every other evil, is both thrown out (by vigorously fighting bad things) and squeezed out (by the new, dominating presence of good things). There is no instant, final fix now: Cast out the demon of lust? Just say No? Let go and let God? No, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” Of course there will be a quick fix for sexual immorality someday: “Beloved, we are God’s children

now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” Meanwhile there is the steady fixing: “Every one who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure.” To oppose immorality is not to despise the immoral person. Christianity teaches a dynamic of transformation, the opposite of both determinism and moralizing.

What's Right about Sex?

By Winston T. Smith

What is right about sex? To some people that is a silly question. It is like asking what is right about ice cream or summer vacation. Sex can be a simple pleasure bringing intimacy and satisfaction. To other people, sex is simply a “need” that adults have. We would never ask what is right about air, sleep, water, or food!

But sex can bring heartache and confusion. It can easily go wrong, becoming a source of brokenness and degradation. Sex can mean enslavement to another person's demands, or self-enslavement to pornography and masturbation, and the like. Even when sex does not degrade into experiences of darkness, the good and the bad get mixed up and tangled together. A good gift easily gets stained by anxiety, distaste, mutual misunderstanding, or episodic moral failure.

What is your experience? Has sex been a blessing in your life? Or did puberty and adulthood open a Pandora's box of curses?

In this article, we will look at what is right about sex. It was created “very good,” a gift from God. When he said “Be fruitful and multiply,” he intended our calling to be a delight. Understanding what is *right* will help us to understand how sex goes *wrong*. It will

also help us to understand how God takes what is wrong and re-makes it right again, remade into his good image.

Made in God's Image—Made as Sexual Beings

In displaying God's power and goodness, the opening chapters of Genesis also display the goodness of sex. In the very beginning, God's Spirit hovers over an unformed swirling mass of chaos, and he speaks. With each utterance, the elements dance to his words. They take the form he commands. They fulfill the function that he decrees. He makes various domains and spaces, and then fills them with his servants. God creates day and night—and fills them with sun, moon and stars. God creates sky—and fills it with birds. God creates sea—and fills it with fish and other creatures that swim. God creates land—and fills it with plants and animals. As his crowning touch, God creates humankind:

Then God said, "Let us make man *in our image, after our likeness*. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man *in his own image, in the image of God* he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and fill the earth."¹

We are so familiar with this passage that it fails to surprise us. But it is an astounding thing that God created us in his image, and that the fruitful union of male and female is intrinsic to our calling to bear his image. When God considered all that he had made, "behold, it was very good." This helps us understand what is right about sex.

1. Gen 1:26–28a; italics added to descriptions of "image."

Notice five things about being created in the image of God.

First, what does God mean when he says, “Let us make man in our image.”? In the ancient near-east an image captured the essence of the being it symbolized. It was not like the memorial statue of a famous person that you might see in your local park. It was more serious, more real than that. Whether of a god or a king, the image expressed the essence and exerted influence on behalf of that personage. Kings would build great statues of themselves and place them throughout the domain as symbols of their presence and power. The image effectively proclaimed, “I may not be here physically—*but I am here*. Let this remind you of my power and control over you and this land.”

To be made in the image of God comes with this sort of gravity and presence—only far greater. God teaches us in Genesis that we are his image-bearers. We bear the living image of the life-giving Creator of the universe! We represent him on earth, ruling and governing his creation, both with him and on his behalf. This is a high calling. We are true, real-life images, representing the King of kings. He has given us the crowning position in his created order.

Since we embody God's care and control *over* creation, we are not to be ruled *by* creation. Any time we are enslaved by some element of creation—sex, food, power, work, relationship, riches—we are experiencing an effect of the fall into sin and death. Slavery is not our true identity. As God's image bearers, we are meant to express his personal presence—in our sexuality as in every other aspect of creation. To share in the nature, character, and purposes of the God we image... this is weighty! But there is more.

Second, we express God's image in the same way that children reflect the traits of their parents. Genesis 5 says:

When God created man, he made him *in the likeness of God*. ...When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. (Gen 5:1–3)

The New Testament takes this and boldly calls Adam “the son of God” (Lk 3:38). Then in words beyond imagination, Scripture brings together Jesus the Son, the love of the Father in making us his children, and our moral transformation into Jesus’ image:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called *children of God*; and so we are.... Beloved, we are *God’s children* now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:1–2)

To be in God’s image is to be his beloved child; to be God’s child is to become his image of love. Our destiny is to mature, and finally to be transformed into the full expression of this image. Becoming like Jesus in love is a moral identity utterly different from being a slave of sin and death. It is to enter a role of significance, responsibility, and beauty. This has huge implications for how we understand and handle our sexuality.

Third, as maturing children of God, we have a role to play in God’s creation. Notice where Adam and Eve represent God. He plants a garden—Eden, a paradise—and places them in it. When you think about the word garden, think arboretum, a pleasure garden, not a backyard vegetable plot. Picture a beautiful, manicured space, impressive to the eye and a joy to the heart. Envision walkways and streams, lush plants, fruit trees, and flowers. In the ancient near-east, a king would create such a beautiful garden in the midst of his

palace complex and fill it with exotic plants and animals. Similarly, a temple might contain such a garden to symbolize the god or king's ability to give life, to cultivate and to bless. In a far greater way, God placed Adam and Eve in his garden and he gave them the role of being fruitful—in a variety of ways. As they fulfilled this commission, God's life-giving goodness and glory would be expressed.

Fourth, one way to be fruitful is to work and keep the garden. These words are more than agricultural terms. When the words *work* and *keep* are placed together in other contexts in the Bible, they describe liturgical service, the work of worship by priests serving in the precincts of God's temple. Adam and Eve are not just gardeners, but image-bearing worshipers in the holy precincts of a holy garden. By our very nature, we are creatures who worship—either worshipping the Creator in freedom or worshipping some element of the creation as slaves. Our daily actions of working and keeping are infused with dignity and meaning when they are acts of devotion, performed by image-bearers for God's purposes. The daily activities of working, learning, marriage, child-rearing, and home-making can seem ordinary and mundane (even becoming degraded and enslaving). But at root these actions are intended to embody our loving response to God's call to work and keep what he has created.

Fifth, the other specific way to be fruitful involved sexual intimacy. This has been implicit in all we have considered. Sexual intimacy between a husband and wife—"male and female he created them, and God blessed them"—is one such dutiful and pleasurable act of love and worship. It embodies the oneness and love our Father has for us. God created Adam and Eve as sexual beings, male and female. Sexual differentiation, identity, and activity are an integral part of human purpose. God creates domains, fills them with life, and brings order and beauty. In the same way, God's image-bearers are to create life, bring offspring into families, cultivate this world

by work and worship, and make the entire earth God's holy garden. In the midst of this sacred space, God commands sexual activity. Through sexual intimacy, Adam and Eve would multiply image-bearers who fruitfully live in God's sacred space, extending the glory of God through the whole earth.

We are made in God's image—made as sexual beings—and that is what's right about sex. Knowing God's intended purposes gives sex dignity, but not everyone believes this.

If you had been one of Israel's ancient neighbors, you would have learned a starkly different creation narrative. Knowing how you got here and what your role is may have been described like this: A fierce battle occurred between two gods. The victor took the defeated god's body and broke it in pieces, using it to make the earth. Then he used the blood to form people. Why? The gods don't like working. They get hungry and need to be served and fed. Your duty, your destiny, is to be their slave. You exist to feed, support, and nourish the gods. You must do the work they do not care to do—or else.²

In this version of creation you do not bear the image of the gods. You only serve their arbitrary demands. Since you become like what you worship (Ps 115:8), you do, in a curious way, bear their image. You, like them, are degraded and self-serving. And your sexuality reflects that. This holds out such a different picture from the dignity of God's story. It is hopeless, futile, and void of love.

Any narrative other than the biblical one shares this fundamental flaw. The modern narrative tends to be a biological narrative: you are a slave to your evolved sexual instincts. The old polytheistic myths have been replaced by a libidinal myth. You and others exist to serve the imperatives of your lust. But if you believe you were

2. John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 29.

born to be a slave, then you are unable to hope for anything different and better. Slavery is your identity and destiny. Perhaps the creation stories of Israel's neighbors offered some fatalistic comfort as they lived at the mercy of the elements and cruel despots. Since they experienced slavery, their story helped them simply accept it. Perhaps the creation stories of our neighbors offer a similar fatalistic comfort, planting us body and soul into the soil of our sins and miseries.

All myths are dehumanizing. But the God in whose image you are made humanizes you. He calls you to turn away from a life of slavery. He calls you to faith, hope, and love. He restores the dignity and wholeness of his image-bearers. Knowing that the real story includes what is right about sex helps us to rethink our own stories, even when (especially when) that story is filled with sexual brokenness. The God who created us to be free meets us in our slaveries and sets us free in his service.

Made to Be Persons not Objects

Interestingly, the first audience of Genesis was enslaved, literally. Moses delivered the creation narrative to God's people as they escaped slavery in Egypt to help them learn what it meant to live as God's free people after living as slaves for hundreds of years. They needed to know that their experience of slavery was not the whole story. Enslavement did not reflect their true identity; they had been created for more. But *everyone* who reads Genesis for the first time reads it as a slave. We all begin life as sinners who are enslaved to sin and its curse.

One of the odd behaviors of sinners/slaves is our constant drive to escape our status as slaves by enslaving others. It seems we cannot help but look at others and ask, "How can they serve me?" Often an aspect of sexual sin is the desire to feel exalted by another, to either

bask in the ways that they give us pleasure or to enjoy the power of being able to bring them pleasure or, for some, even pain. Whatever the motivations may be, sexual sin treats another person as if they are an object that exists to serve us. In sexual sin, there is no regard for the welfare of another or consideration of consequences. The only goal is to experience the pleasure of the moment.

In Genesis, God tells us who we really are so we can live differently. In effect, God speaks to us in our slavery and says, “You were not created to be slaves but to know and serve me, to live in freedom and love.” Genesis should change the way we see ourselves. If we embrace it, Genesis begins to restore the dignity and worth that are ours as God’s children.

Genesis changes the way we see others as well. Though you will be tempted to make objects of and use other people, you are to remember that they too are image bearers of God. When God reminds you of this, he is saying, “These people are not objects, they belong to me, not you. They do not exist for your pleasure but to glorify me as my children.” Rather than seeing others as slaves or objects that exist for our pleasures, we begin to recognize the obligations and responsibilities we have to God and one another.

For example, notice the connection the book of James makes between image bearing and the way we use our words: “No man can tame the tongue; it’s a restless evil full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse men that have been made in God’s likeness” (James 3:8-9). James points out the hypocrisy of using our words to both praise God and then curse those made in his image. If we honor and bless God with our words, we ought to use our words to honor those made in his image.

But James highlights another important connection. When we curse people we also curse the one whose image they bear, their

creator. When you deface the image, you attack the original. The way we treat our fellow image bearers ultimately reflects our attitude toward God. In other words, behind all of our attacks and abuse of people there is another target— God himself. Evil is never simply a privately held animosity toward God, but an expressed hatred of people. Rebellion against God always results in animosity toward those who bear his image, even if it takes the form of selfish isolation rather than explicit acts of hatred toward others.

As a more extreme example, consider serial killer Ted Bundy's attitude toward others. In 1980, while awaiting execution on death row, Bundy met with interviewers who hoped to gain some understanding of how one could be capable of such monstrous things. His response was along these lines: "This planet has billions of people on it, what's one less person on the face of the earth anyway?" Jarring. Unthinkable. Evil. To dismiss God as God, one must also dismiss his image bearers as nothing more than a population of meaningless creatures.

Contrast that with the view of humanity C.S. Lewis describes in his famous sermon "The Weight of Glory":

It's a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses. To remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which if you saw it now you would be strongly tempted to worship or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet if at all only in a nightmare. All day long to some degree we help each other to one or other of these destinations. It's in the light of one of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all

loves, all play, and all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.³

We live every day in the company of image bearers with eternal destinies of glory. Do we live in conscious awareness of that reality or do we allow our hearts to drift into the mindset of darkness and manipulation, seeing them as objects that exist for our pleasures, the delight of our eyes, and even of our bodies? That should not be. “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”

Sometimes, especially in marriage, it is tempting to think of one's spouse as a possession—an object to own. After all, in marriage we become “one flesh” in a unique way. We are no longer our own. But being one flesh should not lead us to think of spouses as possessions that exist to serve our personal desires. Instead, it should remind us of our joint membership and mutual responsibilities in Christ. The New Testament exhorts us to understand our life together as “one flesh,” or members of one body. This does not conjure up notions of selfish demands, but attitudes of honor, mutual concern, nurture, and love. Consider Paul's words to the Corinthian church as he describes our lives together as Christians, “. . . its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Cor 12:25–26). Paul speaks specifically about marriage to the Ephesians, “He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body” (Eph 5:28–29). The emphasis is on how we are to be compassionate and motivated by the welfare of the other.

3. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), 14–15.

But notice, too, that the “one flesh” membership we experience in marriage and the church is rooted in and reflects another relationship—our relationship with Christ. Genuine care for one another grows out of our union with Christ. He is the perfect image of God, and the image of God is restored in us when we are united to Christ. Restoration to the image of God enables us to love each other as we ought, to love as he has loved us. We are made to be persons, not objects.

Made for Relationship

But there is even more to image bearing. In Genesis 1:27 we read, “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created Him, *male and female* He created them.” When God created us he didn’t just intend for us to bear his image as individuals, but to represent him through relationship. As James suggests, the way we live in relationships has everything to do with our identity as God’s image bearers.

Cast Away was a popular movie many years ago starring Tom Hanks. It is the story of a man named Chuck who survives a plane crash and is stranded on an uncharted, deserted island. When I first watched *Cast Away*, I was a little jealous. I enjoy having some alone time to think and read. But as the movie unfolds, you begin to appreciate just how unbearable loneliness can be. The physical hardships of survival fade into the background; Chuck’s biggest problem is being alone. He becomes so desperate for somebody to connect with that he paints a face on a volleyball he found in the plane wreckage. He names the volleyball Wilson, and, as odd as it sounds, develops a relationship with “him.” He talks to Wilson. He begins to care about Wilson. He needs Wilson.

Eventually Chuck constructs a raft and leaves the island in the hopes of being rescued. As he’s floating out in the ocean, Wilson is

swept off of the raft. As Wilson floats away, Chuck panics. He jumps into the water to swim after him, but he cannot catch up to him. Finally he wails and sobs, "Wilson, I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Wilson!" It sounds pretty strange, but by that point the audience can relate to Chuck's anguish. If you have ever experienced the pain and ache of loneliness, you understand that any of us would populate our world with volleyballs in order to imagine relationship.

Why do we experience such a craving for relationship, or, as with Chuck, the illusion of relationship? Again, we find the answer in creation. God created us to reflect his image by living in relationship. God himself exists as a relationship. Before he created anything else, relationship existed because God himself is relationship. As the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God exists as three persons and yet is one God. The church has carefully formulated ways of talking about the Trinity because it is difficult to understand—so wholly *other* than anything we know. But we do realize that the Trinity is a relationship. The Trinity is not God *pretending* to be in a relationship. God's very nature *is* relationship.

As his image bearers, God has made us to live in relationship. The intimacy of marriage presents us with a picture of the relational intimacy of the Trinity. God makes Adam, and then he takes the oneness of Adam and creates a two-ness. He then brings these two back together in marriage to exercise and practice oneness again, not just emotionally or in terms of a covenant, but physically practicing oneness—sexually practicing oneness. To understand our identity and sexuality, we have to appreciate that sexual intimacy was designed to reflect the oneness that God experiences within himself, and that he desires to have with his children. True sexual intimacy between husband and wife is a very natural embodiment of this unity.

There is more however. The sexual intimacy of marriage reflects many different aspects of God's love for us. For instance, God's

love is faithful and trustworthy. This helps us understand why faithfulness and trust are important for sex to be good. Without being lurid, consider the reality of what is required physically for husband and wife to be sexually intimate: you allow one another access to the most sensitive parts of your body that are capable of pleasure but, for that very same reason, make you vulnerable and able to be harmed. Why would you let anybody touch you in that way if you do not know if that person is faithful and trustworthy? To entrust your body to a faithless person would be placing yourself in real danger. Will this person prove untrue? Use you? Physically harm you? Give you a disease? Abandon you with a child?

We also know God's love in the many ways he serves us. God is always concerned to do what is best for us, not what is easy for him. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us that Jesus "took the very nature of a servant," even submitting himself to death for our sake. Christ's example of service urges us to love each other in the same way. For sex to be what God intended it to be, it must be an expression of that same desire to serve and meet the needs of the other.

It is easy to be selfish and self-serving with sex. If you go into it to seize all of the pleasure for yourself, would your spouse call that good sex? For sex to be what it was intended to be, a celebration and embodiment of God's love, it requires patience, self-control and service. Because male and female bodies are wired differently, husbands and wives will not naturally share the same preferences. Spouses need to be sensitive to the ways that men and women may experience sex differently—aroused by different things, at different rates, and requiring a different touch. These differences usually mean that sex will not be mutually gratifying unless each spouse is careful to attend to and thoughtfully serve the other.

This kind of thoughtful serving requires spouses to communicate with each other. But communication about this most intimate

of acts probably will not happen unless it rests on a foundation of communication practiced in day to day life. We should not be surprised, then, that God's love for us is characterized by a constant flow of communication. He reveals himself to us in intimate detail. His heart is poured out to us through song, poetry, and the story of his life with his people. Likewise, he invites us to pour our hearts out to him in prayer and praise. The joy that husband and wife enjoy in physical pleasure provides a hint at the joy of oneness that we will one day enjoy with God. It is a joy built on the oneness that we know in part from the constant flow of communication we experience with him.

One of the most important messages God communicates to us is his deep and abiding love and acceptance of us. Intimacy between a husband and wife should likewise communicate acceptance and affirmation and love. If you feel put down, judged, and critiqued, or if you feel like you are on probation, awaiting the verdict of whether or not you will be loved, then you are not going to make yourself vulnerable. You will not want to emotionally disrobe with your spouse, and you certainly will not feel safe to physically disrobe either.

By thinking through ways that God demonstrates his love, we realize our call as image-bearers. Even our sexuality was designed to reflect his character and love. Yet you have probably experienced disconnection between relationship and sex from time to time in marriage. You may have noticed that when you have deficits in your marriage relationship, there are deficits in the bedroom as well. Sometimes it is obvious: when there has been an ugly argument you might hear something like, "I can't make love to you now. After what you said to me this morning, I don't even know if I like you right now much less want to make love to you." Brokenness in any area of the house will show up as brokenness in the bedroom. Or it could be

a much smaller disconnection: “I do want to be with you, but I feel like we haven’t connected today. I don’t feel like I know what’s going on with you. We haven’t had time to share our hearts and so this just feels a little awkward. Can we spend some time talking first and connecting?” Because sex was designed to be an expression of the whole person, we need to express what is going on inside by being emotionally and spiritually intimate, communicating, connecting, and sharing if we are to express love outwardly with our bodies. We were, after all, made for relationship.

Made to Know and Be Known

What else can we say is right about sex? Sex reminds us and celebrates the fact that we were made for intimacy, made to be known and loved, and made to know and love others. At the end of the creation story in Genesis chapter 2, we are told that the man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame. Nakedness without shame. Amazing. The Bible states this remarkable fact without comment, yet it is so powerful that it should make your jaw hit the floor. It is remarkable because nowhere else in the Bible, and only occasionally in our own lives, do we witness nakedness without shame. Adam and Eve’s comfort with their physical nakedness reflects the reality that they have nothing to hide and nothing to fear from the other. At this point they are sinless. There are no evil thoughts, no vile intentions, and no schemes to manipulate the other. It is safe for them to *outwardly* reveal themselves to one another because they have nothing to conceal *inwardly*. It is safe for them to be open with their thoughts and emotions, as well as with their bodies. That must have been a wonderful experience for them. Perhaps we get brief tastes of this in our own marriages, but these intimate moments tend to be fleeting because we are still sinful, even as we live in the covenant bonds of marriage, and even as we live by grace. We wrestle

with sinful thoughts that we do not want to share, that we cannot bear to acknowledge even to ourselves.

