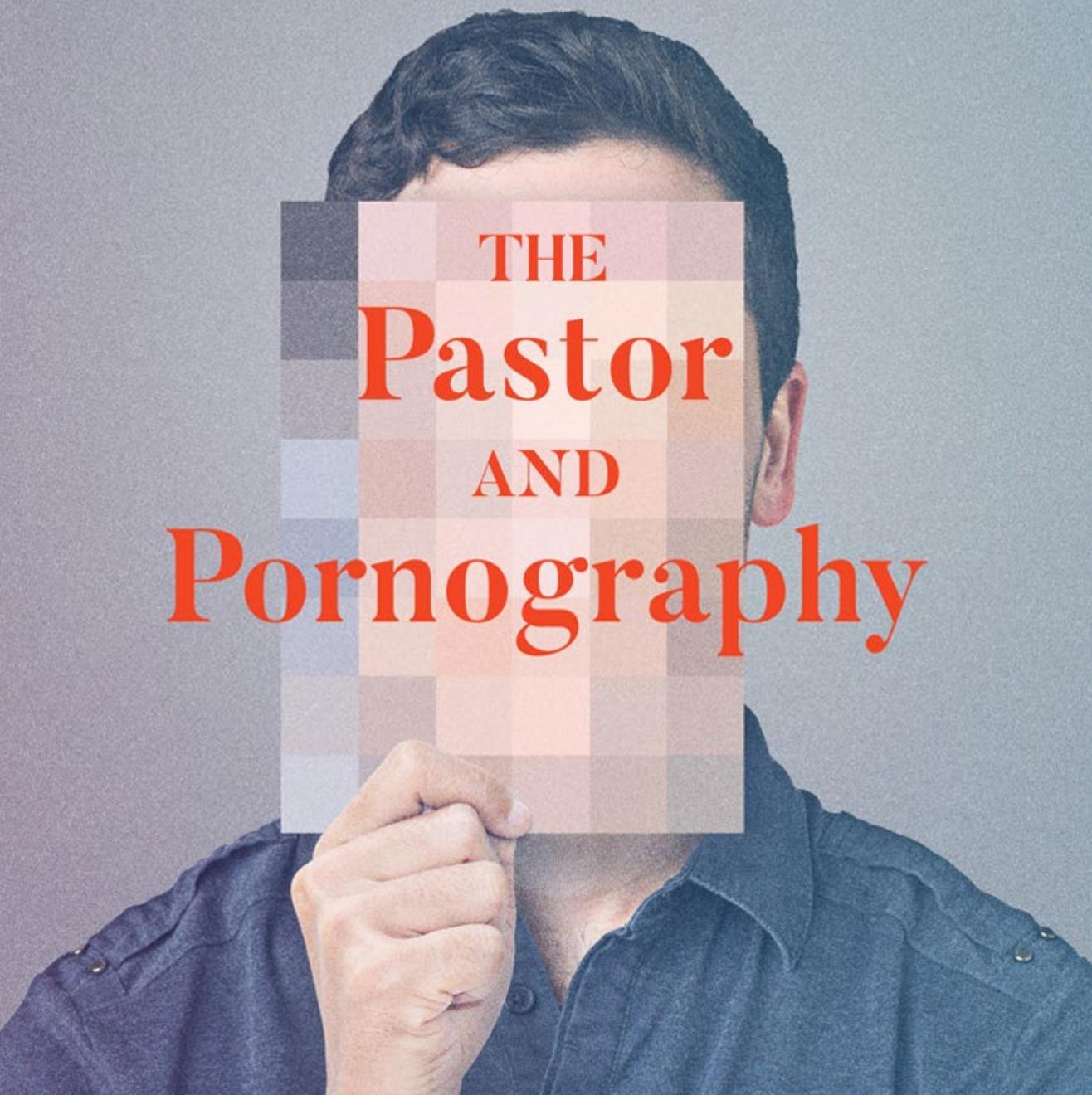


Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

Fall 2018

# IX 9Marks Journal



THE  
Pastor  
AND  
Pornography



Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

# 9Marks Journal

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# Editor's Note



Jonathan Leeman

**W**hy would 9Marks devote an issue of the 9Marks Journal to the topic of pornography and the pastor? Because it's an increasingly common sin, and its commonality tempts us to downplay its destructive power in our marriages and ministries. We want you to take it seriously if you're not, and to have the tools to help others fight if you are.

Think of how much ink Paul spilled on sexual sin in his letter to the Corinthian church. He took it seriously. So should we.

Start with Andy Naselli's piece for a sobering warning, especially if you're tempted to downplay it in your own life. See also Aaron Menikoff's wise counsel. Then jump to Jason Seville's piece for all the potential corporate consequences of this sin.

Garrett Kell takes up the complicated question of whether it disqualifies a pastor, while Garrett's wife, Carrie, counsels the pastor's wife.

Deepak Reju, Jaime Owens, PJ Tibayan, and James Choi offer critical help on cultivating a church that fights this sin together.

And don't miss the pastoral tools offered by Brad Wheeler and John Henderson.

I want to keep going. Every article offers a critical tool in the battle. But you get the point. Equip yourself to fight pornography in your own life and in the lives of others. If you struggle with pornography and have concluded it's inevitable, you have been deceived. It's not. Christ died to sin so that we would sin no longer. Encourage others with this same good news.

# Watch Out! To a Pastor Indulging in Pornography



by Andy Naselli

**P**astor, are you regularly indulging in pornography and rationalizing to yourself why it's okay for you to do that?<sup>1</sup> If you indulge in pornography without remorse, then you may have what Paul calls a seared conscience (1 Tim 4:2).

Your conscience is your sense of what you believe is right or wrong, and if you have a seared conscience about indulging in pornography, then your conscience is so desensitized that (1) it no longer warns you not to indulge in pornography and (2) it no longer accuses and condemns you (and thus makes you feel guilty) after you indulge in pornography.<sup>2</sup>

If that describes you, then you are in danger. Here are eight motivations to repent.

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<sup>1</sup> By indulging in pornography, I mean sinfully enjoying the pleasure of printed or visual material that explicitly describes or displays sexual body parts or activity in order to stimulate erotic feelings.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

## **1. INDULGING IN PORNOGRAPHY WILL SEND YOU TO HELL**

People who habitually and unrepentantly indulge in pornography will go to hell (Matt 5:27–30). One evidence that you have genuine faith in Jesus is that you are fighting lust. Indulging in pornography is a form of sexual immorality. And the sexually immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–11). God’s wrath is against the sexually immoral (Eph 5:3–6). Yes, Christians sin. But Christians are *repenting* sinners.

If you are indulging in pornography, then you are not pure in heart. And only the pure in heart will see God (Matt 5:8). *I’m trying to scare the hell out of you*—or more precisely, to scare you out of hell. Whatever it takes for you to win the battle over lust, it is worth it because indulging in pornography will send you to hell.

## **2. INDULGING IN PORNOGRAPHY DOES NOT GLORIFY GOD WITH YOUR BODY**

“Glorify God in your body.” That’s how Paul concludes a section on sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:12–20). God commands you to glorify him with your body by not committing sexual immorality.

Glorifying God is a way of feeling and thinking and acting that makes much of God. It shows that God is supremely great and good. It demonstrates that God is all-wise and all-satisfying. You glorify God with your physical body when you use it the way God intends. When you indulge in pornography, you sin against God himself because God owns your body. Indulging in pornography does not glorify God with your body.

## **3. INDULGING IN PORNOGRAPHY IS A POISONOUS, FLEETING PLEASURE**

Moses chose not “to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Heb

11:24–26). That means sin can be pleasurable—at least for a time. But that pleasure is fleeting.

Indulging in pornography is immediately pleasurable, but that pleasure is fleeting. It leaves you feeling empty, unsatisfied, yearning for more. It's like eating a sugar-coated poison pill. “He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself” (Prov 6:32).

Don't desire pornography; desire God. To paraphrase John Piper, *we most glorify God when he most satisfies us*. That's what God created us for. The pleasures of pornography are poisonous and fleeting; the pleasures of God are eternally and infinitely satisfying.

#### **4. INDULGING IN PORNOGRAPHY FOOLISHLY WASTES YOUR LIFE**

When you indulge in pornography, you waste your time and energy and sometimes money. You cripple your church because you are like Achan, deceitfully loving your sin instead of forsaking it. You act like what the book of Proverbs calls a fool. “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph 5:15–17).

#### **5. INDULGING IN PORNOGRAPHY BETRAYS YOUR WIFE AND CHILDREN**

This applies to you if you are married or ever will be married.

When you indulge in pornography, you are being unfaithful to your wife. You are betraying her. You are committing adultery against her. You are making her compete with the database of racy images you have lusted after.

When you indulge in pornography, you harm your children. You will lose your moral authority with your family. Your children will suffer. And if it leads to divorce, then your children will suffer even more.

## **6. INDULGING IN PORNOGRAPHY DISQUALIFIES YOU FROM BEING AN ELDER**

If you are indulging in pornography, then you do not meet these elder-qualifications:

- “the husband of one wife [NIV: “faithful to his wife”], sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable” (1 Tim 3:2)
- “the husband of one wife [NIV: “faithful to his wife”] ... a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined” (Titus 1:6, 8)

A pastor is a shepherd. A shepherd *leads* the sheep (Ps 23:1–3; 78:52). And the most significant way shepherds lead is by “being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:1–3).

## **7. INDULGING IN PORNOGRAPHY RUINS YOUR MIND AND CONSCIENCE**

*Indulging in pornography ruins how you think about sex.* Sex is a gift from God that is exclusively for one man and one woman who have covenanted together in marriage. Sex is God’s idea, and we should praise him for it. Pornography corrupts and perverts sex. If you indulge in pornography, you will think about sex perversely.

*Indulging in pornography ruins how you think about women.* Women are humans whom God created in his image, and they beautifully display God’s glory. If you lust after the bodies of wo-

men, then you will think about women as sex objects to satisfy your sinful lusts rather than as fellow image-bearers.

*Indulging in pornography ruins how you think.* It destructively rewires your brain. It ruins how you think and thus warps your affections.

*Consequently, indulging in pornography ruins your conscience.* Your conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong. When you indulge in pornography, you desensitize your conscience because you suppress and silence your conscience and rationalize away your sin. Eventually, you can damage your conscience so badly that it doesn't condemn you when you sin.

## **8. INDULGING IN PORNOGRAPHY PARTICIPATES IN SEX SLAVERY**

Pornography is to sex slavery what gasoline is to the engines of motor vehicles. Gas fuels engines. Pornography fuels the demand for prostitution and thus for sex slavery. Therefore, indulging in pornography to any degree is participating in sex slavery.<sup>3</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

Pastor, those are eight motivations for you to repent if you are indulging in pornography without remorse. Turn to Christ, the source of genuine freedom and happiness.<sup>4</sup>

Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Rom 12:12–14)

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed argument, see Andrew David Naselli, "When You Indulge in Pornography, You Participate in Sex Slavery," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 20:2 (2015): 23–29.

<sup>4</sup> On what genuine repentance looks like, see Heath Lambert, *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 23–28, which Lambert unpacks in chs. 2–6 (pp. 31–105).

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# How to Respond When a Deacon or Elder Struggles with Pornography



by Aaron Menikoff

## WHEN A SERVANT STRUGGLES WITH PORNOGRAPHY

Churches are chock-full of sinners. We know that. We're all sinners. Churches are also chock-full of servants. You know what that means, right? Those servants are sinners, too.

But what happens when sinner-servants stumble into pornography? Churches have deacons with biblical qualifications to meet (1 Tim. 3:8–13). But we also have volunteers serving without a title. It could be the gal playing violin on stage, the elderly man greeting at the door, or the millennial working in the children's ministry.

How should church leadership respond if it discovers a volunteer within the body has viewed pornography? I'm focused on so-

meone who has expressed sorrow for his sin (2 Cor. 7:10–11) and is eager to demonstrate repentance. Of course, every instance is unique, and providing specific counsel without knowing the particulars would be foolish (this is why every local church should have elders who roll up their theological sleeves and ask this question).

Thankfully, God’s Word does give us principles to guide us when a servant of the church stumbles into pornography.

**1. Remember it’s not the unforgivable sin (Matt. 12:31).** Remind him this is yet one more reason he or she is in desperate need of God’s mercy. There is hope in the cross and resurrection (Rom. 6:1–14).

**2. Don’t make light of the sin.** Pornography comes in many forms, from a lingerie ad in a magazine to live videos. Whatever the degree, all sin is heinous. Make that clear. The tiniest sin is an affront to an infinitely holy God (James 2:10).

**3. Gauge the severity of the sin.** Jesus spoke of differing degrees of punishment (Luke 12:47–48). This implies some sins have greater consequences. This is an important principle. When sin is uncovered, a number of questions should be asked:

- What was the intensity of the pornography?
- Was this a one-time stumble or a pattern?
- If there is a pattern, what is the frequency?
- Is the confessor asking for help or was he or she outed?
- Is there a willingness to make war against sin or is there a spirit of defensiveness?

**4. Require appropriate confession.** Confession should be made to each offended party. In the case of a single, did she lie to a roommate? Did he use someone else’s computer? In the case

of a married individual, does the spouse know? At this level, the confession of sin is private. The more confession, the more light, and the more light, the more willingness to make war against sin.

**5. Urge the brother or sister to take extreme measures.** If it's better to gouge out the eye than give in to lust (Matt. 5:27–30), then it's certainly better to lose the smart phone or disconnect the cable.

**6. Ensure appropriate accountability.** Sinners like to hide their sin. But revealing sin offers an opportunity to create systems and forge relationships that will make it harder for this sin to once more rear its ugly head.

**7. If necessary, ask the person to step down from public service.** There are several reasons you might want someone to step down for a season. For example, the confessed sin may have been particularly severe and the volunteer service particularly public. All this makes ongoing service unwise.

Furthermore, if the servant is a deacon, he or she is required to meet specific qualifications in order to hold that office. I'm not suggesting deacons who stumble should be automatically removed from service. I'm simply asserting that biblical qualifications matter, and we have to be open to the possibility of a leader disqualifying him- or herself for a season.

A word about working with children: please be especially cautious about placing someone with children or youth if you know he struggles with pornography. He or she may especially need to step down here—even if only in this particular ministry—until there's a proven track record of victory.

**8. Rejoice because the sin is in the light.** Whatever action you finally make, pray your church is a place where confessed sin is seen as a godly triumph. Yes, there should be consequences—es-

pecially if the sin is particularly severe and the servant is in a particularly public ministry. But don't gloss over the fact God kindly brought it into the open. Your leaders now have the opportunity to demonstrate the grace and mercy of God.

Is your church a place where both *grace* and *holiness* are valued? The answer to this question is found in how you respond to a leading servant who stumbled into pornography.

### **WHEN AN ELDER STRUGGLES WITH PORNOGRAPHY**

Elders are sinners, too. However, the consequences of their sin are more serious than the average church member's. How do we know this? There are a number of reasons:

- Jesus said, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). Because elders are the teachers of the congregation (1 Tim. 3:2), the church body will, over time, begin to resemble them—in ways good and bad.
- Elders are public examples of the faith: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). Because all eyes are on an elder, his stumble into the pool of pornography causes more waves.
- Teachers are judged with greater strictness (James 3:1–2). Though James is focused on an elder's tongue, certainly his whole life is in view. An elder flippant with his eyes is flippant about his eternal future.

Nonetheless, sin wheedles its way into the elder body, and leaders are tempted to hide. But sometimes they can't. Thankfully, their sin is uncovered. This may be because it's caught by a wife or

friend. It may be because they're overcome by a fear of the Lord. Perhaps they have an accountability partner who probed, and they were honest—praise God!

What should be done when an elder admits to stumbling into pornography? Much of what I said in “When a Servant Stumbles” applies here. I’ll attempt to focus on what’s slightly different in the response to an elder’s sin.

**1. Appreciate the gravity of the situation.** Don’t overlook the significance of a pastor’s failure. The church rightly expects elders to devote themselves to “prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). James notes how the “prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16). It seems safe to conclude that the prayers of an elder are hindered if pornography is a problem in his life. This is bad for the church as a whole.

**2. Beware the elder’s temptation to minimize the problem.** Every sinner is going to be tempted to do this. But there’s a special expectation for elders to be holy, and that means they will be tempted to say, “This was a one-time thing, just a moment of weakness.” The elder who says this may be right. But he should be gently pressed to shine as much light on his struggle as possible. The depth of his problem will inform the appropriate response.

**3. Be glad the sin is in the open.** In this case, I’m assuming the elder took initiative to confess or that he is very, very receptive to his sin being known. This is good. We want a culture in our church where everyone feels the freedom to confess sin without being labeled a freak or a monster, including elders.

**4. Ensure the elder shares his stumble with another elder.** If a church leader has fallen into pornography, another church lea-

der should be made aware. Should the same action be taken with *any* stumble into sin? For example, if an elder overeats one night (Prov. 23:20–21) or is too quick to speak (James 1:19)? Probably not. Pornography is an unusually dangerous sin that should be uniquely addressed (1 Cor. 6:18–20).

**5. If the sin is *less* serious, the elder should engage in one-on-one discipleship where appropriate accountability measures are put in place.** The devil is obviously in the details here. Much wisdom is needed. But the larger point I'm trying to make is if an elder stumbles only once it is *probably* unwise to require an immediate, public response—either from the elder body or to the whole church. In this case, if the elder's behavior were to be censured publicly, other elders would be unduly tempted to hide their sin instead of confess it. Simply put, it's possible to overreact to a stumble into pornography, which can have the unintended consequence of tempting needy brothers to hide their sin.

**6. If the sin is *more* serious, the elder body should require him to step down from public ministry for a season.** If a *pattern* of behavior has been uncovered, the elder should refrain from teaching or praying in public for a few months. In this case, I'm talking about a brother who's been hiding irregular and infrequent pornography use *for months* and has finally confessed it to a brother. Though it may or may not be appropriate to remove him from the elder body, he ought at least to confess it to the elder body and step down from public teaching and prayer. In a church with a larger elder body, the congregation may not notice. In a church with a smaller elder body, some explanation may be required.

**7. If the sin is *most* serious, the elder body should require**

**him to resign as an elder.** Jared Wilson helpfully observed, “The bar for the pastoral office is set rather high. . . . Beyond giftedness and ambition, it requires maturity, testing, and *a long obedience in the same direction.*”<sup>5</sup> That last phrase is especially helpful: “a long obedience in the same direction.” If the elder in question has a life marked by a long *disobedience*—it’s time for him to step down. Moreover, he should *want* to step down.

**8. If an elder steps down from his office, the congregation should be *carefully* informed.** At the church I serve, the members of the congregation elect elders. It is appropriate, therefore, for them to know if an elder no longer meets the biblical qualifications. *But this must be done with so much care.* Assuming repentance on the part of the elder, it’s an opportunity for the congregation to:

- understand the sin was serious, but not of a kind that requires excommunication;
- rejoice that a man in the church cares more about holiness than leadership;
- be told he didn’t commit the unpardonable sin;
- give thanks for elders who take the biblical qualifications seriously;
- be told if the possibility for restoration exists;
- encourage this brother who has willingly stepped down for the good of the church;
- be reminded we all sin; and
- avoid gossip.

Unless the brother speaks to the church himself, the comments at a members meeting might look something like this:

Tonight we are announcing that John Doe and the elder body

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<sup>5</sup> Jared Wilson, “Thoughts on the Restoration of Fallen Pastors,” in *Porn and the Pastor: The Life and Death Consequences of Addiction* (SBTS Press, 2018), 75. Italics added.

have agreed he should step down from serving as an elder. You need to know this is *not* because of any public, scandalous sin. Rather, there are some patterns of behavior in John's life that make it impossible for him to currently serve as an elder. We commend him to you as a man who loves the Lord and this church. He has modeled for all of us a willingness to put personal holiness before public leadership. Expect to see John serving in a number of ways, and please pray for him and his family.

God is honored when his churches handle sin in a serious and gracious manner. Let's pray all our elders are above reproach.

### **WHEN THE PREACHER STRUGGLES WITH PORNOGRAPHY**

The public nature of an elder's ministry will heighten his temptation to hide sin. This reality is magnified when the elder is the main preaching pastor. For reasons both good and bad, more is expected of him. Moreover, the fact that he is dependent upon the church for an income can muddy the waters, making it even harder for him to be open about his failures.

This may be a reason so many passages warn against recognizing elders who are in love with money (1 Pet. 5:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:3; 2 Cor. 11:7). A pastor overly attached to a certain standard of living may have a much harder time confessing and fighting sin.

