

Pornography and the Church

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Pornography is present everywhere in our society. From softcore to hardcore, almost anywhere you look, pornography is available for only a few dollars. Sometimes it's free — just free enough to entice a man to seek more. Cable television and the Internet beckon men (and sometimes women) to step into the world of lust, fornication, and adultery. In fact, softcore pornography is ordinarily part of most television cable purchases, even without buying the typical HBO package. Email communications are constantly delivering invitations to look at hardcore pornography. Without some type of filter, a man will be bombarded every day with an invitation to participate in wickedness as he sits down at his computer. Most employers have set strict rules to keep their employees off of pornographic sites.

Pornography is a deathtrap, especially for men. Addiction to pornography can send a soul to Hell. It is a cesspool that can drown those who choose to come to its waters. No matter how sanctified a man is, he is always a candidate for its deadly influence. Without Biblical safeguards, such as a good marriage, prayer, God's Word, accountability, and the desire to keep a good conscience, a man will find himself easy prey for this ugly beast.

The number of men in America addicted to pornography is unknown. But I have heard numbers that lead me to believe that at least one in three men in America are addicted to pornography. Even worse, I would surmise that addiction to pornography is rampant in the church. Even worse than that, it is a major problem with the clergy.

The Church Begins to Respond

The church must declare war on this evil sin. It is beginning to do so. What was once tolerated as merely a weakness in men is now being treated as adultery. Not only is it being treated as adultery, but it is being treated as adultery that may very well rise to the level that justifies a Biblical divorce. In other words, men, if you get caught in the cesspool of pornography, the church may very well determine that your wife has a right to sue you for divorce, even if you have never physically touched another woman. This ought to be alarming to any Christian man.

Many years ago, I was taught in seminary that the only grounds for divorce was sexual unfaithfulness that involved actual physical relations with someone other than the man's wife (not getting into the issue of desertion here). After studying the Scriptures and being in the pastorate for over thirty years, I have since changed my mind. I am convinced now that a man can be so addicted to pornography that it may be in a class of adultery that rises to a level that justifies divorce — without a man ever even touching another woman. The word "mastered" might be a more appropriate Biblical term, but recognizing some validity to modern psychological terms, I have chosen to use the word "addicted." Men may temporarily fall into this sin, but this is not addiction. Addiction is habitual and

controlling. It is parallel to being a drug addict. Deliverance is seldom attained. Indeed, it is my position that the wife may be justified in seeking a divorce through the ecclesiastical courts of the church if her husband is under this habitual and reigning power. Today, contrary to a number of years ago, she may very well win her case.

Many women have had to live with the horrible effects of pornography in their marriages. Traditionally, they have remained silent. It is embarrassing when one's sex life with one's husband becomes a public matter. For most women, it is better to live in misery than to have her sex life discussed by other men. Also, with the modern emphasis in evangelical and Reformed churches on submission by wives, in some cases this has sadly resulted in many women feeling guilty at the thought of challenging the sins of their husbands. Shame and guilt are two powerful forces that have prevented many wives from confronting this sin in a Biblical fashion.

Dr. Bahnsen's Theses

There are two documents that particularly have influenced me to reconsider what I was taught in seminary years ago. The first is a paper written by Dr. Greg Bahnsen entitled "Theses on Divorce and Spousal Abuse." In his paper, Dr. Bahnsen broadens the traditional basis of divorce from mere sexual unfaithfulness to the act of spousal abuse. He says, "The above conclusion is explicitly substantiated by the law of God at Exodus 21:10-11, demonstrating (*a fortiori*) that spousal abuse violated the marriage covenant, and, as such, [is] grounds for divorce."

The second is a Committee Report to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America in 1983. It stated, "One might argue that pornography and masturbation per se are not grounds for divorce; but if a person becomes so dependent on them that they become a substitute for fulfilling the conjugal rights of the spouse, then they could be understood to break the one flesh union." The Report goes on to say that "all of these are unclear cases, and judgment will have to rest with the Session in their application of Biblical principles." The Report concludes, "But, when that sexual sin becomes externalized in such a way that it becomes a substitute for the one flesh relation with one's spouse, the Session may judge it as being *porneia*."

Thus, if addiction to pornography breaks the one flesh union, then it defiles the marriage bed. As such, it may very well break the marriage covenant and become a Biblical basis for divorce. Church courts are beginning to recognize this fact.