After the fall, nakedness and shame become synonymous—and horrific. To be exposed or revealed before another was to be vulnerable to disgrace, rejection, and even violence. In the Old Testament nakedness and shame even became threats made against God's enemies. In the book of Isaiah God says to Babylon, "Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I will take vengeance, I will spare no one" (Isa 47:3). Or in Nahum chapter 3, God says to Nineveh, "I am against you declares the Lord God almighty, I will lift your skirts over your face, I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame" (Nah 3:5). Even God's own people felt shamed and exposed when they encountered him. When Isaiah finds himself in God's presence through a vision his immediate response is, "Woe to me, I am ruined, I'm a man of unclean lips and I live among a people with unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King the Lord Almighty, I am undone" (Isa 6:5).

How can we make sense of nakedness without shame? You and I live in a place where nakedness and shame almost always go together. In fact, nakedness and shame before God puts us in danger of his wrath and destruction. Why would God show us this picture of nakedness without shame when it is impossible for us? After all, we cannot get back to Genesis 2 from this side of Genesis 3.

God shows us this picture because something incredibly new and better has happened. Jesus has come, in spite of our nakedness and shame, and has not turned away from us or destroyed us. He has touched us in a way that does not harm us or defile him. He cleansed us, in effect saying, "You are no longer dirty in my sight and you no longer have to be ashamed." He has uncovered all the things that make us ashamed, all the things in our hearts that make us want to hide and cover ourselves, and covered us with his forgiveness and

love. Christ's covering now enables us to pursue relationships that are no longer plagued by shame. It allows us to image God in our relationships. We will not do that perfectly, but it is the beginning of the reclamation of this important aspect of our humanity.

A story in John 8 illustrates the beginning of that reclamation. Jesus is teaching in the temple courts, and the Pharisees and teachers of the law set a trap for him. They bring a woman that has been caught in adultery to Jesus. If they were truly concerned with sin and justice, they should have brought the man too. They ask him, "The Law of Moses tells us that this person needs to be stoned, what do you say?" The woman is doubly shamed. She was caught in adultery and now stands accused before a judgmental crowd of people. And she stands alone before Jesus. She has no covering and nowhere to hide. What does Jesus do? He stoops down and begins writing on the ground. We do not know what he is writing, but he finally says to the accusers, "If any of you are without sin, let him cast the first stone." He begins writing again, and one by one they all leave. He turns to the woman and says, "Where are your accusers?" They are gone, and he tells her that she is forgiven. She is to go and sin no more. With Jesus now in her story, her shame fades into the background. Christ is more prominent.

Through the cleansing blood of Jesus, we can again embrace the fact that we are made to know and be known.

Made to Give What We've Been Given

This story shows us a radical and dramatic reversal. The prideful are shamed and sent away. The shamed are lifted up, made clean, and restored. This is what Christ does for us and in us. He cleanses and restores us when we turn to him in faith and ask for forgiveness and restoration. And we can be a part of giving that to each other as well. I counseled a woman who struggled with anxiety and fear.

After I worked with her for some time, I thought it would be helpful to have her husband come in, so that I could help him minister to his wife. But when I invited her to share her anxiety and fears with her husband, she did not talk about them. In fact, she sounded happy. I was perplexed and commented on the difference between her current countenance and the way she talked about things with me. Reluctantly she explained to her husband, "I'm afraid to talk to you about my fear. I'm afraid if you know how anxious I really am you won't love me anymore. You won't want to be married to me anymore." Finally she said, "What I really want is to know that I can be honest about who I am, that I can be known for who I really am, and still know that you will love me." Her husband took her hands and said, "I do want you to be who you are. I do want you to tell me about your fears. And I do love you for who you are right now."

In a basic and profound way, her husband embodied Christ's love for her. Every spouse has the opportunity to give the love of Christ to the other in marriage by refusing the shame, and by accepting that Jesus has forgiven us and cleansed us. When we know this to be true for ourselves, we can demonstrate that same truth in the way we respond to our spouse's sin and shame. We can make it okay to talk about the things that we fear and the things we are ashamed of. We can cover one another with the love of Christ. And sexual intimacy itself can be part of that acceptance and covering, because sexual intimacy celebrates and proclaims God's love. Sexual intimacy communicates the gospel when we allow it to say, "You don't have to hide anymore. You may be uncovered. You are beautiful to me. You are clean, and I want to be connected to you. I'm not afraid to touch you and be touched by you." In this very important way, we are made to give what we have been given.

What *Is* Right about Sex?

God created sex as something good. Sex is magnificent. We are his image-bearers, made as sexual beings, made to be persons not objects, and made for relationship. We are cleansed people, restored to know God and others, restored to be known by God and others, and restored to give what we have been given in Christ. Sex is intrinsic to our identity, not as slaves, but as God's children, made in his image to mediate his presence, rule, and love. It invites us to embody his faithful love, celebrate it, and enact it.

Sexual brokenness with its exploitation and distorted lusts is not the final word. We can find freedom from this slavery through the redeeming grace and love of Christ. We must bring our sexual brokenness and sin to him, not asking for the removal of sexual desire, but the removal of sin and shame.

Renewed, restored, and cleansed we have hope that we can experience what genuine and pure sexual oneness can be. That process begins as we experience oneness with Jesus himself. Ask him to touch and cleanse you as you entrust him with what seems so broken and defiled. He desires for you to be one with him. Invite him into the tender places of your heart and receive his love. As he cleanses and restores us, we can then turn to our spouses and offer that same love and embody and enjoy it together.

The Apostle Paul: On Sex

By Edward T. Welch

Sexual purity is a hard sell these days. We cite the risk of AIDS and the devastating consequences of extramarital sex. And perhaps we find favorable statistics which suggest that couples who don't live together before marriage have a slightly better chance of staying together than those who do. But none of these can stand against sexual desire. We live in a sex-obsessed culture, and we are short on persuasive reasons to pursue chastity or establish impregnable walls that keep sexual freedom within the bounds of marriage.

Accountability is a good thing. We say to ourselves, "don't do it," and we ask someone else to help us keep this commitment. Certainly we can use more of this support, but we hope more for truth to persuade and motivate us. We want a stronger foundation for accountability. What, for example, do we say to single adults who seem to love each other and begin flirting with sex? Why should that matter? No one is getting hurt. They won't seem to bear permanent scars if they are sexually active. And it feels good! Does God really care so much about such things?

Corinth: Our Sexual Alter Ego

Our cultural setting, of course, is not unique. *Every* culture is sexually obsessed; some more than others. Corinth, during the New Testament era, was blatantly obsessed with sexuality. It was one of the more sex-saturated cities of the entire Roman Empire. Indiscriminant sexual expression was the norm. Sex was available in brothels, taverns, bathhouses, and inns. Slaves were generally available to their owners and anyone the owner chose. For freewomen, sexual favors were a way to supplement a meager income. And then, of course, there was casual, without-charge sex among those not married to one another. If any group needed persuasive reasons to restrain their sexual desires, it was the Corinthian citizenry.

Paul to Corinth: 1 Corinthians 6:12–20

The apostle Paul addresses sexuality in a compact section within his first letter to the Corinthians. His advice in this section of Scripture ends with “flee sexual immorality” (1 Cor. 6:18). Pay particular attention to everything he says before that final statement. We expect Paul to have reasons for giving this advice regarding sexuality, and we expect those reasons to be compelling. And we expect them to be directly connected to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul taught that the death and resurrection of Christ transformed everything—how we work, how we play, how we spend our money, how we relate to one another. Whereas the deadness of sin once held sway, its fingerprints on everything, the kingdom of Christ brought meaning and life to everything within its purview. This, of course, includes sex.

Some may prefer that sex be a private matter, but if the kingdom of God didn’t speak about sex we would be sorely disappointed. Our libertine instincts might initially applaud sexual freedom, but how could we take seriously God’s words, which offer a *worldview*,

when sex occupies a central place in many minds. Certainly the sufficiency of Scripture comes into question. If the kingdom of God omitted any discussion on sex, then our faith would be only for the ever-after rather than also for right-now-in-real-time.

Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul establishes the defining marks of the new church. Being children of a new kingdom brings a new identity. In chapter 6, Paul discusses the distinctiveness of kingdom sexuality and how the kingdom of Christ brings our sexuality back within the bounds where God intended it to be in the first place.¹ In a licentious culture where sexual boundaries barely exist, Paul's comments sound restrictive. But remember, Paul is not simply trying to shackle out-of-control lust. He sees new humanity in the Corinthian Christians. They are new creatures with new hearts. He reveals how we are intended to live. As such, while it feels like a battle to us, Paul points out a way that is right, true, good, and natural.

He begins by quoting good teaching that was used in the wrong way.

“Everything is permissible for me”—but not everything is beneficial.

“Everything is permissible for me”—but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Cor. 6:12)

Paul might be referencing himself when he cites the believer's freedom: “everything is permissible.” If so, his remarks about permissible things were most likely directed toward clean and unclean foods. Dietary restrictions were a prominent way in which Jews distinguished themselves from Gentiles. Church members carried

1. I have found especially helpful comments in Alistair Scott May's book *The Body for the Lord: Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5-7* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

on a lively discussion about food. Paul talks about food with almost identical phrases in chapter 10. He says that his teaching about food does not apply to sexual immorality. Food is a trivial matter; sex is not. Food is irrelevant to the identity of believers; what we do with our bodies is eternally relevant.

“Food for the stomach and the stomach for food”—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (1 Cor. 6:13)

Paul’s contrast between sex and food is now evident. Paul contrasts this common quotation about food and its lack of eternal consequences with the distinctly spiritual—or Spiritual—nature of sexual behavior. Dietary laws, Paul argues, have to do with what goes *into* our bodies. Of much greater importance is what we *do* with our bodies, because that reveals our allegiances. Our desire for sex points directly and immediately to who masters us.

Paul then merges two theological points: union with Jesus Christ and the authority or lordship of Jesus Christ. Union with Christ is arguably Paul’s central theological idea and his major contribution to the New Testament. The lordship of Jesus can be found in all the New Testament writers. Paul brings these two heavyweight points together in order to reveal the true spiritual dimensions of all sexual behavior.

By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and He will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ Himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said,

“The two will become one flesh.” But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with Him in spirit. (1 Cor. 6:14–17)

Before his conversion, Paul, like many Hebrews, looked forward to the day when the Spirit would pour out on all people (Joel 2:28), and God would replace hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:19). Yet even his highest expectations fell far short of what God actually gave. The new Israel received “Christ in you.” Paul, by faith, was crucified with Christ yet still lived (Gal. 2:20). All the benefits of Jesus, and many of His tribulations, are now ours through unity with Him in His death and resurrection.

Union with Christ is accomplished through the Spirit’s presence in our *physical bodies*. With this, Paul identifies a loophole in the Corinthian church’s theology. That is, if union with Christ is only a spiritual union, then what we do with our bodies is our own business. In reality, Paul reasons, we are actually the members or limbs of Jesus Christ. Through God’s power our bodies join with the risen Christ. Our union with Him is physical and spiritual. How then can we consider union with a prostitute? When someone who is a limb of Christ sexually joins a prostitute, he is first severed from Christ. He is like an amputated limb when he unites with someone other than Christ. It is physically impossible to be appendages of both a casual sexual partner and Christ.

Marriage is an analogy of this union with Christ, though an inadequate one. Whether married or single, our union with Christ is a kind of turbo-charged marriage, and this new relationship demands that we belong to Christ body and soul.

Next Paul attaches his teaching on ownership with lordship or authority. With unity comes authority. That is, the one with whom we are joined has authority or lordship over us. When united with

Christ, he has authority over us. When united with a prostitute, she has authority. And in the next chapter, Paul writes that when united with a spouse, he or she has authority (1 Cor. 7:4).

Sexual immorality proclaims that the sexual partner now has authority over us. We belong to that person, and with the exception of sex within marriage, we do not belong to God. Given the seriousness of ungodly sexual behavior, Paul exhorts all those who have received the Spirit to avoid sexual immorality at all costs.

Flee sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his own body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. (1 Cor. 6:18)

There are sins that, when persistent, separate us from the kingdom of God. Paul lists them: idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, thievery, and others (1 Cor. 6:9). Yet there is something unique about sexual sin. It rips us from being “in” Christ and puts our body in union with a prostitute. Our union with Christ occurs in the body, and when we give our bodies to someone else, we are severed from Christ. Certainly, repentance finds forgiveness. Sexual immorality is not the unpardonable sin, but it is a sin of such violence—the severing from Christ—that Paul highlights it above all others.

Paul summarizes his teaching with imagery of the temple.

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore, honor God with your body. (1 Cor. 6:19, 20)

We have been made holy by the Spirit’s indwelling. Sexual immorality pollutes the body/temple, and in such a temple the Spirit cannot

dwelling. As living temples of the Spirit, we are the property of the one who dwells in us. Our bodies are no longer our own, they are the property of God. Sexual intercourse gives ownership to another so we become their property. We must flee such an unthinkable ownership and honor the one who bought us.

For spouses, thoughts quickly turn toward their own marriage. Is marriage somehow wrong because it gives ownership to another? It is no coincidence that in the next chapter Paul moves to this very question. He has just written about sexual union in such a way that it could be interpreted as wrong under any circumstance. Therefore, celibacy is the only option. Paul's argument about sexual immorality causes him to prize singleness, but he certainly supports marriage as instituted by God. In the margins Paul seems to strain to understand how each spouse has authority over the body of the other but still belong to Christ, but Paul is content to affirm the teaching in Genesis that marriage is a good, though temporary feature, of the kingdom of God. It is good in that God designed it, blessed it, and does not see it as a breach in our relationship with Him because He Himself gave us in marriage to another. It is temporary in that, in eternity, we will not be given to marriage because we will be united to Christ without any qualifications.

Paul for Today

Now listen to what we hear today. Paul took comments heard on the streets in Corinth, challenged them, and radically restructured them. How can we follow his lead?

“Why is it that church discipline is almost always about adultery? Aren't there other sins—even more divisive—that deserve discipline?”

The implication in this statement is that sexual immorality is being picked on too much.

“Does God really care that much about what we do with our genitals?” mused a leader in the conservative evangelical church.

Paul’s response is an emphatic, “Yes, more than you know.”

“Sex is natural. Is it really that big a deal?”

Apart from adultery, sex doesn’t seem like that big a deal. It is natural, instinctive. “Why would God give us sexual passions and then deny any outlet for them?” In other words, when you think about it, it is actually God’s fault for giving us something so volatile and part of us.

How do we respond? First, who says that non-marital sex is natural and instinctive? It is a frightening thought because it certainly puts every marriage in jeopardy of infidelity. The author of that statement, of course, is the world.

When it comes from just one person, you can ignore it. But when a critical mass of people, a cast of thousands, says these things, the volume is loud. It can easily overwhelm a conscience that is ambivalent in the first place. The world says, “Sex is natural; sex is instinctive. It’s appropriate to act on these instincts; just practice safe sex.” And it’s not a faceless mass that says this. Men and women in their late teens and twenties who have tried to live within godly sexual boundaries have been hassled by others. “You are unnatural. There’s something weird, there’s something not right about your decision to avoid sex. Sex is natural and good.” Who says sex is natural? The world and its advertisements for sex-without-boundaries says this.

Second, be alert, because sin feels natural. How do you sin? You don’t wake up in the morning and say, “Today is the day I am going to sin.” No. You wake up in the morning and go off to do what you’re going to do. You do what comes naturally. You sin! How do you become enslaved to sex? You just do what comes naturally. So “natural” is more complicated than we think.

Third, God defines natural. What is God's plan for us? What is true humanness? What is natural as God created us? Simply look at Jesus Christ. In Jesus we find naturalness—true, authentic human naturalness. In Him we see how humans are intended to live. We observe humanness at its pinnacle.

Sex is a good thing, there's no question about that, but we don't *need* sex. Humanness, found in Jesus, is not defined by sexual intercourse. It's natural to have sexual desire under subjection. It's natural for us to love non-spouses as members of our own family, as though they were siblings. It's natural that we would live for another, rather than for our own desires. It's natural that there be shame in nakedness before someone of the opposite sex who's not your spouse. And it's natural to be naked *without* shame before the person God has given us. Sex within boundaries—God's boundaries—is natural and wonderful.

“Sex doesn't mean anything.”

Given Paul's discussion, can someone honestly say that sex doesn't mean anything? Those in Corinth apparently thought so. Behind this pastoral letter is the Corinthian and modern-day excuse, “Sex is just a physical act.” It has no real meaning other than pleasure.

A simple question, however, can show that it is more than just a physical act: “Have you ever been hurt, deeply hurt, because of sex?”

Sexual immorality is unique in its ability to destroy. It is a sin in a category of its own. A loved one can speak in anger, come home drunk, lie about money. A loved one can even flirt, indulge in pornography, have an internet affair, or lose interest in the relationship. Yet none of these sins measures up to the hurt that accompanies a sexual affair. When a spouse, or even a person who is dating, is suspicious of the partner's sexual activity, all questions lead up to this:

“Did you have intercourse with him [her]?” The moments between the question and answer are endless and agonizing. The answer can feel lethal.

This pain is universal and peculiar to humans. Serial mating is the norm in the animal world, and no one seems to care. Among those animals that form bonds, one male animal will fight another to maintain the rights to a female. But it is hard to impose the human experience of jealousy on this infidelity, let alone relational emotional pain.

Sexual sin tears a relationship in a way that nothing else can. Only the Spirit of the living God can reconnect the shattered pieces. The breach is so severe that Jesus said that this alone was grounds for divorce.

The point is that what we do with our genitals is critical, and we all know it. We know that sex is more than just a physical act.

Yet we also agree that, for many people, sex really doesn't mean anything. Even in marriage we can settle for sex-as-physical-release and be unaware of its deeper meaning and symbolism. Men can think exclusively of their own desires. Women go through the sexual motions while planning their next day. And it is not unusual for Christian women to feel like prostitutes in their own marriage. Our Christian task is to remember that every sexual union is profound. It always points to the deeper union that we have with Christ by faith. Sex mirrors the glory of God in the gospel. It exists because it expresses God's oneness with His people, His fidelity to us, His ownership of us, His self-sacrifice, and the pleasure we can take in this relationship.

In marriage, God consecrates sexual union so that it is a gift that mirrors spiritual reality. We reflect God's covenant by saying to each other, “I am yours and you are mine, and I will not give myself to another.” Notice how our common language captures the giving

of authority to another: “I belong to you, and you belong to me.” Such insight is an explosion to the senses that renders mere physical satisfaction as hopelessly shallow.

In non-marital sexual union, meaninglessness is the order of the day. How can this be? It takes practice. The first sexual encounter tends to be very meaningful. It is only promiscuity that dehumanizes it, and such dehumanization is essential for sexual license. Men tend to be quick studies in this dehumanizing process; for women the echoes of meaning often linger. Our task is to arouse the sleeping conscience and remember that sex, in fact, is crammed with meaning. To deny that is to deny our own humanness.