But is it really true that more is expected of the main preaching pastor? I think so. This is in part due to the fact that he preaches more than anyone and is, therefore, the most visible elder in the church body. Thus, when the average visitor or member is looking for an example of the Christian faith, they're most likely going to point to that man. Moreover, if those elders who are unusually devoted to preaching and teaching are *especially* deserving of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17), then it's legitimate to expect those elders to be *especially* faithful to the Word they preach and teach.

How should church leadership respond when their main preacher stumbles? Before you read on, if you haven't already, do look

at the articles, “When the Servant Stumbles” and “When and Elder Stumbles.” Much of what is said there applies here—and I won’t repeat all of it. In the paragraphs that follow, I want to focus on just a few points that may be unique to the elder who is in the spotlight—the one who handles the majority of the preaching. We can all agree, if pornography is in his life, it needs to be addressed.

What are we to do, then, when the preacher stumbles?

**1. Have a category for pastors struggling with a sin that is *not* disqualifying.**<sup>6</sup> When thinking about a pastor’s stumble into pornography, we have to once again remember some sin is more severe than others. Garrett Higbee is helpful here:

While all pornography is immoral, there are different degrees of sexual sin that warrant differing consequences. It is helpful to look at sin on a continuum. Sexual sin does have a unique set of consequences (1 Cor 6:18). Some factors are the private and public nature of the sin (who is impacted), what is an isolated incident versus a regular habit, and how severe it is. Did they stumble onto a sex-scene in a movie but quickly turn the channel? Did they linger but then became convicted and shared it with an accountability partner? Was it premeditated with late night viewing on an internet site? Did they have to get caught? Has it gone past viewing to flirting or sexually inappropriate activity?<sup>7</sup>

Of course, nobody wants to think of his pastor struggling in *any* of these ways, but the statistics indicate otherwise.<sup>8</sup> One of the best things we can do to curb pornography use in pastoral ministry is to allow for this category of pastors who struggle, confess, and are appropriately shepherded into greater and greater degrees

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<sup>6</sup> This language is taken from Garrett Higbee, “Restoring a Pastor After a Struggle with Pornography,” *Porn and the Pastor*, 89.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Morgan Lee, “Here’s How 770 Pastors Describe Their Struggle with Porn,” in *Christianity Today* (26 January 2016). Found at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/january/how-pastors-struggle-porn-phenomenon-josh-mcdowell-barna.html>.

of holiness. I'm *not* saying we ought to allow it to continue! I'm saying we ought to give pastors who have stumbled on the less-serious-side of the continuum the freedom to confess to church leaders without fearing for their job.

**2. Appoint an elder to be the preacher's accountability partner.** Pastors are, of course, free to have numerous accountability partners, both inside and outside the church. That's fine. But there should be an elder within the church to whom the main, preaching pastor is especially accountable.

Where I serve, the elder chair is my accountability partner. I want to know he's going to ask me tough questions, and I have committed to sharing with him when I am feeling tempted. As the chair of our elders, there's a sense in which he is over me, even though I am the *senior* pastor. His unique watchfulness over my soul is important to me, and I am thankful for the transparency it provokes.

When a pastor admits to having viewed pornography, another elder should quickly discern what steps need to be taken. He should be the first line of defense and offense. He should be the one to:

- press to see if more is going on (ensure the preacher is being completely forthcoming);
- discern if there are any bad ministry patterns that are making it harder for the preacher to fight sin (these patterns are no excuse for stumbling, but the church should nonetheless be sensitive to the unusual load most preachers bear); and
- explore whether the preacher's marriage is healthy and talk with his spouse if appropriate.

In short, when the leading preacher of the church stumbles, it's very wise for the leading elder in the church to be the man to begin the process of shepherding his soul.

**3. When necessary, ask the preacher to confess to the entire elder body.** It's such a privilege to be a pastor. When things go well in the church, we often receive an inordinate amount of public praise. Other elders tend to look at us with great respect and admiration. What an honor!

A good pastor will understand that with his unusually public ministry comes a special responsibility to be unusually public about his failure. In other words, he should feel a heightened degree of responsibility to be transparent, when appropriate, not merely with one elder but with *all* elders.

If he's struggling with pornography, has confessed this to another elder, but there remains some question as to whether further action is necessary, take it to the elders. Let them pray over the situation. God has made them elders (Acts 20:28), and they should be trusted to take action that will honor the Lord, the church, and the preacher—in that order.

It's not easy to learn that your main, preaching elder has been stumbling—especially into pornography. But it doesn't *necessarily* mean he shouldn't preach. Let the elders discuss and pray and then decide.

**4. Feel the freedom to call on the preacher to step down.** Depending on the degree and regularity of his sin, he may simply be disqualified to be an elder. If that's the case, the leadership of the church needs to make that decision and then make the appropriate recommendation to the congregation. There's nothing easy about this, but this option must be on the table. If our leadership teams and churches are content to allow unqualified men to serve as preachers, they shouldn't be surprised when God removes his hand of blessing.

I'm a preaching pastor, and I regularly experience the temptation toward lust in one form or another. I'm not helping myself, my family, or my church by hiding that temptation. Moreover, I

agree with Charles Bridges who drew a straight line between the preacher's character and the spiritual vitality of the church. "The want of Divine influence on our work," said Bridges, "should therefore suggest a close and searching scrutiny—Is the whole heart in singleness of purpose consecrated to Christian ministry?"<sup>9</sup> In other words, the holiness of a church's leaders has an effect on the church at large. God disciplines those he loves.

Churches should respond well to their preachers who stumble. Letting them know what will happen *should* they stumble is a great place to start.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Aaron Menikoff is the senior pastor of Mt. Vernon Baptist Church in Sandy Springs, Georgia.

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry with an Inquiry into the Causes of its Inefficiency* (Banner of Truth, 1959), 111. First published 1830.

# When Your Pastor-Husband Looks at Porn



by Carrie Kell

**H**as your husband just confessed that he has been looking at pornography? Perhaps, even worse, did you catch him in the act? Do you feel anger? Sadness? Rejected? Disgusted? Disgusting? Or maybe you've caught him so many times you've grown disheartened and don't care any more?

Sister, you are not alone.

The sting of pornography has struck many marriages. The way forward can feel confusing and demoralizing. But there's hope. I'm writing primarily for pastors wives here, but much of what I will say applies to any wife in this situation.

To give you a little background, my husband—who's also my pastor—has a history with the sin of lust, which has included a long history with pornography. Even as a young pastor, he secretly hid his sin. On our second date, he shared with me his entire history with this sin, so I could make a quick exit if I needed to. But I stayed, knowing this would likely be a battle we'd fight together the rest of our lives.

I'm not here to share 10 steps to handle your spouse's porn problem. You can't walk through this valley with pithy lessons. What I intend to do is share four truths that have helped me keep my eyes on Jesus while walking this path in the hope that you too will be freshly reminded of God's amazing grace to us in his Son.

## **1. THE BODY OF CHRIST IS A GIFT.**

*How do my husband and I move forward? Can we rebuild trust? How can I not sin in my anger?* These are real questions. Don't try to figure this out by yourself. You need others around you, and God has provided help in your local church.

*First, lean on fellow sisters.* Being a pastor's wife can feel isolating, especially when you need to talk about issues you and your husband are facing. But you need a godly sister or two in whom you can confide. They need to be spiritually mature, they need to believe the gospel deeply, they need to take sin seriously, and they need to take grace even more seriously. Is there another elder's wife who's godly and humble? Is there an older saint who can listen to you and give you wise counsel? Or maybe a mature friend at another church? Pray for God to give you a good friend in whom you can confide.

*Secondly, go with your husband to the elders.* If your husband is repentant and desires help, you should bring his sin to the other elders of the church. They love your husband, and they love you. God has called them to care for your souls, and though they may not do so perfectly, God will use them to help you know the way forward.

Realize that your husband needs help from his fellow leaders in discerning whether he has disqualified himself from ministry and may need to step down. That may sound scary, but it will serve the long-term good of your marriage and the church, even if there are short-term costs. Also, see these articles for more help

on the question of whether pornography disqualifies a man from the pastorate.

*Thirdly, go to the elders if he's hiding his sin.* This may be hard to hear, but if your husband doesn't see his sin as serious and is unwilling to come with you to the elders, then go to them alone. You're not betraying him. In fact, he needs you to be brave *for* him. He's betraying Christ, his marriage, the church, and himself. This may be one of the most difficult things you've ever done, but it may also be the thing your husband needs the most. You may be helped by this article by Andy Naselli's about pastors with a seared conscience.

## **2. GOD'S HOLINESS EXPLAINS YOUR PAIN.**

The revulsion and confusion you feel about your husband's sin is right. Our God is holy, and His law affirms that He hates your husband's sin—even more than you do. God's faithfulness stands in opposition to your husband's wandering eye (Ex. 20:14; Lam. 3:23; Matt. 5:27-30; Rom. 3:3). His heart has wandered in unfaithfulness, he has betrayed your trust, and his sin is unjust. Because of this, God stands with you in your righteous anger toward him and his sin.

Sister, you are not alone in your situation, because God stands with you. He also opposes your husband's sin. This comfort gives you courage to stand, and to help him repent of this sin. It also serves as a caution in regards to ways you may be tempted in this vulnerable time (Gal. 6:1-2). God tells you, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Eph. 4:26-27). It is right and good to be angry, but God alone knows how to carry out justice (Rom. 13:17-20). This is why our anger and our husband's sin must be taken to Jesus and seen in light of His gospel.

### 3. THE GOSPEL WILL GIVE YOU STRENGTH.

I've heard it said that we never graduate from needing the gospel. Facing this trial brings that truth to bear. When you're sinned against in this way, you need the gospel *for yourself*. While it's true that Jesus' blood covers all our sin, it's also true that some sins seem to affect us in more extreme ways than others. Pornography is one of those sins. It feels like a direct attack on the spouse. You'll feel devastated and dirty. You may feel rejected and wonder if it's somehow your fault.

Throughout all this, you need the gift of the gospel to strengthen you. Cling to the good news that Jesus enters into our suffering. He has compassion on our crushed spirits, and he has suffered to make you his own. Though you feel rejected, in Christ you are loved and accepted, and he promises to never leave you or forsake you.

If your husband's sin is publicly known, then you may feel the weight of eyes on you. Shame has a way of latching itself to anyone nearby, and who's nearer to your husband than you?

But amazingly, the Holy One himself drew near to touch sinners and absorb our shame. As your husband repents and fights against his sin, you both can be assured that Jesus did not only pay for your husband's guilt from sin, he also covers over both his shame and yours by association. Extending forgiveness to your husband and walking with him in God's forgiveness of him unites you with Jesus. Granting forgiveness is a road that he first walked, and joining with him in this sin a unique way provides joy that will keep you afloat amid the tidal wave of pain from pornography.

You need strength—not only for yourself, but the strength to give *the gospel to your husband*. This doesn't mean you cannot grieve your husband's sin. It's right to mourn how his sin has hurt you, but it's also right to draw upon God's grace. God to help your husband. He needs to know God's grace covers his guilt (Rom 3:19–26). He

needs to remember his transgressions have been nailed to the cross (Col 2:13–15).

Showing gospel love and speaking gospel truth to your husband after he has sinned against you will be terribly difficult. Though some of us may share their struggle, many of us cannot fathom why our husbands would draw any pleasure from looking at pornography. The Scriptures remind us, however, that temptation is common to us all, and this is simply the form his sin is taking (1 Cor 10:13). Though my husband's struggle with lust looks different from my own sin struggles, the gospel reminds me how much we both need Jesus.

Sister, I know you're hurting, but remember how compassionate the Lord has been with you, and ask him to help you have compassion on your husband. If you truly desire to help him walk with the Lord and grow in holiness, then compassion will be a necessity. Pray for God to help you have godly sorrow, not only over how his sin affects you, but how it grieves God. The gospel strengthens you both to run to God's throne of grace in your time of need (Heb 4:14–16).

#### **4. MARRIAGE IS FOR GOD'S GLORY.**

God has designed marriage as a beautiful picture of his glory. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the Church, and wives submit to their husband as unto the Lord (Ephesians 5:22–33). Sin doesn't change this. Sisters, let's not get it twisted and think that if we're sinned against in marriage that we have the right to make marriage something else. I don't say this insensitively, but when we're hurt, we can be tempted to feel entitled. But marriage is from God and for God, and only he can declare what it is.

Knowing and believing this about marriage changes the way we respond when our spouse invites sin into our lives. Your ma-

riage covenant is intended to point you to God and remind you that your response, your words, and your actions toward your husband all matter because they say something about God.

As you cling to Jesus by faith, and respond to your husband from faith, God mightily works to sanctify you and make you more like Jesus. In this sense, God can actually use the sin that has hurt you so badly for good by pressing you and your spouse closer to Jesus. The Holy Spirit will bring these truths to mind and kept me from completely disengaging and giving up when sin entangles our marriage.

The Lord has used our marriage, with all its imperfections and abiding sin, to shape both my husband and me into the image of Christ. He still battles lust, and I still don't understand it, but we've both grown so much. So, as you feel tossed to and fro, look to Jesus as your faithful bridegroom and know that your response to your husband is a response to him. Lean on his strength—and in doing so, you will bring God much glory even in the middle of your pain.

## **5. THE SCRIPTURES ARE YOUR LIFELINE.**

If you discover your husband's sin, you'll feel like you're sinking. In these moments, God's Word is your lifeline. You may feel too angry or too anxious to read. You may be overwhelmed with emotions, but God has given his Word to you.

Through his word, he speaks into your pain as he did with Hagar in the wilderness (Gen 21:17). Through his word, he draws near to you like Jesus did to the woman with the issue of blood; he says "daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering" (Mark 5:27–34). The Scripture is filled with accounts of God mercifully caring for his suffering people.

He assures us that "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through

the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). His Word brings us face to face with our own sin and supplies grace to forgive those who have sin against us (Matt 18). There we find help in our time of need (Heb 4:14–16), comfort in our afflictions (2 Cor 1:3–5), and the certain promise that our sufferings will be eclipsed by his glory (Rom 8:18). Sister, don’t lean on your own understanding in this time of trial, but trust in the Lord with all your heart by listening to his Word. He will show you the way (Prov 3:5–6).

Recently, our church studied the beautiful passage in Luke 15 about the prodigal son. My heart was freshly instructed because I think we generally associate with one of the two sons. But this time, the beauty of the father’s heart convicted me. He joyfully welcomed back his son who had sinned against him in so many ways. He ran to him. He didn’t scold him. He didn’t throw all his offenses back in his face. He held him. He kissed him. He clothed him with a clean robe and rejoiced over him.

My heart naturally reacts so differently toward those who sin against me, including my husband, and especially when it involves something intimate like sinful lust. But the Scriptures call me to look to God and seek him in prayer. Through prayer and his Word, God reminds me of the weight of my own sin and the wonder of Christ’s sacrifice.

God’s compassion toward sinners reminds me how much he loves my husband and me. This brings me peace to know that he has not brought us to himself to harm us. His Word helps me keep my eyes on Jesus, and it will do the same for you. He is faithful, and he will help you take every step that lies before you.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Does Pornography Use Disqualify a Pastor?



By Garrett Kell

**T**he question I want us to consider is this—*how do we discern whether or not a pastor who sins with pornography is disqualified?*

The Scriptures are clear that before pastors are shepherds, they are sheep. They struggle, stray, and sin, just like other believers. But pastors are also to serve as an “example to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). They’re to be “self-controlled,” “upright,” “holy,” and “above reproach” (Tit. 1:6–8, 1 Tim. 3:2). Being “above reproach” doesn’t mean a pastor never sins, but it does mean they serve as an example of how to *resist* and *repent* of sin.

So, if a pastor succumbs to the temptation of pornography, he will be tempted to hide it. The fear of losing his job or being publicly shamed can be paralyzing. The church must hold their pastors accountable by not minimizing sin while at the same time extending mercy to those who repent. Knowing how to hold these tensions together cannot be reduced to a formula. Rather, it requires prayer, wisdom, and the grace of God.

## DIAGNOSING THE SIN STRUGGLE

Are your current pastors struggling with pornography? This is a question every healthy pastoral team should seek to answer honestly. My hope is that you have worked to develop a culture of humility and honesty. I recommend every pastoral team spend time answering this question:

Have you intentionally accessed sexually explicit material in the past year?

Because sin is deceitful, it's necessary to clarify every element of this question. By *intentionally accessed*, I mean, have you knowingly clicked on links, typed in searches, or sought out sites where exposure to seductive material could be found. By *sexually explicit material*, we mean any suggestive or hardcore images, movies, cartoons, or literature.

If a brother answers “no” to this question, it's good reason to thank God. Resisting sin is evidence of his grace. However, it doesn't mean they have no need to be pressed further about their walk with Christ. I'd encourage you to explore more deeply how they are dealing with other abiding sins such as pride, greed, fear of man, and anger.

If a brother answers “yes,” further discussion will be necessary to help us get a full picture of what his sin pattern looks like. You can create your own follow-up questions, but I suggest the following:

- *When was the last time you intentionally sinned in this way?*
- *When was the last time before that?*
- *What has been your pattern of compromise?*
- *What type of material did you access?*
- *How long did you look at it?*
- *How did you respond after you looked at it?*

- *To whom have you confessed your sin?*
- *What steps of repentance have you taken?*
- *How have you lied or been deceitful about this sin?*
- *Have you lied to us about anything we've just asked you?*
- *Is there anything else you do not want us to ask you?*

Several key areas of the struggle are addressed in these questions.

*Content.* What sort of material are they viewing? While every lustful look is sin, there's a vast spectrum between looking at swimsuit catalogs and child pornography. Where the brother is venturing reveals the progression of his sin.

*Frequency.* How often? Once a year? Once a month? Once a week? Daily? Do they show a capacity to resist or are they impulsively indulging? Exhibiting the Spirit's self-control is a mark of maturity, whereas impulsivity reveals callousness.

*Trajectory.* Is this brother's resistance improving or worsening? The trajectory conversation is especially important for brothers who are showing weakness toward searches of material that is "non-pornographic" yet sexually alluring. The more you walk along the edge of temptation, the more certain you are to fall into it.

*Honesty.* Is this brother walking in the light about their struggle? If sin comes out in these conversations that he hasn't already confessed to someone else, it's a sign that other sins—pride, fear of man, and deceit—are alive in his life.

## **WEIGHING THE SIN STRUGGLE**

If the brother has answered yes, and you've gathered as much information from him as necessary, you and your fellow elders prayerfully need to consider next steps. As you do, keep these principles in mind:

### ***Take Sin Seriously***

Overlooking sin can be as serious an offense as the sin itself. We must never minimize something for which Christ shed his blood. Fellow pastors can be tempted to overextend grace and allow a culture of passivity toward sin to take over. We must remain sober-minded about the gravity of sin. Reading relevant passages together can provide opportunities for the Holy Spirit to bring appropriate conviction to the pastors (Gen. 3:1–24; Psalm 32, 38, 51, 103, 130; Eph. 5:1–14).

### ***Take All Sin Seriously***

We must not elevate the sin of pornography in a way that minimizes other sin. While sexual sin is uniquely serious (1 Cor. 6:18), we must be careful to weigh all abiding sin rightly. In some churches, you can be as proud as the devil, but if you aren't looking at porn, you're good to go. We're not permitted to show partiality to particular sins. Remember that anger, quick-temperedness, insensitivity, harshness, pride, laziness, fear of man, people-pleasing, greediness, and neglect of family are all potentially disqualifying sins. Will you take the same approach with those sins as you do with pornography?

### ***Take Grace Seriously***

In an attempt to honor God, some churches have unnecessarily crushed pastors who wrestle with various facets of this sin struggle. Our response to a sinful saint, regardless of their status, must be to help them to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:14–16). Showing patient mercy to a repentant sinner is the essence of Christian ministry. Jesus was patient with sexual sinners, but diligently rebuked those who withheld mercy from the repentant (Jn. 4:1–30, 8:1–11; Lk. 7:39–50, 15:1–2). Throughout your dealings with a pastor who has sinfully compromised, keep both your eyes and his on Jesus who died and rose so they would not be condemned (Rom. 8:1; Heb. 12:1–2).

## *Wade Through the Complexity*

While principles and policies can be helpful guides to navigate the fallout of sin, we must resist reductionistic shepherding. A “no tolerance” policy with pornography is likely to do more damage than good. Why? For one, it discourages confession and transparency. It tempts pastors to hide. But also, there’s a great difference between a pastor who has an instance of sinful compromise and one who has a pattern of deceitful indulgence. Sin is complex, as is its unraveling. There’s no one-size-fits-all procedure to handle this kind of situation, so they must each be taken on a case-by-case basis.

### **CASE STUDIES OF SIN STRUGGLE**

What you are about to read are two real scenarios. These cases occurred in the past few years among born-again, Bible-teaching pastors.

