

# WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

## Week Three:

*How to think well...  
About sexual fidelity*



*Those who cannot conceive of Friendship as a  
substantive love  
but only as a disguise or elaboration of Eros betray the  
fact that they have never had a Friend.  
C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves**

# The FAQs: What You Should Know About Purity Culture

July 24, 2019

## What just happened?

Last week Josh Harris posted on Instagram that he and his wife were separating after 20 years of marriage. Because Harris is considered a foundational influence on “purity culture,” the announcement has launched fresh criticism and debate about the movement.

## What is purity culture?

“Purity culture” is the term often used for the evangelical movement that attempts to promote a biblical view of purity (1 Thess. 4:3-8) by discouraging dating and promoting virginity before marriage, often through the use of tools such as purity pledges, symbols such as purity rings, and events such as purity balls.

## What are purity pledges, purity rings, and purity balls?

Purity pledges are vows taken by teenagers and young adults to abstain from sex before marriage. A prime example is the original pledge from True Love Waits (1993), which read: “Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, those I date, and my future mate to be sexually pure until the day I enter marriage.”

Purity rings are sometimes worn as outward symbols by those who have made a purity pledge. The rings were popularized by the Christian ministry The Silver Ring Thing, which promoted abstinence primarily through music

events. A decade ago, the rings were worn by several young actors and pop stars, including Miley Cyrus, Demi Lovato, Selena Gomez, and the Jonas Brothers.

Purity balls (or Father-Daughter Purity Balls) are formal dance events attended by fathers and their daughters that promote virginity until marriage for teenage girls. At the balls the fathers would often sign a pledge that they would be the example of purity and model integrity for their daughter. The dances were originally conceived in 1998 by a California couple, Randy and Lisa Wilson, as a way of "celebrating God's design and life's little growth spurts."

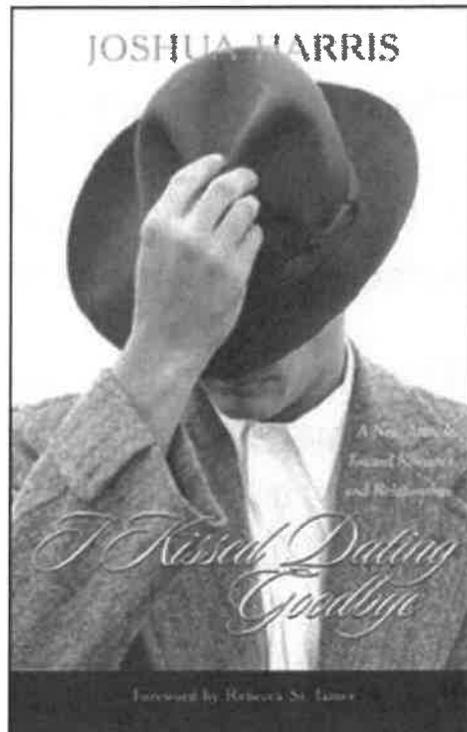
## **How did the purity culture movement get started?**

The purity culture movement began in the 1990s as Christians who were children or teens during the beginning of the 1960s-era sexual revolution began to have children and teenagers of their own. By the early years of 1990s, AIDS had become the number one cause of death for United States men ages 25 to 44, and the teen pregnancy rate had reached an all-time high. The number of premarital sex partners had also increased substantially since the 1970s. For example, in the 1970s only 2 percent of American women had more than 10 sexual partners before marriage; in the 1990s that percentage had increased to 10 percent (in 2010 it was 18 percent).

At the time many evangelicals were reacting to the negative effects of sex outside of marriage and attempted to once again ground sexuality in biblical ethics. In 1992 Richard Ross, a youth ministry consultant at LifeWay Christian Resources, presented the theme of "True Love Waits" in a brainstorming session for a potential Christian sex education campaign. A year later Southern Baptists adopted the program with the goal of 100,000

signed commitment cards (i.e., purity pledges) by the time of their next annual convention. In 1994 True Love Waits held a rally in Washington, D.C. with 25,000 youth and displayed 210,000 commitment cards on the National Mall between the Capitol and the Washington Monument.

Four years later Josh Harris published his first book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, which promoted abstinence and popularized the concept of "courting" as an alternative to dating. The book went on to sell more than a million copies and became a primary text of the purity culture movement. (Harris later issued a statement expressing his concerns about the book and asked his publisher to discontinue its publication. He also produced a documentary video called "I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye.")



## Was purity culture effective in reducing pre-marital sex?

After the launch of the True Love Waits movement there was a significant decline between 1995 and 2002 in sexual activity for girls ages 15 to 17 and boys ages 15 to 18. The proportion of never-married females 15 to 17 years of age who had had sexual intercourse dropped from 38 percent in 1995 to 30 percent in 2002. For male teens, the percent of those who were sexually experienced dropped in both age groups: from 43 percent to 31 percent at age 15 to 17, and from 75 percent to 64 percent at age 18 to 19. Teen pregnancies also dropped dramatically over the next 30 years. It's unclear, though, how much credit the movement deserves for these trends.

A study published in 2009 found that the sexual behavior of teens who had

taken a purity pledge does not differ from that of closely matched non-pledgers. (Five years after the pledge, 82 percent of pledgers denied having ever pledged.) Another study found the sexually transmitted diseases (STD) infection rate of those who had taken the pledge also did not differ from the non-pledgers.

## **What are the criticisms of purity culture?**

Criticism of the purity culture movement comes in two general forms, Bible-based and secular-based.

Bible-based concerns about the movement tend to align with the criticism's Harris made of his own book: it overemphasized the importance of sex, de-emphasized grace, and added unnecessary rules to male-female relationships. As he said in his statement:

There are other weaknesses too: in an effort to set a high standard, the book emphasized practices (not dating, not kissing before marriage) and concepts (giving your heart away) that are not in the Bible. In trying to warn people of the potential pitfalls of dating, it instilled fear for some—fear of making mistakes or having their heart broken. The book also gave some the impression that a certain methodology of relationships would deliver a happy-ever-after ending—a great marriage, a great sex life—even though this is not promised by Scripture.

The other category of criticism comes from those who reject the biblical perspective on sexuality and frame their concerns on secularized (or in the case of some Christians, antinomian) views of sexuality. While they agree with the Bible-based critics about the movement promoting fear and shame, they also think abstinence before marriage is an outdated concept, that the movement promotes gender-based stereotypes, and that it is

wrong to exclude homosexual relationships.

## How should Christians develop a positive culture of purity?

Where purity culture has failed is in keeping the focus on the body and on sex rather than on Christ.

A primary way we can develop a more positive culture of purity is by practicing the spiritual discipline of chastity, which entails purity in conduct and intention. As Lauren Winner writes in her book *Real Sex*, “[Chastity] is not the mere absence of sex but an active conforming of one’s body to the arc of the gospel.”

What is the arc of the gospel? Alex Ward explains that it is the arc from enslaved to sin to bondservant of Christ:

from outsider to brother or sister of Christ; from fallen nature to redeemed creation. That arc includes so much more than physical body parts. It includes the other crucial part of humanity: our souls. We are soul-body creatures. Therefore, we cannot only think of our chastity in relationship to our bodies, but to the very way that we are forming and being conformed in our inmost being to the image of Christ as pure, faithful, and chaste beings (Rom. 8: 29; 12:1-2).

We practice chastity to develop purity, not for the sake of our own sexuality, but for the sake of Christ. In 2013 Ross explained why the purpose of the purity movement, rightly understood, isn’t about preventing STDs or teen pregnancy—or even merely being an obedient Christian. The focus, Ross claims, is glorifying and magnifying Christ.

“In the past, True Love Waits young people have often made promises

thinking, 'Jesus wants me to do this because it will make my life better, so bad things will not happen to me, so I will not be a disobedient Christian,'" Ross said. "Now, there is an element of truth in each of those statements, but I detect a shift [toward] 'Not that I do this so that my life will be better, but I choose purity for Christ's glory. I am doing this for his sake, not my sake. I am doing this because he deserves adoration, and the purity of my life is a way to show him that adoration.' The focus comes off of 'me,' and the focus goes to 'him.' There is no moralism. If I choose sexual purity for the glory of Christ, that is just pure worship."

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# Sex Ethics After Purity Culture: What do the critics want?

Matthew Lee Anderson on August 2, 2019

The news of Josh Harris' separation from his wife and subsequent announcement of his departure from the Christian faith sent shock-waves through evangelical circles. In the late 90s, Harris' *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* was a phenomenon of the first rank, selling over a million copies and destroying all manner of youth groups over whether or not people should date or only "court."

Its prominence and influence made Harris a convenient target for the growing chorus of critics of evangelicalism's "purity culture." Many of those met Harris' announcement with something approaching *schaudenfreude*: his divorce, it seems, is vindication that his message was rotten at its core.

Such a response is, perhaps, understandable. After all, the industry that arose within the 90s and early 2000s around promulgating standards of sexual purity deserves serious scrutiny and censure. Purity balls, purity rings, prince and princess books, and so on were a counter-reaction against (reasonable!) perceptions of a cultural atmosphere in which chastity was eroding.

But as so often happens, the reactionary temperament introduced distorted emphases of its own, and at its worst instrumentalized the Gospel for the sake of preserving abstinence and marital flourishing.

Of course, at the same time 'purity culture' took hold, many evangelicals were talking as much as possible about how to have awesome sex within marriage—a phenomenon that I scrutinized in my first book. The

emergence of the Christian 'sex manuals' in the 80s and their growing popularity in the 90s and 00s, rested upon similar presuppositions as purity culture: the Christian faith is here to help you have Really Hot Sex.

Nearly every sermon I have heard that touched on sex and marriage the past decade invoked some variant of this message: "You have heard it said that pleasure is dirty and bad, but I say unto you..." In its extreme form such an ethic looks something like Mark Driscoll's stance that 'anything goes,' provided it happens within marriage.

At the same time, the choice of purity culture's critics to vilify Harris for his contribution says much about what their fundamental aims are. Harris' book indisputably launched a thousand arguments, and doubtlessly put an end to not a few dates. But its substance is also shockingly banal, and even—for a twenty-three year old—something near wise. Harris issued all the right qualifications about the dangers of legalism, and included an entire chapter on forgiveness.

It was by no means perfect—but its flaws were such that a sensible 16-year-old could easily detect them without too much damage. Most young people inside evangelicalism were not going to purity balls, and had little problem moving on from Harris when they left high school. Legalism pre-existed Harris' book, and has long endured after it.

At the same time, people resonated with Harris' view in part because there was no meaningful alternative. Parents like David French spoke loudly about the joys of going on dates in critiquing Harris, without realizing that as a social practice it had largely died by the late 1990s. A few heroic figures would gamely try to keep it alive, but that was just the problem: that script for finding a marriageable partner now required a *heroic* sort of virtue, which inherently ruled out many of us.

The absence of a script for *how* to enter marriage was partially a consequence of the loss of a social vision for *why* one would marry in the first place—and on those scores, Harris offered a picture of a world that in fact might have been *better* than the Calvinball-like environment surrounding us. It was nostalgic, yes, and was doomed to be distorted in being implemented. But then, every vision is.<sup>1</sup>

For many critics, though, critiquing ‘purity culture’ is simply a proxy for Christianity’s sexual ethics—the prohibitions on same-sex and pre- or extra-marital sexual activity, most of all, but also the injunction to live modestly and chastely in all arenas of our lives. A few are more careful—I appreciated Katelyn Beaty’s endorsement of a married sexual ethic here, for instance. But similar problems to those that entangled Harris’ book threaten even those level-headed critiques: by reacting against the excesses and distortions of purity culture, they risk distorting or diminishing aspects of that sexual ethic that are essential for the full flowering of chastity within our lives and communities. Those who wish to critique purity culture should, for instance, be unhesitatingly vocal about Scripture’s prohibitions, including those against same-sex unions.

As an aside, I’d note that I said something almost identical to the gathering of gay Christians at the Spiritual Friendship pre-conference at Revoice two years ago. The dangers of starting reflection about ethics from a reactionary posture are real, and can prompt us to be hesitating and milquetoast about stances that Scripture is unambiguous and bold about. When that occurs, though, the legitimate criticisms gay Christians have to make about evangelicalism’s culture of teaching get lost within the broader cultural capitulation by those who would make the same criticisms and throw out Scripture’s teachings as well.

To put the point differently, reactionary critics should *start* from their

positive vision of things—rather than working toward such a vision in and through their deconstructive efforts or prophetic denunciations. After all, when ‘purity culture’ is overthrown, what then? Ambivalence or ambiguity about Scripture’s teachings on such questions can only leave a different type of wreckage in its wake, and one that is probably more destructive.

Might I propose *modesty* as one issue that stands in need of retrieval and rehabilitation among the efforts to critique purity culture? For many critics, evangelicalism’s particular approach to modesty placed women under a disproportionate burden to maintain sexual norms, and subsequently imposed disproportionate blame and shame on them for men’s sexual misdeeds.

I have no interest in disputing this thesis in full here. I will note, though, that such (largely) female critics of purity culture can be right, even while telling only a limited and partial story about purity culture’s scope and influence over men. After all, few of them were privy to the vaunted ‘accountability groups’ that structured youth group culture, and the chronic self-laceration for lustful thoughts and attitudes that pervaded them. (Happy was the meeting that was *not* dominated by such issues.) The self-surveillance and scrutiny that Amy DeRogatis marks as an aspect of purity culture played out differently across the sexes, but was no less present among men—even if it was less public, and therefore less visible.

Still, a sexual ethic in which individuals are fully responsible for their own lustful thoughts does not preclude the responsibility of others to maintain norms of dress that preclude intentionally scandalizing or provoking others, unless one has exceedingly good cause to do so. Insofar as modesty is a virtue, it is a recognition that our bodies are part of a moral ecology; they help create an environment within which other people live, people to whom we have real responsibilities to act in love.

We protect what we love, and that includes our own flesh—protect it not only from the unwelcome eyes of others, but even from those eyes we would welcome in a different context or time. If I may quote myself from a related context:

The Christian objection to porn[ography] is not motivated by a fear of sexuality or by 'sex negativity,' but by a sanctified sense of wonder at the beauty of the human being, fully alive and fully revealed. And such wondrous treasures *want* secrecy: Hiddenness is the native habitat of glory.

But our curious society has long shed its reluctance to profane the most holy places: the body in its sexual presentation is now merely one more trivial amusement meant for the satisfaction of momentary and passing interests, leaving no permanent mark on the soul or the society. Sex no longer matters—which is why it will no longer be fun.

For the comedy, the ordinariness, and the mundane weirdness of sex draw energy and life from the enchanted awe which tempts us to kneel in chaste humility before the glory of another human being. No longer sacred, sex has become nothing at all.<sup>2</sup>

Sacred things are often secret things. The preservation of a sense of secrecy within our bodies preserves the freedom to give them to another, within our own time and upon our own times. Modesty preserves the meaning of the body as oriented toward others in freedom; it is a means by which we 'possess [our] vessel' in honour, rather than dishonour. The failure to live modestly does not make us responsible for the wrongdoings of others—but it might place them in a position where they are forced to adopt a heroic level of virtue. And, as we all know too well, there are not many heroes among us.

It is no easy thing being an evangelical who wants to hold firm to traditional sexual ethics these days. Only the real difficulty arises not from the insults and skepticism of the world around us, but from the challenge of persuading our co-religionists that they have been more worldly than they realized *without* ourselves being dismissed as simply capitulating on certain norms. I have myself doubtlessly failed to navigate this challenge as well as I might have; perhaps critics of 'purity culture' will have more success.

## Enjoy the article? Pay the writer.

1. Fun fact: the first book I wrote still sits on my laptop, unpublished. It was an effort to articulate how a vision for marriage was essential to navigating the process of entering marriage in a world without rules. There is lots of Chesterton in it, and it's not very well written. But I haven't seen any reason to disagree with it.
2. From what I can tell, literally no one has read this book—and my contribution to it is probably the best essay I have written about sexual ethics. Please would someone read it? Pretty please?

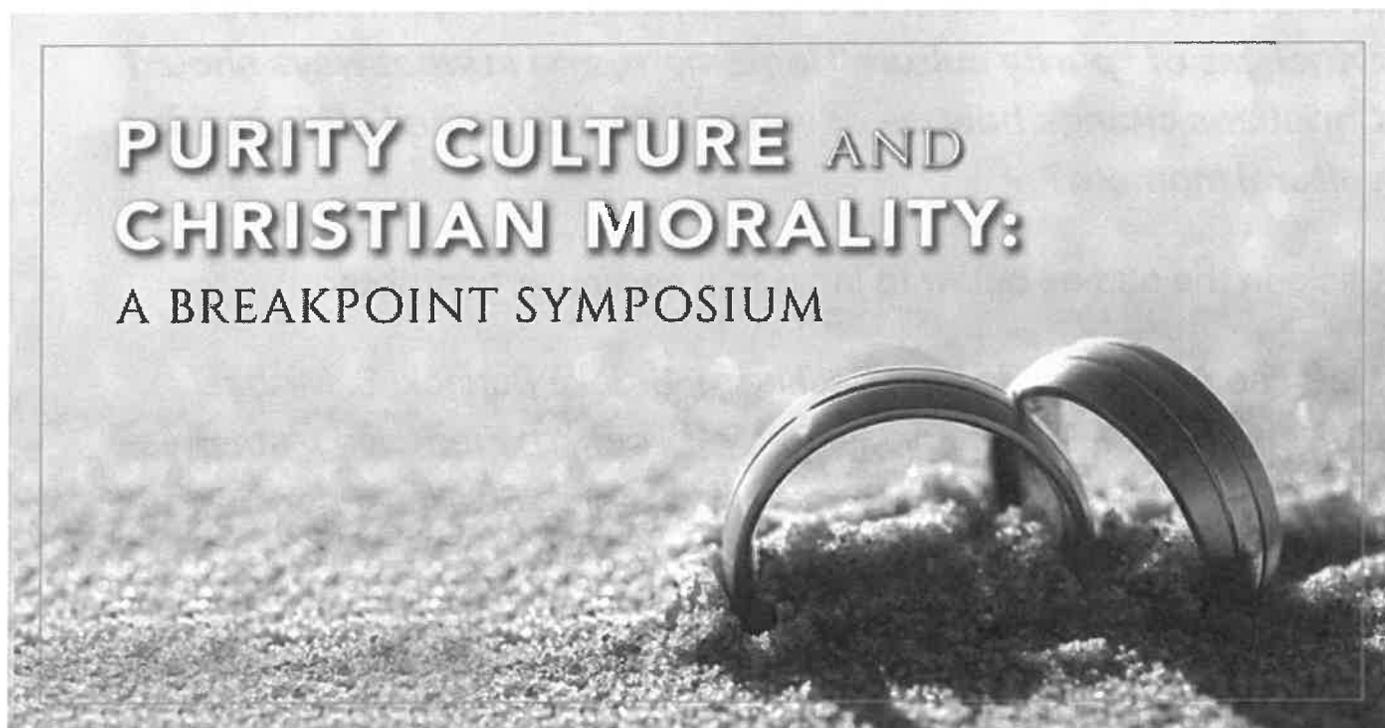
# Purity Culture and Christian Morality: A BreakPoint Symposium

John Stonestreet

by:

Category: Christian Worldview, Symposium

**August 14, 2019**



*The Church has always encouraged Christians to stay morally pure, especially in areas of sexual behavior. During the 1990s, the call to moral purity included public vows, promise-rings, and other expressions of what is now called "purity culture." For many believers, the efforts were helpful, and they were able to build healthy, flourishing marriages. Others were left with guilt and shame.*

*As our wider society has become more sexually broken, many have*

*condemned not only incidental aspects of "purity culture," but all efforts to cultivate sexual purity. Some also question the entire concept of Christian sexual morality.*

*In light of recent headlines, we asked select Christian thinkers to answer the following question:*

***"Purity Culture," which has become shorthand for the ways in which Christians have attempted to promote sexual chastity, has been the target of significant criticism in recent months, especially in the wake of scandals and the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements. Are criticisms of "purity culture" legitimate, and in what ways should Christians change how we advance a Biblical sexual ethic in this cultural moment?***

Click on the names below to jump to a particular contributor:

*Matt Lee Anderson; Joseph Backholm; Brooke Boriack; S. Michael Craven; Jim Daly; Brett Kunkle; Peter J. Leithart; Frederica Mathewes-Green; Sean McDowell; G. Shane Morris; Karen Swallow Prior; Warren Cole Smith; Owen Strachan; Glenn Sunshine; Andrew Walker*

Is it possible to give two half-hearted cheers for the critiques of purity culture that have been advanced in recent years? The attempts many have made to promote modesty and abstinence tended to both exacerbate anxious, legalistic tendencies in the communities where they were adopted and reduced Christian ethics of marriage and family to a narrow-minded concern for whether someone was having sex inside of marriage or not. Such an approach left a void for a post-married sexual life, creating the impression that the aim and purpose of abstinence was to maximize sexual pleasure while being swept up into a romanticized vision of marriage.

In other words, purity culture failed because it was *not* promoting chastity, at least not in the sense as Christian ethics understands the virtue.

So why only two half-hearted cheers? Those critiques have often been made in service of overturning that ethic in its entirety. The abuses and missteps within 'purity culture' do not arise from Christian sexual ethics themselves, but from an anxious, reactionary resistance to a culture turning away from that ethic. In correcting, purity culture overcorrected—and now its critics are at risk of repeating the error, and repudiating purity culture while having nothing substantive with which to replace it. Untangling it from the hollow, lifeless versions on offer in "purity culture" is a critical task—provided that, in doing so, we retrieve and recover the heartbeat of the sexual ethic, rather than reject it.

To do that, though, is the challenge. For my own part, I think our Lord's advice to Christians remains paramount: "You hypocrite, first take out the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

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Purity culture, however we define that, has a point; what we do with our bodies, sexually and otherwise, matters. The contrast with the world's view of sexuality couldn't be clearer. While God offers marriage as the context of sexual expression, the world offers "if it feels good do it." Despite assurances that no one will be hurt if everyone consents, fatherless homes, broken marriages, porn addictions, and epidemic levels of sexually transmitted infections say otherwise.

But if “purity” is clearly a better path, why all the trouble? Because somewhere along the way we forgot that the purity that matters most is something Jesus purchased for us on the cross, not something we earn by being chaste. While the Gospel tells us that God casts our sin as far as the east is from the west, we told our young people that some mistakes stain us forever. Where people were looking for hope and forgiveness, they were offered shame instead. To the extent this happened, it was wrong.

Still, we shouldn’t throw out the baby out with the bathwater, however fashionable it may seem. Virtue is still a foundation of human flourishing, but leave no doubt that the ultimate goal is Jesus. “Purity” without Jesus may help prevent an infection of the body, but self-righteousness of the soul is a far more serious condition. Yes, raise the standard and call people to be better than their impulses, but don’t do it because it will make us pure; do it because Jesus already did.

### **Joseph Backholm is Legal Counsel and Director of “What Would You Say?” for the Colson Center for Christian Worldview**

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As a teenager, I was attracted to this set of behaviors – now described as the stuff of “Purity Culture” – and the promises of what it would deliver. I was fearful of getting life wrong and getting hurt, and this offered me safety and control.

My exit from that season began when I realized that life is not something you can bargain your way through, and that I had more to live for than the great “end” that Purity Culture promised. I was lifted out by a holistic theology of my body, sexual ethics, and life purpose that deepened and adjusted my perspective and priorities.

Critics of Purity Culture might rightfully point out that a formula of behaviors can't guarantee we'll get what we want or don't want, but pretending that freedom is possible without boundaries is just going to send us into another painful ride on the pendulum swing.

The Biblical sexual ethic does deliver. It may not deliver what you want, when you want – it doesn't *guarantee* a spouse, or the absence of pain, or more sexual pleasure. But if you're after an ethic that affirms and celebrates your sexuality without idolizing it, and creates the space for its true freedom, then it will deliver.