We shouldn’t be surprised that non-marital sex can feel meaningless. According to the apostle Paul, non-marital sex is only possible when we are detached from God, and apart from God, everything feels meaningless. So the person who says that sex didn’t mean anything is more right than he or she knows. Non-marital sex is as close as we can get to Nebuchadnezzar’s subhuman, beastly years (Dan. 4:33). The curse on Nebuchadnezzar was simply that he was allowed to be who he really was. His pride was unbecoming of a creature and his idolatry was his way of detaching himself from imaging the true God. In short, he chose to act like a beast. Similarly, in casual sex, we look much more like the dog in the street than someone united with Christ, and no one would put a great deal of value and meaning on a dog’s indiscriminate mounting.

It has been said that the world lives on little scraps of meaning. And, too often, we prefer it that way.

“I love the person. Does sex really hurt anyone?”

If we know that sex is more than simple physical pleasure, why do so many people have a clear conscience when they have sex with a person to whom they are not married? One reason is that many

of God's laws are clearly against other people: lying, stealing, murder, slander, and many others. When sex violates relational commitments, it is clearly against another person and our conscience is aroused. But when there is voluntary sexual immorality which does not break a relational commitment to another person, there seems to be no victim and our consciences are relatively silent. On the surface, no one seems to get hurt in most sexual immorality.

Paul's argument is *not* that sexual immorality is sin against another person. Although we could argue that a man seeking a prostitute sins against her and she against him, Paul writes that sexual immorality is primarily against God and His covenant with us. Since sin suppresses the knowledge of God, our conscience can quickly be numb to the before-God wrongness of sexual immorality.

This is the same reason why homosexuality doesn't seem wrong to many people. Since it is victimless it is fine. But sin is *not* simply against other people. Sin is primarily against God, and that truth is easy to hide (Rom. 1:18–20).

"If you really love her, then you will not sin against her sexually" is true when spoken to a teen, but there is a deeper reality. A teen who makes a profession of faith commits to more than he realizes. When he comes to Christ, he is joined to Him. His blood secured his unity with Him and His authority over him. A kind of marriage has taken place and he is one with Jesus. Such a relationship demands sexual fidelity. An unlawful sexual relationship tears our union with Christ in a way that nothing else can.

"Isn't Paul talking about prostitutes?"

One way to have boundary-less sex is to ignore Scripture; the other is to twist it for our own purposes. In the 1 Corinthians text, one argument could be that Paul is concerned about sex with prostitutes, not sex in a dating relationship.

Since Paul demarcates the boundaries for kingdom living, one of his goals in 1 Corinthians 6 is to emphasize that a believer simply doesn't engage sexually with an unbeliever. A prostitute, in this passage, is more than a technical term for a female occupation. It can refer much more broadly to women involved in sexual immorality and are, therefore, not part of the kingdom of Christ. Fearing that some may run too far with his spiritual reasoning and feel compelled to divorce unbelieving spouses, he soon clarifies that if a believer has married an unbeliever he or she should remain married, assuming that the unbeliever wants to remain married.

What if the woman is a believer, the man and woman love each other, and they hope to one day be married? "We love each other. This is not a sinful one night stand." This continues to be the question for many Christians. In such situations, the woman is not a prostitute no matter how broad the use of the word.

Paul doesn't even answer this directly here because the Hebrew teaching on this is so clear: sex outside of marital bounds is immoral. It is a violation of the character of God and His revealed will. It takes someone who doesn't belong to us and allows that person to rule us in the place of God.

We need constant reminders that sex is an expression of love defined by God, not ourselves. He defines it as most accurately representing Himself when done in the covenant of marriage. A covenant in this case could be defined as a public, witnessed commitment done before the community which blesses the leaving of parents and the forming of an enduring family unit before Christ and for Christ.

Any sexual relationship not authorized and blessed by God is not only adultery before God but is the forceful severing of our union with Christ. Our task is to clarify the spiritual realities taking place, lead the man and woman in repentance, and set out together

with an opportunity to demonstrate that love for God is a higher call than satisfying sexual desires.

Should we allow a premarital sexual relationship to move toward marriage? At this point there are at least two different schools of counsel. One is that the individuals in the relationship have not learned to exalt Christ and be faithful to Him. As such, they are not ready for marriage and perhaps not ready for a relationship at all. Another is “better to marry than burn with passion” (1 Cor. 7:9) and they should marry quickly. Both arguments have some merit, so wisdom is the order of the day.

“But I’m single. This isn’t fair.”

Given Paul’s teaching on sexual immorality, it is not surprising that singleness stands out as his premiere human option for human relationships. But when he wrote this letter, his perspective was biblically unprecedented. In the Old Testament, singleness was a source of shame. It was considered to be a sign of God’s disfavor. Voluntary singleness simply wasn’t an option.

Then Jesus entered the fallen world and forever changed the Christian view of singleness. Paul picks up on this more than anyone. *The* human was single. How is this theologically justifiable and even admirable?

Since sex in marriage is an aspect of someone having authority in our lives, Paul preferred the single life because of unfettered freedom to be devoted to Christ. Singleness, after all, is our eternal state, and Paul always looks to eternity to learn how to live in the present. When we see Christ face-to-face, the purpose of marriage will no longer exist and our union with Christ will be uncompromised and complete. Paul sees singleness as a head start on what is to come.

Do singles miss certain pleasures? Paul doesn’t think so. The physical pleasure of the sexual act and the delight in a unique union

with another person is trumped by the pleasure that we can have even now in our covenant with Christ. It is union that is unsurpassed, and joy that is inexpressible.

What about the pleasure of being uniquely joined to another person? Paul answers that with his doctrine of the church. Single adults are united with the body of Christ and can experience deep unity with other brothers and sisters. Offspring? As the Lord announced to Isaiah, “Sing, O barren woman ... because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband” (Isa. 54:1). The single person will have offspring by way of his or her disciples and those loved deeply.

“Listen,” God says. “You belong to Me. I am jealous for you.”

Jealousy has a bad reputation and deservedly so. It can rage and be utterly relentless in its opposition against others. It does, however, have a good side. Who wouldn't appreciate being the object of another person's jealous affections? Jealousy is only aroused when someone is passionately loved. If you are indifferent about something, you don't care if someone else takes it. If you are indifferent toward a person, you don't care if that person loves you or anyone else. If someone is jealous for you it can be intoxicating.

God is jealous for His people. Paul's marital and union imagery reaches back to many Old Testament passages where God's jealousy is aroused. God wants to share His people with no one else. He is wonderfully possessive. But we shouldn't get too comfortable. God's jealousy is a volatile substance. He speaks of the fire of His jealousy (Zeph. 3:8). There is nothing intoxicating about it. In fact, God's jealousy led to His fury being hurled at His Son so that His jealousy would depart (Ezek. 16:38) and morph into a jealousy that invites rather than destroys and even into a jealousy that pursues.

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her ... I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountains of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain.” (Zech. 8:2, 3)

Behind all good jealousy is the cross. Because of the cross of Jesus we are not consumed by the anger of God but we are forgiven for our spiritual adultery and compelled by a jealous love that has bought us at a great price and transformed us. This love has opened our eyes to spiritual realities, including our own new identity. It has shown us that true humanness is not found in giving ourselves over to our desires but in giving ourselves over to our God and active participation in His kingdom.

“Flee sexual immorality” must always be heard as an expression of redeeming, jealous love. It is the call to flee *from* alienation and separation from the true God and to the one who bought us out of slavery and has now joined us to Himself so that everything that is His is now ours.

Before you say “flee sexual immorality,” preface it with “you are not your own; you are bought with a price.”

“Listen,” God says. “Think ahead.”

God’s counsel to the single person is His counsel for us all. Sex is indeed pleasurable. Otherwise it wouldn’t be the maniacal pursuit of so many. But sex, in one real sense, is not as big a deal as we think.

A big deal is something that stands the test of time. Sex, as fine a gift as it is, doesn’t stand that test. Sex is going to fade into something much more wonderful. Sex is a signpost that points to a

grander union, a grander intimacy with our brothers and sisters, and a perfect union with our Triune God.

So think ahead, and allow the future glory to pull you along. In heaven you will be fully male or fully female. This means that you will love others with all the gifts God has given you, and together, as one, we will love Jesus Christ—our true spouse—with a perfect love.

Lord Jesus, please set my eyes on what is unseen. Teach me to see, value, and pursue those things that are eternal.

Exposing the Lies of Pornography and Counseling the Men Who Believe Them¹

By J. Alasdair Groves

You probably know a man² who has a problem with pornography. Pastors and other counselors not only hear horror stories of men trapped in this secret obsession, but see the life-dominating impacts of pornography. Its effect on the lives of these men and those who love them is serious, even devastating. But while naming the problem and admitting that it is present in our churches is easy, long-term solutions that lead to actual change are much harder to come by. This makes counseling men who use pornography an intimidating and potentially discouraging endeavor. Too often your best encouragements, challenges and wise advice go unheeded, or the change produced is brief, followed by a return to old patterns. In short, you may find counseling pornography users to be one of

1. An earlier version of this article titled: Counseling Single Men (and Men in General) Toward Lasting Freedom from Pornography was published as part of an e-book called *Porn Free Church* by Covenant Eyes in 2012 (www.covenanteyes.com).

2. Though women also struggle with this problem, this article will focus specifically on how to help men. I would love to see a companion article on counseling women who struggle. What is the same? Similar? Different?

the more difficult tasks you face. However, with God's help, it *is* possible for men to experience lasting victory in their battle with this entrenched and powerful foe. Therefore, the goal of this article is to assist you in this ministry by helping you expose pornography for what it really is.

Pornography is powerful because of the relational nature of sex and God's design for it. God created sex as a gift for us, an intensely beautiful expression of the committed, loving, and permanent intimacy between a husband and a wife. Sex is for marriage—and for marriage alone. Pornography removes sex from its God-given setting and depicts it in the *opposite* way—as a temporary, depersonalized experience—stripped of any trace of relationship. With no need for the care and commitment of marriage, sex mutates into an isolating, loveless compulsion. Over time, it undermines the user's relational ability to love and respect women.

This is a dark picture. But sadly even this is not the most destructive result of porn use. The most damaging effect of pornography is that it creates a rift in the man's *relationship with God*. A man who regularly violates God's boundaries for sex by using pornography is estranged from him. Somewhere along the way, he has come to live as if God has not provided what he really needs regarding sex, so he has provided it for himself. Even if he feels guilty and is trying desperately to stop, his behavior shows that the good gifts of God in his life are not enough, that happiness requires something more. This is the most basic and pernicious deception of pornography: the implicit belief that God is withholding something good. This powerful lie spins a web of other lies about sex, women, and relationships. It is only by facing these lies and mending the rift in his relationship with God that a man can hope for true and lasting change in the battle with pornography.

Given that this is the root of the problem, we can see why so much of the advice offered to porn users proves weak and relatively ineffective. Some approaches are clear on the sin involved, but get stuck at the surface level of the behavior:

Just stop it... Learn to “just say no.”... Develop more self-discipline... Cancel your internet access so you won’t be tempted... Get into accountability relationships... Keep yourself busy so you will not be bored.

Other approaches emphasize experiential hardships that make the behavior difficult to resist, but minimize its wrongness as sin:

You have an unmet need for love and acceptance that you are trying to meet with sexual fantasies, and you need to look to Jesus to meet your need... It’s your parent’s fault for failing to talk to you constructively about sex... It’s because of bad influences, and hanging out with the wrong crowd... It’s because you have been hurt by women, and you yearn for intimacy.

Some of these suggestions and explanations contain strands of wisdom. Some may even prove to be vital components of a story of progress and victory. Yet none of them address the underlying problem.

To do that, a man needs to recognize that he is estranged from God and has been defending his lifestyle with lies. I find that as a man realizes this, his whole perspective changes. When he grasps that he has been living as if God’s plan for sex is *not* actually good, it becomes much easier to fight for a deepened belief in God’s inherent goodness. When he sees that he has been accusing God of holding

out on him, the gospel of God's precious gift of grace and forgiveness will lead much more naturally to a refreshing repentance.

Awakening a man to his need for the gospel in his struggle with pornography is the key task for a counselor. Because the lies are rarely conscious or explicit, counselors have a powerful opportunity to open men's eyes to the nature of their core problem with porn. Exposing what he believes about sex and about God's goodness allows a man to repent both for behavior and for motive. He begins to repair the breaches in his relationship with the Shepherd of his soul, as well as reverse the corruption of his behavior.

With this in mind, the bulk of this article will focus on seven common ways that lies about God and sex play out through pornography and distort relationships with God and others. We will close with three ways to help a man overcome the lies he identifies in his life.

Seven Lies Men Believe about Pornography

When a man comes to see porn for what it actually is—a web of falsehoods—it brings hope. Though the web is ugly, enslaving, and spiritually lethal, when a man can see the snare in his path, he has the chance to clear it away. Exposing and attacking these lies lays the groundwork for important restoration and growth in his relationship with God, and with the real women in his life. What follows is a description of seven of the most common lies men believe about pornography. Many of the men you counsel have believed some or all of these.

Lie #1: Sex is a biological need. This is a pervasive lie in our culture. Everyone from psychologists to magazines at the grocery checkout suggest that sex is a biological *need*. Naturally, if sexual fulfillment is a need, then a man must have an outlet for it. If men

have a sex drive that needs some kind of expression but they stifle it, they will do psychological or even physiological damage, or so the logic goes.

This perspective is widespread. But think about the implications. If a man thinks “I really need sex in order to stay healthy,” then, for example, a single man struggling to keep himself pure from pornography is in a no-win situation. On the one hand, he is supposed to refrain from looking at porn, because God has told him it is wrong. On the other hand, God has given him a physical need but no way to meet it. When sex is a *need* rather than a beautiful and relational act of intimacy in marriage, it becomes easy to blame God for putting him in an impossible situation.

As with each of the seven lies we will consider, there is a grain of truth within the distortion. Sex, as part of the covenant of marriage, is meant to be one of the highest joys we can experience. God created sex in marriage as the place where loving devotion and total focus on another person perfectly overlap with total joy in your own body and spirit. For this reason, a good marriage with regular, mutually enjoyable sex will tend to have a positive impact on your health. It lowers stress, lowers blood pressure, may improve sleep, and so on. The Apostle Paul even says that a desire for sexual pleasure in marriage is an appropriate reason to get married, rather than guarding one’s singleness in order to serve the church exclusively (1 Cor 7:9).

But this does not make sex a “need.” Jesus was not married. Jesus never once experienced sexual intimacy. Surely if the perfect human, the man more in tune with the will of God than anyone in history, can forgo sex, then it cannot be a *necessary* component of life as a human being! Scripture knows of our need for the living God and constantly assures us that God provides everything we truly “need.” But our true needs are those found in the Lord’s Prayer and

the Sermon on the Mount: life, bread, water, clothes, and shelter.³ Sex is not on that list.

Dethroning sex from its biological need status has enormous implications. It means a man can desire sex, but he does not require it to be happy and fulfilled. It means a man has no deep and uncontrollable hunger that is inevitably going to drive him to sin. This is good news! It actually brings relief to those who grasp it. When sex is a need, walking in purity feels like sexual self-starvation. When sex is one blessing among many, a man may greatly desire sex but still live a full and joyful life without it. Once a man sees that he does not need sexual release, his sexual lust becomes something he can actually refuse, just as he can refuse to steal a thousand dollars from a friend. He may want the money or the sexual pleasure, but if it is just a desire, he *can* say no. Too often men do not believe that they really can say no.

Even more important is the effect this change has on a man's view of God. When sex is a need, God seems to have given you this incredible urge for something that always proves elusive. The lie says God is like a cruel father who knows you've been looking at that bike in the store window every day for a year and he gives it to you for your birthday, but then he won't let you ride it. But the truth is that God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, and you do not miss out on his best because you are single, or because your wife is paralyzed, or because your wife does not enjoy sex as much or as often as you do. Like good health, riches and athletic ability, some have the sex life they desire and some don't. Regardless, those who trust that God always gives us "everything we need for life and godliness" will always live with the joy of a thankful heart (2 Peter 1:3).

3. In the resurrection, God gives us the ultimate answer to all our needs. Even our genuine "needs" on this earth—life, food, and shelter—are foretastes of the eternal salvation and abundance to come.

At first, challenging the belief that “sex is a need” may feel threatening to a man. “I can’t really help doing it” has been his defense all along. Even if you are careful as you expose this as a lie, it could sound like you are heaping guilt on him. He may assume that your answer will be to “just try harder.” As a counselor you must not rush past how difficult this insight really is for him. Take the time to understand what makes his personal temptations so fierce. Instead of feeling condemned to an impossible task, you want him to feel hopeful that life is possible without a porn “fix.” This shift is a step toward victory and purity.

Lie #2: Life is about sex. You can immediately sense the similarity to the first lie. However, this lie is much harder to recognize, for the same reason fish struggle to recognize water. Everything in our culture suggests that sexual fulfillment is the goal of life. This is why attractive women show up in commercials for products to which they have no connection. We may see what the commercial is doing and laugh, but what most of us fail to recognize is that we often believe the premise of the advertising: increasing sex appeal or opportunity for sexual gratification is *the* goal in life. We know that the right razor or automobile will not make us more attractive and more likely to “get the girl,” but we rarely take the next step and question our own functional view that life is about sex.

It is possible for a man to experience extended periods of freedom from using pornography without changing this basic piece of his worldview. If he is really living for sex, however, the change will not last. He will end up judging all his decisions by their sexual consequences, rather than by how well he honored God or loved others. A single man will grade his choices based on whether they brought him closer to getting married or to getting girls to notice him. A married man will constantly evaluate what leads to a “better

sex life” with his wife, and will tend to manipulatively orient his actions around their sexual relationship.

Sex is a good thing. But life is *not* about the pursuit of sexual happiness. Life is about loving and serving the God who owns us, body and soul. The consequences of a view of life that worships at the altar of sex, even sex with one’s wife, are subtle, pervasive and dire. Such a view is fundamentally selfish and corrupts the way a man buys gifts for his wife, the way he does the dishes, the way he argues with his wife or placates her, and so on. If you hear places in a man’s story where his life revolves around sex, help him see that this is what is going on. By doing so, you will bless him with a chance to place his life more consciously and fully in his Father’s hands.

Lie #3: Marriage makes the problem go away. This lie often comes as the logical conclusion of belief in the first two. It works something like this:

- If I have a biological need, and
- if fulfilling this need is the basic thing I live for,
- then, when I get married or when my marriage is sexually satisfying, I will have both my outlet and the thing I live for.

If you have counseled married men, you are already aware of how desperately false this can be. It can be devastating when a man finds he is still struggling after he gets married. While marriage does tend to have a positive impact on a man’s struggle with temptation at first, the vast majority of men find it does not solve the problem. In my experience, falling into sexual sin after getting married shakes a man’s faith in his relationship with Christ, especially if he thinks he is the only married man who struggles in this way.

Why is the return of the struggle so unsettling to a man’s faith? Because he feels God gave him a solution, but it is not working. He finally got the wife he thought would fix things, but she turned out not to be enough. I have watched some men end up angry with their

wives for falling short of giving them the sexual satisfaction they had hoped for, while others simply shut down in despair. Both avenues are blind to the true motives driving pornography use.

Marriage is not the answer, because a lack of sex is not the problem. The problem is lust, and lust is never satisfied. Think about it this way: have you ever known a man who was satisfied to look at just one pornographic image over and over? Neither have I. On the contrary, the variety and novelty of pornographic material is part of the allure. So if the most beautiful and digitally enhanced supermodel cannot keep a man from continually searching out new stimulation, why would he ever expect that his flesh- and-blood wife with her physical and spiritual flaws could succeed? Sin by its very nature *always* lusts for more.

If a man can come to recognize that the fundamental reason he looks at pornography resides in the sinful desires of his own heart, he will no longer be surprised that the problem continues even though he is married.⁴ Once he sees what is truly driving his behavior, then the hope of turning to a Savior—who forgives him, loves him, and whose costly grace gives him everything he needs to change—will really sound like hope (Titus 2:11–12).