How then may addiction to pornography defile the marriage bed and break the marriage bond? Let me attempt an explanation. If a man comes into the marriage bed and does not provide due benevolence to his wife as a result of living in the world of pornography, then the one flesh relationship is broken and the marriage bed does become defiled. When the marriage bed is defiled, then the marriage bond is severed. In 1 Corinthians 7:3, Paul says, "Let the husband render unto his wife due benevolence" (KJV). Other translations use the word "debt" rather than "benevolence." In the marriage relationship, conjugal relations are indeed a debt, but as the KJV translators recognized, it is also benevolence. Benevolence implies affection expressed during the act of conjugal

relations. Every wife (as well as husband) is due *affection in the form of conjugal relations*, not just the right to participate in a sexual act.

What a Woman Must Have

A woman's view of conjugal relations typically differs from that of a man. Most men would interpret the benevolence in 1 Corinthians 7 as debt being fulfilled if he is physically satisfied with the sexual act itself. For most wives, there is more importantly a deep need for affection and loving benevolence. This text in 1 Corinthians must not be interpreted as being fulfilled merely if a wife is given the opportunity to participate in a sex act. The benevolence due to a wife is primarily affection directed toward the wife that ultimately will help her enjoy fulfillment in the sexual act itself.

For a woman who knows that her husband is addicted to pornography and has been sleeping with other women with *his eyes and his mind*, receiving her due benevolence from him becomes impossible. His sexual overtures in the bed only become an opportunity for him to sleep with another woman. His wife knows this. She knows that this is not affection. It is defilement. In her mind there is another woman in the bed who is actually a nameless slut who gets paid to expose herself to men and lead them to destruction "like an ox goes to the slaughter" (*Pr. 7:22*).

This does not imply that perfect marriages exist and that conjugal expressions of love are always perfect. However, it does imply that in the case of addiction to pornography by a husband, when such addiction is known by the wife, it often becomes impossible for the wife to receive the debt owed to her in affection and dedication — in essence, due benevolence. The sexual relationship often becomes repulsive to her. It becomes disgusting. The one flesh union has been broken and the marriage bed does indeed become defiled.

Again, this need not become justification for any wife to pursue divorce because the husband does not fulfill perfectly the benevolence due her in the sexual relationship. However, it does give a wife the right to claim that when there is habitual, continual addiction to sordid pornography, then she can claim that the marriage bed has been defiled and that she therefore has a right to pursue divorce. Her husband has not been sleeping with her, but with a harlot.

It should also be noted that addiction to pornography seldom occurs in isolation. Usually it is attached with other sins such as deceit, financial mismanagement, and even on occasion physical abuse. These just add to the burden that the wife has to endure, usually silently and secretly. These sins must be *distinguished* from addiction to pornography, but seldom can they be *separated* from pornography. Addiction to pornography does not only bring defilement to the marriage bed, but it also brings destruction and devastation to all the other facets of marriage.

Reclaiming Male Headship

Today in conservative Christian circles where men are seeking to reclaim their headship, husbands must remember that with headship come grave responsibilities. One

responsibility of every husband is to make his wife happy by loving her as he loves himself and as Christ loved the church. This includes sexual fidelity and avoiding pornography.

This is a critical issue for the modern church. It has fallen upon the church of our age to make a clear and unambiguous statement. Addiction to pornography is spreading like cancer. Only those with God's Spirit shall survive its consequences. Many men in the Christian church are this very day addicted to pornography. Some of these men may be reading this article.

Many Christian women have had to live with husbands addicted to pornography for years. They do not know what to do. They need help and they are afraid to reach out to the church. I am afraid that the church by its silence has been sending a message to these women that they need to "Stand By Your Man." Must the wives of men in the church be asked to live with a man addicted to pornography? When such addiction rises to the degree that it is impossible for the wife to receive her "due benevolence," what shall she do? When the one flesh union is broken and the marriage bed is defiled, then does the wife have a Biblical basis for divorce? These are difficult questions and the truth is often in the details, but the church is now being called upon to deal with these issues in a Biblical manner.

The decision to pursue divorce by any wife must be taken with all seriousness. It should not be made in haste, but only after spending much time in prayer, and receiving wise counsel from other godly men and women. A decision to pursue divorce should only be made after every Biblical means has been taken to achieve confession, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration of the marriage.

Yet, having said this, the church has the responsibility to warn men of God of the consequences of addiction to pornography. Also, their wives should be informed of their Biblical rights before God. When addiction to pornography destroys the one flesh union and defiles the marriage bed, and after all Biblical avenues have been exhausted, then wives should be informed that they do indeed have the right to pursue divorce in ecclesiastical courts. It is my opinion that even if the husband repents (which is very difficult to judge) the wife still has the right to pursue divorce, even though she is not obligated to do so.

This is a difficult topic to deal with in a public forum, and I have tried to do so with as much discretion as possible. However, for the sake of many suffering women, I must not be silent.