And it delivers more than what Purity Culture offered. It affirms that my life is complete and valuable and satisfying *today*. Delight my imagination with that truth and I'll be motivated to do more than save sex for marriage – I'll live a creative, productive, fulfilling life *right now*.

### **Brooke Boriack, Program Director for the Colson Fellows with the Colson Center for Christian Worldview**

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It is inadequate to only instruct young people in what they *ought not do* when it comes to sexuality. The temptation of sex is too ubiquitous and powerful, and besides, we shouldn't focus on renouncing what it is shallow and empty when we can promote what is true, and good, and beautiful.

*The Church would be better served by unreservedly promoting the extraordinary gift and beauty of the sexual union as designed by the Creator within its ideal relationship. Sex is the ultimate integrating act between a man and woman; it unites them not only biologically but psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually as well. There is no other equivalent physical human experience. As such, biblical—and therefore*

human—sexuality is a singularly distinct experience that warrants particular and exclusive consideration.

That consideration is for the other person as well as for other human beings who may come into existence. This is what distinguishes biblical sexuality. Biblical sexuality acknowledges the uniquely integrating nature of sex and thus establishes sex as an *other-centered* act of mutual giving and receiving in a relationship that is committed to the consideration and care of all aspects of the people involved.

By design, sex is proven to be best experienced within a relationship of self-giving *agape* love versus self-satisfying *eros* or erotic “love” of the world. We should help young people commit to and pursue, for their sake, and the sake of their potential offspring, the higher good of the only relationship (marriage) that truly offers the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual safety in which true sexual freedom can be most enjoyed.

### **S. Michael Craven is the Director of the Colson Fellows Program with the Colson Center For Christian Worldview**

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Jesus held a high view of human life, relationships, sexuality and marriage. In his teaching, He referred back to Genesis, explaining that God made us in His image male and female – and that this is the basis for marriage between a husband and wife. He understood the beauty and joy of healthy sexuality – as a single man. He knew the good things that spring from healthy sexuality, such as love, marriage, life, children, and relationships.

The “purity culture” placed a lot of emphasis on waiting for marriage to have sex. And while Jesus did teach that sex outside of marriage was sin, He pointed to something deeper than our actions – sinful desires in our

hearts. What He offers, through forgiveness, truth, healing, and the power of the Holy Spirit, is a transformation of our hearts that leads to right behaviors.

As I read about those who say the “purity movement” hurt them, a few themes keep recurring. Some people tried to live up to a standard and failed – so they gave up. Some felt shame and condemnation from those they saw as rigid and judgmental. Some internalized a negative view of sex and tried to stifle their sexuality. And, sadly, some were deeply wounded through sexual abuse or harassment.

Does this mean we throw out Jesus’ teaching on sexuality and align with a broken, hyper-sexualized culture? Of course not! We see the devastation and destruction from broken sexuality all around us. Christians must continue to teach God’s design for marriage and work to live out the biblical sexual ethic. This includes offering grace, healing, and restoration for all of us sinners. We can’t force the world to follow God’s standards, but we can point people toward a better way with God’s truth and our lives.

### **Jim Daly is the President of Focus on the Family**

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It depends on what we mean by “Purity Culture” (PC). As far as it makes purity an if/then proposition—*if you stay a virgin, then marital bliss will follow*—criticism is legitimate. If PC relegates non-virgins to damaged goods, count me out. However, if it means pointing to God’s design for human sexuality—one man, one woman, one flesh, one lifetime—and challenging God’s people to live in obedience, then I’m in. So, we first need a clear picture of what’s being criticized to know if it’s legitimate. Much of the PC criticism I’ve seen caricatures the movement or extrapolates from one’s personal experience to the entire movement and thus, is largely

unhelpful.

To advance God's vision of sexuality, the church must first equip its own people, emphasizing two things: flourishing according to God's design and redemption/restoration according to God's grace. God's intention is sexual purity: "It is God's will...that you should avoid sexual immorality...For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (I Thess. 4:3&7). Without guaranteeing outcomes, we confidently teach the biblical connection between obedience and flourishing. However, a sexually broken culture also needs the restorative power of the gospel. When I met my wife in college, she was a single mom. Obviously, she had lived outside of God's intent for her sexuality. But any PC message that stops there is entirely deficient. When she tells the rest of her story, an amazing picture of God's redemption emerges.

The beauty of flourishing *and* forgiveness, borne out in real lives. Our culture needs to see both in full display.

**Brett Kunkle is the founder and president of MAVEN ([www.maventruth.com](http://www.maventruth.com)) and the co-author of *A Practical Guide to Culture: Helping the Next Generation Navigate Today's World*.**

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Evangelicals aren't wrong to connect purity to sexual behavior. The Bible does the same. Under the Law, sexual sin, idolatry, and shedding innocent blood polluted and sickened the land until it vomited Israel into exile. These same sins pollute the church, and Jesus threatens to remove the lampstand from churches that don't repent of idolatry and immorality (Greek, *porneia*; Revelation 2-3).

But since Jesus, purity and pollution don't work the same. Impurity

besieged Israel. The world overwhelmed them with uncleanness, and so did their own bodies. A woman was unclean during menstruation and for weeks after having a child. A daughter became impure if attended her mother's funeral. Even within marriage, sex made both husband and wife unclean.

Impurity is symbolic death. Impurity threatened Israel because Death ruled the world, including Israel, after Adam's sin.

That's all changed. Because of Jesus, the reign of Death has been replaced by the "reign in life" of "those who receive the abundance of grace" (Romans 5:17). The reign of Death has given way to the reign of the saints.

Christians haven't always gotten the memo. We cower behind protective barricades, as if Death were all-powerful. Too often, we overemphasize the "Don'ts." The sole imperative, especially for young women, is to preserve the negative state of virginity.

The gospel needs to be our starting point. Jesus defeated Death. Sexual sin still pollutes; sex itself *doesn't*. Our bodies aren't sources of pollution. On the contrary, baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus and walking in the Spirit, our bodies are victorious instruments of God's justice and holiness (Romans 6).

We need to relearn the lesson of Edmund Spenser's *Fairie Queene*, whose heroine of chastity isn't a swooning flower but a conquering knight.

**Peter J. Leithart, President, Theopolis Institute, Birmingham, Alabama**

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Our culture understands "purity" very well, and embraces it enthusiastically—that is, when we're shopping for food. It defends "purity" zealously—when we're talking about the environment. It only balks at "purity" when the

subject is sex.

In my hippie college days I claimed to celebrate all religions, but I deeply resented Christianity. We mocked Christians and argued with them, trying to undermine their faith. Someone donated paperback Bibles to the dorms, and my friend tore them up; we thought that was hilarious.

Why did we want to bully Christians, and delight to sadden them? I used to say, "There's something wrong with those Christians. They're *too clean*."

I think it was their purity that annoyed me. We felt somehow judged by them, though they never said judgmental things. Sexual purity somehow challenges people, even when it's just minding its own business.

That's because there is spiritual *power* in purity. This is a deep and ancient spiritual battle we've stumbled into, with a scope much broader than sex. Purity addresses all Creation, putting everything in tune so it can function and flourish according to its design. That's what people mean when they call for purity in the environment, and human sexual behavior is really just a part of that environment.

So instead of apologizing for purity, let's get better at *living* it. All of us, not just singles; we can all get better at governing the thoughts and images we allow in our heads, as St. Paul said, preferring "Whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable" (Phil 4:8). Let's honor purity, even if that makes us more annoyingly "clean." Coming up with new phrasing wouldn't help; it's purity itself that they are rejecting. Perhaps they sense its power better than we do.

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Given recent criticism of purity culture, it is easy to fall into one of two traps: blindly defending it or rejecting every facet of it. The reality is that purity culture was a well-intentioned, but misguided, movement.

Yes, purity culture overplayed marriage, took a formulaic approach to relationships, ignored the value and beauty of singleness, and used the broader societal script of using sex to sell a product (in the case of the purity movement, sex was used to "sell" abstinence).

But purity culture also brought sex to the forefront of discussion in the church, aimed to communicate to girls and boys that they have intrinsic value and can say no to sexual pressure, and it reminded young people that sex really does matter.

Let's acknowledge and repent of the bad from purity culture without losing what is good. Now is the time for a measured response. It matters deeply for this generation of young people, and for a watching world, that we get the biblical sexual ethic right.

**Sean McDowell, Ph.D. is a Professor at Biola University**

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The first thing I insist on when anyone brings up "purity culture" is that they define what they're talking about. Do they mean their old church youth group? Their parents? A particular book? A home schooling curriculum or conference? I ask this because the term often functions like a Rorschach blot test, signifying something different to everyone who uses it. In fact, the teachers, writers, and organizations lumped together under this heading often contradict one another.

More confusingly, Joshua Harris and his now-repudiated book "I Kissed Dating Goodbye" have come to symbolize all of "purity culture." This is a pity, because in my view the book is a vanilla call to Christian morality. Almost none of the bad ideas often imputed to Harris come with page numbers, and there's a reason for that. He never promised anyone that preserving their virginity would guarantee a happy marriage—what some have dubbed the "sexual prosperity gospel." Rather, he gave prudential advice (which, by the way, is thoroughly backed up by social science). He never told anyone that their worth is based on their sexual history. As a matter of fact, he explicitly denied this, pointing readers to the "greater love" of Christ's cross.

Sadly, Harris has now turned away from Christ and His cross, as well as his marriage. After watching many inside and outside the church cheer his *mea culpas* over "purity culture," I wonder: do they realize they were cheering the early stages of a man's apostasy? I also wonder: to what extent has "purity culture" come to mean purity, itself? Have we noticed how many writers have used the term to denounce not only the kitschy ways Christian sexual morality was taught to us as teenagers, but Christian sexual morality, itself? How many of those who celebrated the passing of "purity culture" have taken similarly bold stands on unpopular biblical truths about sex and marriage?

I won't defend everything that sometimes goes under the "purity culture" label any more than I will denounce it all. I think that's sloppy, lazy, and (in a time when the cultural currents are all pulling us toward *impurity*), reckless. There have always been good and bad ways of teaching Christian sexual morality. Sometimes, generalizations and proverbs can come across as absolutes and guarantees. Sometimes, the tree of grace is planted in a garden of law, instead of the other way around. Where false things were taught, we should denounce them unequivocally and specifically. But we

can never back down from eternal moral truths about who God is and how He designed us to live and love, no matter how culturally unpopular they are.

## G. Shane Morris is a Senior Writer at BreakPoint

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While the question framing this discussion about purity culture mentions chastity, purity culture's greatest weakness, as I see it, is its *failure* to embrace a full, robust understanding of chastity.

I devote an entire chapter to this long-forgotten virtue in my book *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. There I argue that, however well-intended, purity culture focuses too much on virginity rather than virtue. As a virtue—a habitual moderation between an extreme of excess and an extreme of deficiency—chastity is a positive discipline that involves the whole person and affects the whole person. Chastity is the proper ordering of one good thing (sexual desire) within a hierarchy of other good things. It is something both married and single people are called to. Chastity, most simply, is fidelity.

Apart from a holistic sense of virtue, virginity itself means little—as evidenced by the creative ways people maintain their virginity while remaining anything but sexually pure or by situations in which virginity is lost unwillingly through sexual assault. The person who is raped is not guilty of being unchaste. On the other hand, the consumer of pornography is.

Purity culture's overemphasis on remaining a virgin until marriage misses the mark by inadvertently making sexual purity a means to an end (such as alluring a fine marriage partner or being rewarded with a great sex life once married) rather than focusing on the virtue that is a quality of one's

character.

## **Karen Swallow Prior, Ph.D, is a Professor of English at Liberty University**

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God's moral law reflects God's character. It, like God Himself, never changes. But we fallen humans sometimes describe God and His character imperfectly. We use language that may not be false, but is incomplete. "Purity culture" was a noble if imperfect attempt to teach young people that God desires the best for us, and that Biblical marriage offers the best opportunity for sexual fulfillment and human flourishing.

Recently, some former "purity culture" adherents – including celebrity pastor Josh Harris — are renouncing the message they once championed. They have seen that such expressions as "purity culture," like all oversimplifications, do not adequately describe the robust and expansive understanding of sexuality and marriage that a mature Christian worldview can bring to this conversation. But it is important that we not throw out a biblical sexual ethic even as we reject transient and incomplete expressions of that ethic. Marriage is a central metaphor of the biblical story. The Bible begins with a marriage. Jesus begins His public ministry with a miracle at a wedding. The Bible concludes with a marriage and a wedding feast. To undermine a biblical understanding of marriage and sexuality is – in a very real sense – to undermine the gospel and the entire biblical narrative.

It is no wonder, then, that those who want to undermine Christianity attack the biblical understanding of marriage. Neither is it a surprise that many who reject a biblical understanding of marriage often quickly reject other essential Christian doctrines, or reject Christianity altogether. Indeed, soon after Josh Harris repudiated "purity culture," he repudiated the Gospel

itself, saying he was no longer a Christian. Romans 1 and many other passages tell us that Christian doctrine and Christian morality and ethics travel together. You cannot reject one without inevitably rejecting the other.

My heart breaks for Josh Harris, his family, and the many who will be led astray by his words and actions. But we should remember that Josh Harris's rejection notwithstanding, Christian morality and Christian marriage are gifts to the world. They point the way to God's highest and best for us. They are blessings, not burdens, especially when compared to the burden of finding peace outside of God's law. Let us therefore remain faithful both to teach and to live in the fertile and satisfying land whose boundaries are marked by God's law and God's love.

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"Purity culture" is not monolithic, much as people often present it as such. It can in truth be many things: a moralistic ethos, a church's gesture toward right living, an unattainable standard, a pledge made when one barely knows what sex is all about, and more. I personally feel little need to defend any and all manifestations of such a culture.

Where, however, this descriptor signifies a sound church's effort to teach its people—in particular its young men and women—to pursue holiness and sexual innocence by the power of divine grace to the greater glory of God, I support "purity culture." I was deeply impacted by some past writings and sermons to this effect. Though temped, I hated my lust, and wanted to mortify it (still do). I wanted to know sexual wholeness and enjoy God's good gift on my wedding day. All this desire was prompted by biblical theology and the indwelling Spirit.

If Christians join the world in mocking “purity culture,” we only show how little purity we know. We must always press for God-centeredness in our spirituality and full recognition of the power of gospel grace for needy people like us. But to mock purity is at some level to mock God. Our hair should stand on end at this thought. Holiness fired by a grand vision of the Lord in all His resplendent excellency may occasion such a response, but true Christians care nothing for the scorn of unbelievers. We care about the praise and honor and renown of the One who has redeemed us in order that we might consciously reflect His purity.

**Owen Strachan, professor at Midwestern Seminary and author of “Always in God’s Hands”**

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While we certainly should promote a biblical understanding of sexuality, it is also important to promote it in the right way. Purity Culture made a number of mistakes on this front, and it is thus not surprising that there has been a backlash against it.

Speaking in a different context, Paul asks, “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, you submit to regulations—‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ ... These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” (Col. 2:20-23) Purity Culture operated on this level, like the Pharisees establishing regulations that went well beyond Scripture, insisting on a kind of asceticism that was based on externals but that has proven to be “of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

The proper approach to promoting biblical sexuality starts with education. We need to explain the reasons for the Bible’s teachings on sex,

theologically and practically. The fact is, doing things God's way produces the best results personally and socially, and there is plenty of evidence that demonstrates this. Understanding the "why" of biblical sexuality is critical to keeping people from falling for the lies of the Sexual Revolution and will help them draw the proper boundaries in their relationships with others.

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Did "Purity Culture" breed a problematic paradigm of sex and sexuality? Sure, I've witnessed firsthand how youth group culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s had negative impacts on how Christians understood God's gift of sexual difference and sexual union. A lot of this stems from a failure of evangelicals to develop a theology of the body that neither glorifies sex nor rejects it.

The response, however, is not to dismiss the very concept of biblical purity, which the Bible very much teaches (Col 3:5). Nor is it to adopt so-called "sex positive" secular theologies that end up discarding the biblical sexual ethic. And that's my primary problem with "Purity Culture" critiques—they end up becoming proxy critiques and proxy dismissals of anything resembling the Bible's teaching on sex.

Many of the critiques against so-called "Purity Culture" are coming either from secular progressives who rejects Christianity's sexual ethic outright, or from jaded and disaffected progressive Christians—or "exvangelicals"—who very well may have experienced problematic teaching as it relates to sex and sexuality, but who now otherwise reject or are embarrassed by the Bible's teaching that sexual intercourse should happen only within marriage.

In their rejection of biblical sexuality, they have offered nothing that does not also collapse into either explicit or implicit sexual libertinism.

If "Purity Culture" is a synonym for fear and legalism, then by all means, let's offer a better paradigm. But in the rush to condemn, let's make sure we're not railing against a caricature of an otherwise historic, biblical, and beautiful orthodoxy when it comes to sexuality.

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# The Pornographic Double-Bind

Mark Regnerus

Forty-three percent of American men (and 9 percent of women) now report using pornography within the past week. It's not an adolescent thing, either, as data from the new *Relationships in America* survey reveals. For men, porn use peaks in their twenties and thirties before beginning to diminish slowly. Indeed, sixty-year-old men are only slightly less likely to have viewed pornography within the past week than men in their twenties and thirties.

Among women, there is a more linear downward trend in pornography use with age. While 19 percent of women under age thirty report porn use in the week prior to the survey, only 3 percent of women in their fifties say the same. The challenge invades congregations as well: 26 percent of weekly church-attending men reported porn use within the past week.

Some experts assert that simple craving for sex is what's behind the desire for porn. Others cite darker motives. Explanations provide only modest comfort to the many women, (and not a few men) who wrestle over the meaning of their spouse or beau's pastime. They feel hurt, if not cheated on. Revelations of pornography use end an unknown number of relationships, including plenty of marriages and many courtships. (Porn use is not, however, a top-ten reason for seeking divorce, as some have erroneously asserted.)

Contrary to what is sometimes asserted, women have the right to be annoyed or upset by porn. It's not a good thing. It's spiritually draining. But we often overlook another casualty of pornography (and the human reaction to it): relationships that fail to launch. Breaking off a relationship because of pornography use can be a rational, justifiable, and moral

reaction to a problem—the predilection for peering at nudity online—but such actions contribute in ways not often noted to our broad retreat from marriage.

I recently observed an online dispute over the matter of men, marrying, and pornography. A crestfallen young woman discovered her boyfriend “struggled” with pornography. I’m never quite sure what “struggling” actually means, since it can be code for anything from shame at taking pleasure in women’s naked beauty all the way up to addiction to hardcore pornography. (There’s a difference.) This young woman elected to remain in her relationship, but she counseled other women to consider the path of least resistance—leaving. Departing, she suggested, is the best option.

It wasn’t the first time I’ve encountered this. Not long before that, I sat around a campfire with a couple dozen enthusiastic young adults, listening to the women recount their list of relationship deal-breakers—porn was of course one of them—while the men sat by sheepishly.

While I’m sympathetic to their concern, I can also promise you that widespread departures—given the dour numbers on porn use—will only accelerate the flight from marriage in the Church and is likely to backfire on women (as many things tend to do in the domain of relationships) who would leave for pastures that may well not be greener.

I would never dream of telling anyone—devoid as I am of information about particular situations—what they ought to do about their boyfriend’s roving eye. However, I have no trouble or qualms in declaring that collectively a categorical call to leave spells doom. Young adults are waiting longer and longer to marry, and fewer are doing so.

To counsel further flight is like asserting that our Christian ancestors should have headed to the hills, as wealthy Romans did, to avoid the plague. You

can't flee far enough, and the Church grew by gutting it out, staying put, and caring for the sick. On the matter of men and pornography, the data suggest you cannot flee far enough. Lots of "prudent" decisions to leave will still lead us to the same place—a widespread marriage avoidance. There's nothing wrong with being unmarried, but we fool ourselves if we think this is the obvious solution.

Male sexual behavior, always a bit difficult to pin down in one place, is moving steadily now in a direction either free of partners or else devoid of long-term commitment to just one woman, aided at every turn by technology. Outside the Church, the revolution runs uncontested, as account after account continues to reveal. Inside the Church, we still seem to have trouble admitting that men are attracted to naked women.

I've said it before: The bottom line is that porn is cheap sex—meaning that it mimics real sex at no cost and no effort, and that many men will track in that direction unless prevented from doing so. And when sex becomes cheap, or alternatives are substituted (as in porn), women get put into a bind. They want to be in a relationship with men, but the men suddenly have more sexual options. Hence (many) women feel compelled to negotiate over things, like porn, that they would never have imagined in the past.

But the gritty reality remains—the Church will have to learn how to navigate this, and press forward with grace and truth. Men and women have to forge relationships—marriage—with each other recognizing human weakness and fostering each other's sanctification. While pornography is certainly a problem, we cannot collectively bail on marriage. It's too important to the future of the Church. Without a marrying culture in the West, chastity will falter on a scale we have not yet seen.

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*at Austin.*

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# The Pornography Culture

*Can society set ethical, legal, or cultural limits on pornography in the age of the Internet? And is this a reasonable or misguided aspiration? In light of the Supreme Court's end-of-term decision on legislation aiming to regulate Internet pornography, The New Atlantis asked legal scholar and theologian David B. Hart to comment.*

David Bentley Hart

Writing not as a lawyer, I am able to address the Supreme Court's recent decision regarding the Child Online Protection Act (COPA) only somewhat obliquely. Concerning the legal merits of the case, certainly, I have little to say. This is not necessarily because I believe one must be a lawyer to understand the Court's decision, but because I am largely indifferent to the legal arguments contained within it, and am convinced that even the question of whether or not it was dictated by genuine constitutional concerns deserves very little attention (as I shall presently argue).

I can begin, however, by confessing my perplexity at some of the *reasoning* behind the court's majority ruling, most especially the curious contention that COPA might prove to be unconstitutional on the grounds that there exists filtering software that provides a "less restrictive means" of preventing access to pornography on the Internet and that does not involve "criminalizing" any particular category of speech. Surely, if we are to be guided by logic, the existence or nonexistence of such software (which is, after all, merely a commercial product that parents may purchase and use if they are so inclined and have the money) cannot possibly make any difference regarding the question of whether the act violates constitutional protections. Moreover, it is difficult for me to grasp why the Court works

upon the premise that whatever means are employed to protect children from Internet pornography should involve the barest minimum imposition possible upon the free expression of pornographers.

Again, not being a lawyer, I have no idea what shadowy precedents might be slouching about in the background of the Court's decision, and I am aware that the alliance between law and logic is often a tenuous one. I can even appreciate something of the Court's anxiety concerning the scope of the government's control over "free expression," given that the modern liberal democratic state — with its formidable apparatus of surveillance and legal coercion, and its inhuman magnitude, and its bureaucratic procedural callousness, and its powers of confiscation, taxation, and crippling prosecution, and its immense technological resources — is so very intrusive, sanctimonious, and irresistible a form of political authority. Allow the government even the smallest advance past the bulwark of the First Amendment, one might justly conclude, and before long we will find ourselves subject to some variant of "hate speech" legislation, of the sort that makes it a criminal offense in Canada and Northern Europe for, say, a priest to call attention publicly to biblical injunctions against homosexuality. We have, as a society, long accepted the legal fiction that we are incapable of even that minimal prudential wisdom necessary to distinguish speech or art worthy of protection from the most debased products of the imagination, and so have become content to rely upon the abstract promise of free speech as our only sure defense against the lure of authoritarianism. And perhaps, at this juncture in cultural history, this lack of judgment is no longer really a fiction.