Lie #4: It is only a matter of time before I fall. This lie, more than any other, wears down a man's perseverance and self-control. How many times has he already promised not to do it again, and then he finds himself back at the same websites? To resist seems pointless. The sense of doom and failure puts increasing strain on a man's relationship with God. Many men come to resent or distrust

4. An important group of men to consider is the single-again widowers and divorcees. Their temptation may be even stronger. "I remember what it was like to have sex with my wife, and I feel cheated that God has taken that away. I can't make it without that outlet!" This attitude will be tempting for almost every previously married man at some point.

God because they believe that if God were really good, then he would take the struggle away.

This is hard. Yes, Christians sin. We will not be perfect until we get to heaven. The battle with sin, especially a life-dominating sin like pornography, is rarely without setbacks. So isn't it simply a fact that men will fall from time to time? Isn't it actually important and helpful to tell men that we know they are not going to be perfect and that Jesus still loves and forgives even when they stumble sexually? Yes and no. Yes, you will continue to fall into many sins during your life. God gives grace to his children and forgives the repentant soul, even seven times seventy times. Thank God that this is true, not just with lust, but with every sin! But the more important answer in the case of pornography is actually: "No, it is *not* simply a matter of time before you fall." Men can say "no" to this sin today, and they will have that same capacity tomorrow and the next day. When a man feels beaten before he even starts, it can be hard to see the value in fighting. Knowing he is not already beaten gives enormous hope. For some this opens the possibility of meaningful resistance instead of merely postponing the inevitable.

We need to be careful here. It is all too easy to build up hope based on a man's effort and to place the focus on this being the *last* time he looks at porn. I find that men feel overwhelmed trying to imagine the rest of their lives without falling again. However, if they take the struggle one day, one hour, one battle at a time, knowing that in each encounter they can actually win through the Spirit working in them, they feel much less overwhelmed.

This is why I actually discourage men from keeping careful track of how long it has been since they looked at pornography. Of course I am happy to see time pass without a fall into sin. I encourage men to celebrate this fruit of the Spirit in their lives. But what

often happens is that a man will finally go for weeks or months without looking at pornography, and then fall into temptation and feel like he has just wasted or destroyed all this hard work. Typically he will then fall again within a much shorter amount of time, showing that a significant part of the reason he was staying away was because he had a streak going. Once the streak is over and he is no longer building an impressive accomplishment, the motivation to say “no” plummets.

But reality could not be more different! God’s mercies *are* new every morning. The gospel means that he can be freely forgiven *yet again* (praise God!), whether he fell yesterday or ten years ago. It means he has received even *more* grace. If a man focuses on a broken streak, he feels discouraged, guilty, and frustrated with himself (and often with God for setting such a high standard). But if a man focuses on the magnitude of the *grace* he continues to receive, he feels deeply thankful and has all the more desire for sexual holiness.

Sometimes in counseling I share an analogy that captures the experience of living with a sense of inevitable defeat. When you are fighting lust it feels like you are in a desert—hot, weary, and thirsty—and pornography looks like an oasis on the dusty path. Lush palm trees cast shade over cool, refreshing water. You know that you have to keep on the path because it is wrong to drink from the oasis. But you have passed countless oases without stopping, and you know you can only take so much more of the blistering sun. Slowly, your eyes become fixed on the oasis... not the path. Just a sip, you tell yourself.

The analogy works for most strugglers with pornography because their experience is that it is a source of escape and sweet refreshment in their hard, or boring, or exhausting, or disappointing

world.⁵ Pornography promises to be the place in their lives they finally get to quench their thirst.

I follow up by presenting the analogy more accurately: The oasis tempting you to leave the path is *not* a refreshing spring. It is a poisoned water hole. It is literally going to kill your soul if you keep drinking it. You may be hot, weary and parched, but this is the last place in the world you want to find a drink.

Men need to see that life is *not* an unrelenting desert where God just tells them to toughen up and to pass by the watering holes. Rather, life is a path a man walks with a Shepherd who leads him to still waters where he will find enough to drink, and to green pastures where he will find restoration for his weary soul.

When a man assumes he will fall again, he is smuggling in the functional belief that pornography is a good thing he is fasting from. But no one fasts from poison. The Spirit teaches a man to pray that he might see his lusting after pornography for the hideous evil it really is, and that he might gain a deeper yearning for the Shepherd's living water instead.

Lie #5: It's not really hurting anyone. The lie that pornography does not hurt anyone is a "luxury" that only a single man or the blindest and most tragically deceived of married men can sustain. Most married men at least see that keeping their pornography secret from their wives is pretty strong evidence that their wives would be upset about them viewing it.⁶

Does pornography hurt anyone? Single men especially may ask, "If you do not have a spouse, isn't it just a victimless crime?" Not on your life. It hurts the women shown in the images. It hurts

5. Notice many different experiences all lead to the same escape.

6. Of course some men don't keep it secret but invite or force their wives to join in watching. This suggests a badly seared conscience. With such men, you must first make prayerful and firm attempts to open their eyes to the evil that they are doing.

you. It hurts your relationships with the women who are in your real life, not your fantasy life.

It hurts the women involved. Think about the women displaying themselves for a man's pleasure. They are being prostituted by the demands of male lust. They are often pushed toward anorexia and bulimia, and trained to view their identity as utterly bound up in their appearance. When a man looks at pornography, he adds his voice to the crowd that pressures them to believe they are sexual objects, nothing more than sexual junk food for men's consumption. While many women bear their own responsibility for participating in creating porn, men who view pornography, at the very least, cheer them on and applaud their descent into a degraded, soulless existence. Clicking on that website makes her de-humanization profitable. Does "soulless" sound a bit too strong? Yet isn't that exactly what pornography really is—worship of the body that ignores the presence of the real *person* involved? Treating women as sexual objects (and pornography is the purest form of objectification) is to treat them as if they are merely bodies with no souls.

As if that were not argument enough, the pornography industry is inextricably tied into a larger system of evil in our world that abuses and destroys women. We need to be honest about the fact that many seemingly willing participants in the pornography industry are either prisoners of people who use drug addictions to keep them "working," or are in fact literal sex-slaves who were trafficked away from their homes. Still further, pornography strongly reinforces our cultural acceptance of casual sexual encounters, which in turn increases the rate of divorce and abortions. When a man participates with the porn industry and treats their product as good and desirable (even when he doesn't pay for it), he is effectively casting his vote in favor of all these tragedies.

It hurts you. This sin wages war against a man's soul (1 Peter 2:11). Satan wants pornography to become a walled-off area that festers in a man's life so that he ultimately prefers pornography and self-satisfaction to the lordship of Jesus. Over time a pornography user comes to view his habit as wrong in the same way that speeding on the highway is wrong—he has simply broken an impersonal rule. His conscience becomes hardened to the point where he is unrepentant and his true loyalty is to his own pleasure. It is only when you help him restore this sin to its divine, relational context that he will see the gravity of his betrayal. Only then will the greater depth of Jesus' grace come front and center again.

It hurts your real relationships with the actual women in your life. Privatized sexual lust puts a wall between a man and his wife, mother, sister, daughter, coworker, neighbor. And where it does not put up a wall, it degrades how he views and treats women, spreading a dark stain into those relationships. Either way, real relationships are harmed either by distance or by degradation. As a man deals with pornography by finding the grace of God, he also finds that his relationships with the women in his life will improve.

As it becomes clear that porn use hurts people, men will struggle with guilt and self-condemnation. As a counselor, bring God's goodness to the table! Always. Help him rush to the cross with a broken heart and renewed hunger for grace. Almost every man will, from time to time, slip back into forgetting what is really at stake, both in this life and eternally. A sobering reminder about the destructive impact of pornography can be a vital wake-up call—and that wake-up call must lead to the mercies of Christ.

Lie #6: Pornography is better than dealing with real women. Pornography pretends to offer the things men want from relationships but can't seem to get. Real women are always sinners with flaws, weaknesses, and shortcomings. Looking at pornography feels

much easier than dealing with a flesh and blood person who can hurt you, reject you, disdain you, ignore you, or let you down. The virtual women you watch in pornography, on the other hand, create a powerful fantasy world. They make you feel “good” (for a moment). They never say “no.” They accept you unconditionally. They make you feel powerful and desirable. They make your desires the center of their attention and never disappoint (or if they do, you click on to the next image or video). It is not hard to understand why many men find pornography vastly safer than dealing with actual women in the world of real relationships.

But, as I have been emphasizing, pornography is a mockery of relationships, a hallucination with only a passing similarity to real intimacy. As a counselor, try to help a man articulate why pornography feels easier, safer, or better to him than actually relating with women. As he puts the lie he has believed into words, some of its spell will be broken and he will find it harder to seek refuge and safety in this fantasy world.

Lie #7: God will not forgive me. Any Christian man who deals with sexual sin is going to feel this at some point. For some men, guilt will be extremely prominent. For others, it will seem absent. A counselor can be confident, however, that every man feels that he has done something deeply wrong and wants to hide it.

I will not belabor this point, as it is probably the most straightforward lie to confront with the truth of Scripture. What does the gospel do if not deal with guilt?! But recognize that this is likely to be an ongoing struggle for men. Your job as a helper is to be the simple, patient, and clear voice of grace responding to these specific, real, and ugly sins.

You will find that dealing with guilt almost always makes a bigger impact than you expect. Frequently men want techniques and tools to avoid looking at pornography, but when they hear and

begin to believe that they are actually forgiven, growth begins to happen. One man asked the question this way: “Am I estranged from God when I fall in my struggle with porn?” He knew forgiveness at the cross was once for all, and yet his feelings told him that he needed to do something, or wait a certain amount of time before it would *really* be okay between him and God. Realizing that God wasn’t furious with him, and that confessing his sins was the only thing he needed to do (or could do for that matter) to make things right with God, made him walk as if eighty pounds had just fallen from his shoulders. Christ bears real sins. And though the shine on this truth faded after a couple of weeks (as often happens with our moments of clarity), it meant that the next time he fell into temptation, my job was only to remind him that his failure didn’t require him to work and scrape to get back the joy of being forgiven in Christ. The experience of grace helped him have a deeper desire to resist his sin.

Guilt is a blessing when it takes us to the cross. The cross is *for* the unworthy.

What these lies reveal: These seven lies will not be equally relevant to every man. Nor are these the only lies men believe in their struggle with pornography. But as lies are exposed, what was once a “harmless pleasure” or a “vague guilt” will now be seen in all its spiritual lethality and ugliness. As ministers of the gospel (whether pastors, counselors, or friends), we are now in the position of helping these men to see how the living and true God can transform them. He is the Good Shepherd who always gives the good things we truly need. He offers forgiveness, grace, and support for the journey. A deepened relationship with God opens the door to freedom and allows us to wisely minister by helping strugglers walk in truth.

Three Ways to Help Men Walk in Truth

Once a man sees that he has been living in lies, how do you help him walk in the truth? This may seem like an overwhelming task given the depth of this type of sin. The journey is not quick and it is not easy, and yet it is a journey that has enormous potential to shape a man's spiritual growth. In this section, I will share some thoughts from my experience about how to be an effective minister to a man on this path.⁷

Before we get to the content of counseling though, let's agree to a few things about the counseling process.

The tone of your counsel matters. This is a small but important implication of the fact that this problem has a relational core. Knowing that pornography both flows from and exacerbates a relational problem means that your relationship with a man who struggles can give him an enormously powerful taste of Christ. The *way* you counsel works hand-in-hand with the *content* of your counsel. If you are shocked, impatient, harsh or condemning, then your demeanor denies God's kindness and compassion toward him in the midst of his sin. On the other hand, if you shrug off the gravity of the sin by saying, "Everybody struggles. It's not that bad." Then you will rob God's mercy and forgiveness of their depth and power by misrepresenting his holiness. "Truth" without grace is not really truth, just as "grace" without truth is not really grace. When you see strugglers with the Father's eyes, you will move toward them with the Father's merciful intentions. We must approach sinners with the grace and mercy that drew each of us to Christ!

7. I realize there is much more that can be said. Here are some additional resources you might find helpful: Edward T. Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001); David White, *Sexual Sanity for Men* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012); and Winston T. Smith, *It's All About Me: The Problem with Masturbation* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2009).

Take it one step at a time. Even for men to whom all of these temptations apply, we anticipate that the Vinedresser is going to prune them carefully and deliberately, not frantically, not focusing on all a man's problems at once. Ask yourself where the Spirit is moving—what is the most important thing God is doing in this man's life right now? Make sure you are asking him about the places in his life *today* where he is feeling conviction and also the places where grace is coming alive for him.

Show him Jesus. The core of counseling a man as he battles against lust and pornography is more than simply exposing lies. It is leading his heart back to his Shepherd. Jesus Christ is the inexpressible gift who mends a man's relationship with God. A man may believe that Jesus died for his sins, but if he feels like God is holding out on him, he will at best resist temptation grudgingly. If God is holding back some good and needed gift, then a man will not fight temptation well. But a man who is keenly aware of God's incredible goodness will want to obey. A man who needs, seeks, and trusts Jesus—who bears the guilt, shame, and punishment that belong to us—will fight to obey his Savior. A man who knows he needs outside help will seek the Father's gift of the Holy Spirit.

With these counseling basics in mind, here are three things you can do to help a man begin his journey.

1. Help the man identify the role that pornography plays in his life. “What is your behavior saying about you?” is one of the most important questions we ever ask in counseling. Here are other questions that get at the same thing. What would be different if you gave up porn? What would you lose? Who would you be? How would you respond to life's challenges without it? This is where you help the man see himself accurately. Even if his struggle disappears, he needs to identify the role it has played, or something else just as spiritually deadly will take its place. Pornography has masqueraded

as a friend in his life, and he will continue to be vulnerable to such “friends”—video games, work, food, alcohol, and exercise to name a few—unless the patterns are named and repented of. Pornography use always says something about how a man’s relationship with God is fractured.

Here are three ways pornography might function in a man’s life:

It relieves boredom. “I find pornography a lot more appealing when I am bored. It is exciting and there is little in my life to be excited about.”

Life is rarely the exciting adventure men would like. Pornography can be an intensely appealing antidote to the dullness. Scripture calls us instead to zeal for God. Your task will be to cast a vision for godliness that helps him personally see that nothing is more important or exciting than being part of the kingdom God is building in this world. Along the way, you may also speak about novelty and excitement as potential places in his life where he is worshiping idols, things other than the true God.

It is an escape. “There is so much stress and disappointment in my life. When my job is going badly, or my kids are acting up, or I feel rejected, or everything feels overwhelming, it’s just easy to unplug from everything... and plug into porn.”

Life is hard. Pornography claims to be the ultimate refuge—no consequences, no effort, nothing but pleasure and freedom from the cares of the world. Escape is probably the single most common reason that a man turns to porn. To help him fight this rationale, you will need to focus on the battle between the two refuges in his life: either pornography or resting in Christ. His actions proclaim that he does not believe Christ is the refuge he needs in his troubles. Finding shelter in Christ will mean this man turns to the Lord and cries out in prayer, pouring out his distress rather than numbing

himself with a hallucination of being desired by beautiful women. It means he repents of doubting God's goodness and faithful provision for him in the stresses he faces, and he repents of the act of looking at pornography. It means he finds hope in remembering that God will provide whatever he needs to walk through the stresses and pressures he feels.

It is a response to a specific problem. "I guess I look at porn a lot when I am angry at my wife and feeling sorry for myself. Maybe it's my way of getting back at her."

This man has seen something extremely important: selfishness in the raw. His wife did something he did not want her to, so he rationalizes that he can therefore do something she does not want him to do. He is essentially punishing her for the "sin" of not obeying his will, even though she may never find out. In this area, the struggle with pornography is less about sexual desire and more about unaddressed anger and judgment directed at his wife.

There are many other roles porn can play in a man's life. Here are a few of them. Pornography can be a way of saying:

- I treasure comfort.
- My life is a failure, so why bother resisting failure in this area?
- I'm angry at God, and porn is a way of getting back at God because he took something from me or broke a promise to me.
- Porn consoles me for not having a girlfriend, or porn consoles me when my girlfriend breaks up with me.
- Porn is the friend that makes it okay that I have no friends.
- I just want to feel good right now, and this is the best feeling I can think of having.

Whatever the situation, a man's use of porn is an expression of his heart. A counselor can help the man identify his heart patterns and

what they say about him. Greater self- understanding leads directly to God.

2. Use Scripture to restore relationship. The Bible's resources for those who wrestle with temptation are limitless. However, you are not necessarily looking for a passage that specifically addresses sex or sexual sin. Instead, I often choose a passage that speaks about who God is and what that implies for who we are and how we live. Scripture always begins with how God has moved toward us, and only then proceeds into the obedience, love, and worship that are the only logical response to such love and initiative from him.

One of my favorite passages to use with men is Colossians 2:20–3:5 (which does mention sexual sins, though this is not the main focus). Paul is pressing the gospel into action in the lives of his hearers, making Christ the centerpiece of the changes he is calling for. Watch how he constructs this exhortation.

First, in Colossians 2:20–23, Paul argues that mere self-restraint and trying to keep the world at a distance doesn't work. A list of things to stay away from will never lead to actual change. He rebukes the Colossians for seeking purity by scrubbing themselves with worldly soap, following rules like "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" Such efforts are all "destined to perish," even though they "have an appearance of wisdom with their harsh treatment of the body."

Paul's point is simple: you are not going to overcome your sin by beating yourself into shape and keeping the outside world at arm's length. Trying harder and being your own drill sergeant has "no value in restraining sensual indulgence." You'll feel better for a while if you establish a list of rules, an exercise regimen, and a plan to do more school work so you won't have as much time to be tempted. But it will never be enough. Rules (in and of themselves) simply cannot stop the flesh and the world (and the devil). Looking

to rules or your own effort to change is insufficient and opposed to how God works to redeem us.

Second, in 3:1–4, Paul gives a compact explanation of how the gospel reshapes our life perspective. Paul’s core message is simple and radically focuses on who God is and how profoundly that impacts us: “Christ is your life.” Awaken to reality. We *are* with Christ. We *are* in Christ. We *are* raised with him. It’s a done deal! So it no longer makes any sense to live for things in this world. Because we died with Christ, because we live in Christ, the time that remains is a foretaste of the delightful fullness of righteousness to come. So we are to “seek the things that are above.” This invites application as deep as Scripture and as broad as human struggles range.

What does this mean for pornography users? It means that Jesus Christ *really is the person that sinners need most in the battle with ingrained patterns of sin!* Paul is saying we do not avoid sin by rules. Instead, we fight sin by pressing closer to the source of our new life—Christ himself. Only a love for Christ that is fiercer than our love of our own comfort, escape, and pride will ever overcome the selfishness of pornography. And Jesus Christ himself fans that love into flame in our hearts by revealing to us what he has done and is doing for us. He is calling us to learn to love what he loves, and to hate what he hates. Our life and our purposes are forever altered by his sacrifice and his presence with us. As we learn to love him, as we find our life and our hope in him, we are being changed. We will respond to even the most severe temptations differently.

Finally, in Colossians 3:5, Paul returns to the question of behavior. But now he proposes the idea of radical warfare against sin, rather than the pious-sounding, worldly rules he described in Colossians 2:21. We are called to go and “put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature.” In other words, “destroy all the junk that would drag you away.” Paul then lists what kinds of things must

be put to death and his first three examples directly target sexual struggles.

I love to point out that Colossians 3:5 sounds like a direct contradiction of Paul's point in Colossians 2:20–23. In verse 5 Paul tells us to put our sin to death, but at the end of chapter 2 he just told us that trying to refrain from sin by hard work is fruitless. The tension between Paul's critique of "do not touch" and his encouragement to put sin to death can only be resolved by following Paul through 3:1–4. Only when you run to Christ in his victory, in his intercession for you, in his love for you and his forgiveness of you, can you move from pious asceticism to radical passionate hatred of your sin.