Case 1: An elder’s wife catches him looking at pornography. After much prying, he confesses to looking at pornography on six occasions in the past two months on his phone and computer. His compromises lasted between three minutes and an hour. He deleted his search history, confessed his sin to God, and resolved not to do it again. He requested friends pray for him because he was “struggling with lust,” but he hadn’t been truly honest with anyone.

Case 2: An elder is working late on a project and begins to scroll through social media on his phone. He clicks on a link that leads to sexually explicit pictures. He scrolls through them for five minutes, resisting the Spirit’s conviction. He’s suddenly sobered, deletes the app on his phone, confesses to God, and then tells his wife. She locks down his phone, and he installs software on all his devices. The next day he confesses his sin to fellow elders with much godly grief.

In both these instances, the pastors have sinned. But the way they sinned, the severity of their sin, and the probable consequences of their sin differ significantly.

*In the first case*, the pastor's sin included a pattern of lying, deceit, cover-up, and prolonged indulgence. At this time, the pastor's ability to treasure God as beautiful, see other people with purity, and serve the church with a clear conscience is called into serious question. He's not qualified to be an example of resisting or repenting of sin at this time. A period of sabbatical, counseling, and proven repentance would be necessary before this brother could be considered for service again.

*In the second case*, the elder's sin is grievous, yet his response was encouraging. He has shown godly remorse and humble confession; he has initiated concrete steps of repentance. There's no pattern of enslavement, nor any hint of hypocrisy. In my opinion, this isolated incident doesn't automatically disqualify the brother from service. Instead, continued repentance and intentional discipleship should be pursued.

As with most pastoral work, navigating the sins of a leader is difficult. This is why it's tempting to avoid the hard work of pastoring by either avoiding the discussion or having an "immediate disqualification" rule. Neither of these stances captures the shepherding that's necessary to evaluate and care for the pastor who has sinned.

These two cases include the same sin, but not the same engagement. The way forward for each of these brothers will likely be drastically different, but the same Savior will be their strength, and the strength of those who walk with them.

## **PATHWAYS AFTER COMPROMISE**

How we respond to a pastor's sin will depend upon many factors. In all cases, the pastor's wife and all the elders should be invol-

ved. Here are a few categories to consider.

1. *Private Care*. A pastor whose struggle isn't characterized by a pattern of compromise and deceit should be prayed for, kept accountable, and likely allowed to continue serving.

Some may push back on this and say that a brother who has compromised in this area will be tempted to pull punches in their teaching about this sin. While I agree that pastors who have hidden sin will sometimes begin to espouse twisted teachings, those who have godly grief accompanied by confession and repentance tend to approach the subject with unique clarity, compassion, and conviction (2 Cor. 1:3–11).

2. *Private Rest*. A pastor whose struggle is slightly more pronounced in frequency or severity may need a private sabbatical. This means the brother doesn't step down publicly, but refrains from coming to elder meetings for several months while he and his wife receive focused care.

This application may also be appropriate for a potential elder candidate that compromises while being considered for service. For example, if a brother was in the pipeline to be recommended to the congregation in two months, but has a compromise similar to Case 2, then that brother's recommendation could carry through, or, probably better, you could wait several months while not totally derailing the move toward a recommendation. As with every other case, this requires much prayer and wisdom from God.

3. *Public Rebuke*. Some pastor's sins reach the level in which it's necessary for the congregation to be informed. As with any other church member's sin, this step shouldn't be made hastily. Helping a struggling pastor privately is preferred, but if their sin persists or proves to be severe, then Paul's instruction must be heeded: "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear" (1 Tim 5:20).

This rebuke may be accompanied by the removal of an elder

from office. If the pastor is in the pay of the church, then the elders may recommend a termination of the pastor's position depending upon the severity. In other instances, the congregation may support the pastor during a sabbatical-like season in which counseling, accountability, and true repentance is pursued.

Restoration of a fallen pastor is an important conversation, but it's not the most pressing one. I strongly discourage setting any dates or timelines early in the process in order to protect the brother from trying to "get it together" by a set date. The Lord will do work in his heart, and you can't put a timeline on that.

If you're part of the elder board, I strongly encourage you to care for the pastor and his family in a God-honoring way during their troubling season. Pastors' souls and their families' wellbeing are often overlooked through this process. This can have devastating effects. For more information on the restoration of pastors as well as other important issues surrounding this topic, check out this resource.

In conclusion, I leave you with three exhortations.

1. If you're flirting with sin, heed Jesus' words, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell" (Matt. 5:29). Do whatever you must not to give into this sin. Do not fight alone. Reach out to a fellow pastor and honestly confess your struggle.

While it's true that there's no condemnation in Christ for sin, there are consequences. Even forgiven sin carries devastating effects. If you've already sinned, now is the time to step into the light. You likely have a million reasons not to, but Jesus is worth whatever it will cost you. You can read about my own journey with confessing this sin as a pastor here.

2. If pornography isn't an area of temptation for you, remain cautious, "let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Be careful not to be overly harsh or punitive

in your care for a fallen brother. The Lord has been mercifully patient with you when you didn't deserve it. You just may be the instrument of mercy God uses to change your fallen pastor's life.

3. Look to Jesus. Whether you're in a season of helping another brother or being helped, Jesus must be the source of your strength, wisdom, power, hope, and joy. Take to heart this promise, "Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24–25).

Amen, come Lord Jesus.

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# Can We Restore Pastors After Sexual Sin: A Short Answer



by John Piper

I'm afraid if I answer this the way that I should, it will give so much license to restore pastors too quickly. But since I should, I should.

Ultimately, I think the answer is yes. A pastor who has sinned sexually can be a pastor again. And I say that just because of the grace of God and the fact that “above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6–7) can be restored, probably.

But here's the catch. Forgiveness comes quickly, expensively, and immediately, at the point of repentance. But trust isn't restored in just a moment. It cannot be.

If a pastor has betrayed his people, and it has wounded a church grievously and wounded his wife grievously, he can be forgiven just like that. Sin wiped away. The blood of Jesus covers it. But as

far as reestablishing trust, which is essential to a shepherd-sheep and wife-husband relationship, how long does that take? A decade? It takes a long time—a long time—until memories are healed.

Very practically, I think this is what I would say: A man who commits adultery, say, in the ministry, should immediately resign and look for other work. And he should make no claim on the church at all. He should get another kind of job and go about his life humbly receiving the discipline and the regular ministries of the church, whether in his former church or in another church.

There are so many who fall who insert themselves quickly in another kind of ministry. And that's just, I think, clear evidence that they don't fathom what has happened.

### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

An audio version of this article is currently online at Desiring God's website here: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-it-possible-to-restore-a-pastor-who-has-sinned-sexually>

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Can We Restore Pastors After Sexual Sin: A Longer Answer



by Jared Wilson

**W**hen a pastor has disqualified himself from his ministry, is he disqualified from ministry altogether? If so, for how long? Forever? Can he ever be restored? If so, how soon?

These sorts of questions are not new, but they do seem more relevant than ever. While there are lots of articles out there on “fallen pastors,” I’ve been surprised to discover few deal with these questions in an in-depth way. I won’t pretend to provide a comprehensive treatment of this difficult subject in this post, but I do want to share some biblical reflections and practical implications I’ve been ruminating on for a while. This subject hits fairly close to home, as I think it does for many. It behooves us to think carefully and biblically about these matters.

## WHAT DISQUALIFIES A PASTOR?

What I find interesting these days is not how many pastors have fallen into disqualification but how many have not. We live in a day and age where any guy with a speaking gift and an entrepreneurial, creative spirit can plant a church and even be successful with it. But gifting is not qualification. Some seem to discuss this subject as if we do not have clear biblical guidance on what qualifies a man for the office of elder/pastor. Except we do. Here is a rough list, a composite from the three primary qualification passages (1 Tim 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5):

1. Sexually/maritally faithful
2. Good manager of household
3. Humble
4. Gentle
5. Sober
6. Peaceful
7. Financially responsible
8. Hospitable
9. Self-controlled
10. Upright in character
11. Committed to holiness
12. Able to teach
13. Spiritually mature (not a new convert)
14. Respectable (and respected by outsiders)
15. A good example to the flock

Evangelicals seem to most often discuss disqualification as it relates to adultery — which, to be clear, is disqualifying — but we rarely bring in the disqualification conversation as it relates to short-tempered, argumentative, or otherwise unself-contro-

lled pastors. The “fall” of Mark Driscoll is probably the closest my particular tribe has come to reckoning with the full-fledged (dis)qualifications for ministry, but it is still not a widely understood concept in the age of the celebrity minister. In fact, I think in many tribes and traditions, the “other biblical qualifications for ministry” have been neglected for a long time. How else to explain that it is typically only once a domineering, financially irresponsible, unsober pastor commits adultery that he is finally removed from his office?

The bottom line is that the bar for the pastoral office is set rather high. It is not open to anybody who “feels called.” Beyond giftedness and ambition, it requires maturity, testing, and a long obedience in the same direction. Because of this, when a pastor has become disqualified, we are dealing with a problem at a different level than even the serious problem of discipline-worthy sins among the laity. It’s not because pastors are supposed to be super-Christians or have more favor with God than lay people, but rather that the leadership office demands a higher standard.

### **CAN DISQUALIFIED PASTORS BE RESTORED?**

The first thing we should say is that we are often talking about two different kinds of restoration without knowing it. Many of evangelicalism’s problems with the scandals of celebrity pastors who disqualify themselves stem from an inability — or an unwillingness — to distinguish between a restoration to vocational ministry from a restoration to the fellowship. In regards to the latter, the answer ought to be an unequivocal yes. Any believer who has fallen morally, pastor or not, ought to be fully restored to the Christian community, given their repentance and the restoration process of their church.

This is why we must be careful with our criticism as well. Sometimes when we argue against the restoration of certain minis-

ters to the pulpit, it sounds as though we are denying their ability to rejoin the fellowship of believers. And sometimes when we are upset about the high standard some set for the pulpit, we call others graceless when they are in fact ready to welcome any repentant sinner to the warmth of Christian fellowship.

What we are talking about here is more specifically this: Can a pastor who has disqualified himself in some way be restored to the pastoral office? In other words: Can a disqualified pastor become re-qualified? This is a rather controversial question. For many, the how and when are nonstarters because they answer “no” to this first consideration. For instance, John MacArthur wrote in a 1991 article:

There are some sins that irreparably shatter a man’s reputation and disqualify him from a ministry of leadership forever. Even Paul, man of God that he was, said he feared such a possibility. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 he says, “I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.”

When referring to his body, Paul obviously had sexual immorality in view. In 1 Corinthians 6:18, he describes it as a sin against one’s own body — sexual sin is in its own category. Certainly it disqualifies a man from church leadership since he permanently forfeits a blameless reputation as a one-woman man (Prov 6:33; 1 Tim 3:2).

I tread lightly here, but I’m going to disagree with Pastor MacArthur. First, if a previous sin forever disqualifies a man, Paul would have already been disqualified for his life of murderous persecution of Christians. Certainly sin committed after one is in union with Christ is in a certain way more serious than sin committed pre-conversion — not serious as in damnable, of course, but serious as in contrary to the new nature — but if any person could ever be deemed forever blameworthy, that would seem to preclude them even from the fellowship. Grace either covers all sin repented of, or it covers none.

I also do not find MacArthur's exegetical case convincing. He puts 1 Corinthians 9:27 in the context of 1 Corinthians 6:18 to argue Paul has in mind sexual immorality. But that does not seem at all to be what Paul is talking about in the immediate context of chapter 9. Verse 27 caps off a long explanatory passage on Paul's missional philosophy, teasing out his concern to be "all things to all people" (v. 22). He does of course mention "self-control" (v. 25), but it is in relation to training. This does not exclude any consideration of guarding against sexual immorality, of course, but the "disqualification" referred to in verse 27 doesn't seem to be connected to a moral failing but a missional one.

In other words, it appears from the trajectory of his reasoning throughout the chapter that the "qualification" in question is about commending himself to both Jew and Greek (vv. 19-23). He does not want to fall short of missional versatility. This is why he spills a lot of ink earlier in the passage on payment for ministry and the like. He then goes on to discuss his discipline in relation to the ceremonial law as a missional consideration. He is speaking largely to contextualization and personal usability. With this in mind — again — we do not take sexual propriety entirely out of the equation, but it would seem that the disqualification he has in mind is more to do with disqualifying himself from access to preaching to people groups (as he mentions in the verse in question) than disqualification from the ministry entirely. I take the immediate context to be of more guidance in understanding 1 Corinthians 9:27 than I do a verse three chapters previous.

All of that said, we obviously know sexual immorality is disqualifying for pastors because of the more direct references that give us the biblical qualifications for ministry. One of these is found, as MacArthur mentions, in 1 Timothy 3:2. But the question we're really asking is if this disqualification is permanent. Even if we take 1 Corinthians 9:27 to refer to a moral failing, it says nothing about the permanence of such a disqualification. MacArthur adds

the word “permanently” to his exposition, but it is not found in the text. What we can agree on, I assume, is that those who seek qualification for pastoral ministry — according to 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5 — must have a well established reputation for and widespread affirmation of the qualities listed therein. (I’m going to come back to that last sentence in a minute, so don’t forget it.) On this subject, another pastor, John Piper, said in a 2009 interview:

Is it possible to restore a pastor who sinned sexually but who is repentant? Or is such a pastor disqualified because he no longer meets the qualification of being “above reproach”?

I’m afraid if I answer this the way that I should, it will give so much license to restore pastors too quickly. But since I should, I should.

Ultimately, I think the answer is yes. A pastor who has sinned sexually can be a pastor again. And I say that just because of the grace of God and the fact that “above reproach” can be restored, probably.

I agree with Piper on this, and I think there is a lot entailed in the “probably” that we should tease out. But first, do we have any biblical precedent for the restoration of a fallen pastor? Well, in fact, of a certain kind we do.

## **WHAT DOES THE RESTORATION OF PETER TELL US ABOUT THE RESTORATION OF DISQUALIFIED PASTORS?**

Let’s be clear here that we are not discussing relational conflicts or a ministerial “falling-out.” Some speak this way about Peter’s denial of Christ and the subsequent reunion with his Lord, but this does not do justice to the terrible sin Peter has committed. On the other hand, we have a few examples in Acts and in some of Paul’s epistles referring to intramural debates and relational conflicts that prompt the parting of ways between ministers of the gospel, but Paul does

not refer to those men as being disqualified from ministry. (He does speak that way about those one-time ministers who embraced heresy or otherwise “fell away” from the faith, of course.) So we have to put Peter’s denial of Jesus in the right category.

Jesus has warned, “But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven” (Matt 10:33). This makes the public denial of Jesus (by any believer) a denial of eternal impact. Compounding this, Peter was even told by Jesus he would do this, and Peter gave his word he would not (Matt 26:35), so now we have a betrayed trust on top of a betrayed witness. Can we agree that any minister who denies even knowing Jesus when put on the spot has entered disqualification territory? With this in mind, let’s revisit the restoration scene found in John 21:15-19:

When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said to him, “you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs,” he told him. A second time he asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said to him, “you know that I love you.” “Shepherd my sheep,” he told him.

He asked him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved that he asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” “Feed my sheep,” Jesus said. “Truly I tell you, when you were younger, you would tie your belt and walk wherever you wanted. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you and carry you where you don’t want to go.” He said this to indicate by what kind of death Peter would glorify God. After saying this, he told him, “Follow me.”

Is this scene instructive in any way for the consideration of pastoral restoration? Even though it is not a didactic passage but rather a narrative, I think so.

First, the larger point is that restoration for sinners is possible. Glory! This is simply, for all believers, a wonderful picture of the gospel. Why did Jesus repeat the question three times? There is no significance in the linguistic difference in the “loves” (agape, phileo), as that appears to be a literary penchant of John’s, but rather Jesus is echoing and thereby covering Peter’s threefold denial. The gist? You cannot out-sin the grace of God. As far as your sin may go, the gospel goes further still.

Second, it seems obvious to me that the restoration in view here is not simply to the fellowship but also to leadership. Some proponents of permanent disqualification miss the gravity of what is taking place in this beautiful moment. The interjection between each question and answer of “Feed/tend my lambs” would seem to indicate that Peter is not simply being restored to “good graces” with Jesus but also to the ministerial office. He is certainly not dismissed from his apostleship and of course goes on to preach and write authoritatively. This is after he has publicly denied knowing Jesus.

Third, beyond those two primary facts — restoration is graciously total, and re-qualification for ministry is possible — everything else we deduce about restoration from this passage must be an inference. For instance, some argue from Peter’s restoration scene that restoration to ministry can be — dare we say, should be? — immediate. It is to this question that I turn next.

### **HOW SOON CAN FALLEN PASTORS BE RESTORED?**

If not never, when? Some say, citing Jesus’s restoration of Peter, immediately. I think not.

To discern from Peter’s restoration a “Jesus and me” approach to pastoral qualification is to miss the robust ecclesiology embedded in John 21 and provided throughout the rest of the Scriptures. There are two important elements in John 21 that are at the least

necessary prerequisites for restoration of fallen pastors: (1) godly grief (John 21:7) and (2) the verdict of the congregation as representative of Christ on earth (Matt 16:19).

To put it bluntly, Jesus is not here in person to tell us, “Yeah, this guy’s ready.” So what do we have? We have his word (the Bible), and we have his body (the church). The answer to the question, “How soon can a fallen pastor be restored?” cannot really be answered definitively in terms of time frame. It may take some longer than others. Some may not ever be restored. The point is — it’s not really up to them. The restoration is performed, as in all discipline cases, by the church where the disqualification has taken place. There are too many factors that may be involved in different cases. But I think we can say “not immediately,” for these reasons:

### **DISCERNING GODLY GRIEF IS NECESSARY.**

Peter’s grief is especially noted. How can we know this grief is godly grief (2 Cor 7:10) and not simply grief over being found out (or “caught”), or worse, a feigned sincerity meant to fool? Well, Jesus himself cannot be fooled. He could look right into Peter’s heart and see his repentance. The church, as Christ’s representative in matters of church discipline today, is of course not omniscient. We determine repentance credible in a variety of ways and act accordingly. Typically, church discipline processes involve steps members must submit to in order to show their cooperation and demonstrate their grief over their sin. For repentant adulterers, this can entail things like opening up their phones and email to their hurt spouse, cutting off all contact with their affair partner, and so on. For habitual porn users, it can involve installing software. For members disciplined for all kinds of sins, it may involve regularly meeting with an accountability partner and/or a counselor. The stipulations vary, but steps toward restoration are taken.

Some may say that is not very gracious, but biblical church discipline is not punitive or condemnatory. It is, in fact, a grace applied. Most folks acknowledge we don't restore unrepentant members to the fellowship. So once we make repentance a requirement, we're necessarily asking, "How do you know if one is repentant?" Obviously there are ways to create an interminable succession of legalistic hoops for someone to jump through. That is graceless. We are simply discerning repentance. That is biblical, and it is gracious because there are more parties at stake than simply the sinner in question — there is the body, the reputation of the church, and the credibility of our witness for Christ. No single sinner is above all of these considerations, and to treat them so is to deny grace to others. No, properly administered, discipline is a grace (Heb 12:11).

### **RESTORATION TO FELLOWSHIP IS NOT THE SAME AS RESTORATION TO THE PASTORATE.**

For any person who has fallen into discipline-worthy sin, restoration to the fellowship can be relatively immediate. I say "relatively" because of the considerations above. But paying penance is not a biblical virtue. Like the father in the parable, we seek with love the restoration of every wayward member, pastor or not, and run to receive them when they indicate interest in returning to the family. But, again, restoration to the fellowship is not the same as restoration to the pastorate. Remember those qualifications?

Peter did not restore himself.

The church, as Christ's representative, must affirm the qualifications of any person to the office of pastor. Christ in person can qualify a man immediately or immediately restore that man once he's fallen. Christ's church, however, has further instruction on how it can make these determinations. To return to an earlier claim: Those who seek qualification for pastoral ministry — ac-

according to 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5 — must have a well established reputation for and widespread affirmation of the qualities listed therein. And those qualifications are not things that can be determined in immediate fashion. They aren't determined quickly when we establish a pastor in the first place, and they shouldn't be jumped over when we consider the restoration of a pastor who's disqualified himself.

You cannot tell if someone is a good manager of a household the first time you meet him. You see the witness of his family life over time. Similarly, when a guy cheats on his wife, you don't determine he's a good family man soon after the revelation. It will take more time, given the offense, to see him walk in repentance, to gain that reputation back. This is the case with any point of disqualification, although some levels of discernment can occur more quickly than others. It is not an immediate thing for a pastor who has been disqualified for a long pattern of verbal abuse or coarse jesting to gain a reputation as a gentle, peaceful man. It is probably less immediate still for a pastor who has been disqualified for a pattern of alcohol addiction or sexual immorality to gain a reputation as sober-minded or a "one-woman man."