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In a larger sense, however, all human law is a fiction, especially law of the sort adjudicated by the Supreme Court. As much as jurists might be

inclined to regard constitutional questions as falling entirely within the province of their art, the Constitution is not in fact merely a legal document; it is a philosophical and political charter, and law is only one (and, in isolation, a deficient) approach to it. Constitutional jurisprudence, moreover, is essentially a hermeneutical tradition; it is not the inexorable unfolding of irrefragable conclusions from unambiguous principles, but a history of willful and often arbitrary interpretation, and as such primarily reflects cultural decisions made well before any legal deliberation has begun. And since legal principles — as opposed to exact ordinances — are remarkable chiefly for their plasticity, it requires only a little hermeneutical audacity to make them say what we wish them to say (one never knows, after all, what emanations may be lurking in what penumbras). Just as the non-establishment clause might well have been taken — had our society evolved in a more civilized direction — as no more than a prohibition upon any federal legislation for or against the establishment of religion, so the promise of freedom of speech might have been taken as a defense of political or religious discourse, and nothing more. There is certainly no good reason why “free speech” should have come to mean an authorization of every conceivable form of expression, or should have been understood to encompass not only words but images and artifacts, or should have been seen as assuring either purveyors or consumers of such things a right of access to all available media or technologies of communication. We interpret it thus because of who we are as a society, or who we have chosen to be; we elect to understand “liberty” as “license.” How we construe the explicit premises enshrined in the constitution is determined by a host of unspoken premises that we merely presume, but that also define us. This is why I profess so little interest in the question of the constitutionality of COPA; the more interesting question, it seems to me, concerns what sort of society we have succeeded in creating if the conclusions we draw from the fundamental principles of our republic oblige us to defend pornographers’

access to a medium as pervasive, porous, complex, and malleable as the Internet against laws intended to protect children.

The damage that pornography can do — to minds or cultures — is not by any means negligible. Especially in our modern age of passive entertainment, saturated as we are by an unending storm of noises and images and barren prattle, portrayals of violence or of sexual degradation possess a remarkable power to permeate, shape, and deprave the imagination; and the imagination is, after all, the wellspring of desire, of personality, of character. Anyone who would claim that constant or even regular exposure to pornography does not affect a person at the profoundest level of consciousness is either singularly stupid or singularly degenerate. Nor has the availability and profusion of pornography in modern Western culture any historical precedent. And the Internet has provided a means of distribution whose potentials we have scarcely begun to grasp. It is a medium of communication at once transnational and private, worldwide and discreet, universal and immediate. It is, as nothing else before it, the technology of what Gianni Vattimo calls the “transparent society,” the technology of global instantaneity, which allows images to be acquired in a moment from almost anywhere, conversations of extraordinary intimacy to be conducted with faceless strangers across continents, relations to be forged and compacts struck in almost total secrecy, silently, in a virtual realm into which no one — certainly no parent — can intrude. I doubt that even the most technologically avant-garde among us can quite conceive how rapidly and how insidiously such a medium can alter the culture around us.

We are already, as it happens, a casually and chronically pornographic society. We dress young girls in clothes so scant and meretricious that honest harlots are all but bereft of any distinctive method for catching a lonely man’s eye. The popular songs and musical spectacles we allow our

children to listen to and watch have transformed many of the classic *divertissements* of the bordello — sexualized gamines, frolicsome tribades, erotic spanking, Oedipal fantasy, very bad “exotic” dance — into the staples of light entertainment. The spectrum of wit explored by television comedy runs largely between the pre- and the post-coital. In short, a great deal of the diabolistic mystique that once clung to pornography — say, in the days when even Aubrey Beardsley’s scarcely adolescent nudes still suggested to most persons a somewhat diseased sensibility — has now been more or less dispelled. But the Internet offers something more disturbing yet: an “interactive” medium for pornography, a parallel world at once fluid and labyrinthine, where the most extreme forms of depravity can be cheaply produced and then propagated on a global scale, where consumers (of almost any age) can be cultivated and groomed, and where a restless mind sheltered by an idle body can explore whole empires of vice in untroubled quiet for hours on end. Even if filtering software were as effective as it is supposed to be (and, as yet, it is not), the spiritually corrosive nature of the very worst pornography is such that — one would think — any additional legal or financial burden placed upon the backs of pornographers would be welcome.

I am obviously being willfully naïve. I know perfectly well that, as a culture, we value our “liberties” above almost every other good; indeed, it is questionable at times whether we have the capacity to recognize any rival good at all. The price of these liberties, however, is occasionally worth considering. I may be revealing just how quaintly reactionary I am in admitting that nothing about our pornographic society bothers me more than the degraded and barbarized vision of the female body and soul it has so successfully promoted, and in admitting also (perhaps more damningly) that I pine rather pathetically for the days of a somewhat more chivalrous image of women. One of the high achievements of Western civilization,

after all, was in finding so many ways to celebrate, elevate, and admire the feminine; while remaining hierarchical and protective in its understanding of women, of course, Christendom also cultivated — as perhaps no other civilization ever has — a solicitude for and a deference towards women born out of a genuine reverence for their natural and supernatural dignity. It may seem absurd even to speak of such things at present, after a century of Western culture's sedulous effort to drain the masculine and the feminine of anything like cosmic or spiritual mystery, and now that vulgarity and aggressiveness are the common property of both sexes and often provide the chief milieu for their interactions. But it is sobering to reflect how far a culture of sexual "frankness" has gone in reducing men and women alike to a level of habitual brutishness that would appall us beyond rescue were we not, as a people, so blessedly protected by our own bad taste. The brief flourishing of the 1970s ideal of masculinity — the epicene ectomorph, sensitive, nurturing, flaccid — soon spawned a renaissance among the young of the contrary ideal of conscienceless and predatory virility. And, as imaginations continue to be shaped by our pornographic society, what sorts of husbands or fathers are being bred? And how will women continue to conform themselves — as surely they must — to our cultural expectations of them? To judge from popular entertainment, our favored images of women fall into two complementary, if rather antithetical, classes: on the one hand, sullen, coarse, quasi-masculine belligerence, on the other, pliant and wanton availability to the most primordial of male appetites — in short, viragoes or odalisks. I am fairly sure that, if I had a daughter, I should want her society to provide her with a sentimental education of richer possibilities than that.

My backwardness aside, however, it is more than empty nostalgia or neurotic anxiety to ask what virtues men and women living in an ever more pervasively pornographic culture can hope to nourish in themselves or in

their children. Sane societies, at any rate, care about such things — more, I would argue, than they care about the “imperative” of placing as few constraints as possible upon individual expression. But we have made the decision as a society that unfettered personal volition is (almost) always to be prized, in principle, above the object towards which volition is directed. It is in the will — in the liberty of choice — that we place primary value, which means that we must as a society strive, as far as possible, to recognize as few objective goods outside the self as we possibly can.

Of course, we are prepared to set certain objective social and legal limits to the exercise of the will, but these are by their very nature flexible and frail, and the great interminable task of human “liberation” — as we tend to understand it — is over time to erase as many of these limits as we safely can. The irreducibly “good” for us is subjective desire, self-expression, self-creation. The very notion that the society we share could be an organically moral realm, devoted as a whole to the formation of the mind or the soul, or that unconstrained personal license might actually make society as a whole less free by making others powerless against the consequences of the “rights” we choose to exercise, runs contrary to all our moral and (dare one say?) metaphysical prejudices. We are devoted to — indeed, in a sense, we worship — the will; and we are hardly the first people willing to offer up our children to our god.

The history of modern political and social doctrine is, to a large degree, the history of Western culture’s long, laborious departure from Jewish, classical, and Christian models of freedom, and the history in consequence of the ascendancy of the language of “rights” over every other possible grammar of the good. It has become something of a commonplace among scholars to note that — from at least the time of Plato through the high Middle Ages — the Western understanding of human freedom was inseparable from an understanding of human nature: to be free was to be

able to flourish as the kind of being one was, so as to attain the *ontological* good towards which one's nature was oriented (i.e., human excellence, charity, the contemplation of God, and so on). For this reason, the movement of the will was always regarded as posterior to the object of its intentions, as something wakened and moved by a desire for rational life's proper *telos*, and as something truly free only insofar as it achieved that end towards which it was called. To choose awry, then — through ignorance or maleficence or corrupt longing — was not considered a manifestation of freedom, but of slavery to the imperfect, the deficient, the privative, the (literally) subhuman. Liberty of choice was only the possibility of freedom, not its realization, and a society could be considered just only insofar as it allowed for and aided in the cultivation of virtue.

There would be little purpose here in rehearsing the story of how late medieval "voluntarism" altered the understanding of freedom — both divine and human — in the direction of the self-moved will, and subtly elevated will in the sense of sheer spontaneity of choice (*arbitrium*) over will in the sense of a rational nature's orientation towards the good (*voluntas*); or of how later moral and political theory evolved from this one strange and vital apostasy, until freedom came to be conceived not as the liberation of one's nature, but as power over one's nature. What is worth noting, however, is that the modern understanding of freedom is essentially incompatible with the Jewish, classical, or Christian understanding of man, the world, and society. Freedom, as we now conceive of it, presumes — and must ever more consciously pursue — an irreducible nihilism: for there must literally be *nothing* transcendent of the will that might command it towards ends it would not choose for itself, no value higher than those the will imposes upon its world, no nature but what the will elects for itself. It is also worth noting, somewhat in passing, that only a society ordered towards the transcendental structure of being — towards the true, the good, and the

beautiful — is capable of anything we might meaningfully describe as civilization, as it is only in the interval between the good and the desire wakened by it that the greatest cultural achievements are possible. Of a society no longer animated by any aspiration nobler than the self's perpetual odyssey of liberation, the best that can be expected is a comfortable banality. Perhaps, indeed, a casually and chronically pornographic society is the inevitable form late modern liberal democratic order must take, since it probably lacks the capacity for anything better.

All of which yields two conclusions. The first is that the gradual erosion — throughout the history of modernity — of any concept of society as a moral and spiritual association governed by useful ethical prejudices, immemorial reverences, and subsidiary structures of authority (church, community, family) has led inevitably to a constant expansion of the power of the state. In fact, it is ever more the case that there are no significant social realities other than the state and the individual (collective will and personal will). And in the absence of a shared culture of virtue, the modern liberal state must function — even if benignly — as a police state, making what use it may of the very technologies that COPA was intended somewhat to control. And that may be the truly important implication of a decision such as the Supreme Court's judgment on COPA: whether we are considering the power of the federal government to penalize pornographers or the power of the federal court to shelter them against such penalties, it is a power that has no immediate or necessary connection to the culture over which it holds sway. We call upon the state to shield us from vice or to set our vices free, because we do not have a culture devoted to the good, or dedicated to virtue, or capable of creating a civil society that is hospitable to any freedom more substantial than that of subjective will. This is simply what it is to be modern.

The second conclusion is that every time a decision like that regarding

COPA is handed down by the Court, it should serve to remind us that between the biblical and the liberal democratic traditions there must always be some element of tension. What either understands as freedom the other must view as a form of bondage. This particular Court decision is not especially dramatic in this regard — it is certainly nowhere near as apocalyptic in its implications as *Roe v. Wade* — and no doubt there are sound legal and even ethical arguments to be made on either side of the issue, within the terms our society can recognize. But perhaps the COPA decision can provide some of us, at least, with a certain salutary sense of alienation: it is good to be reminded from time to time — good for persons like me, with certain pre-modern prejudices — that our relations with the liberal democratic order can be cordial to a degree, but are at best provisional and fleeting, and can never constitute a firm alliance; that here we have no continuing city; that we belong to a kingdom not of this world; and that, while we are bound to love our country, we are forbidden to regard it as our true home.

**David B. Hart** is an Eastern Orthodox theologian and author of **The Beauty of the Infinite**.

David B. Hart, "The Pornography Culture," *The New Atlantis*, Number 6, Summer 2004, pp. 82-89.

# The Porn Myth

Naomi Wolf Oct. 9, 2003

At a benefit the other night, I saw Andrea Dworkin, the anti-porn activist most famous in the eighties for her conviction that opening the floodgates of pornography would lead men to see real women in sexually debased ways. If we did not limit pornography, she argued—before Internet technology made that prospect a technical impossibility—most men would come to objectify women as they objectified porn stars, and treat them accordingly. In a kind of domino theory, she predicted, rape and other kinds of sexual mayhem would surely follow.

The feminist warrior looked gentle and almost frail. The world she had, Cassandra-like, warned us about so passionately was truly here: Porn is, as David Amsden says, the “wallpaper” of our lives now. So was she right or wrong?

She was right about the warning, wrong about the outcome. As she foretold, pornography did breach the dike that separated a marginal, adult, private pursuit from the mainstream public arena. The whole world, post-Internet, did become pornographized. Young men and women are indeed being taught what sex is, how it looks, what its etiquette and expectations are, by pornographic training—and this is having a huge effect on how they interact.

But the effect is not making men into raving beasts. On the contrary: The onslaught of porn is responsible for deadening male libido in relation to real women, and leading men to see fewer and fewer women as “porn-worthy.” Far from having to fend off porn-crazed young men, young women are worrying that as mere flesh and blood, they can scarcely get, let alone hold,

their attention.

Here is what young women tell me on college campuses when the subject comes up: They can't compete, and they know it. For how can a real woman—with pores and her own breasts and even sexual needs of her own (let alone with speech that goes beyond “More, more, you big stud!”)—possibly compete with a cybervision of perfection, downloadable and extinguishable at will, who comes, so to speak, utterly submissive and tailored to the consumer's least specification?

For most of human history, erotic images have been reflections of, or celebrations of, or substitutes for, real naked women. For the first time in human history, the images' power and allure have supplanted that of real naked women. Today, real naked women are just bad porn.

For two decades, I have watched young women experience the continual “mission creep” of how pornography—and now Internet pornography—has lowered their sense of their own sexual value and their actual sexual value. When I came of age in the seventies, it was still pretty cool to be able to offer a young man the actual presence of a naked, willing young woman. There were more young men who wanted to be with naked women than there were naked women on the market. If there was nothing actively alarming about you, you could get a pretty enthusiastic response by just showing up. Your boyfriend may have seen *Playboy*, but hey, you could move, you were warm, you were real. Thirty years ago, simple lovemaking was considered erotic in the pornography that entered mainstream consciousness: *When Behind the Green Door* first opened, clumsy, earnest, missionary-position intercourse was still considered to be a huge turn-on.

Well, I am 40, and mine is the last female generation to experience that sense of sexual confidence and security in what we had to offer. Our

younger sisters had to compete with video porn in the eighties and nineties, when intercourse was not hot enough. Now you have to offer—or flirtatiously suggest—the lesbian scene, the ejaculate-in-the-face scene. Being naked is not enough; you have to be buff, be tan with no tan lines, have the surgically hoisted breasts and the Brazilian bikini wax—just like porn stars. (In my gym, the 40-year-old women have adult pubic hair; the twentysomethings have all been trimmed and styled.) Pornography is addictive; the baseline gets ratcheted up. By the new millennium, a vagina—which, by the way, used to have a pretty high “exchange value,” as Marxist economists would say—wasn’t enough; it barely registered on the thrill scale. All mainstream porn—and certainly the Internet—made routine use of all available female orifices.

**Not Tonight, Honey. I’m Logging On.:** Internet porn is everywhere; even “nice” guys are hooked. So where does that leave their girlfriends? *By David Amsden* (October 20, 2003) **The New Position on Casual Sex:** The rise of Internet dating has brought a sexual openness (not to mention one-night stands) to the younger generation not seen since the seventies heyday of Maxwell’s Plum. But can there be too much of a good thing? *By Vanessa Grigoriadis* (January 13, 2003)

The porn loop is de rigueur, no longer outside the pale; starlets in tabloids boast of learning to strip from professionals; the “cool girls” go with guys to the strip clubs, and even ask for lap dances; college girls are expected to tease guys at keg parties with lesbian kisses à la Britney and Madonna.

But does all this sexual imagery in the air mean that sex has been liberated—or is it the case that the relationship between the multi-billion-dollar porn industry, compulsiveness, and sexual appetite has become like the relationship between agribusiness, processed foods, supersize portions, and obesity? If your appetite is stimulated and fed by poor-quality material,

it takes more junk to fill you up. People are not closer because of porn but further apart; people are not more turned on in their daily lives but less so.

The young women who talk to me on campuses about the effect of pornography on their intimate lives speak of feeling that they can never measure up, that they can never ask for what *they* want; and that if they do not offer what porn offers, they cannot expect to hold a guy. The young men talk about what it is like to grow up learning about sex from porn, and how it is not helpful to them in trying to figure out how to be with a real woman. Mostly, when I ask about loneliness, a deep, sad silence descends on audiences of young men and young women alike. They know they are lonely together, even when conjoined, and that this imagery is a big part of that loneliness. What they don't know is how to get out, how to find each other again erotically, face-to-face.

So Dworkin was right that pornography is compulsive, but she was wrong in thinking it would make men more rapacious. A whole generation of men are less able to connect erotically to women—and ultimately less libidinous.

The reason to turn off the porn might become, to thoughtful people, not a moral one but, in a way, a physical- and emotional-health one; you might want to rethink your constant access to porn in the same way that, if you want to be an athlete, you rethink your smoking. The evidence is in: Greater supply of the stimulant equals diminished capacity.

“For the first time in human history, the images’ power and allure have supplanted that of real naked women. Today, real naked women are just bad porn.”

After all, pornography works in the most basic of ways on the brain: It is Pavlovian. An orgasm is one of the biggest reinforcers imaginable. If you associate orgasm with your wife, a kiss, a scent, a body, that is what, over

time, will turn you on; if you open your focus to an endless stream of ever-more-transgressive images of cybersex slaves, that is what it will take to turn you on. The ubiquity of sexual images does not free eros but dilutes it.

Other cultures know this. I am not advocating a return to the days of hiding female sexuality, but I am noting that the power and charge of sex are maintained when there is some sacredness to it, when it is not on tap all the time. In many more traditional cultures, it is not prudery that leads them to discourage men from looking at pornography. It is, rather, because these cultures understand male sexuality and what it takes to keep men and women turned on to one another over time—to help men, in particular, to, as the Old Testament puts it, “rejoice with the wife of thy youth; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times.” These cultures urge men not to look at porn because they know that a powerful erotic bond between parents is a key element of a strong family.

And feminists have misunderstood many of these prohibitions.

I will never forget a visit I made to Ilana, an old friend who had become an Orthodox Jew in Jerusalem. When I saw her again, she had abandoned her jeans and T-shirts for long skirts and a head scarf. I could not get over it. Ilana has waist-length, wild and curly golden-blond hair. “Can’t I even see your hair?” I asked, trying to find my old friend in there. “No,” she demurred quietly. “Only my husband,” she said with a calm sexual confidence, “ever gets to see my hair.”

When she showed me her little house in a settlement on a hill, and I saw the bedroom, draped in Middle Eastern embroideries, that she shares only with her husband—the kids are not allowed—the sexual intensity in the air was archaic, overwhelming. It was private. It was a feeling of erotic intensity deeper than any I have ever picked up between secular couples in the

liberated West. And I thought: Our husbands see naked women all day—in Times Square if not on the Net. Her husband never even sees another woman's hair.

She must feel, I thought, so hot.

Compare that steaminess with a conversation I had at Northwestern, after I had talked about the effect of porn on relationships. "Why have sex right away?" a boy with tousled hair and Bambi eyes was explaining. "Things are always a little tense and uncomfortable when you just start seeing someone," he said. "I prefer to have sex right away just to get it over with. You know it's going to happen anyway, and it gets rid of the tension."

"Isn't the tension kind of fun?" I asked. "Doesn't that also get rid of the mystery?"

"Mystery?" He looked at me blankly. And then, without hesitating, he replied: "I don't know what you're talking about. Sex has no mystery."

# Getting 'Consent' for Sex Is Too Low a Bar

By Lisa Damour July 18, 2018

What if we advised young people to check for nothing less than enthusiastic agreement from their sexual partners?



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When adults talk to young people about sex, the standard speech includes the warning that they must obtain consent before stepping up intimacy to the next level. Here's the problem: guidance that centers on the term "consent" suggests that a legal standard for permissible sexual interactions

is also a decent or desirable one.

Which it isn't.

So long as discussions of consent crowd out discussions of basic interpersonal sensitivity, we should not be surprised by reports of young men who (more often than the other way round) badger young women for sexual favors. It may be legal to wear someone down, but doing so is not the basis for healthy relationships between any two people, be they of the opposite or same sex.

According to Emily Lauster, a 22-year-old recent graduate of George Washington University who now works in adolescent mental health, "You hear stories all the time of the girl not really being into it, or telling the guy she's tired and the guy not giving her space. Maybe he'll keep trying to initiate something physically, or take a few minutes to talk about something else before bringing it up again."

And so long as we normalize mere consent as an acceptable standard for sexual engagement, it will remain commonplace for young women (and sometimes, young men) to harbor feelings of confusion and regret after participating in sexual activity for which they technically gave consent, but only when pressured.

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Joe Berusch, a 19-year-old from Shaker Heights, Ohio, and rising sophomore at the University of Chicago, said that in talking with friends

about a recent New York Times article regarding sex and consent on campus, he was surprised to learn that several of his female friends “had repeated experiences of being asked over and over again.” He added that he didn’t want to think that women would sometimes “cave because it just made things easier. But I know it does happen.”

Sexual encounters ought to be pleasurable, mutual endeavors. They should advance as partners earnestly and happily agree, not because one party merely grants permission to the other. Too often, our advice to young people trains their attention on consent, the lowest possible bar for lawful sexual activity. We routinely spell out precisely what does, and doesn’t, constitute acquiescence but say little or nothing about tuning in to one’s partner’s desires. To put a very fine point on it, we essentially communicate, “When it comes to your sex life, don’t assault or rape anyone.”

Donnovan Somera Yisrael, an emotional and sexual health educator at Stanford University, suggests that we should expand the discussions of consent to include conversations about “how you detect desire in your partner and verify that desire with consent.”

What if we reserved the term consent for its more appropriate uses, such as in the courtroom or when submitting to a medical procedure? And what if, in the place of consent, we advised young people to check for nothing less than *enthusiastic agreement* from their sexual partners? We could add, “I get it that healthy sex can include some uncertainty. Feeling apprehensive yet eager is all right. But if you or your partner feels apprehensive and merely willing, that’s a no go.”

When drinking is involved, even enthusiastic agreement might be too low a bar for consent, but it’s still an improvement upon the standard we hold now.

We can continue to raise consent as an issue, but let's not suggest that healthy romantic activity *typically* involves situations when consent might be unclear. Instead, we could say, "If you're unsure about whether you have a green light in the bedroom, you may or may not have a legal concern. But you definitely have a relational one. You should not feel comfortable proceeding if your partner says no more than 'O.K. ... fine,' to something you suggest."

"An effective lesson on consent," said Nicole Cushman, executive director of Answer, a national organization that promotes sex education for youth, "is not just about providing a legal definition and a script that young people need to follow." In Ms. Cushman's experience, teaching about consent should address "communication skills, decision making and respect for personal boundaries."

Our surprising comfort with the term consent grows out of a reluctance to acknowledge that women have libidos, too. Only if we ignore female desire can we go along with the troublesome premise that, in heterosexual interactions, men will play offense and women will play defense.

"You can consent to having sex, but is that all we should expect from our sexual experiences?" asked Anna Rosenfeld, 23, a recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and a former peer educator for Planned Parenthood. "As women, we should be taught to expect pleasure and reciprocation — that is a higher bar than what we are necessarily taught to think about."

To remind young people that sex is about shared enjoyment, we might say to both our daughters and our sons, "Know what you want and learn what your partner wants. Good sex happens where those two agendas meet."

Of course as parents, we often feel reluctant to communicate with our

children about their emerging sexual lives. Or we may be so busy warning kids about the potential downsides of sex that we forget to let them know that it also has the potential for intimacy and joy. If we broach the topic at all, we may be inclined to address only the legal and medical ramifications, and say little about the respect we hope young people will extend to, and expect from, their sexual partners.

"The hookup culture has reinforced the lack of respect," Ms. Lauster said. "It suggests that you're not supposed to think of the person in terms of a relationship — you don't necessarily have to respect the person you're hooking up with. And I think that goes both ways — that girls don't necessarily respect the guys they're hooking up with."

Given that most young people are considerate of their friends, advice-giving adults could say, "What goes for your friendships goes the same for your romances: You should be kind and caring toward anyone you're with and expect the same in return."