The struggle against sin, then, is not about setting rules to try to keep ourselves in line. It is about a passionate war on anything that would stand between us and God. It is about seeking out and attacking the dark spawning grounds of lustful, pornographic desires and learning to see how they are the ugly antithesis of "Christ is my life." The worldly wisdom the Colossians were hearing said that the core of their problem was in their bad behaviors and tempting circumstances. Sound familiar? These same kinds of advice and explanation are still the most common today. But Paul roots the core of the problem in our failure to grasp that our very life and hope is bound up in the righteousness and power of the risen Christ. If he is victorious, then we are victorious. Because he is seated in heaven, we are already living a foretaste of heaven's glory and power and victory over sin. This enables us to pray: "Lord, give me a deep yearning to see my sin as evil. Teach me to hate it. Teach me to love putting it to death. Help me see the height and depth and breadth of your love for me. Give me a desire to love you and to be moved by you, to choose life rather than death." This is a prayer God loves to answer.

3. Offer a picture of what victory looks like. Every man I know who struggles with sexual sin has asked some form of this

question, “What does victory look like?” Let me first issue a warning about a few things that are often confused with victory over sexual sin, and then draw a brief sketch of what it looks like when a man genuinely begins to overcome his sin.

What victory is not. Victory is not “managing” your sin. The struggler can’t simply aim to cut back the frequency or severity of his pornographic binges to some acceptable standard. We must never be content with merely drinking *less* poison. Satan often tries to lull us into a compromise with our sin where we decide that as long as the sin does not cross certain lines, it is okay if we do not root it out entirely. Further, because we want to see this sin truly put to death, we should refuse to let up in the battle against lust, even when a man completely stops looking at pornography! Looking at porn is just one of many ways that escapism, or excitement, or anger, or self-pity plays out. A man must be committed to putting sin to death at a heart level—the underlying messages—not only at the level of behavior.

I also do not like to talk about victory as a “cure.” While there can be value in talking about “healing” as tasting fewer consequences of sin, or experiencing relief from guilt and shame, looking at pornography is more choice than disease. A cure mentality elevates the sudden absence of temptation above the steady work of the Spirit in developing a heart of obedience. Further, the men I have talked to who have been “cured” are puzzled and discouraged when they eventually did experience temptation to use pornography again, even if it was not as strong or as often as before. The idea of a cure can make it seem that the goal is freedom from temptation, rather than learning to flee temptation and resist sin in a way that flows from love for Christ. In fact, outer temptations always beset us, and the inner temptation will never completely disappear for most men. For

this reason, the goal is not being free from temptation. It is knowing what to do when temptation appears, and taking action.

Let me put this another way. *Struggle is not a bad thing.* Instead, struggle is the glorious work of God as he redeems and sanctifies fallen hearts. Most men take a negative view of struggle because it is painful, exhausting, and they know they should not love the sins they are tempted to love. Struggle, however, is God's ordained way of working righteousness into our lives, transforming men into people who radically own it when they say "No" to temptation. Struggle itself is only possible because of the reviving work of the Spirit. Men need a vision for struggling well. To struggle against evil is a good thing.

What victory is. Victory is the fruit that comes from the progressive reorientation of our hearts. It is made up of many components operating together. Here are a few:

- Hating sin. Victory over pornography involves the growth of genuine disgust when exposed to the vile lewdness that pornography seeks to glorify, even if there is some simultaneous arousal. If a man finds himself even marginally upset or repulsed by the things that tempt him, then he is already tasting victory.
- Seeking grace. Seeking forgiveness more quickly, wallowing less in guilt, and feeling more thankful for Christ's mercy are all victories. We are working toward a joy in repentance that leaves a man wanting to honor Christ with sexual purity. God's grace to men in their sexual sin teaches them about the depths of mercy in ways I have rarely seen with other sins. Repentance becomes a brokenhearted delight. That sounds like a paradox. But it's analogous to the way we both sing and weep at the funeral of a godly friend. Likewise, in

the mingling of joy and grief, a repentant struggler is having victory.

- Saying “No.” A struggler experiences victory when he begins to say no to temptations that he previously would have considered inescapable. A man who gets a pornographic movie in his inbox while on a business trip and immediately deletes it is winning the fight. Six months ago this would have been inconceivable. In fact, as saying “no” becomes more important and desirable, he begins to seek out places where he can cut things out of his life that tempt him. Perhaps at first he just stays off the computer after 10 pm when his housemates or wife aren’t likely to be around. Then he concludes that he needs to stop watching movies alone. He soon realizes that even when watching with others he needs to avert his eyes during sex scenes. Then he simply chooses to not watch such movies. Eventually he finds himself self-consciously retraining his gaze, not only to avoid ogling women he passes on the street but to see them as people rather than potential objects of sexual excitement. Saying “no” becomes an eager act of faith, affirming that God alone gives what is good, and finding joy in self-control.
- Pursuing accountability. Victory involves confession to a friend or spouse. Next, a struggler invites brothers around him to regularly ask him how he has fared and where he anticipates temptation in the coming days. Over time he goes above and beyond their questions about his falls and temptations. He speaks honestly about his inner struggles with anger, resentment, laziness, and love of comfort, and how the Spirit is leading him to see them more clearly. He speaks of wanting to love people better. Accountability is not a shameful necessity but a wonderful chance for a man

to bring his actions and desires into the light and to ask friends to make the gospel specific once again. “Could you remind me again that Christ forgives me and that I am not condemned? Will you tell me about how you are growing, too? Will you pray for me?”

- Growing in godliness. Ultimately, victory is growth in godliness. Victory is evident when he begins to delight in removing himself from situations where he has been tempted to look at pornography, rather than chafing because he feels as if he is called to fast while sitting in a restaurant. Victory is seeing selfish desires recede and a desire to serve others grow. It is learning to love other people well. It is finding more refuge and comfort in Scripture (which used to simply bring a guilt trip). It is a life of repentance from the sins of both heart and actions. A man triumphs when he has a true awareness of the depth of his sin, when it leads to a deeper love for Christ and other people. Victory is a glorious, unmerited freedom yielding a harvest of gratitude and a welcome change to the cycle of sin, guilt, and despair.

Are these so different from the “right answers” we already knew? No they are not. But they spring from a radically different motivation than the “do not taste, do not touch” mentality that comes so naturally. This victory goes deeper. It lasts longer. And it bears fruit in love, not just abstinence.

Pornography: A Desperate Problem, A Wonderful Opportunity

Pornography is one of the besetting evils in our culture, and the church is not exempt. And yet, the very severity of the struggle brings with it a wonderful opportunity! The vast majority of Christian men who face temptation to look at pornography are keenly aware of

how desperately wrong it is. Other sins are deeply evil (pride, selfishness, and greed), but for most men these seem much less serious and are the kind of sins you can confess to almost anyone on a Sunday morning without much shame. Pornography, however, is instinctively recognized as *sin*. Overcoming porn use feels much more urgent to most men than the other sins in their lives.

Because there is such clarity about the seriousness of the sin, there is an unparalleled opportunity to draw closer to God. God's grace will be more precious and more deeply moving to a man who experiences forgiveness and transformation in this struggle than in almost any other area of his life. If you counsel a man well, he will experience growing freedom from the sin he sees most clearly and feels most keenly. What is more, he will have a new, spiritual strength that enables him to stay on the path with the Shepherd and reject the allure of false oases that appear in his life. In his increasing victory over pornography, he will be better able to recognize the poisoned water holes and will thirst instead for living water from his Shepherd.

In a very real sense, wrestling with an addiction to pornography affords a man a priceless chance to lay his soul bare before the Lord and find grace to help in time of need. It has the potential to revolutionize every aspect of his relationships with his Heavenly Father and with the men and women whom God has placed in his life.

Five Ministry Priorities for Those Struggling with Same-Sex Attraction

By Michael R. Emler

In the *Harry Potter* books, the wizard Voldemort struck such fear and dread into the hearts of the wizarding community that the name itself was considered unspeakable. In conversation, he was referred to as “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” If his name was spoken aloud by someone, the mere mention caused visceral discomfort in the listener.

In many churches, the issue of Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction seems to engender the same hushed and uncomfortable attitude, both in public settings and in private conversation. Is this so in your church community? Is same-sex attraction “The-Struggle-That-Must-Not-Be-Named”? In general, the church—that is, *we*!—have done a poor job of creating an environment in which Christian men and women who struggle in this way are able to share their burden honestly and find strength for the journey of faith. I hope that this article will serve in some small way to counteract the tendency toward uncomfortable silence about this struggle.

This is a huge topic and it can be approached in a variety of ways. In this article, I primarily want to equip ministry leaders and

wise friends to help professing believers who struggle with same-sex attraction and want to live sexually pure lives before God.¹ But if you are someone who wrestles with same-sex attraction, I trust you also will be helped as you “listen in” on my counsel directed to those who love and minister to you.

But first, what am I *not* going to talk about? I’m not going to present the biblical basis for maintaining that homosexual behavior is prohibited by Scripture. It is my starting foundation that the Bible forbids the living out of homoerotic attraction in thought (fantasy life) and action. I refer you to Robert Gagnon’s book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, which makes the most comprehensive and persuasive biblical case for this traditional position.²

I’m also not going to talk about politics and other larger cultural issues such as same-sex marriage and partner benefits. I believe that Scripture clearly teaches that marriage is an exclusive and covenantal relationship between one man and one woman. Too much discourse within the church exists at the political-cultural level and the individual struggler gets left in the dust.

Lastly, I’m not going to focus on the various theories regarding the causes of same-sex attraction. A complex interplay of multiple factors including biology, family dynamics, personal experiences such as sexual abuse, and choices can contribute to the struggle. But whatever causative factors are present, the overwhelming majority of same-sex attracted strugglers affirm they did not *choose* their homosexual desires (just as those with heterosexual desire did not wake up one day and *decide* to be attracted to those of the opposite sex).

1. I will use primarily the term same-sex attraction because it is a *descriptive* term that avoids sexual identity language such as gay, lesbian, queer, or homosexual. I will discuss the importance of this approach later.

2. Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001).

What I *am* going to focus on are several key issues and themes necessary for living faithfully amid the struggle with same-sex attraction, and for ministering faithfully to those who struggle. My counseling experience is primarily with male same-sex attraction so I'll only give a nod to potential differences in the experience of female same-sex attraction. But I trust that what I say will have broad implications for both men and women who are struggling.

The remainder of this article will discuss five key priorities for faithful ministry and discipleship. These steps are not sequential but should happen in parallel. To the extent that we move in these directions, I believe we can significantly ameliorate the guilt, shame, and isolation that same-sex attracted strugglers experience.

Ministry Priority #1: Overcome a “don’t ask, don’t tell” mindset.

This is the starting point. If we’re not talking honestly, there’s little that can happen constructively. This is a broad problem in general within our churches. Some things are acceptable to talk about and others are not.

What does a typical group prayer time look like at your church? Often we ask for prayer for *other* people or situations (not bad in and of itself of course), *or* we share some “acceptable” struggle, usually in generic categories. “I need to be more patient with my children” is okay. Less okay, depending on the level of honesty within your community, is “I screamed at my kids last night and they were cowering in fear. Today I feel like an abject failure as a parent and as a Christian. And I’m worried about the long-term damage I may be inflicting on my children by my frequent losses of temper. I need help.” Do you cringe when you hear that? Jesus doesn’t, nor does he want his people to react in that way to weakness, sin, and brokenness.

Would those who wrestle with same-sex attraction be more likely to share their struggle, either privately or publicly, if other believers model weakness and the expectation of struggle and suffering in the Christian life? I've seen how such honesty and courage begets transparency in a small group setting. When one person shares honestly, others are more prone to do so. I was part of a small group years ago where a culture of vulnerability and acceptance led several members of the group to share their struggles with same-sex attraction for the first time.

What action steps would help to overcome a "don't ask, don't tell" policy?

Certainly the onus is on each of us to do our part in creating a mini-culture of vulnerability by how we share our own hearts, ask for prayer, and model acceptance of others' struggles.

Along these lines, what are some markers that you're a safe person with whom strugglers can share? Consider these diagnostic questions:

- Are you honest about your own brokenness and sin, and therefore not surprised about the brokenness and sin of others?
- Do you listen more than you speak?
- Have you taken the time to learn others' stories, whether they struggle with same-sex attraction or with other sins?
- Do you ask questions that invite deeper reflection and honesty?
- Do you avoid simplistic answers to complex problems?
- Can you keep a confidence?

Being this kind of person invites transparency from others.

On the other hand, what are some markers that you are *not* a safe person with whom strugglers can share?

- Do you ever make snide comments about the gay community?
- Do you ever make fun of men who appear more effeminate than other men?

- Do you speak as if homosexual behavior and same-sex attraction are worse problems than other struggles for a Christian?

Being this kind of person will shut down transparency from others.

What else can you do to invite honesty, particularly at a leadership level in the church? If you're a pastor, do you assume that some members of your congregation are indeed struggling with homosexual attraction? You should assume that this is highly likely, and should acknowledge it from the pulpit, not just privately. Don't only use sermon illustrations of "culturally acceptable" sins, such as materialism, anger, or heterosexual lust. Talk about homosexual lust, too. Research shows that on average 5% of your congregation may battle same-sex attraction at the level of desire or behavior. The number may be higher if your congregation is young and you're ministering in an urban context.³ And do you spend time modeling acceptance and equipping your members with gracious ways of responding to those who confide any struggle with life-dominating sin patterns? We all need to grow in wisdom here in order to create a culture of honest one-anothering. Pastoral leadership will prepare people to be thoughtful and sensitive as these disclosures occur.

Let me close this point with a quote from Christian anthropologist Jenell Williams Paris.

We need to set a place at the table for people with conflicted desires, inconsistent behavior and complicated sexual journeys. And if we really receive them, we'll realize that *they* are *us*.⁴

3. Edward Laumann and colleagues: 6.2% of males and 4.4% of females reported some level of same-sex attraction. E. O. Laumann, J. H. Gagnon, R. T. Michael and S. Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Quoted in Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 32.

4. Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 110.

Each one of us, if we're honest, comes to the table sexually broken or sinful in some way. If we acknowledge this, it will weaken the "don't ask, don't tell" mindset.

Ministry Priority #2: Emphasize identity in Christ over sexual identity.

We've probably all drunk the Kool-Aid on this one! Knowingly or unknowingly, we have bought into a sexual identity paradigm for categorizing ourselves and others—instead of rooting our identity in Christ.

Jenell Williams Paris reminds us that earlier generations did not link sexual feelings to human identity as we do today. She says,

Sexual identity is a Western, nineteenth-century formulation of what it means to be human. It's grounded in a belief that the direction of one's sexual desire is identity-constituting, earning each individual a label (gay, lesbian, straight, etc.) and social role.⁵

These labels did not exist previously; people simply lived in societies as men and women without their sexual desires becoming a central facet of their self-identity.

Viewing people through sexual identity categories can immediately create a chasm between you and your neighbor, between you and your brother or sister. Scripture talks about men and women. Scripture talks about sexual behavior and ethics, including its affirmation that sex is reserved for marriage between a man and a woman. But it doesn't speak of a "sexual identity." Of course, we don't ignore our sexual desires nor how powerfully they can shape our conception of who we are. We are sexual beings, yes, but there's

5. Ibid., 41.

something more fundamental to our personhood, as we'll see in a minute. Bottom line: we're never called in Scripture to discover and embrace our sexual identity.

Here's another way of saying this—we are more than our desires, whether sexual or otherwise. Personhood cannot be reduced to what we desire. So what's more foundational than “sexual identity”? Identity found in Christ.⁶

As believers, our identity is in Christ, not in ourselves. The apostle Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” over ninety times in the New Testament to stress the believer's union with Christ. What does this mean?

- In Christ we are adopted as sons and daughters (Rom 8:16).
- In Christ we are justified. Our sins are forgiven and we are given the very righteousness of Christ (Acts 10:43; Rom 3:23–24; Rom 5:1; 2 Cor 5:21).
- In Christ we are sanctified. We are cleansed, covered, and made holy (1 Cor 1:2; 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:26).
- In Christ we are given a mission. We are ambassadors of the King, living to bring his reconciliation to all people (2 Cor 5:18–20).
- In Christ we will one day experience bodily resurrection unto glory (1 Cor 15).

The agent of this union is the Holy Spirit. Christ has given us his very Spirit to indwell us and give us all the blessings of redemption (Acts 2:33; Eph 1:3–14).

Galatians 2:20 expresses this reality in a slightly different way: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son

6. See Pierce Taylor Hibbs, “A House Built upon the Rock: Finding Our Identity in Christ,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28:2 (2014): 53–58.

of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” I am not my own. You are not your own.

So who are we? Children of the Father, brothers and sisters to King Jesus, heirs of the kingdom, ambassadors of the King’s mission to the world. And that has nothing to do with the direction of our sexual desire and everything to do with God’s pronouncement of our forgiveness and cleansing in Christ.

Notice how powerfully Paul describes the identity shift that takes place in Christ as he writes to the Corinthians (a church that clearly did not have it all together!).

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. 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 Cor 6:9–11)

We are no longer defined by our sinful behaviors but by the justifying and sanctifying work of Jesus Christ.

Finally, notice how Paul also relativizes gender, ethnic, and socio-economic distinctions in light of Christ—“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). All that might be used to identify a person—gender, class, ethnicity, the direction of one’s sexual desire—pales in comparison to being identified with and in Christ.

Identity in Christ is foundational for the next two priorities, which deal with battling same-sex attraction in the trenches.

Ministry Priority #3: Don't confuse temptation with sin.

Let me start by framing this issue more broadly. Here's a question: is it possible to be tempted to gossip but not commit the sin of gossip? "Yes, of course," we would say. Another question: is it possible for a man to be attracted to a woman and not sin? This is a bit more tricky since "attracted to" requires a more precise definition, but I think most would agree that yes, it's definitely possible. Few would deny that a person could potentially have heterosexual physical attraction to someone and not sin.

But is this true for same-sex attracted strugglers as well? Is it possible for a man to experience attraction to another man and not sin? Avoid a kneejerk "yes" or "no" reaction here. You may not have thought about this before, so walk with me slowly as I first discuss the issues of desire, temptation, and sin from a biblical perspective and then apply that discussion by offering practical guidelines for facing temptation.

Biblical perspectives on temptation and sin. I want to look at five biblical perspectives that will ultimately motivate those you are counseling to wage spiritual war in the midst of temptation.

First, the Bible definitely teaches it is possible to be tempted without sinning. The classic text is James 1:13-15.

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

I'll try to parse this out more carefully as I proceed, but for now, notice that desire in and of itself is not sin. There is a difference between temptation and sin.

The apostle Paul also provides instruction: “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). One can experience temptation without succumbing to it.

The Puritan John Owen wrote an entire treatise on this subject. In “Of Temptation,” he focuses on the meaning of Jesus’ admonition to the disciples, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Matt 26:41).⁷ He notes that *entering* into temptation does not necessarily mean “to be conquered by a temptation, to fall down under it, to commit the sin or evil that we are tempted to, or to omit the duties that are opposed. A man may ‘enter into temptation’ and yet not fall under temptation. God can make a way for a man to escape.”⁸ Indeed, a person can enter into the throes of temptation without actually succumbing to temptation by the commission of sin.