This is parallel to the biblical qualification of "not being a new convert." Obviously we are speaking to a (presumably) Christian person who is newly repentant, but the underlying principle is the same. Repentance is an immediate re-entry to the fellowship, but re-entry to the pastorate takes the testing of time.

This is not graceless. It is how Christ protects his church and, incidentally, how he protects repentant sinners from rushing too soon back into the same pressures that revealed their undeveloped character to begin with.

Even if a pastor in light of restoration is planning to assume the pulpit of another church or plant a new church, his restoration to ministry should still be affirmed by his previous community.

There are some extreme cases where this may not be possible, but it should be normative for disqualified leaders humbly submitting to discipline.

So, how soon? I don't know. Not never. Not immediately. Somewhere in between, given the time by the church to discern and affirm one's qualification. I track, again, with John Piper:

Forgiveness comes quickly, expensively, and immediately, on repentance. But trust doesn't, cannot.

If a pastor has betrayed his people, and it has wounded a church grievously and wounded his wife grievously, he can be forgiven just like that. Wiped away. The blood of Jesus covers it. But as far as re-establishing trust, which is essential to a shepherd/sheep and wife/husband relationship, how long does that take? A decade? It takes a long time, a long time, until memories are healed.

And very practically I think this is what I would say: A man who commits adultery, say, in the ministry, should immediately resign and look for other work. And he should make no claim on the church at all. He should get another kind of job and go about his life humbly receiving the discipline and sitting and receiving ministry, whether in that church or in another church. And then the church should turn that around if it believes it should, not him.

Let us remember, friends, that none of us who enjoys the privilege of ministering the gospel is greater than Christ's church, locally or universally. We may have been given a platform, but we are of service to him and at his disposal. We are to be subject to the church.

The gospel is not expendable. But our ministries are. If you are a fallen pastor eager for restoration to ministry, I urge you not to see your time away or the discipline involved in the meantime as graceless. It may be your next lesson in just how big God's grace really is. You may cheapen grace rushing back into that pulpit, assuming you

can only be validated by a return to platform, if only because you remain unwilling to see just how greatly grace can sustain you and satisfy you outside of the spotlight. He is good enough to supply your every need.

### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

This article originally appeared in the e-book *Porn and the Pastor*.

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# Corporate Consequences of Unchecked Porn Use



by Jason Seville

In his 2015 book *How We Got to Now: Six Innovations That Made the Modern World*, Steven Johnson shows the cascading consequences of ideas. 9Marks readers will remember, for example, Gutenberg's contribution for the purposes of the Protestant Reformation. But what you may not know is that the printing press—by putting books under tens of thousands of noses—also helped people realize they were farsighted, which led to manipulating discs of glass for corrective eyewear, which led to making more powerful lenses that could look up into space or down into cells. Thus, moveable type started a chain reaction that helped people clearly see the gospel but also germs and galaxies.

As we consider pornography in this 9Marks Journal, it would be beneficial for us to ponder such chain reactions in the church. If pornography goes unchecked in your church, what threads might the next generation trace back as they're cleaning up a huge

mess and asking, “How did we get here?”

It’s not difficult to discern the consequences on individuals when pornography is unchecked: formidable addiction, haunting shame, calloused consciences, disturbing hypocrisy, and relational selfishness all run rampant? Yet beyond that, here are 11 frightening snapshots of how pornography left unchecked will weaken your church. Note that these aren’t in and of themselves reasons porn should be avoided. We want to kill sin because we love Jesus, not because we want more missionaries in the field. But we should still be aware of these wide-ranging corporate consequences.

## **1. IT WILL WEAKEN CHURCH LEADERSHIP.**

There will simply be fewer pastors, first and foremost, because if unchecked porn use plagues the ranks of the overseer then men will find themselves quickly disqualified. But, second and perhaps more likely, there will be fewer young men raised up as future elders who meet the biblical qualifications of being above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, respectable, upright, holy, disciplined, and outside the charge of debauchery (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

## **2. IT WILL WEAKEN LEADERSHIP CAPITAL.**

This point is less obvious than the previous one, but it will exist nonetheless in a church with unchecked porn use. There will be fewer leaders, but even among the leaders who remain it may be assumed that they have scandalous skeletons in the closet as well. When a church isn’t characterized by a culture of confessing and repenting of sin and clinging to the gospel, it will cast doubt in the minds of many as to whether anyone is actually qualified to preach, lead, and shepherd.

### **3. IT WILL WEAKEN SERVICE IN THE CHURCH.**

In the same way that there will be fewer elders, there will also be fewer deacons who must hold to the faith with a clear conscience (Titus 1:9). But it will run even deeper than that: many will be unwilling to serve. Why? Because serving others involves selflessness and considering others as more important than self. Those ensnared by unchecked porn use, however, will be primarily self-focused, leaving little room for serving others. Additionally, others will be sidelined from service because overwhelming guilt will leave them too ashamed or simply unqualified.

### **4. IT WILL WEAKEN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.**

There will be fewer missionaries, fewer evangelists, fewer church planters, and fewer involved in training and theological education. And that's if the normal candidates put themselves on the shelf. If they don't, then there will be propagators peddling a gospel that they themselves aren't currently cherishing, which will likewise weaken the mission of the church.

### **5. IT WILL WEAKEN THE PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH.**

If you take what Jesus said about lust amounting to adultery (Matt 5:27–30) and combine it with what Peter wrote to husbands about their prayers being hindered for dishonoring their wives (1 Pet 3:7), then it would stand to reason that those with unchecked porn use aren't enjoying healthy and vibrant prayer lives.

### **6. IT WILL WEAKEN SCRIPTURAL ENLIGHTENMENT.**

The prayers of the church will be hindered, and so will Bible study. Meditating, reflecting, and dwelling on the Word of God is a uniquely spiritual work. It's no mere academic exercise. And yet, if porn goes unchecked it will disconnect the gift of the Word from its Giver. God will become a mere concept or an idea. The church

will suffer as its members lack the concentration, clarity of thought, and connection to the illumining work of the Spirit. (Eph 1:17–23) Even worse, some may start to give up on the Bible entirely in an effort to tamp down the conviction that reading it brings in their lives. All of this means less corporate transformation through the Word, less wise counsel given, and less helping each other hold fast to the truth.

## **7. IT WILL WEAKEN THE SINGING OF THE CHURCH.**

It's a beautiful experience to walk into a church where the saints are singing with passion and conviction. The powerful praises of God's people is a great encouragement to the congregation as well as an intriguing witness to non-Christians who may enter. But that corporate reverberation will be muffled in a church where pornography is prevalent. Shame, hypocrisy, and callousness to the beauties of Christ don't typically lead to the loud singing of God's praises.

## **8. IT WILL WEAKEN THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHURCH MEMBERS.**

Church members are tasked with encouraging one another, admonishing one another, speaking the truth with one another, and bearing each others' burdens (1 Thess 5:11; Col 3:16; Eph 4:25; Gal 6:2). We are to exhort one another so that we won't be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13). But unchecked porn use will make us reluctant to carry out our duties with each other. We'll isolate ourselves in shame or pull punches because we feel like hypocrites.

## **9. IT WILL WEAKEN THE MARRIAGES IN THE CHURCH.**

It's an unavoidable fact that unchecked pornography will have a deleterious effect on marriages. Romantic pursuit will wane, sex

lives will suffer, and trust will be broken. It's also not out of the question for porn to serve as a gateway into emotional, physical, and sexual abuse among married couples. There will be unhappy and shattered marriages, which is devastating in its own right, but this means that there will also be a loss of godly examples for younger couples to follow.

#### **10. IT WILL WEAKEN DATING IN THE CHURCH.**

I was shocked to hear a Christian friend of mine quip a few years ago that young Christian women are basically choosing between which porn addict they like best. While I don't think this is true—and I pushed back at his dismal claim—it's sad that some people have adopted such a defeatist mindset. But if we're granting the premise of unchecked porn use in the church, then we have to acknowledge that this could be the *perceived* reality that some men and women feel they're facing: choosing between the lesser of two evils when it comes to a pool of potential spouses.

#### **11. IT WILL WEAKEN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CHURCH.**

Pornography causes us to see others as objects. If this goes unchecked it will turn the common church lobby into a college nightclub. We'll lose the ability to rightly relate to those we're called to love and serve. A brother or sister will be seen as a temptation to be avoided or an object to be ogled. And those on the business end of that stick will feel the pain of that constant avoidance or that objectifying flirtatiousness. This will devolve until we don't even know how to look each other in the eye and have a conversation, much less how to do spiritual good to each other for the glory of God.

## CONCLUSION

Given all we've said above, mentally walk your way through the weekly gathering at your local church and ask: If porn goes unchecked, is anything in our corporate gathering left unaffected?

Conversations in the lobby as you walk in? Awkward and compromised. Call to worship? Many people don't feel like it. Music? A shadow of what it could be. Prayer of praise? Some are grappling with competing loves. Prayer of confession? Self-deceit and rationalizations abound. Pastoral prayer? A lot of prayer for suffering marriages in the church—not as much for the sacrificial mission of the church. Offering? Selfishness reigns. Sermon? Some are calloused toward it, others ambivalent, and a few are questioning the Bible's authority altogether. The Lord's Supper? The question "What does an 'unworthy manner' really mean?" abounds.

In a word, if porn goes unchecked, the corporate consequences will be pervasive. Brothers and sisters, by God's grace, may none of this be true in our churches! But let us be cognizant of the potential corporate consequences so that we may remain vigilant for the sake of Christ.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# How Do Church Members Fight Porn Addiction Together?



by Deepak Reju

**M**ost of what you read about fighting pornography will be relegated to one-on-one discipling. By and large, Christians know they should fight this problem. But I'm interested in a different question: what would it mean to fight pornography *together*? What would it look like to cultivate a culture where leaders and members help one another?

## WHAT LEADERS CAN DO

### 1. What values do leaders establish for their church?

The pastor is the primary culture shaper for his congregation. When your pastor talks about the Christian life, what values does he say are necessary? For example, do you have a church

culture where members feel like they can talk about their sin? I recently heard a young man say, “I grew up in a church where talk about sexual sin was hush-hush. You almost never heard about it, and when you did, it was the occasional preaching against sexual immorality.”

Contrast that with leaders who are willing to say: “Be honest about your sin. Confess your sin to other members. Don’t hide it because sin likes to grow in the darkness. Expose it to the light.” Perhaps it shouldn’t be this way, but sinners generally need permission from leaders to be honest about their sin. This is why leaders must establish a church culture where honesty and transparency about sin is cherished.

## **2. Do leaders model honesty about their struggles?**

We live amid a sea of leaders who have struggled with pornography in their past. Why hide this fact? Why not serve as examples (1 Pet. 5:3b) of what it means to go from porn struggler to pastor? Granted, it’s a long road, but strugglers *need* examples. Wisdom is needed about what to share, and who to share it with. But *never* sharing this fact doesn’t seem to be an appropriate testament to God’s grace in a pastor’s life.

## **3. Do leaders equip, educate, and preach about sex?**

Pastors should teach a positive, redemptive picture about God’s design for a beautiful sex life. No “hush-hush.” So pastors, are you preaching about God’s purposes and design for sex? Don’t mind the Christians who will wince and squirm when you read from Song of Songs—let them hear it boldly and clearly because it’s God’s Word.

Porn strugglers will have a distorted view of sex. They live for the short-term buzz; they exalt pleasure to a place it doesn’t deserve. So their understanding of sex needs to be rebuilt and redeemed.

#### **4. Do the leaders strategize how to fight this problem?**

Because this one issue prevents more men (and some women) from serving in leadership roles than any other sin, our elders strategize how to fight this together. We read, pray, talk, scheme, shepherd, plan, and share best practices. It's easy to spend most of my time in the trenches with strugglers. But sometimes, I need to step out of the trench and strategize with other "generals" and "captains" of the faith.

If you're a pastor, what's your battle plan?

#### **5. Do you pray as a church?**

In our Sunday evening services, Mark Dever offers discipling-related prayer requests like, "Let's pray that we as a church would be willing to ask each other hard questions" or "Let's pray as a church that we'd confess our sin to each other."

By sharing these requests, he not only gets us to pray, but as the primary culture shaper of our church, he holds these out as important for the Christian life. It's as if Mark is saying, "This is what it means to live as a Christian."

### **WHAT MEMBERS CAN DO**

#### **6. Are church members invested in the lives of other members, including fighting against the hard and nasty things?**

As a pastor, I can't help every porn struggler, nor can I provide accountability for every man who confesses this sin to me. I just don't have the time, nor do I think this is the best thing for the church. I can't be a *mini-messiah*—taking on the sins of my whole church.

It's much better for our church members to see themselves as responsible for one another. I want a church culture where members seek to do each other spiritual good, where they pursue one

another and help each other fight sin *together*. Unlike my children—who try to play together as a band but ultimately just create a cacophony of sound—a church is different. When church members are invested in one another, it's like a symphony full of harmony and unity. As the whole church fights together, you start to see what a church *should* be.

But how does this happen? First of all, you must teach your members to *expect* to be a part of each other's lives. And then you must consistently *reinforce* those expectations after they join and you *model* for them what it looks like in your own life.

Member-to-member investment involves more than just general discipling (Bible study and prayer). It demands all of life, which sometimes means dealing with nasty and hard things like pornography addiction.

If members are going to be involved with strugglers, they've got to ask themselves: Am I willing to sacrifice my time to help this young man or woman? Do I know where to go in Scripture? Do I know how to convey hope when he or she is hopeless? Am I willing to pick up the phone when they're tempted to sin again? What will I do when they confess sexual sin for the twentieth time?

### **7. Do your church members model transparency about their struggles?**

If the leaders are honest, then church members are more likely to be honest. I love pointing to examples in our church of Christians who have fought this fight, and by God's grace and their own vigilance they've maintained a degree of victory in the fight.

### **8. Do your church members know what to do if someone confesses to them?**

Steven didn't know what to do. A young man had confessed his sexual sin to him, but he didn't know what questions to ask, where to probe, or how to press into his sin.

I assume situations like this are quite common. That's why the most basic thing we can do for our members is help them to get into the trenches with struggling members. A simple "I'll pray for you" just isn't enough.

Simply put, we must *train* our members to be more effective disciplers. How do we do this? Sometimes it involves teaching, maybe even specific strategies on how to fight pornography. But usually, we do this by *modeling*.

For example, I don't meet with porn strugglers by myself anymore. I ask the discipler to come to our meeting. Why is that? As I ask questions of the struggler, probe his heart, and apply Scripture, the discipler watches me (the pastor) and learns just by being in the room with us. The discipler sees and learns things that just can't be reproduced through a book or a training course.

Here's my challenge to you: Talk over these eight questions with your pastors—or your entire leadership team, including your deacons. Pick a few of your members and include them, too, to see how you measure up. But don't stop there. Take active steps to start cultivating a culture where your church can fight pornography together.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Discipling a Generation Who Grew Up with Porn



by Allen Duty

I was blessed to grow up in a time when pornography was still pretty tough to find. Magazines sat in sealed plastic bags behind sales counters, and you had to pay for any channels or movies that had pornographic content. Don't get me wrong—I saw pornography as a teenager, but I didn't see very much of it.

Sadly, that's not the case with the young men and women in our churches today. Most of them are “digital natives.” They don't remember a time without iPhones, iPads, and free WiFi everywhere. And many of them don't remember a time without unlimited access to pornography.

I'm a pastor in a college town, not a social scientist. I can't tell you how many young Christians view pornography regularly. But I *can* tell you that when I meet with young men, I don't have

to ask, “Have you struggled with pornography?” I can save time by simply asking, “Would you tell me about your struggle with pornography?”

Church, we have a serious problem on our hands, and it’s only getting worse. Every week, young people are coming into our churches, weighed down with guilt and shame. Many express a genuine desire to be free from their sin, but they don’t know what to do. And often, church leaders don’t know how to help them.

So how should we respond to the pornography crisis in our churches, particularly among young people who can’t remember life without it?

### **FIRST, WE MUST TEACH YOUNG CHRISTIANS TO BE SOBER-MINDED ABOUT THEIR SLAVERY TO SIN.**

Dozens of young men over the years have confessed to me, “I’m struggling with lust.” When I ask them to tell me more about the extent of their struggle, they tell me that they’re viewing pornography weekly, multiple times per week, or even daily.

If someone is using illegal drugs like this, we don’t refer to that as a “struggle.” We call it what it is—an addiction.

But for some reason, when it comes to Christians viewing pornography we don’t use the language of addiction, or what the Scriptures would call “slavery to sin” (Rom. 6:6, Gal. 4:3). No, we soften the blunt edge of reality with the language of “struggle.”

As long as we allow young Christians to believe they’re “struggling” with pornography when they’re enslaved to it, they won’t be willing to take the drastic steps necessary to walk in repentance. The addict will never go to rehab until she’s convinced that she’s an addict.

## **SECOND, WE MUST TRAIN YOUNG CHRISTIANS TO FLEE FROM TEMPTATION.**

One of the best ways to get out of a compromising situation is to never put yourself in a compromising situation to begin with. But many young Christians do, especially with respect to the entertainment they consume.

Wildly popular shows like *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld* feature graphic sex, and yet many young Christians watch these shows without a second thought. In his article “12 Questions to Ask Before You Watch *Game of Thrones*,” John Piper writes:

Nudity is not like murder and violence on the screen. Violence on a screen is make-believe; nobody really gets killed. But nudity is not make-believe. These actresses are really naked in front of the camera, doing exactly what the director says to do with their legs and their hands and their breasts.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:18).

Fleeing sexuality immorality includes avoiding entertainment that may be sinful in itself, but also might be a “gateway” to pornography usage.

## **THIRD, WE MUST TRAIN YOUNG CHRISTIANS TO FIGHT.**

John Owen wrote, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” We’re in a fight to the death with sin. But the way many young Christians deal with sin is like watching a movie fight. There’s lots of tough talk, dancing around, and blocking.

If you take a self-defense class, your instructor will first of all tell you to avoid a fight at all costs. But if a fight is unavoidable, then the person who goes in first, fast, and furious is usually going to win. No talking. No dancing around. No blocking.

Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell” (Matt. 5:29)

We’ve got to train young Christians to fight like this. Many will find victory through the ordinary means of grace—reading Scripture, prayer, and accountability in the church. Others will need to “cut out the eye,” which could include exchanging their smartphone for a “dumbphone” with no internet access, or deciding only to use computers in public libraries rather than buying a laptop.

Digital natives have a hard time believing that people survived without smartphones and laptops, but as Jesus says, it’s better to lose something temporary than something eternal. The key is to take whatever measures are necessary to fight against besetting sins. That’s the only way to win a fight to the death.

## **FINALLY, WE MUST POINT YOUNG CHRISTIANS TO THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST.**

Many young men and women have been battling pornography addiction for years. They’re ashamed and discouraged. And while we need to train them to flee and to fight, the best thing we can do is point them to the gospel.

Jesus was tempted in every way—including to lust after women—and yet he never sinned. We must remember that his perfectly obedient life, his sin-atonement death, and his death-defeating resurrection isn’t only the key to our forgiveness, but to our sanctification and joy.

If Jesus is powerful enough to raise the dead to life through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, then he is powerful enough to deliver us from our besetting sins. And that includes addiction to pornography.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Are There Good and Bad Kinds of Accountability?



by Jaime Owens

Looking back at my former life as a Roman Catholic in New England, I can almost smell the varnish and stale cushions of the confessional booth. I would walk into the wooden box slumped over with guilt; a few minutes later, I would walk out standing tall. In my own mind, I had unloaded my guilt before God at the feet of the priest. He listened to my confession through the latticed opening in the thin wall. After a few rote declarations and a prescription of prayers, I believed my sinful slate was wiped clean. My hope in those days can be summed up in just two words: *Rinse. Repeat.*

But accountability shouldn't work this way. It's not a mechanical transaction that washes away our guilt. The ultimate aim of any accountability should be to lead us into the presence of the *only One* who grants grace.

In other words, most of our accountability, though sincere, is too horizontal. It needs more of God. It's easy to become so focused on policing one another's sins that God becomes an afterthought. It's also easy to "keep it light" and largely avoid talk of our sin and God's holiness. Both errors are problematic. If we act as the sin police, we'll eventually become legalists. If we fail to address sin, we'll become antinomian.

We need to foster better, more vertical accountability in our churches. How do we do that?

## **1. GOOD ACCOUNTABILITY IS DEADLY SERIOUS ABOUT SIN**

John writes that God *is* light, and good accountability is serious about shining light into the dark corners of sin. We can define accountability as *partnering together to walk in the light* (1 John 1:5–7).