We owe it to our adolescents to remind them that healthy intimate relationships are about a lot more than securing agreement in bed.

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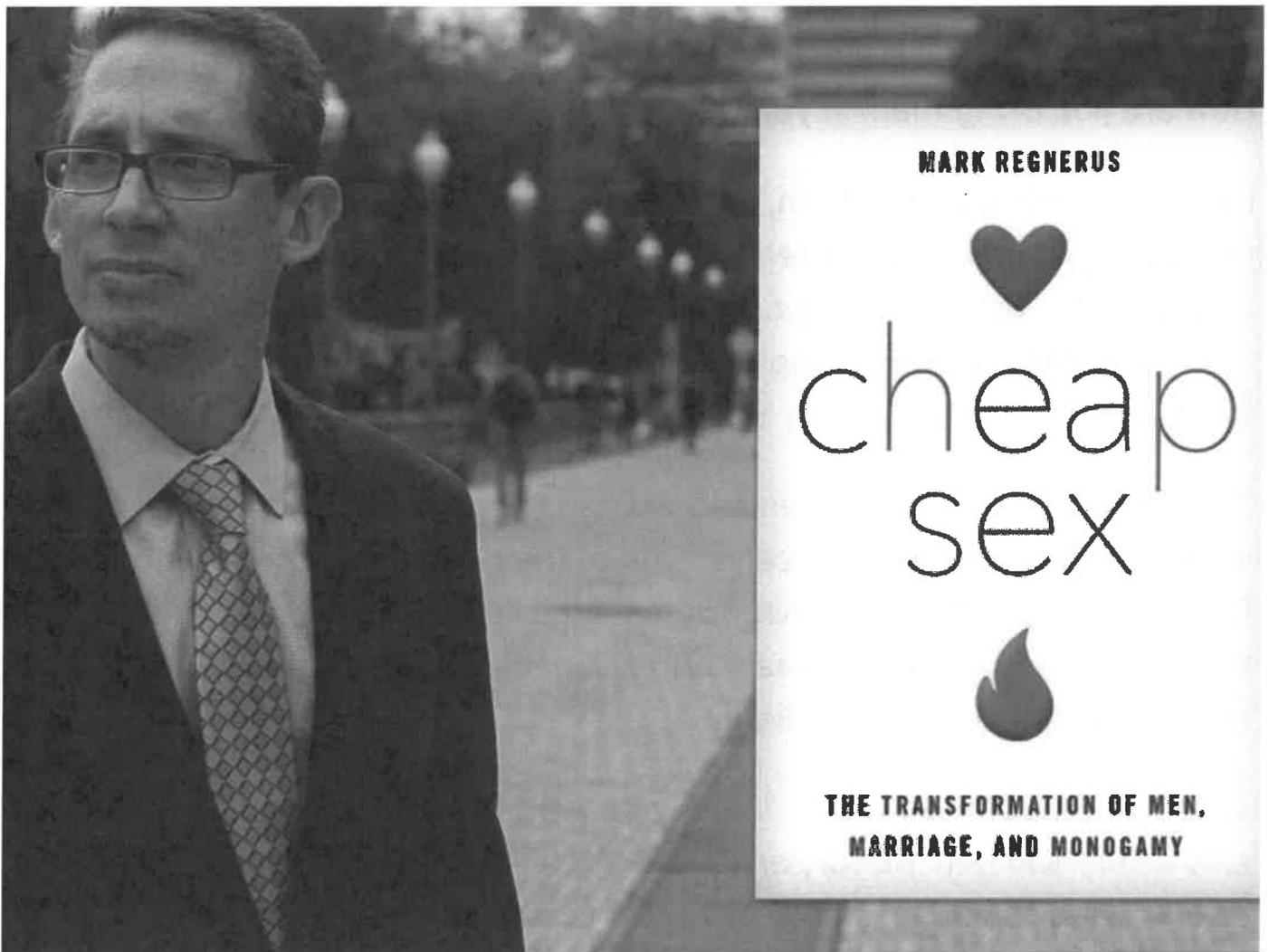
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# Sociologist Mark Regnerus Takes on the Economics of Cheap Sex

Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy outlines the reality of 21st-century relationships.

Judy Roberts



**Mark Regnerus** was trained as a sociologist of religion beginning in 1995 and added the study of sexual relationship behavior about a decade later.

Although his research reveals a world that is not what he as a Catholic would like it to be, he believes that, as Pope Leo XIII wrote in *Rerum Novarum*, "Nothing is more useful than to look upon the world as it really is."

"I always want to know the truth about things," Regnerus says, "and in these domains there is a great deal of misinformation, sculpted narratives and idealistic theorizing going on. I prefer realism, even if I'm not crazy about what I find." In a written exchange with Register correspondent Judy Roberts, he talks about his new book, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (Oxford University Press).

*The words "cheap sex" have both a moral and an economic connotation. How are you using them in your book, and what do they describe?*

I agree that it's a loaded term, and at some level a disturbing one. Lots of people would prefer I not speak of sex in an economic fashion. It's not supposed to work like that. I can agree that sex should not be "cheap," but I would disagree with any suggestion that sex has nothing to do with exchange. Of course it does. You can't wish that away.

The distinctions between men and women suggest that men are the ones who must give in order to receive. One of the central arguments of the book, and it isn't that surprising, is that little is actually required of men today, on average. Sex is cheap — in a variety of ways and because of several developments I highlight.

*In Cheap Sex, you present a "brave new world" of sexual relations that is also a very sad new world, particularly for women who are "learning to have sex like men" but also end up being subjugated to men's interests. You say you are not writing an elegy for a lost era nor making a personal case for social change. What did you hope to accomplish with this book?*

Like I mentioned earlier, this is about honesty and realism in a domain of research that is just swamped with idealism — both from the left and the right, from the secular and the devout. The pathways by which technologies cheapen sex needed to be mapped. And the book is also a generalist updating of what is known about the sexual behavior and relationship patterns of American adults. It serves multiple purposes.

*You cite Anthony Giddens' 1992 book, The Transformation of Intimacy, which talked about how the uptake of contraception "signaled a deep transition in personal life." What evidence of this transition do you see in our contemporary mating and dating scene?*

Where to start? Sexuality is something people now think of (or admit) as malleable, something to "cultivate." We talk about a person's sex life, rather than a relationship with another person. We decreasingly even remember that sex can generate life. Fertility seems like a design flaw now, rather than the primeval reason that sex feels good. We rank order sexual experiences. I could go on, and I do so in the book. Giddens was a prophet, really. His 25-year-old predictions have now materialized.

*Other factors you mention as contributing to the development and proliferation of "cheap sex" are pornography and the internet. How do these relate to contraception, and how do all three work together to cheapen sex?*

In brief, pornography is cheap sex — the cheapest, really. It undermines women's ability to "charge more," that is, to expect better treatment, more wooing and greater relational investment from men.

We tend to think of pornography as causing personal problems. But I focus on the social problem it poses for women in general, regardless of their own actions or that of the men in their life. By "internet" I mean online dating.

The way it's organized and distributed functions to treat human beings as rankable commodities and to speed up our ability to circulate through them. This is how online dating works. It can be navigated for good, but it really can't be reformed in its baseline principles. It cannot reclaim the mating market that contraception has confounded and cheapened.

*Cheap Sex makes the point that our culture's rather dismal state of sexual relations is unlikely to change. Given the realities you describe, what are the implications for people who are trying to live counter culturally in this realm and prepare their children to do the same as they enter the world of relationships and dating?*

My best advice is to not be blind. Willful ignorance might succeed, but more often it will only postpone problems. I also think that many of us do not actually value marrying cultures. If we did, we'd be taking steps to see it happen around us. Instead, we continue to raise the bar for marriage into the stratosphere. I know what will happen — the recession in marriage that is now occurring will only get worse. Stop talking about "deal breakers" and start thinking about "deal makers." If you think a world in which few Christians marry will be a chaste one, you're dreaming.

*You talk in your book about how women are the sexual "gatekeepers" within their relationships. How is it, then, that we have the problem of a "rape culture" on college campuses?*

Women are gatekeepers, yes, but they do not "set the price" by themselves. That is negotiated on terms that are decreasingly friendly to their interests. I say in the book that "hook-up culture" and "rape culture" are both children of the same parent — the split, gender-imbalanced mating market upon which I elaborate extensively.

College administrators remain unwilling to wrestle with the dark side of

human personhood, concluding instead that enforcing speech laws will reform people's motivations and actions. They want men to act better, but are unwilling to admit that men are more apt to do the right thing when they are socially constrained, not just individually challenged. And since women's freedom to have sexual encounters will not be questioned, they are seeking instead to alter how their encounters must transpire. And you thought *in loco parentis* was dead!

On the one hand, it is heartwarming to see universities wonder aloud about how to ensure the sexual behavior of their students could be more wanted and mutual. On the other hand, presuming the sex act is malleable by fiat and subject to bureaucratic oversight is utter hubris. And how many new administrative positions will that require?

*Who are the winners and losers in the new world of sexual relationships?*

It's a mixed bag, and some who think they are winners actually suffer in other ways. Careerist women get what they want — more time to study and commence work and postpone childbearing. They are no doubt successful, and the world benefits from their contributions. But many of them have exchanged something in return — control over how the romantic relationships in their life proceed.

The wealthy, of course, manage to figure out how to exploit new opportunities provided by the new regime. For example, real estate in urban cores is exploding in price as more couples work and delay childbearing — a result of the uptake of the pill. One income there will not suffice. And, yes, many lose something: Stay-at-home mothers struggle for the respect they perceive is given to career-focused women. Not a few men fail to see that high-quality spouses don't stay on the market forever. Many men and women bring forward a self-centered mentality into marriage, which is not

designed for it. I could go on. It was a trade-off.

*You say in the book that relationships and their norms and rules favor men's interests and that the route to marriage, which most women still want, is more fraught with more years and failed relationships than in the past. It sounds like women are giving more than they are getting when it comes to sexual relationships. What has gone wrong in the culture's effort to liberate women not only from pregnancy as a consequence of sexual relations, but from the dominance of men?*

It's certainly true that women give more than they get today. But you have to stop talking about culture as if it is an actor somehow. It's not. Nothing really went wrong in terms of what one should expect. What happened was predictable.

As I assert in the book, the only paradox here is the unrealistic expectation of so many that the securing of ample resources independently of men should have no consequences, or only positive effects, on the success of women's intimate relationships. It's not surprising that women would hope for it. The emotional energy bred by success would seem to be transferable. But sex and even marriage are, at bottom, exchanges. If women no longer need men's resources — that which men can and will always be willing to exchange, if necessary — then relationships become far more difficult to navigate because strong commitments and emotional validation are just plain less necessary (and thus slower to emerge) from men.

Women still want them — they want love, which is a noble pursuit — but the old terms that prompted men's provisions are on the rocks. There is no paradox here. Rather, it is what we should expect. That we are surprised at this development is telling of just how idealistic we are. We should be realists about how people actually are and how relationships work.

*Do most people who engage in cheap sex sense that something is amiss or are they unable to see this because it is all they've known? Did those your team interviewed indicate they would be open to a different path or capable of following one?*

Both. They feel like something is off, but they can't name it. I include a variety of personal narratives where this tension is obvious. It's hard to say whether they're open to something different. When it's all you've known, the models are pretty firmly established. I wish them well, but I'm never surprised when troubles befall them.

*One of your eight predictions for the year 2030 is that organized Christianity will not stem the retreat from marriage in the United States. What does this say about a faith that is called to be salt and thus preserve what is good in the culture?*

Christians are retreating from marriage, too, just at slower rates. We talk about changing culture. But it's not so flexible. What does it say about the faith? It says that Christians want it all. But what they want is what they cannot have — both a culture in which marriage is normative and expected, together with all the desired fruit that won't allow that to happen (greater freedom, choice, flexibility, time and opportunity).

We keep thinking that somehow we can change this. It cannot be changed under current conditions. Rather, think about how Christian communities, families, relationships and persons ought to live in light of it. They will need the help of each other — social and financial — to thumb their nose at the culture.

*Register correspondent Judy Roberts writes from Graytown Ohio.*



# How Pornography Makes Us Less Human and Less Humane

August 26, 2019

“My father often told me that if not for pornography, he’d have become a serial killer,” Chris Offutt once wrote in *The New York Times*.

On Offutt’s telling, his father was both an avid consumer and creator of the dark medium, who made his living as one of America’s most prolific pornographic novelists in the 1970s. But he also secretly drew a series of pornographic comics, which Offutt rather dispassionately reports “eventually ran 120 separate books, totaling 4,000 pages, depicting the torture of women.” Offutt rejects the story his father tried to sell him: “The idea that porn prevented him from killing women,” he muses, “was a self-serving delusion that justified his impulse to write and draw portrayals of torture.” Instead, Offutt thinks his father told himself he needed porn to save him because he couldn’t come to grips with the simple fact that he *liked* it.

Theorists and sociologists have tussled for the past 30 years over whether pornography’s easy availability makes violence more or less likely. The more pressing question, however, is why anyone became interested in the link in the first place. There is no need to take a stand on whether Offutt’s father was right about the powers of pornography to save him from a murderous path. That he felt some deep connection between pornography and murder—between the depiction of women in graphic sexual poses and the violent destruction of their bodies—should be enough to disturb us. Illicit sex and actual violence may be more closely connected than we might like to think.

## Pornography Lies

Pornography deceives. Its sexualized depiction of human persons promises the viewer what it cannot deliver. But *how* pornography lies is difficult to see, if only because our eyes have gone blind from our frequent exposure to the medium. Pervasive consumption of pornography dulls the mind: if we delightedly give ourselves over to falsehoods, we lose our ability to sort truth from fiction. Sin has a compounding effect. The twin wraiths of confusion and ignorance preserve the charm of its false pleasures. It is easier for those drowning in a whirlpool of deceits to embrace their situation as “normal” than it is to escape.

The inescapable availability of pornography, and the corrosive “pornification” of all other forms of media, means that the most pressing challenge for Christians is rediscovering what purity *feels* like. C. S. Lewis famously proposed that spiritual mediocrity is the equivalent of playing with mud pies instead of taking the seaside holiday God offers us. Our situation is more dire, though: we are in danger of forgetting what the sea even offers. The warmth of sunshine that lifts our eyes and our hearts to heaven has been hidden by the stale pollution of our passions. Pornography is the only atmosphere we know: it has clotted our lungs, and we cannot get enough of it.

*Pervasive consumption of pornography dulls the mind: if we delightedly give ourselves over to falsehoods, we lose our ability to sort truth from fiction.*

We have been told by our society to accept porn as the “new normal”—

which is an extremely pernicious and effective lie. Offutt suggests that his father's secrecy was "born of shame and guilt." He avoids moralizing his story, but he subtly implies that his father is attracted to violent images in part because of the stigma attached to his "mainstream" pornographic work. Had he simply accepted that we liked pornography—that pornography is normal—all might have been well. The thought is common enough in our culture, at least, even if Offutt does not agree with it.

In fact, we have pressed the bounds of sexuality so far that "sex negativity" is our only sin left: Any attempt to find a moral basis for sexuality beyond pleasure and consent is simply too prudish, too retrograde to be taken seriously in our enlightened age. Pornography is inescapable; therefore, it must be permissible. There is no other way for us, much less a "more excellent" one.

Imagining a world that has not so cheapened human sexuality, then, is the first act of resistance to the many lies pornography tells. A porn-saturated world or life is not *inevitable*: there is nothing in the cosmos that says it must be a permanent feature of our experience. To confess this, and to acknowledge our own responsibility in making the world we have, is to take the first steps toward freedom. By the grace of God, we can live in a world other than that which we now know. That such a thought is so foreign to most of our society betrays how *weak* the pornography regime is: the moment we begin contemplating the prospect of living otherwise, the whole shoddy artifice that makes it seem attractive collapses into rubble. Finding a "more excellent way" begins with remembering that another way is possible—a thought that the pornography industry does not want anyone to truly believe.

*A porn-saturated world or life is not inevitable:*

*there is nothing in the cosmos that says it must be a permanent feature of our experience.*

Pornography may represent a less vicious deviance than that which murder depends on, but it trades on the same destructive, dehumanizing impulses. And comparing the two disturbs our complacent, lazy acceptance of pornography as a benign and harmless form of amusement. It shocks us because the widespread use of pornography seems so natural, so inevitable. It horrifies us because the world of pornography is our world. The parallel cannot be, *must* not be true. But it is.

## **The Death of Wonder and the Trivialization of What Matters**

“Let wonder seem familiar,” Shakespeare has written, “and to the chapel let us presently.” The line is from his play *Much Ado about Nothing*, which is nothing if not a wondrous tale. A young man mistakenly accuses his fiancée of infidelity, and she faints upon the unjust slander. He believes her dead, and sorrowfully repents on learning his error. All is made well at a wedding, where he is stunned by the vision of his fiancée alive and is chastened by her offer of forgiveness. The friar is the one who instructs us all to become friends with wonder, provided that we make our way off to the chapel for its formalization in due order. The advice is worth following.

The path toward seeing how pornography dehumanizes begins here, in thinking about the death of wonder in our hearts and our lives. But I do not speak of wonder about sex—not yet, anyway. The death of mystery in that realm is only one manifestation of a more general disease, a *pornification* of our eyes and our minds that extends well beyond the realm of sexual stimulation. Whether pornography is to blame for this more general

problem, or vice versa, may remain subject to debate; my only interest is in arguing that what happens in pornography is not limited to sex.

## *What happens in pornography is not limited to sex.*

Consider, for a moment, our practices of reading or watching other entertaining or informational “content.” Our minds are often hurried and frantic, which keeps our attention strictly on the surface of things. Any pleasures that come from reading must be had quickly (especially when reading online), or we give up on the task. We skim articles and book chapters, hastily moving on to consume the next bit of information. Our eyes jump from photo to photo while scrolling our phones in line at the store. We flit about from channel to channel, awaiting the next spectacle that can seize our attention. Ours is a life in *the shallows*, to use Nicholar Carr’s fine phrase. We rarely expend the effort required to contemplate any farther than what appears in our direct line of sight, gorging ourselves on surfaces and images until we finally grow weary and eventually fall asleep.

This ravenous lust of vision is classically known as *curiositas*, curiosity. *Curiositas* is a restlessness of the spirit and mind, an unsettled anxiety that pursues new spectacles to consume. Such pleasurable novelties provide cheap mental stimulation with little to no work. The momentary Facebook check “just to see” gives us a brief respite from the responsibilities before us. We may not care about what we find; what matters is that we have found something new, and that we are entertained. Curiosity fixes our attention on the “things below,” the things that are seen, the things that we can dispense with the moment we are done. But because such visions lack depth they will never satisfy. And because they are ubiquitous they must become more outlandish. The only way to arrest the attention of the curious

is by making a scene, and then attempting to outdo yourself the next time around.

*The Christian objection to porn is not motivated by a fear of sexuality or by 'sex negativity,' but by a sanctified sense of wonder at the beauty of the human being, fully alive and fully revealed.*

A society animated by this kind of curiosity will have two compatible, paradoxical sentiments.

First, it will attempt to peel back the curtain and lay bare sordid and dirty secrets. Curiosity aims to expose what ought not be known. Our society's rampant fascination with the inner workings of the lives of celebrities—lives we will never have—may seem benign. But the voyeurism that moves someone to gaze lustfully through a window operates according to the same logic, only in a sexual key. We will have our spectacles wherever we can find them—and the more *secret*, the better.

Second, curiosity undercuts our stomach for more serious ventures. "Cat videos don't *really* matter," we say—and that is why our interest in them is damning. Curiosity is attentive only to the surface. It cannot abide the *matter*, the *substance*, or the *depths* before us. Curiosity is content with the image; but loving attention needs bodies. The curious has not the patience required for sustained consideration, much less the openness to the consuming immersiveness of wondrous rapture.

It is easy to see the spirit of *curiositas* at work in pornography. Porn offers the most alluring sort of spectacle. Depictions of individuals engaged in secret acts of grave importance can be viewed, enjoyed, and discarded with

no investment or pain on the viewer's part. The rapid-fire, disposable quality of pornography suits and fosters the restlessness of those who view it. It leads them to continue scrolling and hunting for the look or scene that might momentarily awaken their imaginations. All that matters are the surfaces, and the more and more *provocative*, the better.

*It is easier for those drowning in a whirlpool of deceits to embrace their situation as 'normal' than it is to escape.*

There is no room within *curiositas* for reverential awe, for a sense that there are some mysteries that are not ours to unveil. The Christian objection to porn is not motivated by a fear of sexuality or by "sex negativity," but by a sanctified sense of wonder at the beauty of the human being, fully alive and fully revealed. And such wondrous treasures *desire* secrecy: hiddenness is the native habitat of glory. But our curious society has long shed its reluctance to profane the most holy places: the body in its sexual presentation is now merely one more trivial amusement meant for the satisfaction of momentary and passing interests, leaving no permanent mark on the soul or the society. Sex no longer matters—which is why it will no longer be fun. For the comedy, the ordinariness, and the mundane weirdness of sex draw energy and life from the enchanted awe that tempts us to kneel in chaste humility before the glory of another human being. No longer sacred, sex has become nothing at all.

## **Obscenities and the Modesty of Desire**

Reflect for a moment on an obscenity. We know the options well enough. Such words have power because they violently expose what is normally

hidden. Ephesians 5:12 suggests that it is “shameful even to speak of the things that [the pagans] do in secret.” The obscenity takes such matters and *makes a scene* of them, forcing our mind’s eye into the darkness of holy places. When reverence dies, such words lose their force. Our culture’s widespread acceptance of certain words can be explained this way.

The restriction of Ephesians 5:12, though, poses a problem for writing about pornography, a problem that also helps explain how pornography lies. As Christians, we are tasked with critiquing pornography without awakening illicit desires ourselves. If we are too explicit, we engage in the kind of *obscenities* we are denouncing—a problem shock-jock pastors have sometimes fallen into.

Strategic ambiguity about matters of sexuality is essential for protecting love. Those in love are sometimes so swept up in their games that they do not realize the passions forming beneath them. But once love arises, it delights in preserving a hidden core known by the couple alone. The first time couples tell their engagement stories is a paradigmatic example. There is often a gap in the tale somewhere after she says “yes” that is filled by the highly suggestive “and then we said some stuff.” They mean, of course, that they kissed madly and furiously. And appropriately so. But lovers delight in speaking elusively about their most intimate expressions. Naming them directly spoils a good deal of the fun. Song of Solomon is an erotically charged book precisely because it is *not* a sex manual; it hides the physical intimacy where it belongs, behind the veil of metaphors, allusions, and analogies.

Pornography betrays love’s natural inclination toward privacy. But in doing so, it can only depict distortions of the real thing. Pornography is an exemplary instance of the “observer’s paradox,” which says that the subject under observation is unwittingly influenced by the presence of a third party.

The observer's paradox means that publicity changes the event: performing before an audience is a different kind of act than practicing in private. Love's true character can be known only by those experiencing it firsthand. Viewing an act of love from the outside does not allow us to see what we *think* we are viewing: if love is really present, it can only be felt and known within the faces and bodies of those engaging in it. Even pornographers understand this, which is why virtual-reality porn and sex-bots are in our society's (near) future: they promise to simulate the face-to-face character of sexual desire better than a computer screen can.

*Romance and marriage are too much work when sex and pornography are a swipe or click away.*

And we can go farther down this path: what happens within an unobserved room is necessarily different for the couple itself when a camera is present. The face-to-face character of desire is not meant to be *displayed*, but enjoyed. Lovers who film their own sexual activity for their own private enjoyment later allow the structure and logic of pornography to determine their own union—even if they are married. And they do not record their own love, but a subtly distorted imitation of it, as they introduce a willingness on their part to be viewed from the outside—even if they are the only ones watching. Such mimicry may appear, on the surface, to be the pure display of marital intimacy. But when we go beneath the surface it becomes clear that marital unions can surrender to the pornographic, even if they do not produce or watch commercial pornography.