One other passage that differentiates temptation from sin is Hebrews 4:15: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable

7. Owen defines temptation as “any thing, state, way, or condition that, upon any account whatever, hath a force or efficacy to seduce, to draw the mind and heart of a man from its obedience which God requires of him, into any sin, in any degree of it whatever. In particular, that is a temptation to any man which causes or occasions him to sin, or in any thing to go off from his duty, either by bringing evil into his heart, or drawing out that evil that is in his heart, or any other way diverting him from communion with God, and that constant, equal, universal obedience, in matter and manner, that is required of him” (“Of Temptation,” *Temptation and Sin, The Works of John Owen Vol. VI* [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967], 96).

8. *Ibid.*, 97. He further describes the experience of “entering into temptation” this way: “Entering into temptation may be seen in the lesser degrees of it; as, for instance, when the heart begins secretly to *like the matter of the temptation*, and is content to feed it and increase it by any ways that it may without downright sin” (119). “Let, then, a man know that when he likes that which feeds his lust, and keeps it up by ways either good in themselves or not downright sinful, he is entered into temptation” (120). Owen takes for granted the existence of lusts of the flesh in the regenerate, but does not equate that with the commission of sin. The juxtaposition of “peculiar lusts” and “suitable objects or occasions for their exercise” is what constitutes entering into temptation (120).

to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” So Jesus himself was tempted but he did not sin. However, this raises a question, “If Jesus as the perfect Son of God had no indwelling sin, how could he be “lured and enticed by his own desire”? How could he be tempted? This leads to a second point.

Second, temptations may arise from within (the flesh), from the world (situations, circumstances, particular allurements), or from the devil. Owen puts it this way: “Temptation may proceed wither singly from Satan, or the world, or other men in the world, or from ourselves, or jointly from all or some of them, in their several combinations.”⁹ While we as fallen human beings can experience temptation via all three avenues, Jesus experienced temptation from without (the world and the devil), but not from within. Passages that demonstrate the role of the world and Satan in promoting sin include Ephesians 2:1–3 and James 4:1–7 (although both passages also reveal the role of the flesh). In the passages I previously mentioned we see temptation arising internally (James 1), externally (Hebrews 4), and from multiple possible (but unspecified) avenues (1 Corinthians 10; Matthew 26).

Third, sin occurs not simply at the level of outward actions but inward thoughts and intentions. This is a theme throughout the Sermon on the Mount. But specifically with regard to adultery, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:27–28). The phrase *lustful intent* is key. Jesus reminds us that the intentions of the heart matter. But is all physical attraction the same as looking at someone with lustful intent? I don’t think so, or there

9. Ibid., 95.

would be no “space” for temptation. Surely not all looking is longing, and not all seeing is sinning.

But it is a fine line, and Calvin is less generous. Here is his exposition of the tenth commandment (you shall not covet) in *The Institutes*.

We previously said that under the terms “adultery” and “theft” are included the desire to commit adultery and the intention to harm and deceive. . . . For intent, as we spoke of it under the preceding commandments, is deliberate consent of will where lust subjects the heart. But covetousness can exist without such deliberation or consent when the mind is only pricked or tickled by empty and perverse objects.¹⁰

Building on Augustine, Calvin goes on to say this.

Someone will object that fantasies, flitting aimlessly about the mind and then vanishing, cannot be condemned as instances of covetousness, whose seat is in the heart...Nothing desirable ever comes into our mind without our heart leaping with excitement....It was the Lord’s plan to forbid all evil desire.¹¹

Calvin is saying that if our heart leaps with excitement, if our mind is only pricked or tickled by a perverse object—even without intent—then we have sinned.

10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed; translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), Volume 1, Book II.8.49, 413.

11. Calvin, II.8.50, 414.

Calvin was concerned to overturn the contemporary Roman Catholic idea of “venial sin,” which was defined as “desire without deliberate assent, which does not long remain in the heart.” Calling such things venial was taking them too lightly for Calvin. He responds, “But I say: it cannot even steal into the heart except for lack of those things which are required in the law. . . . Has some desire pricked our heart? We are already guilty of covetousness and consequently are transgressors of the law.”¹²

It would seem that Calvin is suggesting that some sins happen without temptation *per se*. To have the desire *is* to commit the sin. What should we think about this? In his zeal to rebut contemporary Roman Catholic theology, does he blur the distinction between the lusts of the flesh (indwelling sin) and the actual commission of sin (in thought, word, or deed)? It seems that Owen (and other places in Scripture I noted) gives more leeway to experience temptation without sinning.

Truly, it is hard to parse a covetous *desire* from lustful intent! It may be difficult to know when someone has crossed the line. Anger might also be in this category. When does righteous anger turn into unrighteous anger? And yet Scripture differentiates the two: it is possible to be angry and not sin (Eph 4:26). Other sins (e.g., lying) are easier to parse into desire (I *want* to save face) from actual sin (I lie to someone to save face). Certainly one takeaway here is that we ought to take special care to guard our hearts against situations that could potentially stir up desire.¹³

12. Calvin, II.8.58, 421.

13. Even the fall of humanity into sin gives some instruction here. When did Adam and Eve sin? It seems it was when they actually ate the fruit that “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew they were naked” (Gen 3:7). Yet, look at the lead-up to the sin itself: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise”—i.e. it was in the context of those aberrant and inordinate desires—“she took of its fruit and ate...” (Gen 3:6).

Fourth, no desire is neutral, per se. All desires and all motivations are with respect to God. Some desires wouldn't exist apart from the fall (e.g., same-sex attraction; desire to harm someone; desire for the praise of man). Their "direction" is inherently away from God. Other desires whose initial "direction" may be inherently good are inevitably tainted with sinful intentions (e.g., a desire for excellence becomes perfectionism; a desire to rule well becomes authoritarianism; attraction for the opposite sex becomes lustful craving).

Still, these "directionally divergent" desires or "inordinate" desires are not necessarily acts of sin in and of themselves. They represent the vestiges of indwelling sin (the flesh) that will certainly erupt into sinful acts of commission and omission (both outwardly and inwardly) apart from the sanctifying work of the Spirit.¹⁴

Fifth, it's appropriate to seek change at the level of our desires, affections, and motivations. Paul says in Galatians 5:24 that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Interestingly, Galatians 5:16–26 also implicitly differentiates the "desires of the flesh" from the gratification of those desires in actual "works of the flesh," which corroborates our earlier discussion differentiating desire from the commission of sin. Even so, Paul tells us that the sanctifying work of the Spirit begins at the level of desires. And so he commands elsewhere, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col 3:5).

In light of these biblical-theological reflections, how should we think about homosexual attraction? Is experiencing a stirring of

14. Here's an agricultural analogy: Seeds are not "neutral." They will produce one kind of tree (or weed!). But until they germinate they are "latent." When germination happens we may not see it externally (sprouting underground = sinning inwardly, which Jesus discusses in the Sermon on the Mount). Eventually (usually) the sprout comes above ground and ultimately bears fruit in keeping with the seed type (= sinning outwardly).

same-sex physical attraction sin? Not necessarily (Calvin's perspective notwithstanding)! I believe it is possible to "be attracted and sin not." Nick Roen, quoting John Piper, notes,

It would be right to say that same-sex desires are sinful in the sense that they are disordered by sin and exist contrary to God's revealed will. But to be caused by sin and rooted in sin *does not* make a sinful desire equal to sinning.¹⁵

Roen goes on to say,

In other words, although SSA [same-sex attraction] is a disordered desire, owing to the fall and thus rooted in sin and broken by sin, nevertheless experiencing SSA is not in itself an act of sinning."¹⁶

Notice the distinction here between the presence of sinful desires owing to indwelling sin (or better, the flesh) from the fall, and the actual commission of sin. Further, consider bodily weakness, illness, and suffering. These experiences did not exist before the fall, came into existence because of the fall, and will not exist in glory. Yet they are not sin.

These perspectives give us several ways of understanding same-sex attraction that are not necessarily equated with the actual commission of sin. Now, does it seem like we are splitting biblical-theological hairs here? Consider the pastoral importance of maintaining this careful distinction.

15. Nick Roen, "Is It Sin to Experience Same-Sex Attraction?," *Desiring God*, December 17, 2013, accessed on June 23, 2014, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/is-it-sin-to-experience-same-sex-attraction>.

16. *Ibid.*

Sometimes we act (and strugglers feel) as if even experiencing a fleeting same-sex *attraction* is always sin in and of itself. And so the same-sex attracted struggler tends to go around in a perpetual state of sinfulness, guilt, and shame. He or she feels stained at the core because of these unnatural/disordered desires—even *if* those desires never rise above the level of temptation. Wes Hill puts it like this:

It's true that . . . [a heterosexual person's lust] . . . isn't pleasing to God. But at least they're attracted to the sex God originally planned for human beings to be attracted to! . . . [Homosexual attraction] feels as though there is no desire that isn't lust, no attraction that isn't illicit.¹⁷

So put yourself in that situation. How does that feel? Like being told to play in a muddy field but also being told not to get dirty? Impossible! It's no wonder then that someone struggling with same-sex attraction may conclude, "Sometimes I feel that no matter what I do, I am displeasing to God. I am perpetually dirty." This is why differentiating between temptation and sin is so critical. In most instances, experiencing a stirring of same-sex physical attraction is a temptation to sin, but not sin itself. This "permission" to struggle builds hope to fight the battle at all levels—desire, affection, thought, words, and deeds.

Most Christian strugglers I've talked with hate the fact that they experience a bodily, sexual attraction to members of the same sex. They would trade it in a heartbeat for heterosexual attraction. It is a "thorn" they plead with God to take away. It is not something they have chosen (as though they woke up one day and decided to have same-sex attraction). Nor are they actively choosing this

17. Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 137.

experience in the present, although they would agree they have a choice of how to respond in the midst of temptation.

Now, I said a few paragraphs earlier that “in most instances” same-sex attraction should be considered temptation to sin, but not sin itself. Are there other instances in which the attraction is hard to separate from the commission of sin? Yes. I have met Christians who have more actively chosen and nurtured same-sex attraction through curiosity, experimentation, and sustained pornography use. In these situations it may be more difficult to differentiate sexual attraction at the desire level from sexual attraction manifested as actual sin (at the thought level) when a particular stirring of same-sex attraction occurs.

Further, although I have lingering questions regarding Calvin’s view, his comments remind us that we should have a low threshold for calling a particular experience of attraction “sin.” That’s true for heterosexual attraction, too! When do I cross the line between admiration of beauty and sexual lust? It’s not always easy to tell. Do I linger in my look? How long is too long? Have I viewed this person as an object? Am I dwelling too long on the remembrance of this person’s physical appearance? These are judgment calls requiring discernment and self-awareness and should prompt us to cry out with the psalmist, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23–24).

Even if a person concludes, “Yes, I think my stirring of sexual attraction right now has crossed the line,” the admission of this sin is a portal to experience, not persistent guilt and shame, but the fresh grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. Don’t miss the magnificent promise of 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Please don’t misunderstand me here. While we do want our counselees to be more aware of the sinful inclinations of their hearts,

we don't want them to become morbidly introspective in parsing the nuances of desire, temptation, and sin. After all, sinful desires are inherently self-deceptive so we'll never be perfectly aware of our inner world! More important than "correctly" identifying whether someone has crossed a thin line into sin is focusing on the wideness and nearness of God's mercy for sinners and sufferers.

Finally, before we move on to practical guidelines for facing temptation, I want to leave you with two more orienting thoughts.

First, while it is important to recognize and say "no" to inordinate sexual desire before it blossoms into sin, sanctification involves more than identifying and denying sinfully oriented desires. It also involves cultivating, as Thomas Chalmers called it, the "expulsive power of a new affection."¹⁸ Chalmers reminds us that we do not turn from sin simply by being convinced it's not good for us. Rather, as we become increasingly captivated by the love of Jesus, our appetites wane for lesser loves. As Helen Lemmel's hymn urges, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace."¹⁹ Many years earlier the psalmist captured the same sentiment when he wrote, "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!" (Ps 34:8a). Whet your appetite for gourmet fare, not empty fast food calories!

Second, if you are the helper, make sure the standard you apply to others regarding their sin is the same standard you apply to yourself (Matt 7:1–7). Sometimes those who do not struggle with same-sex attraction project a moral superiority toward these strugglers, imposing a harsher (and perhaps unbiblical) standard of what

18. Thomas Chalmers, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection," *Christianity.com*, accessed September 5, 2014, <http://www.christianity.com/christian-life/spiritual-growth/the-expulsive-power-of-a-new-affection-11627257.html>.

19. Helen H. Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus" Hymn # 481, *Trinity Hymnal* (Norcross, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990).

obedience looks like. Again, this is why maintaining the distinction between temptation and sin is so important.

Practical guidelines for facing temptation. So, we have reviewed the biblical perspectives; let's now talk practically about how to exploit the space that exists between temptation and sin. Another way of saying this is, how can you encourage strugglers to turn *toward* God rather than *away* from him when they experience a stirring of same-sex attraction? What specifically might you suggest?

- Literally turn away physically from the person who caught your eye if that's the trigger for your temptation.
- Call out to God in prayer. Now this may sound so obvious, but too often I find that I talk more to *myself* than to *God* in the midst of temptation! But what should you pray? Have you (if you're a struggling man) ever prayed like this? "Oh Lord, I find my heart stirred by this guy I bumped into. Help me! Give me grace to turn to you now. Would you stir up affection for you that begins to drown out lesser attractions?" Or sometimes prayer simply sounds like, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"
- Get angry at Satan, the liar, the tempter, the accuser of the children of God. A truly evil one is attacking you right now. What's the lie he wants you to believe? We need to increasingly recognize the false advertising of the devil in the midst of temptation. We need to have eyes to see the spiritual battle that is taking place. Remember that fighting temptation involves more than simply recognizing and fighting evil desires within. Why? Because temptation is more than an interior, psychological experience as Owen reminds us. I think we forget that in the fog of war. We must recognize that the deadly triad of the flesh, the world, and the devil *all* conspire to lead us into sin. So draw battle lines on all three fronts. In

addition to fighting the flesh, recognize and renounce unbiblical perspectives trumpeted by the world and reinforced by the evil one, such as: “Your sexuality is private. What you feel is your reality. The tide has turned in our society, so what’s stopping you? The Bible is irrelevant to modern day committed monogamous relationships. Did God really say? . . .”

- Consider what good work God is calling you to do right now. This is not simply a stall tactic as though you are saying, “Let me busy myself with something else and hopefully I’ll forget what’s going on in my head and body right now.” Rather seek to turn upward and outward in love—for God and for others.
- Pray for the person you’re attracted to, especially if you have multiple occasions to cross paths with this person. This humanizes rather than treats the person as an object of your desires.²⁰
- At the end of the day, ask, “Am I fighting this desire or fueling it?”

These are ways to wage war in the midst of temptation. But such fighting is unlikely to happen if strugglers already feel like they’ve lost the battle each and every time simply by *experiencing* an attraction. Remember that getting bruised and bloodied in the fight against temptation is not a mark of immaturity but of maturity. Such battle wounds and scars are consistent with the life of Jesus.

With this distinction between sin and temptation in mind you may wonder, what change should same-sex attracted strugglers expect in this life? Less sin? Less temptation? Change at the level

20. For a more comprehensive example of what active love looks like in this situation see, “Manipulative Obsession or Love from a Pure Heart?” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28:1 (2014): 76-82.

of desire from same-sex to opposite-sex? This leads to my fourth ministry theme.

Ministry Priority #4: Have realistic, biblical expectations for change.

It is important to have realistic, biblically-based expectations concerning change for those experiencing same-sex attraction. Misconceptions about this lead only to further pain and isolation. Remember that change is the same for all sinners in the sense that it can be difficult, slow, and incomplete in this lifetime. Here, then, are three realistic expectations concerning change.

First, expect to see change on a continuum. Notice this is true for *any* struggle in the Christian life, whether it's anxiety, anger, depression, gossip, gluttony, materialism, alcohol abuse, or heterosexual lust. We're all in the same boat here.

Living faithfully with same-sex attraction can look differently depending on the specific contours of the person's struggle. What do I mean? Clearly, not all same-sex attracted people have the same experience. The struggle itself exists on a continuum.

I have counseled men who spent years in an active gay lifestyle who are now trying to live faithfully either as single or married men. I have listened to men who have described an exclusive and abiding same-sex attraction that by God's grace they have chosen not to indulge in their thought lives or behaviorally. I have talked with men who experience sexual attraction to both men and women. And I know men who have a preference for male company and emotional intimacy that is not particularly sexualized. I have counseled women whose same-sex attraction arose in the context of being repulsed by the harsh misogyny of heterosexual pornography, but who still desire marriage to a man. Each story has unique contours.

What does this mean? Growth *may* look different for a man who has had lifelong persistent and exclusive same-sex attraction²¹ vs. the man who has emotional and physical attraction for both men and women. Just as the struggle is experienced on a continuum, growth in Christ will occur on a continuum, including change at the level of behavior, the level of thought, and the level of desire and affection.

Christian faithfulness *might not* look like the eradication of same-sex desire, but the consistent denial of such desire in service to a greater desire to honor Christ and his kingdom. In fact, that is the norm in the Christian life no matter what sin issue we're dealing with. As a friend said to Wes Hill, "Living with unfulfilled desires is not the exception of the human experience but the rule."²²

This is why I do not support the use of the term *reparative therapy*. I find the term problematic given its exclusive use. Why don't we talk about reparative therapy for those who have a persistent bent toward anger, gossip, harshness, drug addiction, and heterosexual lust? The term implies "if it's broken it can be fixed." It views same-sex attraction as a disease to be cured rather than a desire to be battled. Do we have the same "cure" expectation for *other* life-dominating struggles in the Christian life?!

In my experience—and this is borne out in research done by Christians Stan Jones and Mark Yarhouse—the majority of people

21. Some may use the words "homosexual orientation" to describe the situation of persistent and exclusive same-sex attraction. While I am not opposed to the term in this descriptive sense, I believe its use can create confusion because it is a loaded term meaning different things to different people. For some it suggests an immutable, biological state of being that must be embraced as an identity (gay lifestyle) rather than renounced. For others it remains a descriptive shorthand for the predominant direction of their sexual attraction. Further, the term also suggests an "all or nothing" change process—either I have a homosexual orientation or a heterosexual orientation (or possibly bisexual orientation). But is it really that simple?

22. Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, 72.

continue to struggle with *some* level of same-sex attraction.²³ The idea of reparative therapy, while rightly stressing the potential for change, can do more harm than good because it promises something that isn't a reality for many strugglers on this side of glory.

No doubt some people experience genuine change in the direction of their sexual desire. It's appropriate to pray for that and rejoice when it happens. But many others experience growth differently. They find that in the midst of faithfully battling persistent same-sex attraction that temptation leads to sin less often. It's appropriate to pray for grace along those lines as well and to rejoice in that evidence of growth. Remember, one pattern of Christian growth is not superior to another in God's economy.

You might ask, "Doesn't this breed complacency if the endpoint is not a full 'conversion' of homosexual desire to heterosexual desire?" Not necessarily, for three reasons. First, as I discussed earlier, if experiencing same-sex attraction is viewed more accurately, in most instances as temptation to sin rather than outright personal sin, it actually increases motivation to fight against the wiles of the world, flesh, and devil. Secondly, the sole target of sanctification is not in the sexual desire realm. The Spirit is at work in multiple areas of our lives, not just with regard to sexual desires. There are many

23. Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007). In their longitudinal study of 98 men and women seeking Christian help for their same-sex attraction (the first study of its kind), 15% of participants experienced "conversion" to heterosexual attraction, 23% experienced "chastity" (eradication of or significant decrease in same-sex attraction), 29% experienced some diminution of homosexual attraction, 15% showed no change, 4% experienced no change and gave up on the change process, and 8% gave up and embraced a gay identity. (369). Overall this is encouraging, but it is important to realize that most of the individuals in the "conversion" or "chastity" groups "did not report themselves to be without experience of homosexual arousal and they did not report heterosexual orientation to be unequivocal and uncomplicated" (372). Some level of ongoing struggle should not surprise us given a biblical understanding of progressive sanctification.

simultaneous battlefronts in the war of progressive sanctification. Continued struggle in one area (e.g., persistent same-sex attraction) should not negate effort and growth in other places of spiritual conflict. And lastly, we can't miss that God is at work growing us even in the midst of our failures.²⁴ Failure to arrive at a particular spiritual destination does not nullify all the good work God is doing on the journey.