God is holy. His warnings against pride and pornography are severe. To the untrained ear, they may seem harsh, like the blare of a smoke alarm at 2 a.m. But God's warnings issue forth from his covenant love.

It may seem strange to meet at the local coffee shop or in our living rooms to meditate on God's utter hatred and judgment of sin. The last thing we may want to do is meditate with another believer on the first half of Romans 6:23 ("For the wages of sin is death...") or the warning passages in Hebrews. But love demands that we warn each other of where sin ultimately leads.

It's worth considering the rhythms or structures of accountability in your life. For instance, have you ever sat down with a brother or sister struggling with pornography and loved them enough to sound the alarm of 1 Corinthians 6:9–10?

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homose-

xuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

If we fail to meditate on God's holiness and his warnings, and to help others do the same, we fail to reflect the God who is so serious about sin that he crushed his only Son to free us from its penalty and power. Good accountability, like God, is deadly serious about sin.

## **2. GOOD ACCOUNTABILITY MEDITATES ON GOD'S PROMISES OF MERCY**

Our accountability also misses the mark when we fail to help one another savor the promises of God to his beloved.

Peter tells us that by meditating on God's promises we "escape the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." So let's help one another escape. We often talk about the dangers of having a *laissez-faire* attitude toward sin. But what about the dangers of having a *laissez-faire* attitude toward the promises of God? Accountability that fails to magnify the mercy of God leads only to despair.

Again, take inventory: How patient are you with friends who confess viewing pornography for the tenth time in a month? Do you gently guide your brothers and sisters to the comforting promise of Micah 7:19? "He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." As we pore over these texts with friends, we, too, will be humbled and reminded of God's tender mercies toward us.

God's posture toward his wandering children begins with warning, but it also flowers with hope. As James wrote, "Mercy triumphs over judgment." Good accountability, the vertical kind, passionately warns but also meditates on God's promises of mercy towards us, despite our failures and imperfections.

### 3. GOOD ACCOUNTABILITY DRAWS US INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN PRAYER

Good accountability first leads us to God in his Word, and ultimately to him on our knees. Consider James 5:16, the clearest passage in the Bible on accountability between fellow Christians: “Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

James’s command to confess our sins to one another is fused to the command to approach the throne of grace together in prayer. Is our accountability just a conversation between sinners, or is it more of a conversation together with God?

Good accountability draws us into the presence of God in prayer. Why? Because only at the throne of grace before our merciful Father can we plead for escape from temptation, for holiness, and for restoration.

#### PRACTICAL ENCOURAGEMENTS

The war against indulging in pornography can be won, but sinful sexual desire, as long as we live, is a dragon that will not be slain. Even those of us who have been porn-free for years must remain vigilant. Here are several encouragements to help us deepen our accountability when it comes to sexual sin generally and pornography particularly:

**1. Ask pointed questions.** It’s not enough to speak vaguely about sin. Christians should expose it plainly, even at the risk of embarrassment. So it’s worth asking one another concrete questions. As we describe our sin in detail, we will be better able to process what we’ve done.

**2. Consider our triggers.** Assess with our partners when we’re particularly vulnerable to viewing pornography. For many,

temptation comes after a long day at work. It could be that we're tempted when our spouse is away from home, or when we're traveling in a new place. Know your own and your partner's triggers and offer to be available at those times, whether in person or on the phone.

**3. Always tell the truth.** If we deny we've been tempted or sinned, leave out parts of the truth, or distort the facts, then we're robbing ourselves of holiness and joy. Accountability is only as good as it is honest. If we're not being honest, then we ought to ask ourselves why we're meeting up at all.

**4. Guard against self-righteousness.** There are times we can find a strange satisfaction when hearing about someone else's struggle. We may judge ourselves as more steadfast, more devoted to God. But every person on the face of the earth struggles with sexual sin. Indulging in pornography is egregious. God hates it. But if not for the grace of God, we would all be owned and destroyed by sexual sin. We must pray for humble hearts, and for a quick memory of our own failures and weaknesses as we hold our brothers and sisters accountable.

**5. Take the long view.** As Christians, some sins vanish almost overnight, while others will nip at our heels until we see Jesus. We must keep in mind that pornography and all sexual sin is complex, deeply rooted, and difficult to destroy. It may take some of us months or even years to recognize substantial progress. This is why we must commit to one another for the long haul. We must stay the course. The Apostle Paul compares the Christian life to a marathon, not a 100-meter dash. You may be discouraged in your progress if you look over the span of a year. But wait until year 5 or 10. God's grace is *most* often revealed in our patient plodding.

**6. Celebrate the victories.** Good accountability isn't only about confessing sin. It's also about celebrating our growth in grace. Tell your friends often how encouraged you are with their progress and point out particular evidences of God's grace in their battle for purity. As we consider that these relationships aren't to be contrived but built on a foundation of love and care for one another, accountability will become a joyful means of grace in our lives.

### **QUICK WORD TO PASTORS**

I remember sitting with a group of pastors, and each of them began to share about their accountability “coaches.” I was shocked to realize that each of them pays someone, in many cases hundreds of miles away, to be their accountability partners. One pastor shared with satisfaction how utterly transparent he is with his coach. What struck me most was the implication that these pastors felt that they could find something in these paid partners that they couldn't find in their own churches.

But here's my question to these pastors: has not God provided in the local church all of the means for our sanctification? Could it be that we are reluctant to be accountable to other elders and members because we know we aren't living above reproach? Is the outsourcing of our accountability actually an avoidance of being transparent with the people God has called to live among and serve? Pastor, if you are tempted by pornography, you need a brother who walks with you each day—one who serves you and keeps you accountable because he loves you.

Consider the words of Paul to young Timothy: “Watch your life and doctrine closely.” But we should also pay close attention to the words that follow: “Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

It's true that Paul is calling for pastors to examine themselves. But no pastor—indeed, no Christian on the face of the earth—will get to heaven on his own. The sobering reality is that accounta-

bility for pastors is more critical than we can imagine. The souls under our care, as Paul reflects, are eternally influenced by our godliness or lack thereof. Praise God that he has provided in every local church the means by which all of its members, including pastors, will get to heaven.

## **CONCLUSION**

Accountability cannot save us. But it's as useful to the Christian as it points us to Christ, the very one who, by his mercy, has already saved us. At the end of the day, good accountability is just one tool in the believer's belt that helps us into his holy and merciful presence. As we behold his warnings, his promises, and come to him in prayer, sin loses its grip on our hearts, and we receive fresh grace to love and serve him and his beloved, the church.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Cultivating a Culture of Transparency in Your Church



by James Choi

“James, would you pray that our church would be willing to have *awkward conversations* with each other?”  
“Huh?”

Seriously, that’s what my pastor asks members to pray almost every week at our Sunday evening gatherings. Together, we pray that our members would understand the need to make our relationships transparent—to share embarrassing things about ourselves, to speak honestly, and to ask one another careful, loving questions as a way to cultivate a genuine culture of discipling.

## WHAT IS TRANSPARENCY?

The word *transparency* isn’t found in the Bible, but numerous Scripture passages exhort Christians to live holy and blameless

lives.<sup>10</sup> Jesus says, “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Transparency is living our lives reflecting Jesus’s light as we acknowledge our need for gospel reminders, accountability, and repentance.

## THE PORN PROBLEM

Nevertheless, transparency is difficult because Christians still sin and feel shame. Pornography is but one significant example of humanity’s ongoing struggle with darkness. Sadly, countless Christians succumb to pornography on a regular basis—and pastors aren’t exempt. The consequences of this sin in the church are devastating: pastors disqualified, marriages destroyed, families divided, and missions deterred.

## TOWARD A SOLUTION

How can a local church guard those who are under her care from this grave epidemic? Let’s consider transparency as a posture, a practice, and a prevention against pornography.

### *Transparency: A Posture of Humility*

When it comes to pornography, pride has a way of causing people to overestimate their strength. Pride makes you think you are in control. It keeps you from admitting your problem or installing internet filters. Pride is the reason you’re hesitant to confess your sins to God and others. Pride makes you stubborn. Proverbs 11:2 says, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace...”

Hence, the Bible gives us an alternative, “...but with the humble is wisdom.” Transparency requires humility.

From the pulpit, our members are taught that biblical love involves confrontation. Just as Jesus in his humility confronted us in

<sup>10</sup> Reference: Ephesians 4:25, Psalm 139:23-24, 1 Peter 2:12, Hebrews 4:13, 2 Timothy 2:15, Philippians 2:15, Proverbs 28:13

our sin (Phil 2:5–8) we are taught of the benefits of formative and corrective church discipline. Additionally, our elders model giving and receiving godly criticism and encouragement, especially at our weekly service review. Put together, these disciplines cultivate a culture of inviting feedback and criticism for purpose of growth and godliness.

What a gift of God it is for us to have people in our lives who love us through teaching and correction. Is there a better way to wage war against pride and pornography in the local church than to foster Christian humility through biblical teaching and modeling? A posture of humility is the first step toward fighting the porn problem in the local church because humility leads us to confession (Matthew 5:3–4).

### *Transparency: A Practice of Accountability*

Transparency is a means and a fruit of godliness. This means you need to develop the “muscle” of transparency (Ephesians 4:29). What good is humility if you don’t persevere in accountability (James 1:3)? So press on! (Philippians 3:14).

Thankfully, we find true accountability through the local church. Does your church take responsibility for your profession of faith? Does it help you to confess your sins?

Meaningful church membership is God’s design for Christian accountability.<sup>11</sup> Church members are covenanted to you, and biblically qualified elders are accountable for you (Hebrews 13:17). Consider the benefits of church membership: a local church affirms your profession of faith; invests in your discipleship; teaches, corrects, and counsels you through difficult seasons; loves you; and prays for you.

This is at least one reason why our elders regularly lead our members to reflect on and recite our church covenant before every Lord’s Supper and Members’ Meeting. We want members

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<sup>11</sup> Reference: <https://www.9marks.org/article/journaltwelve-reasons-why-membership-matters/>

to be reminded of the covenant they've made before God and one another.

Does your understanding of “accountability” include church membership? Furthermore, is your church’s membership structured in a way so that it’s *appealing* for non-Christians, *annoying* for nominal Christians, and *appetizing* for hungry Christians?

Accountability via church membership is an extremely important step in fighting the porn problem. It helps Christians to walk in the light and in fellowship with God’s people (1 John 1:7), which both enables genuine confession and ultimately leads to genuine repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10).<sup>12</sup>

### *Transparency: Prevention through Loving Correction*

So how does a local church prevent pornography from taking its full effect in the lives of her members? How does a local church guard one another from the deceitfulness of sin?

Some may be surprised to find that the Bible provides a clear answer. First Corinthians 5:4–5 instructs us what to do with man in the church in unrepentant sin: “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus...you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

This passage teaches us that the church is to judge those who are inside (1 Corinthians 5:12–13) through a process of loving correction (Matthew 18:15–18). Why do we do this? So that their souls will be spared on the last day. For the sake of love, local churches should exercise loving corporate correction as a means to prevent unrepentance.

At our church, we’ve seen loving correction produce glorious fruit. We’ve seen members humbly confess their sins and take steps toward repentance. We’ve seen brothers decline a deacon

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<sup>12</sup> For a very helpful talk on Confession by one of our elders who helped me think much on this topic: <http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/elders-talk-transparency/>

or elder nomination or dating opportunities; we've seen brothers step down from eldering for a season because of their struggle with pornography or other sins. In doing so, they've modeled transparency through discipling and accountability. These brothers are recipients of God's mercy (Proverbs 28:13) and a grace upon grace (John 1:14, 16).

After all, the benefits of repentance far outweigh the consequences of sin. If you're struggling with pornography, know that Jesus' forgiveness is true and available to you.

## **CONCLUSION**

Jesus gave himself up for the church (Ephesians 5:25). He died to sanctify the church (5:26), and he *will* present her in splendor without spot, wrinkle, or blemish (5:27).

Therefore, Jesus isn't shocked by the porn industry's rampant reach; he's not shocked by your sin. In fact, he offers forgiveness, mercy, grace, and love to all. I pray you will experience this through his church.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# How to Make Your Church a Safe Space for Confession



by P. J. Tibayan

In the last few years, the idea of a “safe space” on university campuses has been practiced and debated. The idea is to have a space on campus where a person is safe from being silenced or bullied by those who have more power, where someone could be insulated from ridicule or pain. In safe spaces, there is no shaming because a student is protected, both ideologically and emotionally, from anything that disrupts their good feelings.

Leaving the debate about university safe spaces aside, I suggest that local churches ought to be the “safest space” for Christians to confess sins in general and sins tied to pornography in particular.

James commands us to “confess your sins to one another” (James 5:16). Confession to others weakens temptation (John 3:19–21; 1 John 1:5–10). It’s not burdensome (1 John 5:3), but

burden-sharing and burden-relieving.

Yet people don't naturally confess their sins. Instead we work to please and impress others. This is true in the world, and it's true in our churches. As a result, our churches don't feel safe for confession. I've felt the barrage of sin and secrecy among my own church family.

Yet, by God's grace, my church is learning to cultivate a culture of grace and confession. Here are two steps that have helped to cultivate a culture in which members more readily confess the sin of pornography use.

### **STEP 1: RECOGNIZE AND ARTICULATE THE CHURCH AS A SAFE SPACE**

Your church won't be safe if your idea of safe is being "safe" from the danger of being offended, reprovved, corrected, or having your feelings hurt.

Christians should seek safety from a far greater danger: unrepentant sin. Because of this, our churches must be a place where saints wage war *together* against the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:12–13). Confession should be normal, while rejection, gossip, and self-righteousness aren't.

Why? Because (1) the church is a group of self-conscious sinners, (2) the church is a group of redeemed sinners, and (3) Christ structured the church for the Christian's growth.

**The church is the safest space for confession because the church is a group of self-conscious sinners who cannot condemn you.**

A church shouldn't be surprised that Christians sin. On the contrary, we're taught to expect it and to remove the log from our own eye—seeing our sin as the bigger problem—before removing the speck out of a confessor's eye (Matt 7:1–5).

**The church is the safest space for confession because the church is a group of redeemed sinners who experience growth in grace.**

The Lord Jesus blessed and recreated the church. He filled it with those who are poor in spirit, who mourn their sin and the sins of others, who are compassionate to the needy, and who are purified in heart by the new covenant (Ezek 36:25–27; Matt 5:3–8).

God's people expect to bear each other's burdens because others have borne theirs. Because they're sinners who have been redeemed only by grace, self-righteous judgment and shame don't make sense. Christians focus on heart change and transformation, not behavior modification—which means Christians renew their faith in Jesus *constantly*, understanding that strengthening others comes through brokenness, repentance, and faith in Christ (Luke 22:31–32).

But let's be honest. Are churches really like this? Though imperfect and in progress, churches ought to be.

**The church is the safest space for confession because Christ structured the church for the Christian's growth.**

Jesus commands the church to share responsibility over one another as a body of believers who exercise the keys of the kingdom (Matt 18:15–17). He intends for redeemed sinners to live amid other self-consciously redeemed sinners, who take responsibility for one another's discipleship and growth. Simply put, every Christian needs his or her fellow church members. And they need him or her, too.

Furthermore, Jesus gives elders to local churches as gifts to model Christian maturity (Eph 4:11–16; 1 Tim 3:1–7). Christians need elders, just like sheep need shepherds.

Regarding this God-ordained arrangement, one church member recently wrote to me, “They won't be okay with my sin, but they'll still love me and help me confess to others and ask for forgiveness and help me to mourn over my sin. And I know they'll

help me in taking practical steps in fighting lust.”

Due to our commitment to one another, we cannot run from each other when things get tough and sin is exposed. Our proximity and regular interactions force us to deal with sin (Phil 4:21) or to grow weary in pretending. And when grace is regularly exercised, this “creates a baseline of trust,” as one of my church members put it. Christians can sense the dangers their brothers and sisters are in when they avoid other members.

As a pastor, you must continually repeat these things to your church family so that they eventually take root and bear fruit.

## **STEP 2: CULTIVATE YOUR CHURCH AS A SAFE SPACE**

Pastors can strengthen a culture of confession and restoration by praying, preaching, overseeing, equipping, and modeling mature Christianity.

### **Pray for and preach the corporate responsibility of burden-bearing and burden-sharing.**

One member told me that it is easier to confess at our church because there is “a collective habit where majority of the church members confess specific sins to one another.” If, on the other hand, “the majority refrain from sharing their own sin, it reinforces that sin should be hidden.” But “when more people share, it sets a precedent for more timid people to be freed from the shame of hiding and enables them to confess sin, seek support, and receive help.”

Pastor, pray for your church to grow in the practice of confessing sin for help in sanctification. When you preach, apply the text to the church as a body, not just to individual Christians. Encourage them to help each other bear the burdens the text addresses. Ask hard questions in the sermon so that people learn how.

**Oversee structures and other church practices that strengthen safety in confession.**

As a pastor, I make sure that every Sunday we have a corporate prayer of confession where sins are pointedly, concretely, and specifically confessed: “Lord, we confess that, just this past week, we let our eyes take a second look at the person on the street. We let our minds stray to someone else’s spouse...” We also renew our church covenant every first Sunday of the month before we take communion. In our membership class, we teach on the corporate and personal responsibilities for every member. And when I interview a member who desires to join our church, I ask questions about some temptations. I also make sure our small group structures encourage confession and accountability.

All of this clarifies the expectation that our church cares about the sin and temptations that wage war against our members’ souls (1 Peter 2:11).

**Equip members to confess, ask, and apply the gospel to each other.**

Teach church members how and why to confess sin—because sin is always present and it wants to destroy us. Tell them to face this reality squarely by openly yet discreetly addressing necessary issues that many find taboo.

Teach them to ask hard questions. I’ve passed around Randy Alcorn’s article on accountability groups and have sent it to all our members.

Equip your members to *hear* someone’s confession, and to respond in a way that helps the confessor feel biblical conviction, remember Jesus, and ask for forgiveness. Equip your members to communicate the kindness of God in the gospel because it’s God’s kindness and not our guilt-tripping or shaming that leads to transformative repentance (Rom 2:4).

Train your people not to define a fellow church member by their singular sin. Christ Jesus defines them as the family of God, a saint in Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

### **Model the Christian's need.**

Christians naturally follow their leaders. Do you feel your need for your church family? Do you feel the need to confess your sins and repent in the midst of your relationships with fellow church members? Do you believe this is best not only for them, but also for you? Do you believe you encourage church members to find strength in Jesus and not in you as the perfect pastor? Do you see yourself first as a Christian in need of accountability and discipleship, or as a pastor helping others to do these things? Do you preach what you do not practice?

Pastor, do you feel like your church is a safe space to confess your own sins? Do you trust your church family for your own growth by being wisely vulnerable? You should.

Do you ever model your own need for Christ? If not, you won't effectively convince others to trust the body that you yourself don't trust. Your example of fear will undermine your teaching. Your church will feel a further disconnect between ideal and practice. And your people will continue to hide and look elsewhere for relief from shame and guilt.

But if you do model your need for Christ, you'll lead and disciple people to confess their sins. And by God's grace, over time, your church will become an actual safe space—protecting saints from unrepentant sin and unnecessary shame—and your people will make progress in killing their sin (Rom 8:12–13).

Safe churches are led by safe pastors.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Killing an Increasingly Tolerated Sin



by Vergil Brown

**E**very generation is marked by sin. From forced sterilizations to internment camps to sentencing disparities for drug convictions—every day is exceedingly evil.

One of the prevailing iniquities of our time is the increasing tolerance of pornography. Men used to hide their smut in the trunk of their cars or keep it buried deep under a workbench in their garage. Today, visiting a strip club is a viable conclusion to an evening business meeting, erotic novels become bestsellers and eventual blockbusters, porn actors are celebrities, lingerie fashion shows are nationally televised, and nudity in cable dramas is the norm.

We've gone from scandalous secrecy to open acceptance.

The temptation for the Christian is to redefine sexual purity according to the shifting standards of morality. What does it mean to be pure: Monogamy? Not engaging in a physical sexual act? Thankfully, God's Word is our authority on sexual purity, our unchanging roadmap to joy and fulfillment.

Consider 1 Thessalonians 4:1–7:

*Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.*

The apostle Paul expected the church to remember his earlier teachings on Christian living and to be growing “more and more” in purity.

This instruction to purity might seem obvious. But in a promiscuous society like Thessalonica—one like our very own—it requires counter-cultural living. So these believers needed the exhortation *not* to go with the current, but to live and please God.

For believers in Thessalonica and believers today, the Bible charts for us the path to purity.

### **FIRST, WE’RE TOLD TO ABSTAIN FROM SEXUAL IMMORALITY.**

This means not engaging in any kind of illicit sexual activity outside of biblical marriage.