Pornography lies, then, by imitating the pleasures and the sacrifices of love, and destroys them in the process. But death can mimic life persuasively for only so long. We are hurtling fast toward pornography's triumphal destruction of the romance that once guarded and preserved our

relationships. By turning the central mystery of human sexuality into a public display, pornography undermines the rules and conventions that both honored sex and made sin possible. When sexual pleasure assumed the throne of our hearts, romance was the inevitable victim. Romance and marriage are too much work when sex and pornography are a swipe or click away. Hollywood's happy endings may have made us believe too easily that marriage is effortless and simple—but they were also one of our last bulwarks against the banal degradation of sex. The pornified mind cannot be bothered with the adornment of foreplay, much less the patient and constant pursuit of one's spouse. Though such burdens give the act more meaning and significance, they take time and energy to happily sustain. Why bother as long as the easy pleasures of porn are at hand?

## Objectification and Porn

Industrialized sex profits from orgasms, which means that they need to be had on the cheap. And so the industry manufactures pleasures with as few costs to the producer or consumer as possible. Time is money: Offutt's dad "wrote" his "novels" in as few as three days. And labor is plentiful. Women in porn are shockingly dispensable; they have "shelf-lives" of only a few short years, if they survive past first exposure at all. And real women will soon be irrelevant to the process, anyway. Digitally created, CGI porn will be cheap and easy to produce, making "victimless" porn a real possibility.

But it is the orgasms of the audience—not the performers—that make pornographers money. The man who watches pornography is *himself* the product: it is his pleasure that the industry aims at, his satisfaction that matters most of all. The women and men who perform before an audience become objects of their audience's gratification; but the bitter, brutal irony of the pornography industry is that by aiming at such pleasure the audience objectifies *itself* by becoming a product in a commercial transaction. Porn

degrades everyone involved in it, but its customers most of all—for they are the unwitting dupes who do not realize the game that is being played against them.

*Porn degrades everyone involved, but its customers most of all—for they are the unwitting dupes who do not realize the game that is being played against them.*

Where is the viewer of pornography when they watch a scene, and why does it arouse them? In its central case, sexual desire aims at reciprocity: arousal happens when we are drawn not simply to a beautiful person, but when we notice that person welcoming and returning our interest. We want to be wanted, and sexual desire is our bodily recognition that we are desired in a similar, bodily way. Pornography trades on the hope that we will be desired: we believe that the woman looking back at us wants us, that she is “ours” in the way a spouse might one day become (many of these claims are developed in full in Roger Scruton’s *Sexual Desire*).

Viewers of pornography, then, place themselves imaginatively *within* the scene. There is a kind of “empathy” at work in such viewership, a self-identification that happens between ourselves and the subjects being depicted. The audience at *King Lear* feels all of his sorrow by seeing themselves manifested in Lear’s mistakes, and his own decline as illuminating their own challenges. But this empathetic identification means that viewing is never neutral: watching entangles our wills by presenting us with a point of view and requiring that we accept or reject it. If we delight when characters in novels do wrong, we really are doing something wrong. The self-identification between the viewer and the subject is what makes

pornography attractive, and what makes it bad: imagining ourselves in such scenarios is a morally potent act, in that our wills affirm the acts as they are happening. Pornography, if it is anything, cannot be morally trivial.

But this identification of the self with what we are viewing betrays the expansive and unrestrained narcissistic greed at the heart of the pornographic world. The women who look out from the screen do not merely want *us*, but our most fantastic and delusional portraits of our selves. In order for the fiction that they desire us to have any sense, we must (momentarily, at least) think ourselves desirable. Such an irrational, unfounded wishfulness only survives by feeding itself on more lies—so the depiction of one woman goes up to two, and so the harem is born.

Beneath pornography is the supposition that the mere fact of our desire for a woman makes us worthy of her. And so, not being bound by any kind of norm, desire must proceed endlessly. It is no surprise that the industrialized, cheap-and-easy sex of pornography has answered and evoked an almost unrestrained sexual greed, which allows us to be gods and goddesses within the safety of our own fantasies. It is for deep and important reasons that the Ten Commandments use the economic language of "coveting" to describe the badness of errant sexual desires.

*Marriage is a union of only two, and no others:  
pornography replaces one member, reducing  
them from equal partner to instrument for  
personal gratification.*

The empathetic imagining of themselves in a pornography scene, though, does turn the other participants into objects and instruments for our own satisfaction. What are all the other characters in the scene *for*? Nothing

save our self-indulgence. Pornography reduces conversation and relationship from an intimate disclosure of our personhood to an irritating waystation on the quick path to sexual pleasure. Elaborate and sophisticated stories function as little more than extended foreplay for the pornographic. And all the participants disappear when our payoff arrives. We click to a new page, we turn off the sex-bot so we can go get lunch, we furtively flee the the prostitute and return to our "real" lives. The scenarios are different; the logic is the same. In each case, the woman is nothing more than an instrument to our fantastical pleasures: she is a tool that we discard the moment we find a more satisfactory widget. The people of pornography are no more irreplaceable than salad forks: If one gets tired or boring, swap it for another and no harm is (ostensibly) done.

Pornography is not bad because it causes adultery. Instead, it is bad because the user acts *as if* committing adultery. Pornography is stimulating because we imagine ourselves in sexual acts not involving our spouses. Pornography use means that one's spouse is fungible or replaceable with respect to sexual activity, an activity central to the shape and meaning of marriage. And this is so even if we do not realize that is what we are doing. It is possible to do great wrongs without knowing, or even intending them. Marriage is a union of only two, and no others: pornography replaces one member, reducing them from equal partner to instrument for personal gratification.

## Peopling of the World

Pornography is a murder from the heart. Is this too strong? Or must we use such language to wake us from the slumbering injustice in which we live? Perhaps, if our eyes were able to break through the smoggy haze of our pornified society, we would see the slow, steady hand of Death at work all around us. Perhaps we would awake into the terror of those who once knew

how holiness felt. Perhaps if we would recognize the desecration of the temple of the living God that we are all every day complicit in, we would pray to the same Lord for mercy.

Reducing the human person to an instrument for our pleasure is to wish in our hearts that they simply did not exist as persons. If we believe human beings can be replaced by sex-bots or virtual-reality pornography, what good are they, precisely? Persons are independent centers of agency, with their own wills and minds and reason. They cannot be traded, like baseball cards, on the basis that one brings us more sexual pleasure than another. To do so violates the nature of their humanity. Pornography, I say again, is a form of murder within the heart.

*The world must be peopled—we must be people within the world, serving one another. Porn stands in the way of this.*

Which is why, eventually, pornography obscures or violates the faces of the women who are drawn into it. From the eyes and the mouth flow forth speech and song and poetry and all the marks that make humans mysteries. But as pornography progresses, the person is *effaced*. The locus of their personal presence is reduced to a receptacle of our own projective fantasies. "In pornography the face has no role to play," Scruton has written, "other than to be subjected to the empire of the body."

Against such violence we can only respond as Shakespeare did: "The world must be peopled!" Pornography *de-peoples* the world. I have mentioned that it hangs on the pretense that the human beings around us are instruments for our pleasure. But making people tools allows us to pretend that we have no obligations toward them, that they cannot make a claim on

us. There is no sharper contrast with such a life than babies, who show a delightfully flagrant disregard for the pleasures of their parents. Parents love their little humans in part because they are tiny, adorable bundles of obligations. A sexuality ordered appropriately will bear fruit—in children, yes, but also in being empowered by the Spirit to joyfully welcome the other human bundles of needs into our lives, even if we are not ourselves married. The world must be peopled—we must be people within the world, serving one another. Pornography stands in the way.

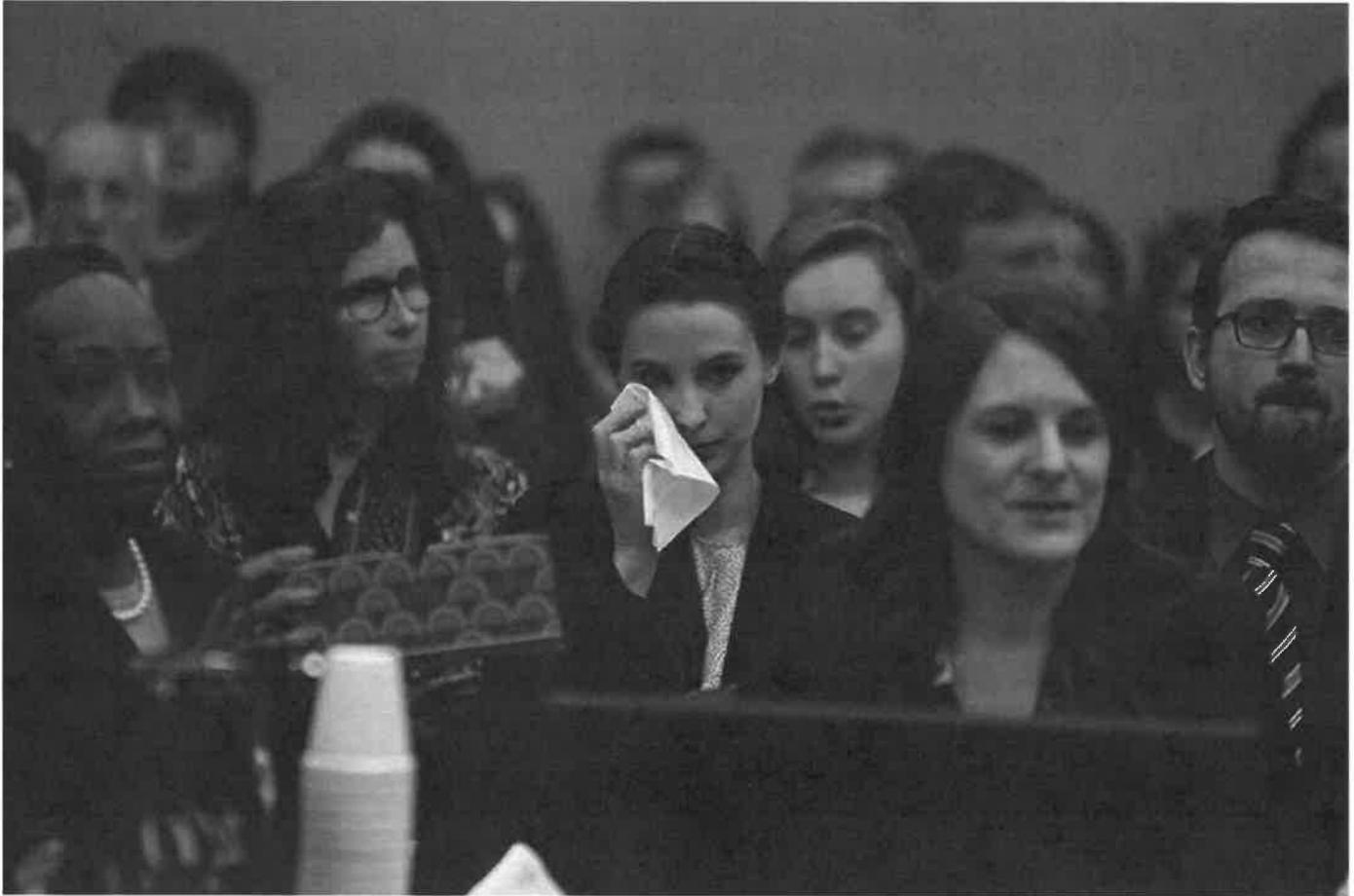
“Let wonder seem familiar, and to the chapel let us presently.” For confession and repentance, for renewal and forgiveness, for the manner of our treatment of one another—a manner we are *all* participants in—and for, above all, the hope of the gospel. We are restored as people in the word of grace, set free from the bondage of “inevitability” for our sins. At the cross of Christ, every human life finds a worth that is inestimable. Christ has died for all (2 Cor. 5:14–15)! How then shall we not meet each other with a chaste and holy reverence, with a sanctified fear and trembling that is a mark of our salvation? The lives of those who make and consume pornography bear the stamp, the *image* of Jesus Christ. When we finally see them as they are, with the clear eyes of purity, we will know either awe for their majesty or sorrow for its marring. Let such wonder be familiar: within it lies the wellspring of hope.

This is an adapted excerpt from *The Gospel and Pornography* (B&H Books, 2017), edited by Russell Moore and Andrew T. Walker, used with permission from B&H Publishing Group.



# She surrendered her secrets to put away a sexual predator. But her sacrifice isn't over





## **A COURIER JOURNAL SPECIAL REPORT**

### **The Sacrifice**

**Rachael Denhollander surrendered her deepest secrets to help put Larry Nassar away.**

**None of this is what Rachael wanted.**

**Given the choice, she'd gladly slip into anonymity, satisfied to be a preacher's wife, mother of four children and a home-school teacher.**

**But she's steadfast in her call to do what's right, no matter the cost.**

**And for Rachael, what is right is to travel the country to speak out for**

## abused women and girls.

**All eyes are on her as she challenges some of the nation's most powerful institutions to do what's right.**

**Matt Mencarini, Louisville Courier Journal** Updated 11:50 p.m. EDT Sep. 9, 2019

Rachael Denhollander always wanted to keep it a secret.

The journal she tucked away in a hidden folder contained her most private thoughts, anguished conversations with herself detailing what her doctor, Larry Nassar, had done to her on his exam table.

The moments he penetrated her with his ungloved fingers, his hand hidden under a towel, while making small talk with her mother, just a few feet away.

"Am I hurting you, Rach?" he whispered close to her ear.

Beginning in 2004, Rachael's cursive handwriting on each page detailed her vulnerability and her doubts that God cared. She feared she was somehow impure for her future husband.

This story contains explicit details of sexual abuse that may be disturbing to some readers. While the Courier Journal's policy is to not identify victims of sexual assault, Rachael Denhollander has spoken publicly about her abuse and agreed to speak openly for this story.

"Save me O' God," she wrote on the first line of the first page.

No one was ever supposed to see that journal — certainly not the man who so horrifically violated her.

Nassar, once a famed sports medicine doctor, had stolen so much — her innocence, her trust, her relationship with her own body. It was the very same thing, the world would later learn, that he'd done to more than 300

other women and girls.

His abuse went on for decades. Olympians. College athletes. Young gymnasts. Women and girls who sought his help. And the 6-year-old daughter of family friends.

What Nassar couldn't have were Rachael's deepest thoughts. For 12 years, she locked them away in 31 loose-leaf pages, until the moment she knew they could stop him.

So, Rachael made a sacrifice.



Show caption Save me O' God is the first line written on the first day of a journal kept by Rachael Denhollander. She kept the journal...

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

This deeply private woman — a mother of four, a lawyer and devoted wife to Jacob Denhollander — who never cries, who shows perfect poise, made the choice to turn over her most tender thoughts to police. She hoped the evidence could finally protect the little girls she couldn't save before.

In August 2016, Rachael, now 34, became the first woman to publicly say that Nassar, a former Michigan State University and USA Gymnastics doctor, sexually abused her. Her account sparked one of the largest sexual assault cases in U.S. history.

Her presence and sacrifice helped drive the stake that banished Nassar to prison for the rest of his life.

**Rachael Denhollander**

*The worst part of testifying was having to talk about the impact because that's what Larry always wanted to know. And that was the*

*one thing I always kept from him, and I couldn't this time.*

But that came at a price: It forever tied her name to his. And it gave him what she never wanted him to have.

"It's a window," she said. "You don't give people windows because then you're vulnerable.

"The worst part of testifying was having to talk about the impact because that's what Larry always wanted to know. And that was the one thing I always kept from him, and I couldn't this time."

None of this is what Rachael wanted.

Given the choice, she'd gladly slip back into anonymity at home in Louisville.

Rachael Denhollander straps her daughter, Elora, onto her back so that she can bake a cake with her other children at their former home in Louisville. May 2019

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

But she's steadfast in her call to do what's right, no matter the cost.

And for Rachael, what's right is to travel the country to speak out for abused women and girls, to remind them of their intrinsic worth and to challenge churches, universities and sports programs to do the right thing when allegations of abuse are exposed.

This mission means more time away from family and the weight of reliving her story at the podium or in interviews every day.

But she remains faithful.

"You do the best with what you're given," Rachael said. "And one day, I'm given changing diapers and teaching kids to read, and the next day this is

what I'm given. And then you flip back and forth. And you do the best you can."

Those closest to Rachael see God's hand in shaping her mission. She agrees her preparation was no accident. Debate camp. Law school. A supportive family. Faith.

What fortified her to come forward has sustained her these past three years as she's endured shifts in her identity, her privacy and her duty.

But Rachael doesn't believe God purposely put her in harm's way, nor any of the hundreds of other girls Nassar assaulted.

### **Rachael Denhollander: Goodness, evil exist in opposition of each other**

Denhollander still grieves for the abuse she endured but finds some solace in "Just being able to speak the truth."

Michael Clevenger, Louisville Courier Journal

"I don't think God reaches down and puppet masters evil," she said. "Evil exists that has a different origin. It's going to be there. It's better to be able to do something about it than not be able to do anything.

"So, in a sense, yes, I wish it wasn't me. I'm also very glad it didn't have to be anybody else."

### **Why Rachael chose to become a voice for justice**

Wearing a clearance-rack dress and her signature self-described Disney princess ponytail over her shoulder, Rachael sat on a downtown Birmingham, Alabama, stage on a summer night in June with five other pastors and advocates.

The Southern Baptist Convention officially would convene the next morning, but this night was billed as a conversation about sexual abuse within the network of churches amid a national scandal enveloping the denomination.

More than a thousand Southern Baptists filled the convention center hall. Most only learned about Rachael 17 months earlier, at the end of Nassar's criminal cases when the world was captivated by her story and the stories of 155 other women he had assaulted.

Now a stalwart figure among the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements, she didn't hesitate to condemn Southern Baptist pastors for failing to protect sexual assault victims from predators within the church.

■ Rachael Denhollander expresses her thoughts on stage with church leaders during a panel discussion at the Southern Baptist Convention in Birmingham, Alabama. June 2019

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

She was surgical, deliberate, commanding as she spoke into a handheld microphone, never raising her voice — a woman telling men their role in a tradition that largely still doesn't allow women to preach at all.

"By and large, the survivor community loves the church," she told the crowd, filled with dozens of pastors, including some who resent her accusations and view her as an adversary.

"They love Jesus. They love the Gospel. I have found my greatest refuge and hope with the Gospel. And our desire is to see the church do this better so that it becomes the refuge it was intended to be.

"... You need to understand the perspective that (survivors) come from. You need to feel the grief and the betrayal and the harm and the hurt that they have felt."

She wasn't done.

"I think it is very telling that I have heard hundreds, literally hundreds, of sermons directed on the quiet and submissive sphere that a woman should have. I have heard not one on how to value a woman's voice. I have heard not one on the issue of sexual assault.

"... As soon as an issue comes along that needs to be fought for, all that masculinity disappears. And the women are left on the front line with you telling them, 'Be quiet, submissive, fight your battles.'

"Do it. Better. Brothers."

The applause started before Rachael had finished. A line, mostly of women, formed to meet her before she walked off stage.

Each wanted to hug her, thank her, to tell her they, too, had been abused.

Madeline, an abuse survivor whom The Courier Journal is identifying by her first name, said she watched Rachael ask a simple but powerful question at the end of the Nassar cases in 2018 before he was sentenced — "*How much is a little girl worth?*"

Madeline cried as she spoke to Rachael.

Rachael held her.

■

Rachael Denhollander hugs Madeline, an abuse survivor, after a panel discussion on abuse in the church the night before the Southern Baptist Convention opened in Birmingham, Alabama.

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

Afterward, Madeline spoke about what Rachael meant to her, describing her as a modern-day Martin Luther King Jr.

"She doesn't know me, and she probably doesn't know that there are hundreds, thousands of women just watching going, 'OK, if she can do it, I

can do it," Madeline said. "But that is what I have said to myself, 'She can do this. I can do this.'"

Rachael has grown accustomed to the long lines of people who appear after speeches and panels she has attended across the country these past 19 months.

"I just want to give them what they need, as much as I can in that moment," she said. "To let them know that they've been heard. That they have been powerful, they have been strong, that there's hope.

"There is life afterwards."

*Rachael Denhollander*

Rachael walked out of the convention center and returned to her hotel room where her husband and infant daughter awaited. She was exhausted.

*I have found my greatest refuge and hope with the Gospel.*

"I know she's very polished and everything when she talks, but it takes a toll on her because she is still an abuse survivor," Rachael's husband, Jacob, said. "She still has that trauma in her background. And now she is healed to a certain degree. But ... it's still hard."

The next morning, Rachael walked through the Birmingham airport, the weight from the previous night's panel gone for the moment as she held her baby. The flight back to Louisville, connecting through Atlanta, was boarding.

Two more airports and two more flights lay ahead.

This is her life now, the one she chose over the one she truly wants — to be at home with her husband and children.

## The life Rachael really wants is at home

On a bright summer morning in the Denhollander kitchen, Rachael sat on a wooden countertop stool, 10-month-old Elora's high chair pulled to her hip.

She read aloud from "Anne of Green Gables," holding the book in one hand as she reached with the other to put more food on the baby's tray.

The white, solid-surface countertop showed the aftermath of an earlier nail painting attempt. Pink, green and orange smeared along two sides.

■

Rachael Denhollander reads "Anne of Green Gables" to her children.

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

Hope, whose fourth birthday was fast approaching, knelt on a low-backed chair with tennis balls affixed to the feet to spare the hardwood floor. She wore a pink bicycle helmet covered with Disney princesses as she listened to Rachael read the story.

Jonathan, the 7-year-old, perched on a stool where he could look over Rachael's shoulder. And Grace, who's 5, listened at the other end of the table.

One of the girls interrupted to ask for more ham.

"Yes, just a minute," Rachael said, before jumping back into the story. "Do your potatoes first, OK?"

Rachael raised and lowered her voice for the dialogue between Anne Shirley, the book's namesake, and Marilla Cuthbert, the woman she'd come to stay with. Marilla suspected Anne had taken her brooch.

"Do you think that her window was open? Magpies?" Jonathan suggested

as the potential thieves.

"Oh, magpies is a good guess," Rachael told him. "I don't know, we'll have to read and see."

"Maybe she's just not looking in the right drawer," Grace offered.

"That's possible," Rachael said. "That's a good guess."

Before she could continue, more interruptions: *What's a magpie? Why didn't Marilla look behind her? What will happen next?*

Rachael cherishes summer mornings like these. All questions and theories, no matter how small or unlikely, are valid — even the ones that confused the plots of "Anne of Green Gables" and "The Hobbit," the other book they read aloud during the day.

■

Rachael Denhollander and her husband, Jacob, share evening prayers and scripture discussion with their children.  
Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

She finds the results of the children's antics or experiments — trying to have conversations while chewing food or car tracks on the wall — too funny or ingenious to be a bother.

With Rachael, a home-school teacher, every moment is a teaching moment in the Denhollander house on Louisville's eastern edge, even during the kids' summer break.

Rachael's few moments to herself often don't come until late at night, when she can reflect on the changes and disruptions her family has endured these past three years.

Three houses. Countless five-hour trips to Michigan for Nassar's case. Lives

in constant transition.

The preparation began long before Rachael knew the name Larry Nassar.

## **The moment that forever changed Rachael's life**

Nassar wasn't the first man to sexually abuse Rachael.

She was 7 when a member of her family's Michigan church inappropriately touched her as she sat on his lap. Rachael told her mother, Camille Moxon, she felt uncomfortable around him but couldn't explain why.

Some in the congregation saw the special attention the man was giving Rachael. They warned her parents, who distanced the family from the man. But others in the church didn't believe he could be a predator and thought Rachael's parents overreacted.

They grew cautious and cold around Rachael, who was still too young to understand. All she knew was that people she loved — people she thought loved her — stopped cuddling her or holding her in their laps.

The experience sparked the first lie Rachael told herself: If you can't absolutely prove the abuse, don't speak up because it will cost you everything.

Four years later, in 1996, 12-year-old Rachael's family gathered around the TV to watch the U.S. women's Olympic team win a gold medal in Atlanta. Her gymnastics career started shortly after that.