Having said that, we should also set before us the example and exhortation of Paul whose own persistent thorn (whatever physical or spiritual challenge it may have been) did not lead to complacency in discipleship.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Cor 9:24–27)

Paul's journey was ongoing and he pursued holiness actively in the midst of his various trials.

Second, don't expect the process of sanctification to be radically different from OR radically the same as the process with other issues of temptation and sin. On the one hand, battling

24. John Newton actually writes of the "advantages from remaining sin." While in no way urging spiritual complacency, Newton highlights the potential benefits of the ongoing battle with various sins, including a heightened awareness of God's faithfulness and love and a growing humility in the believer's life. "Advantages From Remaining Sin" in *Select Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), 150–154. See also Barbara Duguid, *Extravagant Grace: God's Glory Displayed in our Weakness* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 212.

same-sex attraction is not radically different from other struggles in the Christian life in which we have to live with unfulfilled desires and embrace a bigger agenda of holiness. Let's be careful not to put same-sex attraction into a different category. Doing so only amplifies guilt, shame, and isolation for those who are struggling. The dynamics of biblical change are the same for all of us, regardless of the particular temptations or weaknesses we face. No matter what desires we are battling, God intends to reshape and transform them in a more kingdom-centered direction over the course of our lives.

In addition, just as with other patterns of temptation and sin, it is appropriate to explore real and substantial contextual factors that contribute to the struggle. For example, if you're working with a man to help him with his anger, it is certainly appropriate to talk about the stressors in his life that trigger it, such as his eldest daughter leaving the faith or the reality that he and his family are on the brink of financial ruin because he lost his job. In a similar way with same-sex attraction, it is appropriate to explore other relational dynamics and experiences that may be exacerbating the struggle and bringing more shame, such as a history of sexual abuse, bullying, poor relationships with parents or siblings, and poor choices in the past. Part of healing and growth involves wrestling with multiple issues that may contribute in some way to the experience of same-sex attraction, just as they do to other struggles in the Christian life. This is a critical part of hearing and understanding someone's story.

And so, exploring heart dynamics (motivations, fears, desires, longings) along with contextual contributors (relationships, traumatic events, societal-cultural pressures, etc.) to same-sex attraction is similar to the biblical approach for other struggles.

Yet, battling same-sex attraction is not quite the same as denying unruly desires associated with (for example) money, power, success, or comfort. As I mentioned earlier, there is something in

the struggle with sexual sin and brokenness that threatens to overtake one's identity and personhood. It feels much more "internal" and more tied to one's very identity than perhaps many other sin patterns. No doubt, some of this is because we experience our sexuality in somatic ways. Further, the same-sex attraction struggle is deeply intertwined with expectations in relationships. "Will I ever have someone who considers me his/her primary relationship?" "As I grow older will I be alone?" We saw earlier the importance of not tying our identity to our sexuality. But because our sexuality is such a powerful aspect of our embodiment and our expectations for community, sexual desires and passions *do* feel more connected to the essence of personhood.

Add to that the heightened scrutiny the church places upon same-sex attracted Christians (over and above heterosexual sin) and it can be hard to view same-sex attraction as a struggle "common to man," to use the apostle Paul's phrase (1 Cor 10:13). It's much more acceptable among men to struggle with heterosexual sin and brokenness than it is to struggle with homosexual sin and brokenness. Every talk on pornography for men that I've heard assumed a heterosexual struggle. No wonder a man attracted to other men feels different and out of the mainstream. He realizes he can't act on his attractions in a God-honoring way, unlike opposite-sex attraction, which at least has the potential to be acted upon in the context of marriage.

To wrap up this point, I think it is appropriate to recognize the increased burden of suffering experienced by Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction, even as we also affirm the commonalities of wrestling with change at the level of heart desire and behavior that each of us experience no matter what patterns of temptation and sin are present.

Third, hold expectations for the long term loosely (in terms of marriage vs. celibate singleness). The goal of growth is neither

marriage nor celibate singleness, per se, but conformity to the character of Christ. This is true whatever state you're in, for however long you remain in it.

Many strugglers who want to honor Christ feel caught between a rock and a hard place. The men I've counseled who have an exclusive and abiding attraction to men have a hard time envisioning what marriage could look like apart from their same-sex desires being replaced by opposite-sex desires. They wonder what level of sexual intimacy is possible with a woman if they have only experienced same-sex attraction. At the same time, the prospect of lifelong celibate singleness isn't very appealing either.

This is why I think it's important to encourage strugglers to live in the "now." Be who God is calling you to be today. Invest in the relationships that are before you now. You don't know what the future will bring and how God's transforming power will play out in your life over time. Some who struggle with same-sex attraction will get married to a person of the opposite sex; others will remain single. But God has determined that every Christian will bear the fruit of his indwelling Spirit.

Having said that, perhaps our views of marriage and sex within marriage contribute to the pessimism many same-sex attracted strugglers feel when it comes to the potential for marriage. While I will speak more about this in the next section, consider this for now: it may be appropriate to re-conceive what marriage might look like between certain same-sex attracted strugglers and their spouses. For example, could you imagine a marriage of less frequent sexual intimacy in which a man, while he may not be as sexually aroused for his wife as he is for men, actually gains joy by serving his wife in this way? And his wife experiences his participation in (even a diminished) sex life as deep love and commitment rather than as being shortchanged in the physical intimacy department? Certainly this

situation would require committed and mature believers earnestly desiring to pursue this option instead of singleness. And it would require extensive premarital counseling as well as careful follow up after marriage.

This is not to say that the spouse struggling with same-sex attraction couldn't *grow* in sexual desire for his spouse; they just shouldn't enter marriage *counting* on this happening, as though marriage is the "cure" for same-sex attraction. (Similarly, as many husbands and wives will sadly testify, marriage is not the cure for heterosexual lust either).

In suggesting this vision of a potential marital relationship, I want to emphasize I am not advocating marriage as the goal or litmus test for Christian growth in a same-sex attracted struggler. I have mentioned it just as a possibility that might be good and life-giving for some, particularly for those whose same-sex attraction is not lifelong and exclusive. For many others it will not be realistic, and celibate singleness will be the long-term reality. In either case, we should emphasize the goal of living as a disciple of Christ and bearing the fruit of His Spirit.

How you react to these possibilities is tied to the way you understand attraction, friendship, service, fidelity, and intimacy within marriage. In our culture these blessings of God are often over-sexualized. Perhaps we need a much better biblical theology of beauty, friendship, and intimacy than we currently have. (But that's an article for another time!)

Ministry Priority #5: Create a context for both singles and married couples to thrive in your church.

This ministry priority obviously pertains to more than same-sex attracted strugglers, so why is this important? The way we affirm (or do not affirm) singles in the church will either exacerbate or

help alleviate the struggle with same-sex attraction. A low view of singleness within the church will aggravate the struggle with same-sex attraction because it suggests the only really plausible way out is for strugglers to “convert” their sexual attraction and get married. But remember that our end goal in ministry and discipleship is *Christlikeness* in whatever context God has us, whether it involves celibate singleness or married life.

Have we in some Christian circles made marriage an idol, as if the marriage relationship is the ultimate source of life? We won’t say that outright, but actions speak louder than words. Listen to the words of Rodney Clapp, “Christians aspire to stake our lives on the master story of the God revealed in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ. But it may well be that the master story of Western culture—and of many actual Christian lives—is the myth of romantic love.”²⁵ Have we bought into a Western romantic ideal? If so, we are communicating singleness is a second-class relational state.

Yet marriage *and* single celibacy are the two given norms for living as sexual beings.²⁶ Was Jesus less of a human being and a man because he was single and celibate? Was he less of a sexual being because he experienced his sexuality apart from sexual intercourse?

In order to affirm single celibacy, we need to push beyond sexual-identity paradigms and the exaltation of experienced sexual pleasure. Sex within marriage is no doubt important, but it is not

25. Rodney Clapp, “Why Christians Have Lousy Sex Lives,” *ReGeneration Quarterly*, Summer 1995, 7-10, quoted in Dayna Olson, “The Witness of Celibate Sexuality,” *InterVarsity Collegiate Ministries*, accessed June 25, 2014, www.cms.intervarsity.org/mx/item/3831/.

26. Richard Bewes, “The New Hampshire Decision: Statement from All Souls Church, Langham Place, London W1, November 2003,” *Free Republic*, accessed June 25, 2014, www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1029497/posts. In fact, Jesus reminds the Sadducees that in the eschaton, people “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matt 22:30). If marriage is a temporary human institution that points ultimately to the marriage between the Lamb and his bride, the church corporate, shouldn’t that impact positively our view of singleness since that is where we’re all headed?

the only thing. It's never the glue that holds a marriage together. And the challenge of singleness is far bigger than foregoing sexual intimacy. As Jenell Paris notes, "Without marriage, a person may well miss out on loving touch, life in a household, positive contact with children, companionship, financial stability, health insurance, and certainty of care when he or she is sick or aging."²⁷ I've heard these very concerns voiced by both men and women who are committed to the biblical sexual ethic but because of persistent same-sex attraction find their resolve tested. As they grow older and see their friends establish primary relationships with their spouses, they find themselves more alone and experiencing less vibrant community even if they are proactive in cultivating relationships. Once their friends are married and having children, they often find they have to be the initiators relationally, and that can be both discouraging and exhausting.

This is why improving ministry to those who struggle with same-sex attraction is tied to cultivating and affirming singles in the church. If we don't do this, the affirmation of celibacy (whether for a season or life-long) will seem hypocritical. Going without sex cannot mean going without intimacy!

In a marriage ceremony several years ago I heard the minister highlight the wonderful exclusivity of marriage—"I am yours and you are mine"—words from the Song of Songs. This exclusivity within marriage is a genuine blessing, but I ached for my single friends who were in attendance, especially those I knew were struggling with same-sex attraction. Stressing the relational exclusivity in marriage is right and good, but for single strugglers who may never marry it exacerbates the sense that there really is not one person who is exclusively *for me*. So how *do* we address these relational realities?

27. Paris, *End of Sexual Identity*, 131.

What actions steps might lead to a church environment that blesses both singles and the married? I'll address married couples, leaders, and same-sex attracted singles sequentially.

The call to married couples. It is important to broaden the concept of "I am yours and you are mine." This goal is something that we should routinely actualize within the larger community of faith. The book of Acts and the New Testament epistles show that the early church functioned in corporate, familial ways. Both singles and married couples constitute Christ's church. "One another" commands abound.

Living out this familial ethos means coming to grips with the realities Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 7:32–34.

The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.

Paul is speaking in a matter-of-fact way here. He's not disparaging marriage,²⁸ but describing how married couples have responsibilities to one another that hinder service to the wider body of Christ. It is often a real challenge to build deep, consistent relationships beyond spouse and immediate family. Overcoming this challenge begins with viewing family as bigger than blood relations and bigger than one's household.

28. In fact, earlier in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul argues for marriage as the rightful place to experience sexual intimacy. It is true, however, that in this passage Paul clearly favors celibate singleness over marriage in light of where redemptive history is going: "For the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31).

If you are married, ask yourself, “What is the quality of my relationships with the singles in my church? Are the vast majority of my friends the same age and stage of life as I am? If so, what steps can I take to develop a broader web of relationships?” Please note, I’m not urging an “adopt a single” approach as though relational intimacy and ministry is a one-way street. Rather, I want married couples to realize you *need* singles in your life! And not just as your babysitters. As I’ve heard Lauren Winner say, “Singleness tutors us in the primacy of sibling relationship in Christ.”²⁹

I realize there are different seasons in the lives of couples and families. Not every time period is equally amenable to cultivating outside relationships. (Of course this is true for single persons as well!) I have two active children (teen and pre-teen) and my wife works outside the home. Especially during the school year, with homework, projects, church activities, and sports it is easy to become insular and hunker down in survival mode. But how easy it is for a “season of life” to become a lifestyle! Fortunately, I have an eminently sociable daughter who frequently asks who we can have over for dinner to help me lift my eyes above the horizon of my nuclear family.

In addition, don’t forget how challenging it is to be single and celibate. Don’t take for granted the privilege you have to fulfill your sexual passions within marriage.³⁰ Ask your single friends how they are doing in this arena and pray regularly for their purity and chastity. At the same time, don’t assume sexual temptation is the main struggle they are dealing with at the moment!

29. Lauren Winner, “Redeeming Sex for Singles” audio available at <http://www.ccef.org/redeeming-sex-singles>

30. And don’t forget how challenging it may be for you to endure short (and sometimes longer) seasons of celibacy within marriage due to situations such as childbirth, illness, and physical separation.

To conclude my appeal to married readers, remember that single persons struggling with same-sex attraction often experience relationship attrition as more and more of their single friends get married. If you are married, cultivate relationships with your single brothers and sisters. They need you. And you need them, perhaps more than you realize.

The call to church leaders. How can leaders foster a church environment that blesses both singles and the married? To begin, foster community within your church between all members so that relationships are natural and deep. As you do this, always remember that community is experienced not only as fellowship and relational intimacy but also as partnership in mission. The church is not a community of relationally self-satisfied people but a community on mission with the triune God, always looking to enlarge the scope of its community. Loving interdependence within the body (a good thing!) is not the endpoint—Habakkuk 2:14 is! “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” By all means promote community in your church, but don’t forget to tie it to mission. Remember Jesus’ words, “All people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Love is a centrifugal force, propelling singles and marrieds alike into a kingdom project far larger than their own relational fulfillment.

As community is encouraged, be wise regarding age and stage-based groupings in your church. While there are benefits to such groupings, they can perpetuate the myth that the best and most natural relationships are with those who are most like you. Don’t create a “singles ghetto” or a “married couples ghetto.” And regarding the former, remember that being single in your 20s, being single and never married in your late 30s, being single again after divorce at 47, and becoming a widow/widower at 68 are all different experiences.

Singleness is not a monolithic experience any more than same-sex attraction is a monolithic experience. Stage-of-life groups can potentially blur other important distinctions.

Be sure to cast a winsome and positive vision for celibacy that goes beyond simply encouraging singles to remain abstinent. Singleness should never be viewed as a pit stop on the journey to marriage, or a time of waiting and sexual self-discipline that will be rewarded one day in connubial bliss. Think about it—not everyone will marry. But *every* person in your congregation has experienced singleness at one point (or more) in his or her life. We have a practical theology of marriage. Why shouldn't we promote a practical theology of singleness and celibacy?³¹

There are many practical ramifications of affirming singleness. Consider just a few: if your church has a women's Bible study and it only meets on a weekday morning (with childcare!), what does that communicate to single women (and married women who work outside the home, for that matter)? Do you make a big deal of Mother's Day? (Consider the impact on single women or married women with infertility.) Does your men's retreat theme center on being the husband and father God calls you to be?³² Seek honest feedback from the singles in your congregation about their experience of inclusion and involvement.

Lastly, don't perpetuate gender stereotypes. By rigidly affirming what masculinity and femininity must look like, we may actually contribute to a same-sex attracted believer's decision to leave the

31. Helpful resources here are Christine A. Colón and Bonnie E. Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009); Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); Lauren F. Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

32. This is not to say a single man couldn't benefit from attending such a retreat, but if church events cater predominantly to those who are married you may experience a self-fulfilling cycle: less and less singles will experience welcome at your church.

church and pursue a gay lifestyle. We can reinforce a sexual identity paradigm when we communicate overtly or subtly, “A *real* man [that is, a red-blooded heterosexual male] doesn’t like art, cooking, and deep conversations.” If you’re a man who loves these things, what does that mean? If only “gay men” supposedly gravitate in those directions, doesn’t it foster further confusion about one’s sexuality? Or if you communicate to women that femininity is inconsistent with certain activities and styles of dress, or that anything other than marriage and stay-at-home motherhood is second best, then what’s a single woman to do—let alone a single woman who struggles with same-sex attraction?³³ Might she question whether she “fits in” at this church?

The call to singles who struggle with same-sex attraction.

I want to write briefly to same-sex attracted singles regarding this theme of creating a church environment where both singles and married couples thrive. Why? Because bringing that vision to fruition is not the sole responsibility of leaders and married couples. Your participation is key. We are all called to proactivity. Don’t give into the temptation to retreat, especially if you feel overlooked in your congregation. Seek out those singles and married couples who will steward your story well. Be honest about your struggles to connect within the body of Christ.

I have been challenged by several godly single friends struggling with same-sex attraction who have given an honest and gracious critique of their local church culture as it pertains to the experience of community. My single friends frequently have given me eyes to see places of marginalization and isolation within the community of faith.

33. For additional study see Michael R. Emlet, “Truly Male, Truly Female: A Biblical View of Gender” available at <http://www.ccef.org/truly-male-truly-female-biblical-view-0>

What about Your Church?

We have covered a lot of ground in this article, but I want to leave you prayerfully considering this question: Is same-sex attraction “The-Struggle-That-Must-Not-Be-Named” at your church? It is contrary to the intentions of God that any struggle should be treated in this way.

Vaughan Roberts, rector of St. Ebbes Church, Oxford, who has acknowledged his own battle with same-sex attraction says this of the strugglers who leave the church:

I’ve often wondered whether more might have persevered if they had felt there was another way open to them other than the affirmation of a gay identity and lifestyle advocated by the world. . . [or]. . . the isolation they experienced in the evangelical church with their largely private battle.³⁴

Is living a gay lifestyle or suffering in isolation the only two viable choices to those struggling with same-sex attraction at your church? We should find neither of these options acceptable! My hope is that this article has provided perspective into another way, one that maintains fidelity to the teaching of Scripture, promotes community within the church, equips leaders, and supplies hope, wisdom, and strength for those who struggle with same-sex attraction.

* * *

34. Julian Hardyman (interviewer), “A Battle I Face,” *Virtue Online*, accessed September 5, 2014, [http:// www.virtueonline.org/battle-i-face-vaughan-roberts](http://www.virtueonline.org/battle-i-face-vaughan-roberts).

Questions for Further Reflection and Discussion

- What have you learned about same-sex attraction from the stories of those you know who struggle in this way? How is their struggle similar to your own struggles in the Christian life?
- Are you a safe person for same-sex attracted strugglers? Is your church a safe place for same-sex attracted strugglers? If so, what is the evidence for this? If not, what is God calling you to do to be part of the change process? What specifically can you do within your church to cultivate a culture where strugglers feel free to talk?
- How can you affirm the importance of your sexuality without tying your identity to your sexuality? How does that look in singleness? How does it look in marriage?
- What did you think of the discussion differentiating temptation and sin? What helps you persevere in obedience in the midst of temptation? How do you respond when you fail?
- Do you think the article is realistic about the change process for someone struggling with same-sex attraction? Why or why not?
- Consider your own besetting sin patterns. What are the markers that growth is happening?
- If you are single what did you find helpful about the last of the five ministry priorities discussed? If you are married, what did you find most helpful?
- What questions remain for you after reading this article?