We make fun of the old-time saints who outlawed dancing and going to movies. But do you ever wonder if our generation has gone way too far the other way? Have we overcorrected and made allowances for the flesh?

Today, if you talk about something being foolish or dangerous,

you're become a legalist trying rob a brother or sister of their freedom in Christ. But the Bible is clear: Christians ought to flee sexual immorality. And we don't have to wait until something causes us to sin before we recognize a temptation as dangerous.

We're weaker than we realize, not as strong as we think. So we must be humble and vigilant.

## **SECOND, THE BIBLE SAYS WE MUST CONTROL OUR BODY IN A WAY THAT IS HOLY AND HONORABLE.**

The verb translated *to control* (*ktasthai*) in classical Greek ranged in meaning from being proficient in something, such as music or poetry, to exercising lordship over slaves.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, we must control our bodies. Sin's desire is for you but you must rule over it (Gen. 4:7). By the Spirit, you reckon your members to be instruments of righteousness (Rom. 6:13).

Proverbs 25:28 says, "Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control." An ancient city without walls opened itself to attack. In the same way, the person who lacks self-control puts their guard is down, and they're open to the assaults of temptation.

We must build up walls of protection. Perhaps an accountability software "wall" or a fasting "wall" or a meditating on the Word of God "wall" or a confessing my sins and asking for prayer in the community of believers "wall" or a prayer "wall." Whatever the wall is, you must build it and tend to it.

For married Christians in particular, we must cultivate intimacy within marriage. This will help to keep us from being overwhelmed by temptation.

## **THIRD, THE BIBLE SAYS DON'T BE CONTROLLED BY THE PASSIONS OF LUST LIKE PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW GOD.**

Why does being distinct from the world matter?

13 Green, G. L. (2002). *The letters to the Thessalonians* (p. 191). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos.

First, as Paul teaches, it pleases God. Our Creator made us for a clear purpose. He has called us to a holiness that requires more than external righteousness, but inward transformation. God is pleased when we fulfill that purpose and reflect his character to the world.

Second, being distinct makes us a light for Christ in a dark world. This is becoming more and more the case. What may have been mistaken as “good, old-fashion morals” 60 years ago has since become a noteworthy and intriguing way of life. The guy who insists on clean fun for his bachelor party now stands out. We should pray that our purity will cause unbelievers to examine the claims we make about Jesus.

#### **FOURTH, PURITY IS IMPORTANT FOR OUR HAPPINESS.**

True joy is found in the will of God. The world lies and promises that we’ll be happy and free if we just let go of our prudish ways and follow our passions. As someone who has sat with people who have gone down that path, let me tell you what waits for you at the end: pain, brokenness, and despair.

Don’t believe the world’s lies. Jesus offers us something far greater than the lesser pleasures of this world. He gives us himself. God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, and the delight of knowing God and living according to his purposes offers a more exhilarating and fulfilling pursuit.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Does Pornography Use Ever Justify Church Discipline?



by Brad Wheeler

**A**t what point, if ever, does a persistent pattern of pornography warrant church discipline?

It's an all-too-familiar scene. They're sitting right across from you: their shoulders sag, their head hangs low in shame. If you can even see their eyes, you notice they look empty and exhausted.

But the point is, you're here again. And your predictable questions about purity and pornography are met with their sadly predictable answers.

If you're a pastor, I trust you have found yourselves in such situations. You've been meeting with someone, trying to help them through an addiction to pornography. And yet, for all the time and prayers, hopes and hugs, promises and good intentions,

resolutions and moral resolve—nothing seems to happen. It all appears futile. It's as if you're sitting across from the living embodiment of Sisyphus. Once again, down the hill the rock rolls.

Is church discipline your only option? If not, what does true repentance look like?

## WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

Repentance is not sorrow. For one can feel sorrow, and yet deep down still love their sin (cf. Lk 18:23; 2 Cor. 7:10-11). Nor is repentance evidenced simply in resolutions or remorse or regret or moral resolve.

Repentance is a radical change in one's attitude toward sin that produces a corresponding change in action. Repentance is *belief in action*. It's turning our backs upon our illicit passions so we can truly embrace God's promises. It recognizes the allure of sin, but replaces it with the assurance of heaven. It exchanges what we think we must have (sin), for what God knows we most need (him). Repentance is not simply devoting ourselves to better behavior, but living for a better savior. It's quite simply "turn[ing] to God from idols, so that we can serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9).

In other words, genuine repentance results in imperfect, halting, but genuine change.

## DISCERNING REPENTANCE

To be sure, all of us have lived Paul's lament in Romans 7: "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. . . . What a wretched man I am!" The power of sin remains stubbornly strong—whether it's alcohol abuse or anorexia, gossip or gluttony, cutting others with our words or cutting our own skin. Certainly none of us always repent completely

or perfectly. Indeed, some Christians will walk with a discernible limp for life.

Yet the genuine Christian *desires* change. As much as they may feel defeated, they never concede defeat. They keep fighting. After all, being a Christian doesn't mean your life is absent of defeat; it means that you stubbornly follow Jesus even in the midst of defeat. During some seasons, it may feel like we stumble more than we stand, but we resolve to stand again. For no true Christian finally declares a truce with sin.

Not only does a genuine Christian desire change, but their life gives *evidence* of change. It may be imperceptibly slow, and might accompany great struggle, but over time there will be some discernible change.

## **DOES PERSISTENT PORN USE WARRANT CHURCH DISCIPLINE?**

Now to the pressing question: when persistent patterns of pornography persist, is church discipline ever warranted?

From Scripture, I understand corrective church discipline is required when sin is demonstrable, serious, and unrepentant.

Is pornography demonstrable? Unlike pride, for example, is it clear and objective, not left up to conjecture and interpretation? Though our courts have struggled to define it, to paraphrase the famous line from Justice Potter Stewart: “We know it when we see it.” Sadly, nearly any adolescent can testify to that fact today. So, yes, pornography use is demonstrable.

Is it serious? Given the way it denigrates those made in God's image; given the way it treats others as base objects and tools of sexual gratification; given the way it rewires the brain, distorts the gift of sex, and destroys marriage; given the way it makes us complicit with the sex trade and thus violates the clear command to love our neighbor—there is no doubt

of pornography's seriousness. *Yes*, pornography use is serious.

Is it unrepentant? This is far and away the most difficult question. Discerning repentance will nearly always be a judgment call, and we don't want to call for the Spanish Inquisition with every stubborn addiction. And yet, we also don't want to create a culture in which individuals are fearful to be honest and transparent about their struggles, or where they're encouraged toward legalism.

While there's no simple formula, the more we answer "yes" to the following questions, the closer we move toward a disciplinable offense.

- Is there a settled coldness or indifference to the sin?
- Have they ceased fighting and largely made peace with their sin?
- Are they no longer ashamed at the severity of their sin?
- Do the warnings of Scripture no longer carry any weight?
- Do they find ways to make excuses rather than own up to the consequences?
- Do they no longer pursue counsel?
- Jesus calls us to embrace radical solutions in order to cut sin out of our life (Mt 5:29). Are they increasingly unwilling to embrace such solutions? Are they quick to explain why such radical solutions aren't required?
- Is the sin becoming more frequent and/or more deviant?
- Has it persisted for a prolonged period of time, not just weeks and a few months, but many months or years?
- Is it increasingly causing damage in their relationships with their spouse (if they're married), or their relationships with other church members?

Even if you find yourself answering "yes" to many of the questions above, you still must weigh such things as: the health of the congregation; the receptivity and maturity of the body when it

comes to discipline; the past practice of discipline; and the respect of the elders/leadership among the body.

And yet, if we always and only decide on inaction, we should consider the effect this might have on erring sheep (who need to repent), weaker sheep (who are at risk of being led astray), and those who aren't sheep at all (who need not be confused about what it means to be Christian).

Shamefully, the sin of pornography is common inside the church. We should be quick to walk with brothers and sisters engaged in the fight. And we should be willing to walk with them for a long time—as long as the ember of that fight still glows.

But when that ember goes dark? For the sake of our marriages, for the sake of the purity of our corporate witness, and for the sake of the person enslaved to sin and self-deception, we must be willing to pursue church discipline for members who unrepentantly persist in engaging in pornography.

If such an option isn't even on the table, what does that say about the church and its posture toward this increasingly common sin?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# The Sins Behind the Sin of Pornography



by John Henderson

**T**he Rosary Pea vine carries a toxin called abrin, one of the deadliest on earth. If the coating breaks, ingesting a seed from the vine can kill a human being. Because of their vibrant colors, people actually use the seeds in jewelry and for rosary prayer beads. The vine thrives in tropical environments and can spread aggressively under the right conditions, which means it's nearly impossible to eradicate without also addressing the provisions by which it thrives.

The same could be said about pornography. Deadly to the human soul and destructive to human life, pornography flourishes under the right conditions — within a broader ecosystem of sins, struggles, and situations. It never operates in isolation. It incubates under the right combination of factors. Pornography feeds upon other sins the way cancer feeds on sugar, and it feeds other sins the way cancer feeds other diseases. We cannot separate and quarantine sexual sin. It's better we accept its connection to as-

pects of our lives we might think unrelated and might prefer to leave untouched.

This is important — not simply to understand pornography, but to wage war against it. We cannot choke out weeds without also killing their seeds, without treating the soil in which they take root, and without limiting the fertilizers we use to feed them. We are much more doomed when we try to defeat pornography without addressing the streams that water it.

In this chapter, we aim to understand pornography in relationship to everything else we think, feel, and do, in order to put pornography to death through the only means by which it actually dies — comprehensive life transformation by the gospel of Jesus Christ. We will consider the composition of the soil from which it sprouts, the fertilizers by which it thrives, and the harvest it produces. In doing so we hope to gather biblical, Christ-centered counsel for comprehensive heart and life change.

## **THE SEEDBED OF PORNOGRAPHY**

In Proverbs 7, Solomon tells the story of a foolish young man who plunges his life into ruin through sexual immorality. The highlights of the account offer incredible insights into various precursors to sexual sin: the pretense of folly, the pride of life, and the praise of man.

## **THE PRETENSE OF FOLLY**

Folly pretends to be wise. The foolish man assumes he is not so foolish, and interacts with the elements of his world as if he is in control. He thinks to bring fire to his chest and not be burned (Prov 6:27). The story bears it out:

My son, keep my words and treasure up my commandments with you; keep my commandments and live; keep my teaching as the apple of your eye; bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart. Say to wisdom, “You are

my sister,” and call insight your intimate friend, to keep you from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words.

For at the window of my house I have looked out through my lattice, and I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man lacking sense, passing along the street near her corner, taking the road to her house in the twilight, in the evening, at the time of night and darkness.

The young man lacks sense because he passes along the street near the corner of the forbidden woman as if immune to her smooth words, as if able to get close without falling prey to her schemes, as if going in to her will not cost his life. The woman is a figure for all sexual immorality, and the way she and the young man relate to one another represents how pornography speaks to us, and we respond to it.

Consider how many forays into pornography begin with thinking ourselves wise enough and strong enough to dally with the world without falling head first into it. Scrolling the internet, late night television binges, casually scrolling social media, flirtations at work, unchecked fantasies, unaccountable travels from home, access to devices without filters — a mere sampling of ways we foolishly pass along the street near her corner under the pretense of safety.

## **THE PRIDE OF LIFE**

Any sense of entitlement will tune us more strongly to the wavelengths of pornography. If you think you deserve the attention and pleasure of attractive women, then you’re set up to be easily seduced. If you love the idea of men or women at your beckon call, willing to take their clothes off at your bidding, then pornography will eat you alive. Listen to the story unfold:

And behold, the woman meets him, dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart. She is loud and wayward; her feet do not stay at home; now in the street, now

in the market, and at every corner she lies in wait. She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him, “I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows; so now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you. I have spread my couch with coverings, colored linens from Egyptian linen; I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love till morning; let us delight ourselves with love. For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey; he took a bag of money with him; at full moon he will come home.” With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him.

Notice how the woman appeals to the pride of the young man. She flatters him. She gives him the opportunity to possess the wife of another man, which appeals to his arrogance. It offers the chance to conquer, to be better than other men. Whatever failures he faced earlier in the day can be erased through a victory in the bedroom. Whatever thirst for power he carries can be satisfied by drinking the opportunity she offers. No fear of the Lord. No humble love for his neighbor. No concern for the marriage of this woman; only a selfish thirst for a sexual achievement.

The images of wealth, pleasure, and love are presented as objects he’s entitled to claim. She says, “I’m all yours. We can do whatever you please. You’re the one in control.” Oh the power! No proud man or woman can resist. Of course, the scene is thick with irony. Thinking he’s about to triumph, he follows her to the slaughterhouse.

## **THE PRAISE AND FEAR OF MAN**

From my point of view, the praise and fear of man compose the lifeblood of pornography. The images of pornography are designed to convey a strategic and powerful message to the viewer: You’re attractive. You’re intoxicating. You’re an incredible lover. You’re great. The men and women always say yes to you. They want you. They

smile at you. They worship you. Human praise is an integral part of the seduction in Proverbs 7. Notice in the passage how the woman praises the young man. She came out to find him and no one else. She's pleased with him above others. She desires him, not her husband. The way she seizes him, kisses him, and looks at him expresses an intense desire for him, which he finds absolutely intoxicating. If we love the praise of others, then we will love pornography.

At the same time, the men and women captured in the images of pornography never reject you. They never tell you no. Pornography provides a world where you can receive validation and approval without the fear of rejection and disapproval. No matter how ashamed of looking at pornography you may be, it never criticizes you. Pornography also offers the illusion of privacy and safety. The woman lists the reasons why they won't be caught. Her husband is on a long journey. What the husband doesn't know won't hurt him. What you do in the privacy of your bedroom is no one else's business. It will be their little secret. No one will know. Pornography thrives in the dark, in a life filled with secrets.

## **THE NOURISHMENT OF PORNOGRAPHY**

Not only does the condition of our hearts determine whether or not pornography takes root, what we feed our hearts in daily life influences the degree by which pornography grows. Sexual sin spreads under certain conditions.

### ***Anxiety and stress***

Living in a state of anxiety, stress, and worry tends to increase our desire for the soothing pleasure of sexual sin, especially pornography. When combined with masturbation, it may not remove anxiety, but it will take the edge off. It distracts us from the burdens of life. It numbs us to the objects of our worry.

Like alcohol or pain medication, pornography can act like a powerful sedative. It helps release physical tensions and calm agitated emotions. It enables us to avoid the root causes of our anxiety by quieting all the deafening noise of daily deadlines, expectations, and responsibilities. The Lord tells us to call on him in a day of trouble, to not worry, and to entrust ourselves to him. Pornography offers the alternative, an attractive and immediate false god.

### ***Fantasy and control***

A vibrant fantasy life increases our desire for pornography.

The tendency to take refuge in mental happy places when life becomes painful, or just plain boring, encourages a pattern of seeking refuge in other kinds of fantasy happy places, like pornography. Rather than face our troubles, experience pain, and wait upon the Lord, we can envision erotic images and embed ourselves in erotic storylines. We control when and where we go. Rather than embrace and serve within the mundane details of life, pornography brings a sense of excitement and energy.

Though the Lord gives us imagination as part of bearing his image, we can use it to serve idols. Our capacity to create can be misdirected into sexual fantasy. An imagination best employed to understand the rich imagery of Scripture, to compel our worship of God, to stir up our hope for the kingdom of Jesus Christ might be wrongly employed to play out sexual escapades.

### ***Sensuality and worldliness***

An overall desire for sensual excitement nourishes pornography. Pleasure is a good gift from God, but we can worship the gift more than the giver. Having our senses thrilled can become a consuming desire, so can avoiding sensory pain. Rather than seeing the things of the world as a means to love God and others, we can love those things more than God and others. This is at the heart of worldliness.

A love for the world and the things of the world will always make sexual sin attractive. The Apostle Paul points to the examples of worldly men: “They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (Eph 4:19). Paul is quick to say, “That is not the way you learned Christ” (Eph 4:20). In Christ we are new creations, no longer enslaved to the passions of the flesh, and “the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality” (Gal 5:19). If we use food, drink, media, and other created things as means to serve the flesh, then we establish conditions under which pornography thrives.

This is one reason why regular, faith-driven prayer and fasting helps combat sexual sin. It starves the sinful flesh as a whole, submitting us more completely to the Father, tethering us more tightly to Jesus Christ, and filling us more fully with the Spirit.

### ***Disappointment, anger, and self-pity***

Sometimes the indulgence of pornography and masturbation expresses a kind of spiritual temper tantrum. When people disappoint, wrong, or betray us, sexual pleasure becomes more tempting. It even feels more justified. Alongside his sexual sin, Samson bore a fiery temper and tended toward self-pity. In fact, his life tended to swing between fits of anger and fits of immorality. Our flesh is prone to the same swings. Meditating on our disappointments, fuming in anger, and stewing in self-pity stirs up the desires of the flesh for pornography.

### ***Relational laziness and escapism***

“Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment” (Prov 18:1). Real-life relationships can be challenging, and the sinful flesh hates sacrificial love. We love escape. The responsibilities of relationships, whether in marriage, family, or church, can be weighty and even painful. It

takes energy to initiate conversation. It takes effort to seek and serve others. When conflict comes, it takes humility, time, and energy to resolve it biblically.

Pornography, on the other hand, is easy. Interactions with the people in pornography do not require work or sacrifice or humility or conflict resolution or joyful service. They serve us. The people exist for us. We don't have to speak or listen. We don't have to share and give — only take and receive. A mindset and pattern of relational laziness and escapism only encourages our affinity for pornography.

## **THE HARVEST OF PORNOGRAPHY**

Indulging pornography yields a host of effects that, in turn, strengthen our desire and attachment to sensuality and pornography in the future. The sin we indulge in today always gives shape and power to the temptations we face tomorrow.

### ***Shame, covering, and hiding***

After Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened to good and evil in a new, dreadful way (Gen 3:7). No longer were they naked and unashamed. They were naked and ashamed, which is one reason they immediately make fig leaf coverings for themselves. Perhaps their fears were averted for a little while, until they heard the sound of the Lord drawing near. All of a sudden their little coverings were not enough. They “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8). The trees God created for their food became a means to avoid his presence.

Taking bites from the fruits of pornography produces a similar pattern of effects. We feel ashamed. Without genuine repentance, we cover ourselves with self-righteous works and temporary fixes. Maybe we read the Bible a little more, we make

sure to attend a church service, we vow to never look at pornography again. Or maybe we run to television, video games, and food. Maybe we use permissible things to hide behind. None of this actually works, because our attempts to cover and hide only make pornography more attractive tomorrow.

### ***Dehumanization***

Pornography, by nature, dehumanizes. It dehumanizes the people captured in the images and stories portrayed. It uncovers their nakedness. It robs their dignity. It turns them into objects of lust and self-serving pleasure. It enslaves them to the sexually deviant whims of their employers as well as the carnal appetites of the consumer.

It also dehumanizes us, the viewer. We become creatures of lust and craving. Biological drives begin to rule us, and carnal appetites begin to control us instead of the Word and spirit of God. We become more like animals and less like the humans he created us to be.

### ***Impatience, frustration, and inability to endure affliction***

Anytime we feed the flesh, though soothed for the moment, it gains the upper hand in our lives. When we fuel fire, it grows hotter (Prov 30:15-16). And when we fuel the fire of selfish pride in our souls, we only grow more selfish and proud. When we grow more selfish and proud, we grow more impatient and frustrated with God, people, and inconvenient circumstances. Thus, we become more vulnerable to the temptations of pornography, for it offers immediate, self-serving gratification at the expense of others, and our flesh loves gratification at the expense of others.

Habitual indulgence of the flesh weakens our tolerance for adversity. Sensuality, by definition, hates and resists pain and suffering. It craves physical comfort and pleasure. The longer we indulge pornography, or any other emotion-numbing sub-

tance, the less capable of enduring affliction we become, which only makes us more susceptible to sensual escape in the future.

### *Entanglement and escalation*

Sin is sticky. If we cling to it, then it gladly clings to us. Indeed, we cannot throw ourselves into a pit of tar and then expect to climb out and walk away. The moment our bodies are submerged into the substance, we're stuck. All of our movements only move us deeper into the hole. Gravity works against us. The chemical composition of tar and skin make it impossible to pull out.

Indulging pornography sexualizes our view of the world, which causes us to notice sensual images more easily. Posters of women in skimpy clothes, certain words, certain sounds, specific memories will jump out like never before. Our dreams become sexualized. Even non-sexual images become sexualized: a modestly dressed woman at work, a man working out at the gym, a harmless joke, these can become sexual in our minds, because pornography paints our whole world in sexual colors. Indulging pornography feeds our craving for more. It develops our appetite for it. It clings to us. Our flesh always wants more, to push the limits, to go further. It will not stop until it destroys our lives and relationships.