### **'How Much Is a Little Girl Worth?' read by author Rachael Denhollander**

Denhollander penned the illustrated children's book that reveals many of the ideals that she holds dear.

Michael Clevenger, Louisville Courier Journal

She was a little girl in love with the sport — the hand grips, the old mechanic's garage where her team worked out, her time with teammates.

Rachael wasn't a star. She didn't have the typical gymnast physique and only advanced to the lowest competitive level, but the acrobatics and maneuvers made her feel like she was flying.

Still, the practices took a toll on Rachael. She injured her back so severely when she was 15 that she would wake up with a numb leg. She also had a lingering wrist injury. But she wanted back on the mat, back with her teammates.

She wanted to fly again.

So in early 2000, Rachael and her mother drove 70 miles from Kalamazoo to East Lansing to see Nassar. They walked down the medical clinic hallway, past photos of Olympians, both in awe that a doctor who worked with gold medalists had made time for them. If anyone could help her, mother and daughter hoped, Nassar could.

The abuse began during Rachael's very first appointment.

During appointments over the years that followed, Rachael lay on his exam table, her head toward her mother, sometimes wearing baggy athletic shorts or covered with a towel. Nassar positioned himself so Rachael's mother couldn't see his hands.

■ Rachael Denhollander testifies at a preliminary hearing for former MSU doctor Larry Nassar Friday, May 12, 2017.

Matthew Dae Smith/Lansing State Journal

Rachael had no idea her mother didn't know what Nassar was doing when he was supposed to be treating her back.

She would lie on the table feeling humiliated and degraded as Nassar penetrated her vagina with his fingers. Sometimes for as long as 40 minutes.

"The best I could figure was it had to be legitimate," Rachael said, looking back. "He couldn't be the national team physician, he couldn't be teaching osteopathic medicine, he couldn't be this revered physician if he wasn't doing legitimate medicine."

This was the second lie Rachael told herself: That Nassar, because of who he was, couldn't be an abuser.

But still, she'd lie in bed at night shaking her head, trying to reconcile how she felt with the lies she believed. She balled her hands into fists and dug her fingernails into her palms, the pain giving her mind somewhere to focus.

Then came the third lie she told herself: She was the problem and couldn't trust her instincts.

On one of the final appointments, Nassar massaged her breast. She didn't scream or cry or reach out to her mother.

She froze.

That was the last time he abused her. He stopped scheduling her for appointments in late 2001. She never got an answer as to why he stopped. Maybe he lost interest or got what he wanted, she thought.

The damage from the abuse continued to fester. Rachael became uncomfortable around men, tensing if they stood behind her.

She had nightmares about hands and about the abuse. In some nightmares, she was assaulted by someone other than Nassar, someone she knew or

loved.

After noticing her daughter's changed behavior, Rachael's mom pushed for details. Rachael told her that Nassar molested her and that she saw him sexually aroused during one appointment.

Her mother asked: *Do you want to go to the police?*

This was the first time, but not last, Rachael faced this question.

She wanted to do something because she doubted she was Nassar's only victim and didn't think he'd stop abusing. But she didn't know what.

Could she come forward and keep her identity hidden? Would anyone believe her?

Too many questions without answers. Too many barriers for a teenager to navigate.

Rachael felt despair set in along with the reality that there was nothing she could do.

"Silence seemed safer," she said.

Years passed. Bearing the abuse and trauma in her mind alone wasn't working, so she resolved to find a way.

On May 5, 2004, Rachael picked a folder with babies on the cover, a happy and innocuous image, thinking people would leave it alone if they found it.

Page by page Rachael filled up her folder.



Show caption The journal was key evidence in the case because not only does it contain disclosure of the abuse years before she came forward, it contains...

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

"How do you explain to someone the confusion, sick feeling, and shame without knowing why?" she wrote on one page.

"It was never the hand in the dark," she wrote on another. "It was always the hand I held. And it's your fault all over again, because it never would have happened if you hadn't trusted."

At one point she wrote: "I was too terrified and ashamed, (too) confused, to understand back then, but the price for not understanding then, is that no one understands now. What I thought was my fault then, most think is my fault now."

Despite the trauma and shame, Rachael dove into topics she loved — law, debate and public policy. She passed the bar by 25, excelled at mock appellate arguments and thought of a career as a constitutional lawyer, arguing before the Supreme Court.

And she wanted a family. She'd been planning it for decades.

That plan began to come together in 2006 when Rachael met her future husband in the comments sections of a satire blog.



Rachael Denhollander and husband, Jacob, talk inside their home during a promotional video shoot for Rachael's upcoming book. June 2019

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

From the same little desk where she sat and wondered whether Nassar had stolen something irreplaceable from her, she also wrote to Jacob Denhollander.

Her messages went from her home in Kalamazoo to his in Salmon Arm,

British Columbia.

Jacob lived on a mountain with lots of books and little siblings, which appealed to Rachael's heart. They had the same religious convictions — that you need to live your faith constantly — and the same sense of humor, which reflected their love of classic literature and sometimes more than a hint of sarcasm.

After a year of emails, Jacob flew to Kalamazoo so they could finally meet face to face, at the baggage claim at the airport.

"He had really nice eyes," Rachael recalled.

Within days, Rachael could see a life with Jacob. He, on the other hand, wondered what he could add to the life of this smart, capable woman he was falling in love with.

Rachael knew before he left she had to reveal the secret she'd kept locked away. She had to know if she could trust him — if he believed her.

Rachael told Jacob when the two went for a walk. She kept her eyes down waiting on his response.

Jacob believed her and now knew what he could bring to the relationship. He could support and protect her.

He could be the one person she let see inside her heart.

■

Learning to be patient and helping Rachael grieve are ways that Jacob helps his wife. On her toughest days, he would wrap her in a blanket and hold her. August 2019

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

They married in 2009 and in 2012 moved to Louisville, where Jacob started

at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

By 2016, they had three children under age 5 and lived in a tiny, 1,000-square-foot home in the city's Clifton Heights neighborhood. Rachael home-schooled the two older children.

They loved it because they were so close.

Then one August morning in 2016, Rachael opened her computer to type up a grocery list. She saw an Indianapolis Star article trending on Facebook: [USA Gymnastics had covered up sexual abuse complaints against coaches for decades.](#)

In that moment, her life changed.

■  
Larry Nassar

She read the story over and over while holding her baby daughter, thinking about all the little girls in the story who had been sexually assaulted. She knew there was another abuser, one who remained unmasked: Larry Nassar.

Rachael laid the baby's head on her shoulder and took a deep breath. Merely thinking of what might happen if she came forward made her feel like she might vomit.

Her body flushed with sudden fear that wouldn't fade.

Fifteen years after her abuse ended, Rachael had reached a good place in her healing. The flashbacks and nightmares were less frequent. She had the life she wanted.

But she thought back to the night before she turned 25, when she couldn't sleep, thinking that the milestone birthday pushed her case against Nassar past the criminal statute of limitations in Michigan.

**Rachael Denhollander**

*So, in a sense, yes, I wish it wasn't me. I'm also very glad it didn't have to be anybody else.*

But now, she thought, even if Nassar could never be charged with abusing her, her voice could help other girls.

She opened up her email and began to type.

"I recently read the article titled 'Out of Balance' published by the IndyStar. My experience may not be relevant to your investigation, but I am emailing to report an incident," she wrote to the newspaper, giving them a new name.

"... I have seen little hope that any light would be shed by coming forward, so I have remained quiet. If there is a possibility that is changing, I will come forward as publicly as necessary."

## **Rachael decides to surrender her secrets**

In late August 2016, Rachael sat in her Louisville living room and told two journalists, both men, from The Indianapolis Star what she had kept to herself for half her life.

Rachael had to tell the whole truth. The journalists were there for hours, and once the camera started recording, Rachael never took a break.

■

Rachael Denhollander spoke out about Larry Nassar's abuse after reading a report in The Indianapolis Star detailing how USA Gymnastics had covered up sexual abuse complaints against coaches for decades.

"It's very difficult to come forward against somebody who's as prominent as he is," she told them.

Starting when Rachael was 15, she told the reporters, Larry Nassar unhooked her bra and massaged her breasts. He penetrated her with his fingers. Her mother was there for all of it, even though she didn't know what was happening. That's why Rachael didn't stop it.

Jacob sat near Rachael, listening to details he'd never heard before.

Rachael knew other victims would read her story. She wanted them to know they weren't alone.

The journalists left and Rachael walked up to Jacob. She smiled as he wrapped his arms around her and she fell against him, exhausted and unsure what came next.

Days later, they drove to the Michigan State University Police Department — to people she feared might protect Nassar — because she'd learned the statute of limitations hadn't expired. The detective needed to know everything.

From the moment she decided to come forward, Rachael knew she'd have to sacrifice more than anonymity. She knew she'd have to surrender her deepest thoughts. She dug her journal out of storage and mailed it to police.

Her secrets were no longer hers.

### **Rachael Denhollander: Why giving up journal was such a sacrifice**

Denhollander kept a journal about how Larry Nassar's abuse affected her. She had to give that to the prosecutor in the case and it still haunts her.

Michael Clevenger, Louisville Courier Journal

Doing the right thing began to exact its toll. Rachael lost weight. She was often sick and lightheaded, with a constant sense of being unsafe and exposed both emotionally and physically.

The family was at a church festival on a day she thought the article would publish. She was too emotionally drained to plan Jonathan's fifth birthday party.

"I felt like I was just robbed of those experiences," she said. "That my kids were robbed of having me present."

Nine months after going to police, Rachael sat 10 feet away from Nassar in a dark courtroom in Michigan, its walls closer than she had expected.

She sat for more than two hours during a hearing to determine whether there was sufficient evidence to take the case to trial. She described every horrid detail of her abuse, even raising her hands to show how Nassar violated her.

"At the point that I relinquished my privacy, there was a train that just wasn't going to stop. And I knew that," Rachael said.

"Anything I testified to, all of those details, it was tied to me. And there was no way to stop that. ... So if there's not a way to stop it — maximize it for the benefit."

Rachael Denhollander answers questions from Assistant Attorney General Angela Povilaitis during a preliminary hearing for Larry Nassar in 55th District Court in Mason, Michigan on May 12, 2017. Nassar is seated just behind Povilaitis..

Matthew Dae Smith/Lansing State Journal

That's why Rachael took the unusual step to insist the courtroom be open to media, with no restrictions on what could be shown or reported. This

way, Nassar couldn't hide, and she gave other victims a glimpse of the courtroom.

There was the contentious cross-examination from one of Nassar's attorneys, who questioned Rachael on why she spent so much time building and preparing her case before going to police.

"I'm an attorney," Rachael replied. "I knew what you would ask."

In many ways, this day was worse than the abuse itself, Rachael said. There was an audience now, inside and outside the courtroom.

She was physically and emotionally exhausted.

Jacob got a hotel room so Rachael could have some space to process the day. He held her, and they talked, his touch and presence a way to imprint good memories over the bad in Rachael's mind. It's what Jacob could do that no one else could.

The torment of the case wasn't over.

Over the months that followed, Rachael looked at her daughters practicing ballet or reading and couldn't help but see all the little girls Nassar abused, the ones she was now trying to protect.

Little girls and grown women dragged into the case, whose wounds were reopened because of her. Little girls and women who didn't know they'd been sexually abused because they still believed those lies.

That is, until Rachael spoke up.

She kept talking to reporters, which triggered more nightmares but brought more women and girls forward, strengthening the case.

As 2017 neared an end, the case took an unexpected turn. Nassar's attorneys reached out to state prosecutors looking for a plea deal. If Nassar wanted to avoid a trial, the prosecutor had conditions. Chief among them: That every victim be given the chance to speak during his sentencing.

So starting on the morning of Jan. 16, 2018, Rachael sat in courtrooms over three weeks and listened as 203 women and girls voiced their trauma and pain.

She wanted to hear every word.

Rachael Denhollander, left, is introduced by Assistant Attorney General Angela Povaliatis, before she makes the final victim impact statement Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018, in Ingham County Circuit Court.

MATTHEW DAE SMITH/Lansing State Journal

## **Rachael embraces the job she never wanted**

On Feb. 5, 2018, Nassar walked out through a corner of the courtroom wearing an orange jail jumpsuit, his hands folded and cuffed to the waist restraint. He looked down as he disappeared through the doorway on his way to prison.

TV satellite trucks lined the road in front of the courthouse.

Rachael stood inside, surrounded by reporters and cameras, microphones held out to capture her words. Camera lights lit up her face.

"We have taken care of one perpetrator," she told reporters. "We have not taken care of the systems that allowed him to flourish for 20 years."

In that moment, Rachael fully embraced her role as an advocate.

"What do you do when you have something that's important to do," she said later, "and you can do it very well, and you don't want to do it?"

She wrapped herself in a pink blanket late at night and started writing her memoir — "What is a Girl Worth?" And then a children's book with a similar name — "How Much is a Little Girl Worth?"

She continued the interviews, pushing for reforms at Michigan State University and USA Gymnastics. She crisscrossed the country, meeting with victims and lawmakers, pushing for new laws in such places as Michigan and Vermont.

#### **Rachael Denhollander**

*We have taken care of one perpetrator. We have not taken care of the systems that allowed him to flourish for 20 years.*

She spoke out about sexual abuse scandals involving a doctor at the University of Southern California, within the Catholic Church and in the Southern Baptist community.

Not everyone was receptive to her message.

"Everybody's really appreciative of what I did with Larry, because everybody knows who Larry is now," she said. "Everybody got to see. But when I speak up with the church community, well that's *different* for a good number of people. When I speak up about certain politicians on both sides of the aisle, well that's *different*. When I speak up against certain sports teams or other universities, well that's *different*."

"Everybody has that instinctive community response. And the real test for how much we understand the dynamics of abuse, and how committed we are, is what we do when it's in our own community. What do we do when it

will cost?"

The truth is, the outcomes in the Nassar cases — the convictions and long prison sentences and some semblance of justice — were never as inevitable as they seemed when it was all over. And the possibility that Rachael's efforts and sacrifices could have ended unsuccessfully was never far from her mind.

■ Rachael Denhollander holds her speech and a tissue after delivering her impact statement in front of former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar inside Ingham County Circuit Court in Lansing, Mich., Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018.

Jenna Watson/IndyStar

Rachael needed The Indianapolis Star reporters to write the story that prompted her to come forward. She needed the detective who believed her and the prosecutor who saw her case and the others as worth the fight.

There were hundreds of women and girls who followed Rachael in telling their stories of abuse and trauma, their collective voices becoming too loud for the world to ignore.

But someone needed to sacrifice to start it all. That was Rachael.

"He didn't remember who I was anymore," she said of Nassar. "He didn't remember what he did. But he does now. I don't like that. I don't get to be forgotten anymore.

"And I think some of that, I guess, could be a power thing. 'Well, he'll remember me forever.' But it's not like that. That's not how I feel about it. I would rather be one of the hundreds that he doesn't remember anymore because he did it so much."

Rachael knows #MeToo and #ChurchToo hashtags alone won't get victims into a prosecutor's office, a courtroom or a therapy appointment. That's why she steps to the podium, meets with victims and grants interviews

when she'd rather be home reading to her children.

"I'm a Calvinist, so I think God has a plan for everything," her husband, Jacob, said. "But I think that in some cases, you definitely see his providence more clearly than in other instances.

"The question becomes, I think, was she prepared for exposing Larry Nassar or was Larry Nassar preparing her for something else? And I'm becoming more convinced that Larry Nassar was preparing her for something else."

All eyes are on Rachael Denhollander as she speaks at a fundraiser in Wyoming. June 2019  
Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

## The place where Rachael is truly happy

Rachael stood at a lectern in a sunshine-flooded dining room at the Teton Pines Resort and Country Club on a clear Wyoming morning in late June and told her story once again.

The abuse from both men. The lies she once told herself.

"Not facing the reality of what I had lost and the damage that was done seemed less painful," she said to the group gathered at a fundraiser for sexual assault and domestic violence victims. "But in reality, it kept me from the truth, and it kept me from healing."

The crowd of 150 advocates, law enforcement members and donors gasped when Rachael told them about the institutional failures at Michigan State and USA Gymnastics that allowed

*Rachael Denhollander*

*Larry did abuse most of his victims right in front of their parents.*

Nassar's abuse to go on for so long. They sat captivated.

Unlike most trips where Rachael tries to minimize time away from the kids, this one was a family vacation. As Rachael spoke, Jacob and the four children explored exhibits in the Jackson Hole Children's Museum.

She spoke again that afternoon to another group, delivering a similar message.

"We have to start understanding how abusers wield the circumstances around them to make abuse seem impossible," she told the crowd. "Larry did abuse most of his victims right in front of their parents.

"And that really was, I think, one of the most horrific things he did. Because the reality that most parents have to grapple with is that they sat there and watched their daughters get molested, and they had no idea what was happening."

A line waited for her shortly after her speech. People stopped her on the way to thank her.

They see her as a champion for their cause. A hero. A light in the darkness.

But Rachael's nightmares remain. Her wounds are permanent. She doesn't yet know how to fully heal.

"I've talked about seeing a counselor, just to have somebody to talk to besides (Jacob), because he carries it a lot," Rachael said. "I just don't know if I want to add one more thing to my schedule, if that makes sense. Like it's just, it's so busy.

■

Rachael Denhollander and her husband, Jacob, travel in a tram at Jackson Hole, Wyoming. June 2019  
Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

"I don't know ultimately if it would end up helping or just be frustrating because it's one more thing to do."

During their time in Wyoming, Rachael hoped to re-create a vacation she went on with her family when she was 12. A time before Larry Nassar. A trip filled with memories she still treasures: hiking and praying with her family, and her father reading "The Hobbit" aloud while nature surrounded them.

On this sunny June morning, Rachael, Jacob and their children started their hike in the Teton mountain range up a twisting path, each turn getting them closer to the Hidden Falls, the first stop.

"It's called hidden waterfall because it's like a secret," Rachael told Hope.

They reached the falls, stopping for a snack break and to take in the rushing falls. They carried on up the mountain with periodic stops so the kids could do some amateur "bouldering" up and down small rock faces along the path.

Grace is already developing an interest in gymnastics. She borrows Rachael's phone to watch gymnastics videos online, and Rachael worries about what else she might find.

Jonathan has already asked what a pedophile is. It's a crime, they told him.

"Every once in a while they tell everybody their mom's famous," Rachael said. "It's weird. We try to really temper that because I'm not famous, but that's the impression they have because I was on TV."

The older kids don't remember much of life before the case, but they've sacrificed just as Jacob and Rachael have. Grace and Hope missed ballet lessons. Jonathan missed a hockey season.

This was part of the consequences of sin, Rachael told them, and it goes much further than they know.

■ Rachael Denhollander finds peace in the Tetons with her family.

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

One day, Rachael and Jacob will have to tell their children what their sacrifices were for.

But on this day, as the midday sun warmed the walk, the Denhollanders left the forest behind for rocky and twisting passages, the elevation rising.

When they reached Inspiration Point, at the 7,200-foot mark, the path widened and led to a plateau.

Rachael looked out over a skyline that stretched for miles, happy once again to be in the mountains.

"They're immovable. They're always there," she said. "I think they're just an incredible combination of strength and beauty both. I mean, you see that a lot in nature, but they don't change. They've planted themselves and they are going to stay. They're not moving, not for anybody.

"And yet they're just indescribably beautiful at the same time. I love that combination. It's very restful. It's secure."

Grace, Hope and Jonathan sat along the ridge as Jacob read aloud from "The Hobbit."

Rachael stood behind them, her eyes on Elora, sound asleep on her chest, little legs poking out of pink pants as Rachael's arms cradled her and her dreams.

Soon they'd start the hike back down, a family vacation coming to an end, with Rachael's other life waiting to pull her away.

The autumn will be filled with a national book tour and more speaking engagements, and all that accompanies those things: More postponed healing. More nightmares. More sacrifices.

But up here on this mountain, Rachael brushed the hair from Elora's sleeping face, leaned down and kissed her head.

In this moment, Rachael is where she always wanted to be.



Show caption Rachael Denhollander holds her daughter, Elora, as her husband, Jacob, reads the Hobbit to their children at Inspiration Point in Tetons National Park in Wyoming....

Michael Clevenger/Courier Journal

**Jacob Denhollander:** In her courageous battle for justice against Larry Nassar, my wife became my hero

**Prosecutor:** Denhollander's greatest contribution may be to the girls who will never meet Larry Nassar

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# C.S. Lewis Talks to a Dog About Lust

February 2, 2017

People sometimes think of Christian morality as a straitjacket—as if God has given us arbitrary commands that we must keep in order to prove our devotion to him. Following God’s instructions (especially in matters related to sexuality) requires us to sacrifice what we truly want, or to squelch our desires, in order to show God how much we love him. We are to give up what we want and obey him instead.

Reading through the collected letters of C. S. Lewis this year, I came across this gem in a letter from Lewis to his lifelong friend, Arthur Greeves, on September 12, 1933. Lewis was no stranger to lust and sexual temptation, and neither was Greeves, who experienced same-sex attraction.

But Lewis believed that the “Christian morality is arbitrary” perspective doesn’t go deep enough. It doesn’t consider what *we* really want. Neither does it deal with what *God* really wants. He uses his dog as an example:

“Supposing you are taking a dog on a lead through a turnstile or past a post. You know what happens (apart from his usual ceremonies in passing a post!). He tries to go to the wrong side and gets his head looped round the post. *You* see that he can’t do it, and therefore pull him back. You pull him *back* because you want to enable him to go *forward*. He wants exactly the same thing—namely to go *forward*: for that very reason he resists your pull *back*, or, if he is an obedient dog, yields to it reluctantly as a matter of duty which seems to him to be quite in opposition to his own will: though *in fact* it is only by yielding to you that he will ever succeed in getting where he wants.”

I wish I'd come across this illustration sooner, because I would have included it in *This Is Our Time* as an example of one of my book's main points—that underneath the myths we believe and the actions we perform are both longings and lies.

The dog believes the lie that the only way forward, the only way to get what it wants, is to push ahead. Lewis, the dog-owner, affirms the longing of the dog to go forward, but he must pull the dog back in order for it to actually make any progress.

## Lewis Talks to His Dog

Next, Lewis explains what he would say to his dog, if suddenly it became a theologian and was frustrated by the owner's thwarting of its will:

“My dear dog, if by your will you mean what you really want to do, viz. to get forward along the road, I not only understand this desire but *share* it. Forward is exactly where I want you to go.

“If by your will, on the other hand, you mean your will to pull against the collar and try to force yourself forward in a direction which is no use—why I *understand* it of course: but just because I understand it (and the whole situation, which you *don't* understand) I cannot possibly share it. In fact the more I sympathize with your *real* wish—that is, the wish to get on—the less can I sympathize (in the sense of ‘share’ or ‘agree with’) your resistance to the collar: for I see that this is actually rendering the attainment of your real wish impossible.”

## God Shares Our Ultimate Desire

Lewis applies this parable to our own situation. As human beings, we long for happiness, yet believe the lies that lead to evil actions:

“God not only understands but *shares* the desire which is at the root of all my evil—the desire for complete and ecstatic happiness. He made me for no other purpose than to enjoy it. But He knows, and I do not, how it can be really and permanently attained. He knows that most of *my* personal attempts to reach it are actually putting it further and further out of my reach. With these therefore He cannot sympathize or ‘agree’: His sympathy with my *real* will makes that impossible. (He may *pity* my misdirected struggles, but that is another matter.)

So, over against the person who says, “I must squelch my desires, out of duty to God” Lewis says, *No, God actually shares your ultimate desire. He is redirecting your path so you can actually find that joy you long for.*

And over against the person who says, “God affirms me as I am and sympathizes with all my desires,” Lewis would say, *No. Because God affirms your ultimate desire, he must categorically reject your sinful actions and desires, for they will forever keep you from what you really want.*

## **The Longing for Joy and the Lie of Sin**

What’s the takeaway? First, Lewis says we can look back at our history and see there is a God-given longing behind many of our sinful actions.