Sexual Sin and the Wider, Deeper Battle

By David Powlison

Sexual sins grab everyone's attention. They haunt the conscience and excite the gossip. They push other sins into the background. They go up on the marquee in red letters ten feet high.¹

But no sin stands alone. Counseling must always focus on specifics, because you can't talk about everything at once. When counseling tries to isolate one particular problem as The Problem, it loses the interconnectedness between many aspects of a person's life. Tunnel vision is not the way God goes about working in people. Often a tough, perplexing problem starts to yield when one of the 'connections' or 'underlying causes' or 'next door neighbors' is brought onto the table. Seeing how wider and deeper

1. This characterization partly arises from tendencies within American Christian culture. Other Christian cultures may do their calculus of the conscience a bit differently. In Uganda, for example, anger is particularly shameful, the bogie-man sin that automatically disqualifies from ministry. But Ugandans view sexual immorality the way that Americans view anger outbursts or gluttony. Such behaviors are sinful but aren't uniquely shocking and damning. Dante's *Divine Comedy* portrays "normal" sexual sins—sensuality, fornication—as meriting a shallower circle in hell. Like gluttony or sloth, these are distortions of normal desires. But sins of treachery, sexual and otherwise, involve betrayal of trust, and they sit in the deepest pit of hell.

problems connect to The Problem brings a great deal of hope. It lets counseling ministry aim for progress on many interrelated fronts, creating ripple effects. It makes counseling wonderfully flexible, surprising.

I liken this to the way in which Allies conducted World War II. There were, of course, specific firefights on specific battle fields. But there were also many other ways of fighting that contributed to eventual victory: bombing of supply lines, efficient logistical organization to keep troops supplied, R&D to continually improve weapons. Counseling is similar. It is not a *mano a mano* single combat between one sin and the one Redeemer. It is the invasion of a continent by multiple means. Let's look at some of what that means in counseling people stuck in sexual sins.

It's a Wider War

Consider the struggle with sin this way. Imagine a multiplex theater screening many movies simultaneously. Sexual sin is the "feature film" advertised on the marquee. But other significant films are playing in other screening rooms. The war with sin takes place in many places simultaneously. In ministry to people who struggle with sexual sins, you may get the breakthrough in another screening room, with a sin that you might not have noticed or might not have considered to be related. A breakthrough—with anger, or pride, or anxiety, or laziness—may have ripple effects that eventually help disarm the big bogie-man that has been hogging all the attention and earnest concern. It's very important to widen the battlefield, and not to let the high profile sins blinker us from seeing the whole picture. I will give a case study of how sexual sin can and must be located within wider battles.

“My temper tantrum at God”

Tom is a single man, thirty-five years old. You might be able to fill in the rest of his story, because his pattern is so typical! He came to Christ with a sincere profession of faith when he was fifteen. At about the same time, his twenty-year struggle with sexual lust began. It involves episodic use of pornography and episodic masturbation, about which Tom is deeply discouraged. Over the years he has experienced many ups of “victory,” and just as many downs of “defeat.”

Tom came for help from me as his elder and small-group leader. He was currently discouraged by recent failures, by the latest downturn in a seemingly endless cycle. Over the years he has tried “all the right things,” the standard answers and techniques. He’s tried accountability—sincerely. It helped some, but not decisively.

Accountability had a way of starting strong but slipping to the side. At a certain point, to tell others you failed yet again, and to receive either sympathy or exhortation, stopped being helpful. Tom has memorized Scripture and wrestled to apply truth in moments of battle. It’s often helped, but then in snow-blind moments, when he most needs help, he’ll forget everything he knows. Sex fills his mind and Scripture vanishes from sight. Other times he just overrides the truth in an act of “Who cares?” rebellion. Then he feels terrible—his conscience only goes snow-blind for half an hour at a time! He’s prayed and continues to pray. He’s fasted. He’s sought to discipline himself. He’s planned constructive things to do with his time and to do with and for others. He’s gotten involved in ministry to teens. He’s tried things that aren’t in the Bible: vigorous exercise, cold showers, dietary regimes. Briefly, he even tried the advice of a self-help book, trying to think of masturbation as “normal, everybody does it, so give yourself permission.” His conscience could never get around Jesus’ words: “I say to you that everyone who looks

at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28).

Tom has tried it all. Most things (except giving up the fight) helped a bit. But in the end, success was always spotty and fragile. Tom has gained no greater insight into his heart and into the inner workings of sin and grace. For twenty years it’s been: “Sin is bad. Don’t do it. Just do _____ to help you not sin.” His entire Christian life has been conceived and constructed around this struggle with episodic sexual sin.

His pattern is as follows. Seasons of relative purity might last for days, weeks, even for a few months. He measures his success by “How long since I last fell?” The longer he goes, the more his hopes rise, “Maybe now I’ve finally broken the back of my besetting sin.” Then he falls again. He stumbles through seasons of defeat, wandering back to the same old pigsty. “Am I even a Christian? Why bother? What’s the point? Nothing ever works.” He’s plagued with guilt, discouragement, despair, shame. Sometimes Tom will even turn to pornography to dull the misery of his guilt over using pornography. He’ll beg God’s forgiveness over and over and over, without any relief or any joy. Two weeks or a month of “victory” does far more to alleviate his guilt than anything arising from his relationship with Christ. Then, for unaccountable reasons the season will change for the better. He’ll get sick of sin or get inspired to fight again. That’s when he gives me a call. He really wants deliverance once and for all.

What should I do in trying to help Tom? I am reticent to simply give Tom more of the same things he’s tried dozens of times and found wanting. I don’t want to just give him a pep talk and a Scripture, urge him to gird his loins to run the race, and offer accountability phone calls. What is he missing? What’s happening in the other theaters of his life? Are there motives and patterns

neither of us yet sees? What's going on in the days or hours before he stumbles? What about how he (mis)handles the days and weeks after a fall? Why does his whole approach to life seem like so much complicated machinery for managing moral failure? Why does his approach to the Christian life seem so dehumanized and depersonalized? His Christianity seems like a big production, a lot of earnest effort at self-improvement. Why does his collection of truths and techniques never seem to warm up and invigorate the quality of his relationships with God and people? Is the centerpiece of the Christian life really this endless cycle of "I sin. I don't sin. I sin. I don't sin. I sin." What are we missing?

I asked Tom to do a simple thing, attempting to gain a better sense of the overall terrain of his life: "Would you keep a log of when you are tempted?" I want to know what's going on when he struggles. When? Where? What just happened? What did you do? What were you feeling? What were you thinking? If you resisted, how did you do it? If you fell, how did you react afterwards? Does anything else correlate to sexual temptations?

Through all the ups and downs, Tom had maintained a great sense of humor. He laughed at me and said, "I don't need to keep a log. I already know the answer. I only fall on Friday or Saturday nights—usually Friday, since Saturday is right before Sunday." If you have any pastoral counseling genes in you, you light up at an answer like that. Repeated patterns always prove extremely revealing on inspection. I asked, "Why does sexual sin surface on Friday night? What's going on with that?" He said, "I go out and buy *Playboy* magazine as my temper tantrum at God."

Amazing. Look what we've just found out: another movie is playing in a theater next door. Now we're not only dealing with a couple of bad behaviors, buying pornography and masturbating. We're dealing with *anger at God* that drives those behaviors. What's

that about? Tom went on to give a fuller picture. “I come home from work on Friday night, back to the apartment. I’m all alone. I imagine that all my single friends are out on dates, and my married friends are spending time with their wives. But I’m all alone in my apartment. I build up a good head of steam of self-pity. Then by nine or ten o’clock, I think, ‘You deserve a break today’—even hear the little McDonalds jingle in my head, and then sexual desires start to look really, really sweet. ‘God has cheated you. If only I had a girlfriend or a wife. I can’t stand how I feel. Why not feel good for awhile? What does it matter anyway?’ Then I hop in the car, head to 7–11, and fall into sin.”

Amazing, isn’t it? Pornography and masturbation grabbed all the attention, generated all the guilt, defined the moment and act of “falling.” Let’s call that Screening Room #1. But we’ve also heard about anger at God that precedes and legitimates sexual sin: Screening Room #2. We’ve heard about hours of low-grade self-pity, grumbling, and envious fantasies: a matinee performance in Screening Room #3. We’ve heard Tom name the original desire that leads to self-pity, to anger at God, and finally to sexual lust: “God owes me a wife. I need, want, demand a woman to love me.” That’s playing in Screening Room #4, an unobtrusive G-rated film, seemingly no problem at all. It’s a classic non-sexual lust of the flesh that Tom has never viewed as problematic. In fact, in his mind, it’s practically a promise from God: “Psalm 37:4 says, ‘Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.’ If I do my part, God should do His part and give me a wife.”

As Tom and I kept talking, I found out why God owes him a wife: “I’ve tried to do all the right things. I’ve served Him. I’ve tried accountability. I’ve memorized Scripture. I’ve tried to be a good Christian. I do ministry. I witness. I tithe. But God hasn’t come through.” In other words, the “right answers” for fighting sin are

also the levers to pry goodies out of God. Tom's words sound eerily like the self-righteous whine of the older brother in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son: "I'm good; therefore God owes me the goodies I want." Subsequent anger at God operates like any other sinful anger: "You aren't giving me what I want, expect, need, and demand." This fatally-flawed, proud "upside" of the classic legalistic construct has been showing in Screening Room #5. And why does Tom mope in self-lacerating depression for days and weeks after falling, rather than finding God's living mercies new every morning? That's the self-punitive, despairing "downside" of the legalistic construct: "I'm bad; therefore God won't give me the goodies." Screening Room #6 plays out self-punishment, self-atonement, penance, and self-hatred.

It doesn't take much theological insight to see how all these distortions of Tom's relationship with God express different forms of basic unbelief. We suppress living knowledge of the true God. We create a universe for ourselves voided of the real God's presence, truth, and purposes. Unbelief does not mean a vacuum; rather the universe fills up with seductive, persuasive fictions. Screening Room #7 is showing a blockbuster that Tom had never noticed as trouble. (When Dame Folly keeps her clothes on she sounds like common sense.) In fact, we even found out why Tom is so eager right now to get my counsel and advice. Why did he want to have victory over his lust problem, to try again, to defeat the dragon of lust, once and for all? He's recently had his eye on an eligible young lady who started to attend our church. That's reawakened his motivation to fight. If only lust goes, then God owes, and maybe he'll get the wife of his dreams. Even Tom's agenda for counseling plays a bit part in the wider battle: Screening Room #8!

Look how far we've come in half an hour. Tom's "fall" at 9:30 p.m. last Friday was not where he started to fall. It was not even his most devastating fall. For me to assist Tom's discipleship to Jesus

is not simply to offer tips and truths that might help him remain “morally pure” on subsequent Fridays. Counseling must be about rewiring Tom’s entire life. “Cure of souls” is what ministry does.

Do you can see why we must widen the battlefield in order to cure souls? Tom concentrates all his attention on one marquee sin that sporadically surfaces, defining and energizing all his guilty feelings. But that narrowing of attention serves to mask far more serious, pervasive sins. As a pastor, friend, or other counselor, you don’t want to concentrate all your energies in the same place Tom does. There are other, deeper opportunities for grace and truth to rewrite the script of this man’s life. Tom had turned his whole relationship with God into flimsy scaffolding. Self-righteousness (“victory at last”) would get him the goodies he really wants out of life. Though Tom knew and professed sound theology, in daily practice, he reduced God to the “errand boy of his wandering desires” (Bob Dylan).

Tom and I put the fire of truth and grace to the scaffolding. Wonderful changes started to run through his life. We didn’t ignore temptations to sexual sin, but many other things that he had never before noticed became urgently important. We spent far more time talking about self-pity and grumbling as “early warning” sins, about how the desire for a wife becomes a mastering lust, about how the self-righteousness construct falls before the dynamics of grace. Temptations to sexual sin greatly diminished. The topography of the battlefield radically changed. The significance of Jesus Christ’s love went off the charts. The lights of more accurate and comprehensive self-knowledge came on. A man going in circles, muddling in the middle, started to leap and bound in the right direction. We experienced the delights of a season of gazelle growth. Ministering to someone who has struggled for twenty years with the exact same thing is disheartening, and frequently a recipe for futility.

Ministering to someone who is starting to battle a half-dozen foes that were previously invisible is extremely heartening! Widening the war served to deepen and heighten the significance of the Savior whom met Tom on every battlefield.

It's a Deeper War

The Bible is always about behavior, but it is never only about behavior. God's indictment of human nature always gets below the surface into the "heart." His gaze and Word expose the thoughts, intentions, desires, and fears that shape the entire way that we approach life. An immoral act—or fantasy behavior—is a sin in itself. But such behavior always arises from desires and beliefs that dethrone God.

Whenever I do wrong, I am loving something besides God with all my heart, soul, mind, and might. I am listening attentively to some other voice. Typically (but not always!), immoral actions arise in connection with erotic desires that squirm out from under God's lordship. But immorality results from many other motives, too, and usually arises from a combination of motives. We saw some of this in describing Tom. Erotic motives, the "feel good" of sex, played an important role. But other motives—"I want a wife"; "If I'm good, God owes me goodies"; "I'm angry because God has let me down"—interconnected with his eroticism.

Many co-conspirators play a role when Tom starts rummaging in the gutter of "I want to look at a naked Playmate" and "I need sexual release now." Many other lusts join hands to give a boost to sexual lust. It's worth digging, both in order to understand yourself and in order to minister wisely to other people. As our understanding of sin's inner cravings deepens, our ability to know and appreciate the God of grace grows deeper still. Consider a handful of typical examples to prime the pump.

Angry Desires for Revenge

Sexual acting out can be a way to express anger. I once counseled a couple who had committed backlash adulteries. First they had a big fight, full of yelling, threats, and bitter accusations. In anger the man went out and slept with a prostitute. Still burning with anger, he came home and gloated about it to his wife. In retaliatory anger, the woman went out and seduced her husband's best friend. Did they get any erotic pleasure out of those acts? Probably. But was eros the driving force? No way. Though it's not always so dramatic, anger often plays a role in immorality: a teenager finds sex a convenient way to rebel against and to hurt morally upright parents; a man cruises the Internet after he and his wife exchange words; a woman masturbates to fantasies of former boyfriends after she and her husband argue. In all these situations, the redemption of dirtied sexuality can only happen alongside the redemption of dirtied anger.

Longing to Feel Loved, Approved, Affirmed, Given Romantic Attention

Consider the situation of an overweight, lonely, teenage girl with acne, whose enjoyment of sex as an act is minimal or even nil. Why then is she promiscuous, giving away sexual favors to any boy who pays her any attention? She barter her body in service not to erotic lust, but in order to feed her consuming lust for romantic attention. When boys say sweet things and pledge their faithful love, she might even know inside that they are lying. She knows that they are merely using her as a receptacle for their lust, but she temporarily blocks out the thought. She does sex anyway, because she's hooked on "feeling loved." Ministry to such a young woman does her a disservice if we only concentrate on the wrong of fornication and do not help her to understand the subtler enslavement of living

for human attention. Sex can be an instrument in the hands of non-sexual lust. Both evils must find the mercies and transforming power of Christ.

Thrilling Desire for the Power and Excitement of the Chase

Some people enjoy the sense of power and control over another person's sexual response. The flirt, the tease, the Don Juan, the seducer are not motivated solely by sexual desires. Often evil erotic pleasure is enhanced and complemented by deeper evil pleasures: the chase, the hunt, the thrill of conquest, the rush that comes with being able to manipulate the romantic-erotic arousal of another. There is a kind of sadistic pleasure driving through such sexual sins. They like to see people get aroused, "fall" for them, and squirm. They may become indifferent to a willing sexual partner once that particular chase has ended. Repentance and change for seducers will address lusts for perverse power and excitement, as well as lusts for sex.

Anxious Desires for Money to Meet Basic Survival Needs

The obvious link of sex to money is the "sex industry": sex makes lots of money for lots of people. As in the previous cases, eros may be one factor. But in money-making sex, pleasure plays second fiddle to mammon. There are also more subtle situations. A single mother in our church was in very tight financial straits. She found herself strongly tempted by her sleazy landlord's offer of free rent in exchange for sexual favors. If she had fallen, sexual desire might have been non-existent. In fact, she might have fornicated despite feeling active repugnance, shame, and guilt in the act. To God's glory, she opened up her struggle to a wise woman. In a variety of appropriate ways the church was able to come to her aid with care and counsel. One aspect of care for her came from the deacons (who didn't even know what almost happened): "Know that you will not end up on

the street. We are your family. If you get stuck, if you wonder where the money will come from for rent, or groceries, or a doctor's bill, don't think twice about asking for help." Interesting, isn't it? Mercy ministry to financial needs played a significant role in reducing a woman's vulnerability to one particular sort of sexual temptation. She needed counsel, too, in order to run further in her race of repentance. But anxiety, finances, and the character of God were more salient than her sexual temptation.

Distorted Messianic Desire to Help Another

Certainly there are pastors and priests who are sexual predators, but that's not the only dynamic of sexual sin in the ministry. I've dealt with a number of situations that involved the very impulses that make for ministry—run far off the rails. For example, a pastor feels deep concern for a lonely young widow or divorcée. He so much (too much) wants to help her and comfort her. She so appreciates his wise, Scriptural counsel. He's such a role model of kindness, gentleness, communication, attentive concern. But life is still very hard and lonely for her. He starts to console her with hugs. They end up in bed. The motives? Sexual, yes. But more significant in the early going was a warped desire to be helpful, to be admired, to make a real difference, to be important, to "save" her. When anyone who is not the Messiah starts to act messianic, it gets very ugly very fast. When you minister to a minister who has committed sexual sin, you might find that sex was only the poisoned dessert. The poisonous entrée might be a very different set of deceitful desires, desires arising more in the mind than from the body (Eph. 4:22; 2:3).

Desire for Relief and Rest amid the Pressures of Life

Sexual sin often serves as a kind of "escape valve" from other problems. When steam pressure gets too high in a pressure cooker, it

blows off steam. That's a metaphor for what's often true with people, too. Consider a man who faces, and mishandles, extreme pressures in his work place. He's part of a team facing a drop-dead deadline for a major project. They've been running behind. He's had a month of eighty-hour work weeks. He's harried, driven, preoccupied, worried, worn out. Every day his boss applies more pressure, more panic, more threats. There's been vicious infighting on the project team: who's responsible for what task, who's to blame for what glitch, who gets credit for what achievement. All along, he is not casting real cares on the God who cares for him; he is not "anxious for nothing," but anxious about lots of things. After two straight all-nighters, just under the wire, they finish the project. They made it. He made it. Success. Finally he has a free night, with no deadlines, no jungle of intramural combat, no tomorrow to worry about. But after a month of living "stressed-out," he feels no relief. He finds no satisfaction in achievement. So he surfs the Internet, revels in pornography, forgets his troubles. What's going on with him?

Erotic sin is part of his picture, but there's lots more. Every deviant motive—each lust of the flesh, lie, false love—is a hijacker. It mimics some aspect of God. It usurps some promise of God. Consider that about two-thirds of the Psalms present God as "our refuge" in the midst of the troubles of life. Amid threat, hurt, disappointment, and attack, God protects, cares, and looks out for us. Our friend has faced troubles: people out to get him, threats to his job, intolerable demands, relentless weeks. But he's been finding no true refuge during this frenzied month. Now, in a spasm of immorality, he takes "false refuge" in eroticism. His erotic behavior serves as a counterfeit rest from his troubles. Psalm 23 breathes true refuge: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." This man pants after

false refuge: “After I’ve walked through that godforsaken valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, because the photograph of a surgically-enhanced female wearing no clothes is with me.” A false refuge looks pretty silly when it’s exposed for what it really is.

The Deeper War for the Heart’s Primary Love

Sexual sin is one expression of a deeper war for the heart’s loyalty and primary love. Learning to see more clearly is a crucial part of your sanctification journey. Teaching others to have eyes open to the deeper battles is a crucial part of wise pastoral ministry. Jesus Christ looks better and better the more we see what He is about. He is not simply in the business of cleaning up a few embarrassing moral blots. Deepening the battle deepens the significance of the Savior. He alone sees your heart accurately. He alone loves you well enough to make you love Him.