## **THE GOSPEL**

If we want pornography eradicated from our lives, then we must deal with these kinds of conditions head on. All the pretenses of folly, every ounce of pride, and any desire for human praise need to be extinguished through the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not strong, but weak, and must learn to relate to God and this world as those who are poor in spirit (Matt 5:3). We cannot handle the world, so why pretend? We cannot last a single round in the ring with Satan, and we must learn to live a simple, sober Christian life.

We do not exist on high, but below, and we must assume the proper posture of humble servants, unworthy of mercy, let alone exaltation. Blessed are we in Christ, but not entitled. Someday we will be exalted with Christ, but not now. The fear of man brings a snare, so we must wean ourselves from the intoxicating potion of human praise in order to live more fully for the praise of Jesus Christ (Prov 29:25).

As those who have been chosen by God, holy and beloved, we receive hearts with new capacities to face life honestly, peacefully, and enduringly. Christ is our refuge. Christ is our peace. At his right hand there are pleasures forever. He helps us suffer the loss of all things and count them as rubbish. Christ bears our shame. In his righteousness, we stand before God the father. Through him, we become more fully human, and by his mercy we endure every form of trouble. In Christ, we die to sin. No longer must we live entangled to it or defeated by it.

Every part of the soil, every possible condition, and every ounce of harvest connected to pornography in our lives has been, and will continue to be, addressed through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel offers rich counsel against pornography directly, but it also brings about the kind of comprehensive life transformation that makes it difficult for pornography to take root and spread. The Lord wants our entire being. Praise God for the promise that his redeeming hand will not cease before finishing what he began in us (Phil 1:6).

### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

This article originally appeared in the e-book *Porn and the Pastor*.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# What to Say When a Church Member Asks for Help



by Clint Darst

**W**hen a church member first confesses pornography consumption, they're usually relieved to admit their battle and get help in their fight. And rightly so—they've taken the hugely necessary first step on the long road toward holiness.

As pastors, how should we counsel them in this initial conversation?

## **1. REMIND THEM OF THEIR IDENTITY.**

Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (Mt. 5:8). Sexual sin turns this blessing on its head: "Cursed are the impure in heart for they shall not see God."

Pornography clouds a Christian's view of God and leads him to feel like he is galaxies away. In other words, we can assume they're exhausted from carrying the guilt and shame associated with fee-

ding their lust. So as their pastor, we should remind them “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

At the same time, we must not minimize sin. It deserves the very wrath of God. And yet, for the Christian, Christ drank the full cup of God’s wrath—down to the very last drop. He died for the sins of his people, and three days later he left their lust and pornography consumption in the grave as he walked out, victorious. This is why Paul says to all those who are in Christ: you are a brother and “no longer a debtor to sin” (Rom. 8:12). Furthermore, God has given his Spirit to clear up Christians’ cloudy view of God by reminding them that in Christ they can cry out, “ABBA! Father!” (Rom. 8:15).

As pastors, we can do nothing more important than to remind our struggling church member that they are a child of God with a perfect Father who loves them enough to discipline them so that they might flee from all sexual immorality and pursue the freedom of personal holiness.

But holiness doesn’t just *happen*. By God’s grace and dependent on the power of the Spirit, we must work toward it. This is why—after reminding them of their unchanging identity in Christ—we must give our church members practical steps, too.

## **2. ASSESS THE INTENSITY OF THE BATTLE.**

In order to help them develop an appropriate mortification plan, we need to know how long this sin has been going on (decades, years, months, etc.), how often (monthly, weekly, daily, etc.), and how long (a few minutes at a time, an hour or more, etc.). Sadly, it’s generally wise to ask what kind of pornography they’re engaging in—heterosexual, homosexual, something involving children or youth?

This information will help us as their pastor to identify an addiction and to discern if there’s a need for unique help.

## **3. ESTABLISH ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE BATTLE**

The Spirit has placed this particular Christian in our care, but

also in the care of his or her other brothers and sisters. After confessing this sin, they must find one or two fellow saints who will regularly hold them accountable. If they don't know anyone, then help them find someone. It's an absolute necessity to bring in others for both accountability and prayer.

#### **4. PLAN OUT ACTION FOR THE BATTLE.**

The Spirit convicts Christians of sin so that they will stop hiding in the darkness and instead walk in the light. The initial confession is only the beginning of this process, and though it will be humbling, emotional, and perhaps even embarrassing, it doesn't necessarily change the heart.

Moving forward, we will help them by adding barriers that discourage them from feeding their lust. I usually recommend software like Covenant Eyes, and then I ask them if I can adjust viewing permissions on their smart phone with a password that only I know. Perhaps they need to get rid of their private internet access altogether. Different situations call for different responses. But as their pastor, we must leave them with next steps even as we teach them that they need more than mere behavior modification.

#### **5. ADDRESS THE HEART OF THE BATTLE.**

There are lots of good books out there to help struggling saints rip out the roots of sexual sin. One of my favorites is *Sex is Not the Problem, Lust is* by Joshua Harris. But more than a book, we should encourage them to memorize God's Word, particularly verses like Matthew 5:8, 1 Corinthians 10:13, and Romans 8:13.

If the person confessing to pornography use is married, we must make sure the spouse is cared for and the marriage is prioritized. If a person is confessing to a pattern of looking at pornography, I usually encourage them to tell their spouse—at least once.

Then they can decide with their spouse how to move forward in the future. Some spouses prefer, after the initial confession, for a man to confess to a trusted male friend.

Depending on the data gathered from this first meeting, we may commit to a few more meetings and then give the primary follow-up to an accountability partner while still touching base every now and then.

If there's an obvious addiction, I'll seek outside help to supplement the discipling process. But in the moments after the battle is first confessed, my primary goal is to remind them of their identity in Christ and their responsibility to wage war against lust. Only then do I seek to equip them with a few action steps.

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# Helping Women Who Struggle with Pornography



by Stephanie Laferriere

**“M**en, what do you do view on your screens when no one is watching?”

Undoubtedly, this is an important question to ask on a Sunday morning. But for some women in the congregation, hearing it will further bury them in shame. After all, they also know what it feels like—week after week, day after day, possibly even that morning—to give into, to indulge, and to lose yet another battle to pornography.

Perhaps they stumbled upon pornography during an inappropriate relationship, perhaps they initially investigated due to curiosity, perhaps they struggled with an illness and used pornography to compensate for their physical weakness.

Or maybe they’re just like me. I was exposed to pornography

at a young age, and I returned to it again and again—secretly—as a guide for how women ought to be treated, how we ought to act in order to receive validation. For nine years, I was entangled and addicted, in the throes of obsession, looking at picture after picture to find my identity while objectifying others.

Thankfully, the Lord saved me at the age of 18, and though my desire to view pornography had largely diminished, the implications of my sin remained. But I didn't know how to communicate this need to my pastors and fellow church members.

During my time in vocational ministry—both at a Christian college and now as full-time staff at a church—I've come to find my experience is common among women.

So pastors, below are three suggestions and applications to consider as you seek to pastor women who have struggled or are struggling with pornography. Of course, these aren't exhaustive, but they can serve as a starting point to be incorporated into your discussions and discipleship opportunities with women in your congregation.

## **1. DON'T MAKE PORNOGRAPHY SIMPLY A MAN'S PROBLEM.**

If a woman in your congregation confesses to struggling with lust, don't minimize or assume it's a small affair. The ramifications of sin are costly for both women and men. Women also need to be reminded of the call to holiness (1 Thess. 4). We need to be reminded of the Holy Spirit's power to grant us self-control in this fight for purity.

Sadly, pornography is often ignored as a woman's struggle. But pastor, you have the opportunity to facilitate helpful conversations by not isolating sins into categories based on gender. Remember us in your Sunday applications, refer to us directly, and show us the costly weight of sin.

## **2. DO POINT US TO THE CROSS AND REMIND US OF REDEMPTION.**

Women who struggle with pornography experience a great amount of guilt and shame, and so we often often feel hopeless. At times, some may feel more comfortable to confess more “understandable” sins.

Do the women in your church know that they can confess their struggle with pornography, lust, and loneliness with other women? Will they be met with the truth of God’s faithfulness and forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9)? After confession, women may fear that they will be labeled by their struggle instead of seen for who they are in Christ. To avoid this, pastors must work to cultivate a culture of wise women that not only ask specific and pointed questions but are equipped to remind fellow sisters of their position as redeemed in Christ.

Women need to hear both from the pulpit and in discipleship groups that pornography is among the many sins Christ died for. This is especially the case for those who are weary amid the fight. Many women believe they’ve struggled for far too long. So show them Christ and remind them of his propitiation for their sins (1 Jn. 2:2).

## **3. DON’T NEGLECT TO SHOW US OUR VALUE IN GOD’S PLAN OF CREATION.**

Women who struggle with pornography have to daily reconcile the evil objectification they pursue. What happened in the Garden distorted everyone’s view of sex and true beauty. Because of this, some women wonder if their worth is only found in what they offer sexually.

Teach us from God’s Word about God’s purpose in making both man and woman in his image (Gen. 1:26–28). Remind us of our inherent worth and dignity—regardless of our body type or

facial features. And encourage the men in your congregation to do the same—to regard women as sisters and mothers.

The reasons behind anyone's addiction to pornography are layered and complex. But the truth of redemption through Christ remains the same. So pastors, as you seek to build a culture that wages war against pornography, remember us women and remind us of these glorious truths.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Helping Women Whose Husbands Struggle with Pornography



by Jeremy Yong

**N**o doubt the sin of watching porn plagues many in the church. While much attention is given to counseling those who watch porn, what counsel can we as pastors give to the wives who have both been sinned against and who desire to see their husband grow in holiness?<sup>14</sup>

## 1. SISTER, SEEK SOLACE IN CHRIST.

A wife who has just heard her husband confess might seek solace in hearing more apologies, in dreaming of a husband who doesn't watch porn, or in having a marriage without conflict.

But ultimate solace cannot be found in anything other than

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<sup>14</sup> Using Paul Tripp's structure for counseling—"love, know, speak, do"—this article addresses what pastors are to "speak" and call their people to "do" what God desires. However, it bears repeating here that pastors should seek to understand (love and know) those they counsel, as facts gained and feelings understood will undoubtedly shape counsel given. For Tripp's counseling format, see *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change, Helping People in Need of Change*.

Christ the Savior and faithful bridegroom. When one feels intense feelings of betrayal and abandonment, pastors need to comfort the afflicted by leading them to their faithful Savior who loves them and promises never to leave them or forsake them. Pastors should assure these wives that God stands with them against their husband's sin.<sup>15</sup> He has compassion for the hurting. He draws near to the broken-hearted.

But looking to God in Christ might mean helping the sister to come face-to-face with her own misplaced hopes. In these moments we ought to remind the sister that God uses our circumstances to wean us from even the good things that fails us (spouses, marriages, etc.).

For those who feel hopeless and abandoned, we point them to Christ as the true rest for their soul (Mt 11:28–30). For those fearful and anxious about the eternal destiny of their husband's soul and the "success" of the marriage, we point them to Christ as the One whose promises and power can be confidently relied on (Phil 1:6). For those who are insecure and filled with twisted jealousy, we point them to Christ and remind them that God alone deserves all the glory from his creation and that he alone is to be the grand object of our attention and affection (Rom 1:18–32; 1 Tim 1:15).

Only God is worthy of our perfect trust and ultimate hope. Therefore, encourage the afflicted to seek solace in Christ.

The next two encouragements aim to strengthen the hurting heart to be one that helps.

## **2. SISTER, REMEMBER THAT YOUR HUSBAND HAS SINNED PRIMARILY AGAINST GOD.**

It will be devastating for a sister to hear her husband has been sinning against her by watching porn. And yet, though the husband

<sup>15</sup> Jesus even gives grounds for divorce for sexual immorality, which includes pornography. See Tom Schreiner's article in this issue entitled "Pornography and Divorce."

has indeed sinned grievously against his wife (and others), we must not forget that he primarily has sinned against God (Ps 51:4).

Forgetting this truth may actually put the husband's soul in an even more precarious place. After all, it's possible for a wounded wife to wish for her husband to reconcile with her before any mention is given to God.

Understanding that sin is primarily sin against God reminds sisters to live in the reality that God demands her husband reconcile first and foremost to him. As a pastor, your counsel in this area should aim first at helping the wife see her husband in relation to God, and then only secondarily, in relation to others. If you reverse the order, then the wife will functionally and perhaps even inevitably become a god over her husband. But when the order is preserved, he will know he is primarily accountable to his Maker.

### **3. SISTER, LOOK FOR YOURSELF IN YOUR HUSBAND.**

Though she may not sin like him, she's nevertheless a sinner like him. And when a sister lives life before the eyes of her holy God, it's only right she be able to humbly acknowledge she, too, is a sinner.

It may be difficult for a sister to hear such counsel depending on how fresh the wounds are and how deeply they are felt. Pray for wisdom to know when and how to counsel certain truths over the course of counseling. It can be useful to clarify that the aim of such counsel isn't to excuse the husband's sin, but to help cultivate identification with her husband. The larger point is, the person who doesn't know she needs forgiveness will never forgive. She'll only make demands for perfection, which means that her marriage will never be restored.

By reminding themselves and even embracing their need for God's grace, the offended party can soften their own hurting heart and cultivate a much-needed spirit of cooperation.

#### 4. SISTER, FIGHT FOR YOUR HUSBAND'S FAITH.

God desires spouses to be agents of sanctification for each other. The degree to which one helps depends on how much one is able to bear.

It's rare, but some spouses become each other's accountability partners. It's more common for a wife simply to know her husband receives accountability from some brothers in the church. There's no single right answer here. As a pastor, help the couple find the correct balance for them.

More than anything, you want the sister to see the sweetness of co-laboring with her husband. How can she help?

First, by praying. Pray his heart would be enthralled and satisfied with Christ (Ps 23:1) so that he would forsake sin. Pray he would grow in loving Christ. Pray God would convict him deeply of his sin in all of its facets. Pray he grows in zeal for and knowledge of the glory of God. Pray this zeal compels him to use his "instruments for righteousness" (Rom 6:13), and this zeal stirs in him a desire to see all God's created people do the same. We could go on with good things to pray.

Second, by growing in a biblical understanding of the nature of lust. Such understanding prepares her to minister to her husband. Of course, her ministry doesn't have to stop there. This understanding prepares her to minister to other sisters in the church who battle in similar ways.

Here are just a few helpful resources for people beginning to work through the issue.

- *Sex is Not the Problem, Lust Is*, by Joshua Harris. This book discusses lust and pornography from a biblical perspective and in an introductory way.
- *Making All Things New*, by David Powlison. This book presents the fact that the sin doesn't spring up in isolation but is

often fueled by or connected to other issues and sins.

- *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*, by William M. Struthers. This book tackles the effects of pornography on human physiology. While approaching the subject from a biological point of view, it's still helpful in understanding why the addiction to pornography is so strong.

The information gained in resources such as these should help the sister understand the nature of lust which will in turn help her fight for her husband's faith, working with him for his joy and holiness in Christ through prayer, understanding, and encouragement (2 Cor. 1:24).

## **5. SISTER, SEEK ACCOUNTABILITY.**

Our sisters are best helped if we prepare them for what may be a long and hard battle as her husband's temptation to pornography may last extended periods of time. She'll need to persevere amid trials as she reminds herself of her identity as a child of God, trusts in God's sovereignty and goodness, and helps her husband by loving him with the love of Christ.

While the pastor can regularly check in on the couple, she will be served best by having accountability with another sister. If she doesn't know who to ask or where to start, match her with a fellow member of the church. As she strives to trust in Christ and minister to her husband, she'll need the encouragement of church members who will fight for her faith as she fights for her own and her husband's.

## **CONCLUSION**

Much more could be said, but I hope these foundational truths help us pastors minister to the hurting hearts of sisters whose

husbands struggle with pornography. By God's grace and with Christ's example, these wounded sisters can move toward helping their husbands, even in the face of such great offense.

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

The counsel in this article assumes the wife and husband are genuine Christians and are members of a healthy church. It also assumes the husband is convicted of his sin, repenting, and seeking forgiveness from God and restoration with his wife. Addressing these truths often requires hours of counseling depending on circumstances, and wisdom is required to know how and when to help a sister press deeper into them.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# 8 Tips for Fighting Pornography



by Paul Jeon

**P**lenty of lists for fighting for purity and overcoming porn addiction have been written—by Christians and secularists alike. Even the latter, perhaps to the surprise of some Christians, have come to realize that unbound freedom to follow our desires leads to enslavement and malformation.

Because of the plethora of such lists, it's hard to say anything new. But perhaps that's not the point. Perhaps what might be helpful is to share a bit about how I and others have worked out these basic principles in concrete ways.

After all, on a very regular basis I'm reminded of how consequential porn addiction has become. When we think of Esau exchanging his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup, we laugh and think, "What a fool!" But how many—especially men but also women—have done the same? How many have sacrificed their marriages, careers, and overall health for momentary pleasures that have left them empty and wanting more?

To that end, fight against porn. But as you read them, remember the Son of God in power.

### **FIRST, ADOPT A WAR MENTALITY.**

We must take an extreme approach to fighting this sin. Like Joseph, we must simply flee from the allure of Potiphar's wife. One dear friend shared with me such extreme resolve. He had a smartphone but noticed his visits to unwholesome sites became more frequent. So he did something outrageous. He canceled his data plan, gave away his smartphone, and bought a flip phone. Imagine that! I've seen the phone. It looks like something you would have bought years ago when cell phones were first making their way into the mass market. He admits that he looks silly in the eyes of many, and that he's unable to enjoy the benefits of having a GPS on demand or looking for the best Vietnamese sandwiches on Yelp. But, in his own words, "You gotta do what you gotta if you're serious about fighting for purity."

Many claim to want freedom and purity, but I wonder: how many of us are willing to take these necessary "extreme" and even "legalistic" steps?

### **SECOND, BE VERY PURPOSEFUL ABOUT YOUR SETTING AND SCHEDULE.**

Many people enjoy the luxury of telecommuting. While this is a wonderful perk, it also leads to increased isolation. Consider for a moment the last time you watched porn. Were you sipping a Frappuccino at Starbucks? Were you dressed in a suit as your colleagues walked back and forth discussing the latest office gossip?

More than likely, you were alone in your home office or wherever else you can remain hidden from people but not from

God. It might be worth cataloging where and when you fall into sexual temptation.

In my “industry,” many pastors confess that Mondays are especially challenging after a long weekend of leading worship, preaching, and meeting with members and newcomers. For others, it might be a Friday morning, perhaps the one day in the week you get to work from home. Most of your work is done, and your mindset has shifted to winding down.

Wherever and whenever you watch porn, you need to break the pattern by becoming more intentional about your setting and schedule. If you know the chances of watching porn will exponentially increase by working in isolation, try to work in a public setting—a local coffee shop, or library. If you know there’s a time of day or day of the week when you’re more vulnerable, then insert a specific activity. Instead of being tempted to watch porn, go for a run.

Everyone’s circumstances will differ. Some travel regularly, and some have sensitive work that requires isolation. The point here is simple: we can’t afford to be passive. We need to be proactive about our setting and schedule. This seemingly small act really can do wonders.

### **THIRD, GUARD YOUR EYES.**

Recall Wile E. Coyote in his unending quest to capture Road Runner. One of Wile’s favorite tools was a dynamic blaster. He would push down on a lever that was connected to explosives by a set of wires. Road Runner would often find a way to escape the danger, but we are not so fortunate. Eyes that wander and rest on different parts of the human anatomy trigger a sexual impulse; and once the impulse is triggered, it’s hard to stop the final outcome. This is why we have to take control of our eyes.

In one instance, I was walking with a pastor in New York City. We passed a popular lingerie store, a billboard with a scantily dressed woman, and a group of women dressed for clubbing. Throu-

ghout this walk, his eyes were fixed on the ground. I know this because he kept bumping into me. He later commented, “Summers are especially difficult, but this is what it takes.” This might sound extreme, but enough older and very godly men have said to me, “It doesn’t get any easier as you get older. You just have to get better at watching what you watch.”

#### **FOURTH, READ AND LISTEN TO STORIES BY ADDICTS AND ABOUT ADDICTS—ADDICTS OF ALL KINDS, NOT JUST PORN ADDICTS.**

By doing this, you come to a deeper appreciation of how devastating addiction is for everyone involved. Scare tactics aren’t very effective in the long run, but that’s not the point. We need to realize that individual addiction has wide effects, rippling and ripping into the lives of others, especially into the lives of loved ones.