“I may always feel looking back on any past sin that in the very heart of my evil passion there was something that God approves and wants me to feel not less but more. Take a sin of Lust. The overwhelming thirst for *rapture* was good and even divine: it has not got to be unsaid (so to speak) and recanted.”

But now Lewis exposes the lie: the idea that giving into your sinful, illicit lust will fulfill that longing:

“But [the thirst] will never be quenched as I tried to quench it. If I refrain—if I submit to the collar and come round the right side of the lamp-post—God will be guiding me quickly as He can to where I shall get what I really wanted all the time.”

## The Gracious, Ruthless God

Second, Lewis says this parable applies to future temptation, and helps us understand why we should expect God to be ruthless in condemning our sin:

“When we are thinking of a sin in the future, i.e. when we are tempted, we must remember that *just because* God wants for us what we really want and knows the only way to get it, therefore He must, in a sense, be quite ruthless towards sin.

“He is not like a human authority who can be begged off or caught in an indulgent mood. The more He loves you the more determined He must be to pull you back from your way which leads nowhere into His way which leads you where you want to God. Hence MacDonald’s words ‘The *all-punishing, all-pardoning* Father!’”

It is impossible to appeal to God’s “love” in order to affirm you in your lusts. God *cannot* and *will not* affirm your sinful desires and actions because to do so would make it impossible for you to know true joy.

So what should you do when you fall into sin? Ask for forgiveness *and* redirection.

“You may go the wrong way again, and again He may forgive you: as the dog’s master may extricate the dog after he has tied the whole lead round the lamp-post. But there is no hope *in the end* of getting where you want to

go except by going God's way."

## Longings and Lies in Our Lust

This parable about the dog helps us see both the longings and the lies in the world's understanding of sexuality, and it smashes the idea that God wants to kill our joy or obliterate all our desires. Far from it! Instead, Lewis believes that God pulls back the collar precisely because He wants us to find the delight we crave, in Him:

"I think one may be quite rid of the old haunting suspicion—which raises its head in every temptation—that there is something else than God, some other country into which He forbids us to trespass—some kind of delight which He 'doesn't appreciate' or just chooses to forbid, but which would be real delight if only we were allowed to get it. The thing *just isn't there*.

Whatever we desire is either what God is trying to give us as quickly as He can, or else a false picture of what He is trying to give us—a false picture which would not attract us for a moment if we saw the real thing.

"God knows what we want, even in our vilest acts. He is longing to give it to us. He is not looking on from the outside at some new 'taste' or 'separate desire of our own.' Only because he has laid up *real* goods for us to desire are we able to go wrong by snatching at them in greedy, misdirected ways. . .

"Thus you may well feel that God understands our temptations—understands them a great deal more than we do. But don't forget MacDonald again—'*Only God understands evil and hates it.*' Only the dog's master knows how useless it is to try to get on with the lead knotted around the lamppost. This is why we must be prepared to find God implacably and immovably forbidding what may seem to us very small and trivial things."

God understands our temptations. He knows our hearts better than we do. He sympathizes with our ignorant attempts to find joy apart from him. But in his great love, he refuses to affirm us in our misdirected ways. To do so would be to abandon us to the leash and lamppost, where we would strangle ourselves.

[Learn more](#) about the relationship between TGC and the blogs we are honored to host.

# Sex, death and marriage

steve

In case anyone is interested, this is the paper I gave at an ETS panel on theological methodology for discussing marriage; many of the arguments have or will appear in print elsewhere, but I'm not going to publish this, so it may as well be here.

*And I say to you, that whoever puts away his wife – except on account of porneia – and marries another woman commits adultery.*

*[His] disciples said to him, 'If that is the way it is for a man with his wife, it is not a good idea to get married!'* Mt. 19:9-10 (my tr.)

This retort from the disciples fascinates me, as does its neglect in recent commentary and ethical reflection. Let me pose my question straightforwardly: can any of us here imagine Christian leaders in our own context responding to a description of a Christian sexual ethic by asserting it is better not to marry? If, as I presume, the answer is no, it might be worth us asking why there is this difference: what did the disciples know that we don't, or what do we know that they didn't?

Jesus has been challenged over the famous, if probably apocryphal controversy between R. Shammai and R. Hillel; he responds by citing Genesis, affirming marriage as a creation ordinance intended by God, and so not to be broken by human beings – 'what God has united, let no-one untie' (6b). They cite Moses' stone tablets; he cites their stony hearts – a concession, but it was not so at the Beginning and now at the beginning of the End it will not be so again. Matthew's Jesus then offers an exception – *porneia*[1] – and so offers a much more liberal reading than we discover in

Mark or Luke; the disciples still however, recoil at the strictness of the interpretation – so hard it would be better not to marry at all. Jesus responds with the strange saying about varieties of eunuchs, and then turns to play with some children. Someone – a rich young ruler, on Luke's telling – arrives and leaves, sorrowful, and we hear about camels and needles' eyes, and Peter's protest about how much he has given up already.

There are some textual variants, mostly apparent assimilations to the similar text in Mt. 5:31-32; none of them change the force of the teaching, or the strength of the disciples' rejection. So how might this be read? Badly, would seem to be the general answer amongst us moderns. Some commentators – France (TNTC) for example – assume the disciples cannot mean what they say: '[w]as this a serious suggestion, or were these words spoken with a wry smile which the printed word cannot convey?' Well, Jesus took it seriously, speaking of Kingdom castration with his next breath. Morris (Pillar) is equally weak: '[t]he disciples envisage problems in maintaining the marriage relationship with this hanging over their heads. They probably had no intention of making use of the provision for divorce, but they found it comforting that the provision was there in case of need.'

Hagner (WBC) does a little better, at least acknowledging the plain meaning of the disciples' objection: '[t]he risks ... were too great in their estimate'. But the risks of what? He says 'becoming inseparably linked with an unsatisfactory wife, in whatever way'. Is that really it? 'Unsatisfactory'? I think we need to recall the strength of the Jewish commitment to marriage at this point, and insist that whatever worries the disciples, it is a bit stronger than this. Hays[2] offers something more plausible: for a man to renounce the right to divorce would be, he comments, 'startling ... within Matthew's patriarchal cultural context', but it can, he suggests, be placed alongside renunciation of anger, turning the cheek, loving the enemy, as a principled embrace of powerlessness which is a mark of the Kingdom.

Older readers listened to the text more carefully. Calvin makes two fairly characteristic moves in his commentary on the harmony: he blames the devil, and he is surprisingly feminist.[3] For the latter, he criticises the disciples for not thinking about what wives have to endure – all assumed in the day that wives had no right of divorce, of course – ‘why do they not consider how hard is the bondage of wives?’ he asks. And he answers ‘devoted to themselves and their own convenience, they are driven by the feeling of the flesh to disregard others, and to think only of what is advantageous for themselves’. Warming to the theme, he asserts ‘it is a display of base ingratitude that, from the dread or dislike of a single inconvenience, they reject a wonderful gift of God.’ Then he warns that ‘Satan has always endeavoured to make [marriage] an object of hatred and detestation...’ Matthew Henry is similarly down on the disciples: ‘like sullen children, if they have not what they would have, they will throw away what they have. If they may not be allowed to put away their wives when they please, they will have no wives at all ... Corrupt nature is impatient of restraint, and would fain break Christ’s bonds in sunder, and have liberty for its own lusts.’

These older writers see what only Hayes amongst the modern writers I have cited recognises: the disciples are complaining that the Christian view of marriage Jesus presents is impossibly strict; this is a call to holiness which makes their heads spin, makes them ask ‘who can possibly live like this?’ Henry is rather stoical in his recommendations for shouldering the burden – he remains a good Puritan after all: ‘whatever our condition is, we must ... be thankful for its comforts, submissive to its crosses, and ... make the best of that which is.’ Calvin and Henry, that is, see that – for the disciples at least – the demands Jesus makes concerning marriage are sufficiently onerous that they cast doubt on whether marriage is a good idea for anyone – a proposition no modern writer seems prepared to entertain.

Now, one response to this would be to turn back to Genesis, as Jesus himself did; there we discover marriage presented in simply positive ways: 'it is not good for the human to be alone; I will make a well-matched ally for him...' (Gen. 2:18). We should note, however, that everything is presented in simply positive ways in Genesis 1 and 2; that's why we call it paradise... In Genesis 3 we discover temptation, disobedience and shame; sin, curse and exile – the knowledge of good and evil, which we were so much better off without. And in the curse, the easy companionship of the marriage relationship is broken: 'your desire will be for your husband, and he will master you.' (Gen. 3:16). The Hebrew words here are the same as those the Lord uses when speaking to Cain of lurking sin a few lines later 'its desire is for you, but you must master it' (Gen. 4:7). [4] The words together speak of a battle for control; the delightful companionship of marriage has become open warfare. And, think Peter and John and the rest, if there's no escape from the battlefield, it is better never to enter it.

It is noteworthy that two other realities come together here in Gen. 3: childbearing, not mentioned at all in the description of marriage in Genesis 2; and death. Of course, they belong together; the begetting of children is, prior to knowledge of the resurrection, the only possible human response to death. The Scriptures make this clear enough: come the Kingdom, 'they will neither marry nor be given in marriage, but they will be like the angels in heaven,' says Jesus. When death ends, so does childbearing and so does marriage. East of Eden, we marry to have children, and we have children because we know we will die – a point Robert Song has demonstrated convincingly.

The Fathers knew this well enough: writing against Marcion, Tertullian taught that sexual intercourse began after the Fall, as a result of mortality. 'Where there is death, there is also marriage.' (C. *Marcion* IV 38.5.43-45, p.468 in SC 456) He makes the explicit link with our saying of Jesus when

he writes on the resurrection: death ends in the Kingdom and so marriage ends too. (*Res. Mort.* XXXVI.5.24-25) The point became general in the fourth century: Chrysostom states it most pithily, almost echoing Tertullian: *hopou gar thanatos, ekei gamos*, (*Virg.* XVI.6.70 (SC 125, p. 142) but Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Athanasius, Jerome, and Ambrose all make the same point. [5]

There was a eunuch, rendered so to serve his queen. He would die without children, but he was not far from the Kingdom. One day he was reading a prophet writing about another who would die childless: '[w]ho can speak of his descendants?' But the prophet went on 'he will see his offspring and prolong his days ... because he poured out his life unto death.' (Is. 53:10-11 NIV) Immediately the prophet reinforces the confusion: 'Sing, barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.' (Is. 54:1 NIV). Death and childbearing come together once more, this time in paradox in the prophet's strange song.

Philip opened the Scriptures, doing the work of an evangelist, told him the good news of Jesus. Death is done to death – and so, of course, childrearing and marriage are decisively reordered. Now there is no need to marry – and so a dangerous error repeatedly arises amongst those who believe in Jesus, that real discipleship is celibate. The error is dangerous because it is so close to the truth; Jesus is risen; death is conquered; and so marriage is unnecessary. The logic is profoundly attractive to any community who actually believe the gospel. The Corinthians were merely amongst the first such, and so the first of their questions to Paul turns on the claim 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman.' (1Cor. 7:1, my tr.)

Of course, Paul doesn't disagree – not because he is misogynistic, not because he is horrified by sex, but because he believes in the resurrection.

But he qualifies: although the Kingdom is coming, it is not yet come, and so he warns of the continuing reality of sin. Since *porneia* happens, he counsels, be married, be faithful, and be sexually available to each other. 'I say this as concession, not command' (1Cor. 7:6) – our hearts are stony still. Better not to marry, of course – but better to marry than to burn, he remarks laconically. So there is a mutuality of availability: wives own their husbands' bodies and husbands their wives'; in marriage spouses surrender themselves to each other so that both may fulfil their physical needs. But still – concession, not command; this is not the best way; because Jesus is risen, marriage is unnecessary.

So the preoccupation of the early church with the ethical status of marriage was just right. This wasn't the result of some Platonic distrust of matter; it was the result of the sure hope in the resurrection of the dead. The church of the martyrs believed in the resurrection, and so struggled with marriage. Now, I certainly want to follow the catholic reasoning that led to the affirmation of the goodness of marriage, but let's trace that reasoning properly: it is a part of the Augustinian ethic of mediocrity, an acknowledgement that the self-control Paul speaks of is much more often lacking than not. Virtually all people burn, so marriage is – common and usual, if never normal – for Christians.

The genius of the Augustinian ethic though is to see that marriage can be discipleship, not just concession, and it can be discipleship in just the way celibacy can. Celibacy is of course the Christian norm – to assert otherwise is to deny the resurrection – but both marriage and celibacy, well practiced, are modes of asceticism, thick clusters of practices that serve to reorder our sinful and wayward desires and make us fit for the Kingdom. Marriage, Christianly practiced, is not a way of indulging our desires, but a way of redirecting them. The only way we can make Christian sense of marriage as anything more than a pastoral accommodation to human weakness is to see

it as a mode of practice for living in the Kingdom, although in the Kingdom we will neither marry nor be given in marriage.

Our topic is not same-sex marriage, but let me say a word or two. The Christian ethical issue is not whether lesbian and gay people have a 'right' to marry, whatever that contemporary obfuscation might mean. Rather, we must look at three questions: can a same-sex marriage be a practice of asceticism that re-orders wayward desires Christianly? This position was argued by Gene Rogers in the best book yet written defending same-sex marriage. If we answer no, we might ask whether there is space for a third discipline alongside marriage and celibacy – this is the argument of Robert Song in his excellent recent book. If we answer no to that, we can only look for some form of pastoral accommodation, similar to that many churches have reached over divorce, or respond with compassionate refusal.

More interesting is why this has become an issue for us; I suspect that the answer is wrapped up in the same cultural realities that make us modern readers unable to comprehend the disciples' retort with which we began. At some point in the twentieth century, we in the West became convinced that sexual activity is necessary for healthy and properly adult human life. Let me, inexactly, call this the 'Freudian' position. The call to celibacy in this context sounds like an act of astonishing cruelty, depriving someone of a basic necessity for human flourishing.

Our inherited ethical tradition does not have the language or arguments to deal with this challenge, because it is not the challenge it was crafted to address. We have, literally, nothing to say theologically (and this is true whether we think the right way forward is conservative or progressive, which is why there are presently so few good books on sexual ethics from any side).

It gets worse, though: for a couple of generations, we Evangelicals – and all other Protestants – essentially surrendered to this error by making marriage an inevitable part of Christian maturity. We constructed church programmes on the assumption that single people were either young adults preparing for marriage or elderly and widowed; we doubted ministerial candidates who was not married, because they could therefore not be properly ‘grown up’. This was a capitulation to an error, but it sort of worked OK – until the churches were forced to acknowledge that some people are lesbian/gay/exclusively same-sex attracted, and so not able to accept the inevitability of (traditional) marriage. If we think marriage belongs necessarily to the fulness of life, not in a response to death, then we have no answers for lesbian and gay disciples that are not culturally unimaginable and unspeakably cruel.

We can see this capitulation working itself out in the way in which, in many churches, the beginning and end of sexual ethics is telling young people to ‘save themselves for marriage’ as if sex was an uncomplicated human good that merely needs to be properly located by our moral reasoning. Let us be completely clear: that is not a Christian sexual ethic; that is the ethic of a pagan fertility cult that worships sex because it cannot believe in the resurrection of Christ. We should rather teach people, young and old, married and single – and in complex erotic relationships – that their lived responses to their sexual desires must be ever increasingly ordered to the resurrected life of the Kingdom.

The deep reflection of the Church on the Scriptures has led to the conviction that there are two, and only two, ways of life that are so ordered: marriage and celibacy. Marriage – if it is to be something good, and not merely a concession to our stony hearts, is absolutely not a space for the unlimited indulgence of sexual desires. Rather, it is a set of practices in and through which we learn to desire differently. We’ve heard already Paul

insisting on a mutual bodily surrender between spouses in 1 Corinthians; these internal acts of mutual submission, of re-ordering our sinful and selfish desires, are reinforced by the necessary openness to procreation that exists in the marriage relationship. Children, in the light of the resurrection of Christ, are not a way of responding to death, but an opportunity for our crabbed and incurved selves to be opened out in love.

Celibacy, if it is to be something good, and not merely the presence of an absence, is similarly a set of practices in and through which we learn to desire differently. Lacking the opportunity to endlessly submit to a spouse, the celibate Christian will intentionally seek ways to open her life out in love – and the church, if it is to be faithful to the gospel of the resurrection – must offer her such ways. Inevitably these will involve practices of community, probably ordered by rule; I strongly suspect that they will need to involve the sorts of vowed friendships that Wesley Hill was talking about in part on Tuesday night.

Our hearts are stony and our desires misdirected; this is true of us all, without exception and without distinction. (To be clear again concerning one salient point: the erotic desires of the person who knows themselves to be lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual are not more misdirected than the desires of the person who knows themselves to be straight.) East of Eden, all our desires are warped and misdirected. Freed by resurrection faith from the need to procreate in response to death, we can marry, or be celibate, for Kingdom reasons, and in the endless self-denial and mutual submission of marriage, or the intentionally-embraced self-denial and submission of celibacy, we can become fit for the Kingdom, able, at last, to satisfy our one true desire, to look upon the face of the Lord and not be consumed.

[1] Which we should probably read to mean a breach of any of the sexual purity regulations contained in the holiness code of Lev. 18-20.

[2] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 365.

[3] Of course I am not proposing Calvin as a proto-feminist, but his readings of Scripture often seem remarkably open to what would now be regarded as feminist perspectives. I suppose merely that he is a faithful interpreter of Scripture, and that it is the inspired text, not the reader, which challenges patriarchal assumptions.

[4] I owe the suggestion of using this verbal parallel to interpret Gen. 3:16 to my colleague Dr Bill Tooman, who advanced it in a seminar he gave to St Andrews Baptist Church in November 2015.

[5] So Josiah Trenham, *Marriage and Virginity according to St John Chrysostom* (Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1259/>) p.89, n. 102.

# Escaping the Prison of the Self

## Wesley Hill

During college, I was part of a young men's prayer group, and our leader, an Anglican priest, once gave us a copy of a letter C. S. Lewis sent in 1956 to Keith Masson, an American reader of his. The topic of the letter was masturbation. Here is an excerpt:

For me the real evil of masturbation would be that it takes an appetite which, in lawful use, leads the individual out of himself to complete (and correct) his own personality in that of another (and finally in children and even grandchildren) and turns it back: sends the man back into the prison of himself, there to keep a harem of imaginary brides. And this harem, once admitted, works against his *ever* getting out and really uniting with a real woman. For the harem is always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifices or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attractions which no real woman can rival. Among those shadowy brides he is always adored, always the perfect lover: no demand is made on his unselfishness, no mortification ever imposed on his vanity. In the end, they become merely the medium through which he increasingly adores himself . . . . And it is not only the faculty of love which is thus sterilized, forced back on itself, but also the faculty of imagination.

The true exercise of imagination, in my view, is (a) To help us to understand other people (b) To respond to, and, some of us, to produce, art. But it has also a bad use: to provide for us, in shadowy form, a substitute for virtues, successes, distinctions etc. which ought to be sought *outside* in the real world—e.g. picturing all I'd do if I were rich instead of earning and saving. Masturbation involves this abuse of imagination in erotic matters (which I think bad in itself) and thereby encourages a similar abuse of it in all

spheres. After all, almost the *main* work of life is to *come out* of our selves, out of the little, dark prison we are all born in. Masturbation is to be avoided as *all* things are to be avoided which retard this process. The danger is that of coming to *love* the prison.

This is a wise and humane letter, and when my fellow students and I received it from our mentor many years ago, it generated several lines of fruitful conversation. But rereading it now, I'm struck afresh by its particular vantage point: It is written with the assumption, it seems, that its recipient will one day marry. The harem that the lustful young man keeps in his imagination "works against his *ever* getting out and really uniting with a real woman." I'm sure Lewis was right to take that approach, but it makes me wonder what he would have said to many of us who are celibate and not planning to be married. If we are going to avoid masturbation, we need a different incentive from the one Lewis offers, since few of us expect to "unite with a real woman" someday.

(It's this *kind* of thing, by the way—a priest/mentor addressing a group of college-aged men on the assumption that they're all straight and soon-to-be-engaged—that often contributes to the loneliness of celibate people in Christian circles. Pastoral guidance usually addresses itself to the majority—in this case, heterosexual young men who, all things being equal, will eventually get married. And no doubt that's as it should be. But when the minority, such as gay-and-planning-on-celibacy Christians, don't enter the minds of the mentors and priests dispensing pastoral guidance, that oversight can make them feel all the more marginalized.)

So let me take a stab at broadening Lewis and my priest friend's perspective. Taking my cues from Lewis' letter, I would argue that masturbation—or lust more generally—harms the celibate person too, not because it may hinder a future marital union but because it can also harm

*friendship*. If the celibate person, no less than the husband or wife, is called to *go out of himself* in the love of friendship and siblinghood and in other bonds of kinship, then he also should want to guard his heart from constructing self-serving fantasies that have nothing to do with *self-giving*. Especially for gay Christians, keeping an imaginary cadre of men (or women, as the case may be) whom we can ogle at will is a habit that harms our ability to strengthen the ties of friendship. This is because friendship, as someone said to me recently, is *more* itself, not less, when it is unencumbered by lustful desire.

Moreover, if part of the rationale of Christian celibacy is to witness to the goodness of *marriage* precisely by refraining from sexual relations outside of marriage, then the sexual purity of the celibate—again, no less than that of the married—points to the beauty of a real man uniting with a real woman. (“By abstaining from temporary liaisons, the chaste and single reinforce the logic of marriage,” says my friend Chris Roberts.) Therefore, even if Lewis himself doesn’t spell this out, I can take his rationale for a soon-to-be-married person’s chastity as relevant for my vocational-celibate chastity, too.

Of course, spelling out the rationale for chastity does little to help with the actual *practice* of it. For that, the grace of God in Christ, as experienced in Christian community, is needed. But that’s another post for another day.



# Christians & Masturbation: Seven Perspectives

June 03, 2013

When I first introduced our yearlong series on Sexuality & The Church, I polled you for your input and ideas, and the most popular suggestion came from a reader named Lucy who wrote:

*"With sexuality (and with singleness) could you look at masturbation from a theological perspective? I think it is something that maybe teenage guys hear about all the time, but rarely even gets whispered about among women. And it's not that I think there would be different rules, but rather I need a theological framework in which to think about it, and no one wants to even begin talking. I'm single and in my 30s and my non-Christian friends think 'contentment in singleness' is a euphemism for something. Are they right?"*

I wanted to get a diversity of perspectives in response to this question, so I contacted several folks whose opinion on matters related to sexuality I respect, and asked them this question:

## **Is masturbation an acceptable component to healthy sexuality for Christians?**

Below are responses from Abigail Rine, Anna Broadway, Richard Beck, Dianna Anderson, Matthew Lee Anderson, Jenell Williams Paris, and Tara Owens. I hope you learn as much from them as I did!

### **Abigail Rine**



***Abigail Rine teaches literature and gender studies at George Fox University. She writes for The Atlantic and is the author of the forthcoming book Irigaray, Incarnation and Contemporary Women's Fiction. Find her at Mama Unabridged or on Twitter.***

I am sure others are better equipped to speak to the biblical/theological dimension of this conversation, so I'll just say that I do not see the Bible as giving any sort of indictment against masturbation, although a puritanical narrative of sexuality is often imposed upon the Bible to make it seem that way. I think that masturbation can absolutely be a healthy part of both married and unmarried sexuality. (Of course, any sexual behavior can be distorted and used in unhealthy ways, but I'm not going to go into detail about that either, because that is often where the conversation begins and ends.) Instead, I'm going to give some specific examples of how I see masturbation as a healthy part of sexuality:

1) For those who plan to wait until marriage to have sex, masturbation can be a healthy way of dealing with natural sexual desire while single. The expectation that young men and women should go ten or fifteen years or

more beyond puberty without expressing their sexuality in any way – and then suddenly “turn it on” when married – is, I believe, completely unrealistic and potentially harmful. How can we expect people to embrace the sexual dimension of embodiment in marriage while pushing the message that touching certain parts of one’s own body is inherently dirty and shameful?

2) Speaking about female sexuality in particular: we have this naïve idea that all women can reach orgasm through vaginal intercourse alone, which is just not physiologically true for the majority of women. I think masturbation can be an excellent way for individual women to learn the uniqueness of their bodies and how they experience pleasure, which can then be communicated to a spouse.

3) To get a little more personal: I had a baby six months ago, and in the wake of the physical trauma of childbirth, I felt like my body had been totally rewired. For the first time, I began to dread and fear having sex with my husband, which was incredibly disconcerting. Exploring my own body has been very helpful in making me feel physically normal and like a sexual being again – and this had fed directly into rebooting my sex life with my husband. I am also glad that my husband was able to use masturbation to get sexual release while I was physically unable to have sex with him – this took the pressure off of me while I was coping with the intense physical and emotional demands of caring for a newborn and recovering from pregnancy/birth.

**Anna Broadway**



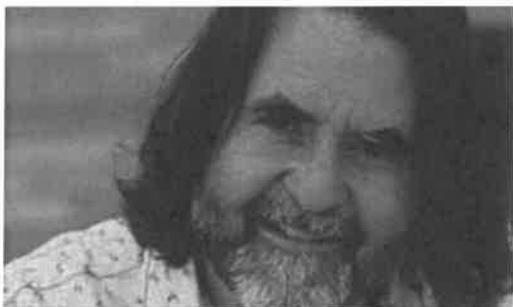
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Whether or not masturbation can be part of healthy sexuality depends on how we define the second part of the question: healthy sexuality. Based on my reading of the Bible, I believe sex is one of the many ways God created humans to bear the image of our maker in the world.

*Who is that maker?* According to the historic, creedal understanding, a triune God: one being, three persons. That paradox is very difficult to understand, but I think that's one reason God created both man and woman — the multiple persons in the trinity couldn't be represented in human form without different types of persons. How then are we to understand the profound unity possible between the different persons of the Trinity? I would argue the best picture God gave us was marriage — and in particular the sexual union between man and wife.

If that's true, it's hard to escape the conclusion that the primary purpose of sex is profoundly relational: it's meant to tightly unify husband and wife in a profound, material metaphor of the self-giving love shared within the Trinity. So when it comes to masturbation, I have had to conclude that it falls short of God's intention for human sexuality. In my randiest, loneliest moments, I can certainly wish for a different conviction, but even then, what I most desire is not the freedom to masturbate with a clear conscience, but to be married and near enough to that spouse to once again fumble our way through the best earthly picture we have of the Trinity's penultimate love.

## Richard Beck



***In addition to being one of my favorite bloggers, Richard Beck is Professor and Department Chair of Psychology at Abilene Christian University. He is the author of Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality and The Authenticity of Faith: The Varieties and Illusions of Religious Experience. Richard is married to Jana and they have two sons, Brenden and Aidan. He blogs at Experimental Theology.***

First, I'd like to bring up the issue of Internet pornography and its relationship to masturbation. With the rise of Internet porn, the consumption of pornography has reached unprecedented levels. And it's difficult, to say the least, to reconcile that consumption and the support it gives to the adult entertainment industry with the Christian commitments of

justice and love. To be sure, many will battle with pornography all their lives, like an alcoholic fights daily for sobriety. There must be grace for our failures, but this is a battle that must be fought.

And beyond issues related to justice, psychologists are only just beginning to grasp the full impact of pornography upon our brains and how those effects are creating sexual and relational dysfunction. For an introduction to the issues psychologists are beginning to examine see Gary Wilson's [widely-viewed TED Talk](#).

That issue duly noted, let me get to my main points:

I think it is important to recognize how masturbation functions in the life of those who are single. And even for those who eventually get married, we need to note how marriage has become increasingly delayed in Western cultures. A 2011 Pew Report found that the median age of (first) marriages was 29 for men and 27 for women. In the 1960s the median averages for both genders was in the early 20s, and in ancient cultures we married as teenagers. Given this delay, how are we to manage our sex drive from the onset of puberty to wedding night? To say nothing of the sexual challenges involved in lifelong singleness.

All that to say, masturbation may be a vital aspect in how single persons cultivate and achieve sexual chastity. That is, masturbation may be a critical part in how a single person achieves emotional and sexual well-being if they hold to an ideal that sexual relations should only take place within a covenanted, life-long, monogamous relationship.

In short, I don't think the physical act of masturbation should be moralized. The real issue in this conversation, the big elephant in the room, is Jesus' prohibition against lust (cf. Matt. 5.27-28). Masturbation per se might not be a sin but what about the attendant lust? Can you masturbate to the point

of orgasm without lust being a part of that experience?

And yet, I think this observation shifts the topic away from masturbation toward a theology of lust. What does it mean to lust? Should transitory erotic feelings be considered lust? Or is lust something more obsessive, persistent, greedy, covetous, acquisitive, and possessive in nature?

Because if transient erotic feelings are not lust then let me make a somewhat counterintuitive point: masturbation might be a great tool to combat lust.

Sexual arousal can become psychologically consuming, and debilitating, if not given a quick physiological outlet. We've all experienced this. When sexually aroused, it's hard to concentrate on anything else. Our mind is fixated on the object of arousal. And trying to repress these feelings often exacerbates them. How, then, to get past these feelings and impulses? Physiological release can help here. Masturbate, clear your head, and move on with your day. When masturbation is treated in this almost perfunctory manner, as a physiological catharsis, it can be a very healthy means of quickly ridding yourself of unwanted sexual feelings and distractions.

To be sure, if masturbation isn't being used in this perfunctory manner and is being accompanied by regular and possessive fantasies toward someone who isn't, say, your spouse, then more might need to be said, (along with what I said above about pornography). But again, the issue then is less with masturbation than lust and how that lust might be symptomatic of relational issues that need attention.

## Dianna Anderson

***Dianna Anderson is the author of the forthcoming book, DAMAGED GOODS, out in Spring 2015 from Jericho Books. When she is not***



***writing, she is on the lookout for a new day job. She resides in the Chicago area. Find her on her blog or on Twitter.***

Is masturbation an acceptable component to healthy sexuality?

Short answer: Yes. Long answer: Yes, absolutely. In fact, I might scratch "acceptable" from there and change it to "important."

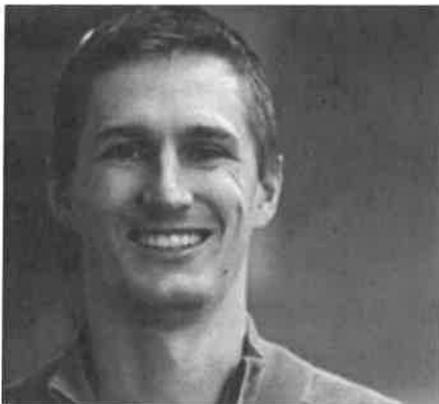
I think, when thinking about this question, the first thing we need to do is separate masturbation from pornography. Masturbation is not de facto coupled with pornography, and therefore is not in itself problematic. A lot of Christians leap quickly from one to the other, and it's important to make a distinction. Pornography is a completely separate beast of a question.

Like sex itself, masturbation is sinful only insofar as you use it sinfully. And what counts as "sinfully" for one person may not be sinful for others. This, most of all, requires knowing and understanding yourself and what your limits are. If you don't feel comfortable masturbating because you feel like it takes you to a bad place where you objectify other people, then don't do it. We make mistakes in christendom when we assume that masturbation is problematic for some, so no one, ever, should do this private thing. That's a problem, because my lines about what is sinful are not your lines, and making you conform to my lines in something as intensely complicated as sexuality won't end well.

As far as it being a component of healthy sexuality, it can be a helpful tool for understanding yourself and what feels right and what doesn't before you

ever enter into a sexual relationship. It can also make you more comfortable and more confident with your own body so that you are more comfortable when the time comes with a partner. Masturbation can be an important component of a healthy sexuality and can be an important part of a healthy sex life (if you're comfortable taking care of yourself, there's less pressure when you're with a partner). It can be misused and abused, like any good thing, certainly, but it can also be a great boon to understanding and becoming comfortable with yourself as well.

## Matthew Lee Anderson



***Matthew Lee Anderson is the author of Earthen Vessels: Why our Bodies Matter to our Faith and The End of our Exploring: A Book about Questioning and the Confidence of Faith. He blogs at Mere Orthodoxy.***

If our ethic is to be Christian, then it must be qualified by the cross and resurrection of Jesus. That is to say, the pattern for our lives and actions must be shaped by a love that treats pleasure as the (sometimes delayed) fruit of our sacrificial self-giving for others, rather than a good without qualification.

If we disconnect the experience of sexual pleasure from the moment of giving ourselves for another, to another in love, we fundamentally distort the meaning of the human body in its sexual dimension. In the auto-eroticism

of masturbation, we pursue a particular sort of satisfaction or a particular experience of pleasure. But it is through the mutual self-giving in love that our humanity is established (whether in sex or beyond), rather than the abstract experience of pleasure or the fulfillment of a craving or felt need.

However enjoyable it might be, masturbation fails to fulfill this form of human sexuality, and as such is corrosive to the integrity of our persons and our intimacy of the Spirit.

## Jenell Williams Paris



**Jenell Williams Paris is a professor of anthropology at Messiah College in Grantham, PA, and the author of *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are.***

Christians often talk about the morality of masturbation as if, were it to be definitively deemed immoral, people would stop doing it. It seems to me that a better question is, "Given that most people masturbate, how can we see even

this area of life in the light of faith?"

Social science research finds that most people masturbate, including both adolescents and adults, men and women (higher proportions of men than women), and those who are single, married, or partnered. Some people don't do it at all, for a variety of reasons including faith conviction or partner expectations. Masturbation can be compulsive, but it isn't necessarily. It doesn't typically replace face-to-face relationships, but for younger people today, males especially, easy and constant access to pornography distorts

their drive for, and their behavior in, relationships with women.

Masturbation is very much like all other dimensions of human sexuality, which is very much like spirituality. There is gift, beauty, understanding, and pleasure, but also mystery and not-knowing; we live with incomplete understanding of ourselves, our intimate partners, and the sacred. There is also temptation, darkness, and sin. In masturbation, marriage or intimate partnership, and in the spiritual life in general, we encounter confusing, disturbing, and unwanted impulses, fantasies, and behaviors.

Christianity is often reduced to a moral system that encourages (or harangues) people toward being good instead of bad. But like life in general, sex seems to defy our attempts to be good; in both masturbation and in sexual partnership, unruly, wild, and unpredictable parts of ourselves often emerge. If cared for, acknowledged, and brought into the light, the wildness of sex still doesn't submit to domestication, but it can offer practice in humility, humor, and groundedness. When we ignore it, trying to be more angel than human, what is repressed often returns in distorted and harmful forms.

We were created human, not angels, and nothing highlights that more insistently than sexuality. Learning to handle, acknowledge, and discuss sexuality – including masturbation – with appropriate boundaries and in trusted circles, is part of the journey toward authentic personhood.

Perhaps it even relates to something Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30).

It's no surprise that our best efforts to be good make us feel weary and

burdened. We settle for moral judgment, shame, and silence, when the ease, the lightness, and the gentleness of our Savior is right there for us.

## Tara Owens

***Tara Owens, CSD, is a spiritual director, speaker and author with Anam Cara Ministries. She teaches on the topic of spirituality and sexuality in seminaries and spiritual direction training programs throughout North America. She has a book on spirituality and the body coming out with InterVarsity Press in 2014. You can connect with her on Twitter or Facebook.***



The term *healthy sexuality* presupposes that we have a good idea of what our sexuality is and does, and I would argue that, for the most part, both our culture and the Church have fairly disordered models of what sexuality is supposed to look like. Part of the reason we struggle with the question of masturbation is because we have trouble living in the tension of our desires. It's easier (and I find the tendency in myself almost every day) to fall back onto the black and white rules that we're often offered as answer to our struggles instead of doing the hard work of encountering our own desires and longings in relationship with God and others. For the most part, we've been given two sets of unhelpful "rules" for what we should do with our sexuality: (1) respond to our sexuality as an appetite, like hunger, and feed appropriately or (2) avoid or subjugate our

sexuality as something to be expressed only in covenanted conjugal relationship and ignored or sublimated at all other times. This is a false dichotomy, and both of these paradigms tend to end up in dysfunction. We either find ourselves at the mercy of our “needs” which leads to a low grade despair, or divorced from the life and pleasure that sexuality brings, living in a kind of discontented numbness.

Like many of the questions surrounding sexuality, I don't think we can find simple answers—or any answers that hold together in real life situations—outside of the context of relationship. For me, sexuality is broader than mere genital expression (intercourse, foreplay, masturbation, etc.), and encompasses all of the embodied ways that we desire connection with the world, with one another, and with God—as well as all of the ways we go about expressing that desire. While that definition can be taken to extremes, taking a broader view of sexuality allows us to see the ways that sexuality impels us to connection with one another. Taken in this context, masturbation and whether or not it is a healthy expression of sexuality for a particular individual become questions of whether or not the acts of masturbation at a particular season of life are drawing you deeper into isolation from others and from God, or into deeper connection and intimacy.

How does this play out? The answer will be different for different people in different contexts—but the principles underlying those answers will be the same. A single woman in her 20s who is discovering her body and her desires might be approaching masturbation as a celebration of sexuality and the gift of her body and desires; she could equally begin using masturbation as a place to take her sorrows, longings, and insecurities. In the former, masturbation can be a healthy expression of sexuality if kept squarely in the context of a relationship which, in her case, is with God, with her future mate, and with herself. In the latter, masturbation quickly becomes a place to go to hide from others and God, a place that, like any

appetite-fulfilling activity, can quickly lead to addiction. Ultimately, the question of whether or not masturbation is healthy for a particular person springs from the question that governs all good discernment: *Does this action help me love myself and others more fully and freely, and does it allow me to love God more deeply and with more of myself?*

If you take this question as your baseline for the question of masturbation, a husband who chooses masturbation for a season while he and his wife parent young children can be seen as freeing and loving—a choice appropriate to healthy sexuality—as masturbation can take the sexual pressure off of the relationship and lead to greater intimacy (as long as the decision is discussed and not made unilaterally). On the other side of that situation, masturbation chosen out of frustration and expediency would push him further away from his spouse, compounding relational tension and making loving each other and God a further hill to climb in an already exhausted and exhausting situation.

I know “yes” or “no” would be easier answers to this question, but I don’t believe that our sexuality was created by God simply to be treated mechanistically. I believe sexuality is a gift and a grace that is given to us by God, and it can produce some of the most radically beautiful and loving acts as well as some of the most horrible and hateful. As the first line of the Didache says, “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways.”

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**So, is masturbation an acceptable component to healthy sexuality for Christians? How would you answer that question?**

**I look forward to reading your responses, and plan to share the most popular comment in a post next week!**

# In the Face of Sexual Temptation, Repression Is a Sure-Fire Failure

How do we solve the problem of desire? Christian asceticism offers an alternative way.

Rachel Gilson August 29, 2019

My first relationship to desire was to give in to it. As a teenager in the early aughts, I believed that life was found by identifying my desires and rushing toward their satisfaction. I played this out in academics and especially in sexuality. My life beat to the pulse of Ariana Grande's chant, "I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it." The right response to desire was indulgence.

Unbeknownst to me as a non-Christian, the purity movement was running in parallel. Those who experienced that movement from the inside have spent recent months breaking down its excesses and missteps. Their conclusion (and mine) is that repression and avoidance are unbiblical responses to desire, no more Christian, perhaps, than my teenage, atheistic abandonment to it.

In the midst of these reoccurring public square discussions, the tension between libertinism on one side and repression on the other leaves most of us yearning for the reasonable *via media*, the middle way between failed extremes. In that space, is there a scripturally sound theology of desire?

Yes. I want to suggest that Christian asceticism, ancient though it is, offers a way forward. It uniquely treats God as the end, not the means, of desire.

It also circumvents the shortcomings of repression and avoidance. Here, I'm not talking about biblically wise avoidance. It is stupid and unsafe to put

ourselves in places where we know we will be strongly tempted to lust or sin. Temptation, while not sin, is not safe for us; Jesus commands us to pray that we would be kept from it. Similarly, Paul's admonition to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18) can't mean any less than this.

Instead, I want to point out that repression and avoidance have a Christian name but a pagan lifestyle. Both are tactical responses that center around willpower. A person practicing repression might attempt to ignore desire in a "pretend-it-isn't-there" way. Or he might avoid most contact with people he finds attractive. Others are unwilling to acknowledge their sexual feelings at all (especially if one happens to be female or same-sex attracted), because that acknowledgment might bring shame from one's community.

First, both of these tactics try to wrest reward from God through bribery. If you are sexually pure, goes the thinking, then God will reward you with a sexy, best-friend spouse. This so-called "sexual prosperity gospel" is unbiblical and untrue. Not only that, it's devastating to young men and women who work diligently to be faithful only to come up empty-handed. Like the uncured invalid at a faith healing, they're left to wonder if the problem is with them.

Article continues below



Second, repression and avoidance strategies are often motivated by a desire to conform to social expectation. But if pleasing pastors, friends, or parents becomes our primary source of motivation for sexual purity, we are

deceived. Just because the end product aligns with God's commands doesn't mean we are practicing Christian virtues.

This leads to a third indictment of repression and avoidance: One does not need Jesus Christ to practice them. Some Christians find that the right combination of carrots and sticks allows them to ignore their desire, or alternatively, they structure their circumstances so that desire rarely rears its head. Self-righteousness sets in and brings with it the impulse to advise others. Christ remains present in name only. He is seen as the one who will be disappointed at failure or who will dole out treats for good behavior. He is viewed only as the Judge when he himself should be the prize.

In other words, a system that doesn't *need* Jesus is not meaningfully Christian. If his sovereignty is replaced by human authority, and if the goal isn't him but sex—or for silver medalists, virginity—would anyone even notice if Jesus slowly disappeared?

Here again, I need to caveat that within a truly Christian view of sexual desire, avoidance of temptation and distraction from desire can in fact be useful tools. However, when we rely upon them solely, they fail; like branches ripped from the vine, they wither.

Finally, there is a fourth way that repression and avoidance fall outside of authentic Christianity: They carve out a huge gulf between singleness and marriage.

If your main recourse to sexual desire is repression or avoidance, singleness is a trap. When you only ignore, punish, or avoid these feelings, you set yourself up for fatigue, frustration, and failure. Many Christian singles feel this heavy yoke. Marriage, on the other hand, is treated like the Promised Land, the reward, the fulfillment of God's purposes. To be married is to finish the brutal race of repression and avoidance and to finally be blessed.

This false dichotomy between marriage and singleness is deeply unbiblical. It also fails to acknowledge that marriage is a training space for desire. Married people face loss of desire for their spouse, aroused desire for those who are not their spouse, and breaks from intercourse for myriad reasons. Sexual dysfunction and even abuse are a painful, routine part of our fallen world.

Scripture proffers no false division: We see there that God honors both singleness and marriage. Jesus was a single man in a time and culture where marriage was functionally compulsory, and yet in Matthew 19, he affirms the goodness and honor of both godly singleness and godly marriage. Pitting these states against each other is profoundly unChristian.

In the face of these four-fold failures, I see a simple alternative: We need a distinctly Christian vision for how to live as embodied desirers in a fallen world. To put it more bluntly, we need Jesus Christ himself. Where he is, there is always hope and life.

Can Jesus be found in the practice of Christian asceticism? In her book, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God*, Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley argues "yes." Some of her conclusions fall outside of biblical bounds. And yet with respect to desire, she opens up a beautiful scriptural vista.

Through a tour of Sigmund Freud, Gregory of Nyssa, and her own theological mining, Coakley prods her readers to consider that *true* asceticism allows a person to lift her gaze toward the only thing that truly satisfies desire, the only thing that remains when desire cannot be otherwise fulfilled: a vision of God. That vision can only be won through prayer and practice. Together, these habits help consecrate the desires of both married and celibate believers.

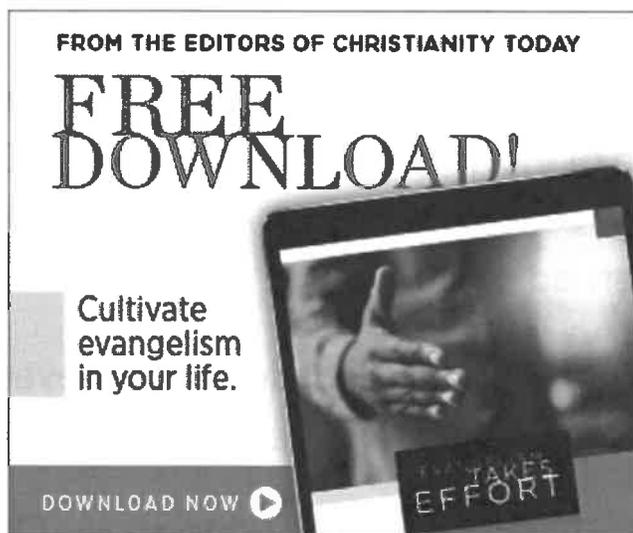
As Coakley provocatively puts it, “the reflective, faithful celibate and the reflective, faithful married person may have more in common—by way of prayerful surrendering of inevitably *thwarted* desire to God—than the unreflective or faithless celibate, or the carelessly happy or indeed unhappily careless married person.”

This, then, is the heart of Christian asceticism: that every desire be considered in light of the treasure and person of Jesus Christ.

First, we must consider each desire in context of what he has declared good and evil. We are sinful and broken; we are not reliable judges. Just because a desire *feels* right does not *make* it right. God has been clear, and we honor him when we flee temptation by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, we must consider that each desire presses us not only toward its obvious end but also reveals that God alone is the true end of every longing. So yes, our desires are often thwarted, but that fact doesn't doom us. Instead, even our unfulfilled yearnings can lead us toward the beauty and fulfillment found in God himself. He is the one who made us desiring creatures, because he, too, experiences desire. We are like him, and all our desires are ultimately pictures of what God-in-Christ longs to fulfill for us.

Article continues below



Some of our desires are disordered—warped by original sin. My own same-sex attraction is an example. Other desires are ordered in general but disordered by degree or distribution. A man’s desire for women may be ordered on one level but out of order with lust, adultery, or promiscuity. Either way, the gift of Christ is to be able to repent of sin, seek the Holy Spirit in the face of temptation, and take joy in an obedience that flows from the belief that we are fully known and fully loved.

Repression and avoidance are ultimately human-centered responses. They stuff desire, suffocate it, banish it, and yet rarely succeed at engendering true purity. By contrast, Christian asceticism reminds us that we are *not* stronger than desire and then invites us to cast our gaze toward the One who is. It asks the Christian to follow the sight line of desire—like looking down the barrel of a gun—and train it on what all desire is ultimately satisfied by: the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

Christian asceticism destroys the bribery system because we learn that God is the end, not the means. We learn to long for *him*, not purity for its own sake or satisfaction of sexual desire alone. Under this model, those in spiritual authority are not means to smaller ends but rather children of the same Father. Jesus stands at the very center, because Christian asceticism

forces us to understand every desire in relationship to our Beloved. And as Coakley points out, it also levels the plane between singles and marrieds. All of us, paired off or not, find our thwarted desires consoled by Christ and provided for by him. We each find in his church myriad “yesses” to desire as we wait for the new heaven and the new earth.

In the end, sex is a gift, but it’s not the point. As Christians, we can mourn its loss or celebrate its presence. But when it moves to the center of our vision, either through indulgence or repression, we end up pursuing “Christian” goals through unChristian tactics. Jesus must be our vision, our great yes that balms the smaller *no*’s. Until he is enough, no other yes or *no* will be sufficient.

*Rachel Gilson serves on Cru’s leadership team for theological development and culture. She blogs at [rachelgilson.com](http://rachelgilson.com) and can be found on Twitter [@RachelGilson](https://twitter.com/RachelGilson).*