Perhaps we’ll become more receptive to adopting a war mentality when we listen to the tragic stories of others. Another benefit is that you can learn how others have overcome their addictions and then retool their approach for your own struggle. I remember hearing about how one coffee addict surrounded himself with gallons of water. Whenever the urge came for another latte, he would down enough water until his body couldn’t handle any more liquids. Someone might be able to look at this more benign addiction and consider alternate activities that can replace watching pornography.

#### **FIFTH, ACCEPT THAT WATCHING PORNOGRAPHY IS AKIN TO COMMITTING ADULTERY.**

If you’re married and you watch pornography, you’re cheating on your spouse. To be sure, it’s not the same as actually having sexual relations outside of your marriage bed. But just because it’s not *as* bad doesn’t mean that it’s not bad.

It might be helpful is to say aloud before, while, and after you watch porn: “I’m about to cheat on my wife, I’m cheating on my wife, and I just cheated on my wife.” Say it out loud! At the very least, it’ll awaken you to the realization that you’ve been okay with adultery.

Similarly, when you watch porn and engage in sexual fantasy, that fantasized person is or may someday be married to another person. In this sense, you’re doing injustice not just to the person you’re objectifying but also robbing that person’s spouse of what’s rightfully and uniquely his. How would you react if thousands of men were objectifying your wife? That’s the very sin we’re guilty of when we watch porn, fantasize, and masturbate.

#### **SIXTH, BE RESILIENT.**

For many, the struggle against porn will require a long-term perspective. Going cold turkey, as most addicts can attest, is nearly impossible—all the more if the addiction began at a young age and has been alive for many years. It’s ordinarily not realistic.

Moreover, those who naively suppose that they can abruptly stop often fail and ultimately give up the fight. What I’m saying is that even with your most sincere efforts, you’ll likely falter.

But don’t give up. Make sure you’re taking two steps forward each time you relapse. I’m not suggesting occasional porn is okay. I’m just acknowledging the reality that like all wars, the struggle here will be long and difficult, marked by wins and losses. But the hope is progress.

#### **SEVENTH, REMEMBER THE PRINCIPLE, “YOU BECOME THE AIR YOU BREATHE.”**

There are communities you want to avoid. Some are obvious. Don’t hang out a lot with people who think monogamy is un-

natural, go to strip clubs for bachelor parties, and believe porn watching is just what people do. If you hear this nonsense enough, you'll begin to believe it.

Some communities to avoid are less obvious. It's those who feign holiness but struggle in secret. They can also be the group that likes to throw out vague terms like accountability, purity, and lust, while avoiding specificity and action. It's important to surround yourself with men and women who take this struggle very seriously and therefore do silly things like purchasing a flip phone, making strategic plans, walking with their eyes down, or joining Sex Addicts Anonymous.

We're vulnerable beings. For all our talk of autonomy, we're more malleable than we realize or care to admit. Surrounding yourself with people who are sober about their struggle and are taking concrete steps toward freedom will likely prod you to do the same.

**FINALLY, REMEMBER “THE SON-OF-GOD-IN-POWER” (ROMANS 1:4), THE ONE WHO DIED FOR OUR SINS, WAS RAISED FOR OUR VINDICATION AND HAS POURED OUT HIS SPIRIT ON US SO THAT WE CAN NOW BE AND DO WHAT WE COULD NOT LEFT TO OUR DEVICES.**

The fight for purity is not to merit God's favor or win acceptance among the elect. The fight for purity is an outworking of our new identity in Christ; and the power for victory is the Spirit, the same Spirit that filled Jesus prior to his battle with Satan in the wilderness. Without question, we are called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). For many today, this includes laboring with all our might to disembody pornography from our lives. Still, even this appropriate battle must be done knowing that “it is God who works in [us], both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

The struggle for freedom from pornography is real and difficult. No one principle or practice will suffice. Victory will come through the cumulative and consistent application of these suggestions and more over an extended period of time. We must continue to struggle, for this is why God's grace has been revealed, that we might be delivered from all lawlessness and pursue upright and holy lives as we await Christ's return. Our Lord demands nothing less.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# How to Counsel Couples Through Past Sexual Sin



by Scott Croft

**R**emember when doing pre-marital counseling with young couples regarding sex involved a brief warning about temptation and supplementing their education about the birds and the bees that their staid or embarrassed parents had neglected to mention?

Yeah, me neither.

If you're reading this article, then you're likely dealing with couples where at least one person has committed repeated and perhaps grievous sexual sin. Now, they're trying to navigate through this reality toward a godly, healthy marriage in which the "trust bank" has been desperately depleted and needs to be restored.

Practically, let's talk about when and how pastors can guide dating or engaged couples through these difficult conversations.

## WHEN?

There's no hard-line answer here, but my best recommendation is that past sexual sin should be discussed in that awkward stage in which the relationship is going well and likely headed toward marriage but before the couple is formally engaged (for a cure to insomnia, see my articles [[here](#)] and [[here](#)] on stages of a pre-marital relationship). In our culture, engagement is considered a serious commitment that requires a bit of weeping and gnashing of teeth to break, though it happens more often than you think. Given that fact, people should have an opportunity to know, before making a commitment to marry someone, that his or her potential spouse has had sex with numerous people or until last week was in the midst of an active addiction to porn. I'll talk about the biblical responses to such information below, but it seems wise that the "committer" of sexual sin should confess before the prospective spouse has reached the theoretical and cultural point of no return.

Having said that, we shouldn't encourage couples to talk about past sexual sin too early. Revealing intimate details of one's past sin early in a relationship is generally not a good idea because (1) it tends to create an inappropriate level of intimacy for the early stages of a relationship, and (2) it tends to put an unfair burden on a new relationship by asking people to deal with really difficult things about their partner's *past* before they really know each other's *current* character and walk with Christ.

## HOW?

First, past sexual sin should be talked about in general terms. Confessing the mere fact of sexual sin with other partners or a past struggle with pornography may well be enough. Reasonable follow-up questions might discuss the number of sexual partners, whether they've experienced same-sex attraction, or the timing

and level of victory over porn. Beyond that, details are usually good for no one's soul and generally unhelpful unless they're genuinely relevant to the wisdom of a marriage decision. It's also not a topic to be repeatedly dwelt upon if that can be avoided.

So here's my baseline advice: past or present sexual sin should be discussed in a single conversation in which both people confess what they need to. Perhaps this is followed up by additional conversations as people need to process what they've learned.

Past sexual sin should be confessed with humility, empathy, and likely some measure of sadness or regret, but not guilt or shame, inasmuch as the Lord Jesus Christ has accounted for such sins on the cross. Still, brothers and sisters dealing with sexual sin— and *revealing* it to someone they hope will love them—may be wracked with guilt and shame that need not be a part of the abundant life in Christ.

On the other side of the equation, a potential spouse ought to hear confession of past sexual sin with sadness, regret, even frustration if that's where the heart is – but ultimately with an attitude of grace.

To be clear, the wise and godly response will not *always* be to move forward with the relationship. Being informed of a potential spouse's prior addiction to child pornography, for instance, comes to mind as an issue that may genuinely affect the wisdom of a marriage decision. Still, in dealing with *past* sin, the godly response should most often be a willingness to proceed with the relationship *if, on balance, other factors already point in that direction.*<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, someone who hears such a confession from a potential spouse—especially if their own sexual sin has been comparatively less profound—can struggle with sadness, anger, bitterness, fear, and self-righteousness.

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<sup>16</sup> How to deal with a *current* addiction to porn or ongoing sexual sin is a topic for another day.

So how do we advise men and women in one or both of these positions?

As I suggested above, fundamentally this is an issue of showing grace to a fellow sinner forgiven in Christ. In fact, most of the same basic scriptural principles speak to both the offender and the offended. Though sexual sin (like all sin) is most fundamentally committed against God, it's also a sin against any other person involved and the sinner's future spouse, so it's perfectly understandable for a *potential* spouse to respond with feelings of hurt and sadness.

But if the sinner is now in Christ, then he or she is “a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). If a sinning believer has confessed his or her past sins to God as his child, then God has not only forgiven them but has “cleansed [him] from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9); he has thrown those sins into the sea to remember them no more. God doesn't just forgive; he forgets. When he looks at his children, he delights in us because he sees his perfect Son. And so he calls us to view our brothers and sisters in Christ in the same way. This is precisely why Jesus himself has harsh words and a stark warning for those who are forgiven but cannot forgive (Matthew 18:21–35).

As pastors, we need to remind young couples not only that we are all sinners (Romans 3:23), but also that we are all *sexual* sinners. Even if a man or woman has not sinned sexually with another person, pornography use, masturbation, and lustful thoughts all count against them, ruining any perceived perfection. We're *all* fallen sexually.

But there is grace and healing in the gospel. Encourage young brothers and sisters both to rest in the grace God has shown them in Christ and to show their potential spouses that same grace.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This may go without saying, but as you have these conversations, keep an eye out for those of your sheep with

## CONCLUSION

Finally, a little practical encouragement: The emotional, spiritual, and sexual intimacy that flourishes in a loving, godly marriage often goes a long way toward healing past hurts. It has a way of crowding out feelings connected to past sin.

So remind your sheep that God ordained marriage; that he is *for* sexually healthy marriages; and that every godly, loving, and gracious marriage—all of which involve two sexual sinners—mirrors the gospel and glorifies God.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Croft lives in the Louisville, Ky., area with his wife, Rachel, and son, William, where he works as an attorney and serves as an elder of Third Avenue Baptist Church.

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deeper issues surrounding sexuality or deeper issues of emotional and mental health more generally. Especially around the issues of past sexual abuse or trauma, longer-term loving care and counseling likely will be called for.

# Is Pornography Use Ever Grounds for Divorce?



by Tom Schreiner

## 1. IN MATTHEW 5:32 AND 19:9, JESUS GIVES GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE BASED ON SEXUAL IMMORALITY (PORNEIA). IS THAT YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE TEXT?

Yes, *porneia* is a broad term designating sexual immorality, and the most natural way of reading the text sees Jesus as allowing an exception for divorce and remarriage in the case of sexual sin. Some want to say that the word *porneia* refers to incest or to sexual sin in the engagement period, but we would need clear signals in context to limit the word *porneia* to such specific sins. And those clear indications are lacking in both Matthew 5 and Matthew 19. Others say that the exception clause only applies to divorce, but not to remarriage. Such a restriction is not clear in the Greek text. The most natural way of reading Matt. 5:32 and 19:9 is that the exception clause applies to divorce and remarriage.

## **2. DOES PORNOGRAPHY USE EVER QUALIFY AS PORNEIA? IF SO, DOES JUST ONE USE OF PORNOGRAPHY QUALIFY? MUST IT BE A HABIT? AN ADDICTION?**

Yes, pornography constitutes *porneia* since the word designates sexual sin in general. How to apply the text is a matter of hermeneutics, and we must remember that we don't go to Scripture in cases like these as if it is a rulebook with case laws.

I'm *not* saying there are no universal commands in Scripture! Of course there are. We must not murder, commit adultery, and steal. The Scriptures, however, do not provide detailed case law for all the situations we face. It is imperative, therefore, that we apply the Scriptures with wisdom. The Lord shapes us and sanctifies us by making us more like Jesus. We begin to live in a new way and think about life in a new way. Wisdom doesn't mean that we simply search the Scriptures to find "answers" for all our specific questions. Of course, Scripture is our authority and is the *basis* for any wisdom we have. And we must apply the truths of Scripture to specific situations. However, we are not like robots searching the database of the Scriptures to see what we should do. God is changing us so that we think more like Christ.

So, does pornography ever qualify as grounds of divorce? It is precisely here that we need wisdom since God is giving us a transformed mind (Rom. 12:2), so that we can discern what is pleasing to the Lord (Eph. 5:10). Wisdom means that we are not quick to recommend divorce since Jesus teaches us that the marriage between one man and one woman is a life-long covenant. Divorce is always a last resort, and thus we should not immediately commend divorce because a person engages in pornography, especially if the use is singular or even occasional. We must immediately say, from the perspective of wisdom, that any use of pornography is egregious and heinous; there are no excuses for looking at pornography. At the same time, we don't want to say that any use of pornography justifies divorce.

People want to know when pornography use crosses the line so that divorce is justified. Here's the answer: when it is egregious enough to warrant divorce! One could respond, but what in the world does that mean? Give me specifics! I would reply that we can't write down a simple answer to a question like this.

To be sure, there are cases where pornography use is serious enough to warrant divorce. Thankfully, the Lord has given wise counselors and elders to help believers discern whether divorce is permissible in a particular situation. If we had a handy rulebook to consult on the matter, we wouldn't need the leadership and counsel of elders/pastors/overseers. But the question of how to apply what Scripture says takes wisdom. Thus, church members need to make such agonizing decisions in the context of their local church.

### **3. HOW WOULD YOU WORK THROUGH IT PASTORALLY IF AN EXASPERATED CHURCH MEMBER CAME TO YOU CONVINCED THAT HE OR SHE WANTED DIVORCE BECAUSE OF THEIR SPOUSE'S PORN ADDICTION?**

A church member may come to the elders and demand a divorce because of the pornography use of spouse, even as the elders wisely counsel against a divorce in that situation. The person desiring a divorce should have the inclination to follow the counsel of the elders since the Lord has appointed them to shepherd the souls of the flock.

Are elders sometimes wrong? Are they sometimes even abusive and tyrannical in their use of authority? Of course! Elders are fallible, too, and sometimes elders make wrong decisions, and in some cases the leaders of a church are not wise and godly in the shepherding of their flock. We don't live in a perfect world.

I would say, then, that the inclination of the person desiring a divorce should be to follow the counsel of the elders. If the person

thinks a divorce is warranted anyway, the elders should be slow to discipline the person who disagrees unless it is very clear that the person wanting the divorce is in blatant sin.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Thomas R. Schreiner is a Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and the Pastor of Preaching at Clifton Baptist Church. You can find him on Twitter at @DrTomSchreiner.

# Book Review: Captured by a Better Vision: Living Porn Free, by Tim Chester



Reviewed by [Dave Gobbett](#)

*“He told me he’s used porn again. We talked about his problem. We prayed together. Then I said, ‘The first thing we need to do is put accountability software on your computer.’ His face dropped. He was devastated. I could see it as clear as day. He didn’t want to be a porn user, but he still wanted to use porn. Perhaps he would try to change, but he still wanted the option of going to porn.” (p. 19)*

**T**hus Tim Chester begins *Captured by a Better Vision: Living Porn Free*. In this wide-ranging, honest, and profoundly gospel-centred book, Chester demonstrates that the con-

temporary pornography pandemic which is crippling lives and ministries is fundamentally a problem of idolatry. Building on his wonderful pastoral primer, *You Can Change*, Chester recognizes that struggling with porn reveals deep things about the human heart, and therefore requires a deep grasp of the gospel by way of rescue.

Mere self-help has “no value in restraining sensual indulgence” (Col 2:23), as Odysseus found to his peril when he relied on plugging his sailors’ ears with beeswax to insulate them from the seductive song of the Sirens. Only the captivating, sweet, and better music of Orpheus could drown out the Sirens’ song and keep the sailors safe. Similarly, only the captivating, sweet, and better music of the gospel—the “better vision” of God’s glory, goodness, and grace—can drown out the allure of sexual temptation. But it will take a fight.

I’ve used *Captured by a Better Vision* several times in single-sex small groups and one-to-one contexts—with students and ministry colleagues. It has been a profound experience every time. On one occasion, the pastoral fallout was especially challenging, though having worked through the situation with prayer, honesty, and accountability, one individual shared with me: “That was the hardest—and best—thing has ever happened to me.” Praise God for his renewing and restoring grace.

A quick note on accountability relationships: you only get out what you put in. A student once told me, “Dave, do you know how easy it is for students to ‘say the right thing’ in one-to-ones?” It saddened me to hear that, though I’m glad he was honest enough to admit it. But here’s the truth: we’re masters at throwing people off the scent if we have something to hide. It’s worth remembering that as you begin meeting to discuss a book like this.

Each chapter of *Captured by a Better Vision* comes with discussion questions that helpfully focus the conversation. You might

want to be careful where you meet, however. I once convened a group to discuss the book in a local Starbucks, which meant occasionally hushed voices while we sipped our Flat Whites!

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dave Gobbett is Lead Pastor of Highfields Church in Cardiff, Wales

# Book Review: A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing, by Glynn Harrison



Reviewed by [Dave Gobbett](#)

**G**lynn Harrison is a retired professor of psychiatry at the University of Bristol, where he was also a practicing consultant psychiatrist. He's a well-respected evangelical speaker on issues of faith and psychology in the UK. Several years ago I asked to him to speak for me at Highfields Church on the issue of pornography because I'd heard him a couple of times previously address the topic excellently.

Glynn declined—at least to speak on *that* topic. His reason: in his mind, too many Christians only think about—and church leaders often only speak into—issues of sexuality by focusing exclusively on the *negatives*. “No to homosexuality; no to transgender

ideology; no to premarital sexual intimacy; no to pornography.” While agreeing theologically with those concerns, Glynn told me that he has become increasingly burdened by the need to give evangelical Christians the appropriate biblical vocabulary to say what they’re *for* as much as what they’re *against*. In the biblical worldview, what is sex is for? What is marriage for? What are families for?

Cue his latest book, *A Better Story: God, Sex, and Human Flourishing*. Rather than diving straight into critique mode, Glynn seeks to understand how and why the sexual revolution has taken place. How has the ground shifted so much in such a short space of time? What’s the ideology that lies behind? Who are its key storytellers?

Building on the work of Jonathan Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind*, Glynn reflects on how the sexual revolution has been propagated through emotional rather than rational arguments. He uses the example of a video called “Homecoming” (freely available on YouTube), which was produced as part of the same-sex marriage campaign in the UK. Glynn suggests that the power of a visual narrative—a soldier returning home to his loved ones, only in this case, his loved one is a man—changed hearts by entertaining them. So he provocatively asks:

What chance does an awkwardly structured thirty-minute sermon delivered once a week by an averagely gifted preacher have against such cultural power? Or a fumbling talk about sex given by a red-faced father to a squirming eleven-year-old, set against the images and stories that have been rumbling across his screens for years? ... What [hope is there] that a young woman will unearth the courage to stand against the flow when she can already smell her pastor’s silent fear? (56–57).

It’s a bruising read, but read it we must, if we’re to see what we’re up against in our brave new world.

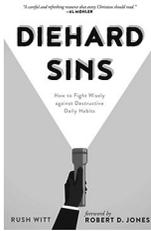
Having painted the picture as darkly as he can (though no darker than reality), Glynn turns to proposing a better story. He writes, “In the Christian worldview, flourishing is about realizing our potential as human beings made in the image of God. It’s about becoming fruitful, creative and relational human beings, alongside the development of Christlike character” (174).

In summary, *A Better Story* is a thoughtful, faithful and persuasive proposal for how to respond—or at least begin to respond—to the sexual revolution. We hugely profited from the book on our staff team earlier this year, and I highly recommend it.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dave Gobbett is Lead Pastor of Highfields Church in Cardiff, Wales

# Book Review: Diehard Sins, by Rush Witt



Reviewed by Josh Vincent

**J**ohn Owen famously quipped, “Be killing sin, or it will be killing you.” In *Diehard Sins*, Rush Witt wants to arm believers with a double-barreled weapon of theological and practical counsel to help them launch grace-empowered attacks on the subtler sins that rarely register on their moral radars. In the same vain as Jerry Bridges’ *Respectable Sins*, *Diehard Sins* seeks to prescribe practical help for “the little, daily sins” that “eat up our lives from the inside out” (21).

As a pastor and a professionally trained biblical counselor, Witt brings his experiences to bear on this book, making it useful for both pastors and professional counselors.

## SUMMARY

*Diehard Sins* is separated into three parts that spell out a plan of caring for others through counseling and discipleship (21).

Part 1 encourages Christians to joyfully enter the daily struggle with destructive daily habits. He helps readers understand four important truths: human effort is insufficient (ch. 1); “remaining sin” exists in every human heart (ch. 2); we need to believe “Jesus frees us to bring our sins into the light of his forgiveness” (ch. 3); and we ought to enter this fight with joy (ch. 4).

In Part 2, Witt calls us to “understand the role of thoughts, words, and actions in our daily quest to kill sin” (95), because sin tends to hide in these areas. The goal is to move believers from slavery to sonship (110) as we seek our identity in Christ. Witt also says prioritizes “guarding our beliefs” (128) because our actions reveal what we truly believe.

Part 3 argues that Christians need to bring Christ and his provisions to the fight. The gospel provides a rich treasury of spiritual resources to bear good fruit. He specifically addresses how God himself, the Bible, the gospel, the church, and the ordinances serve as powerful resources for growth in Christ (139).

## **FOUR REASONS IT'S WORTH YOUR TIME**

### ***1. It's practical.***

Witt's book reads like an Ed Welch or Paul Tripp book. He begins each chapter with a single diagnostic snapshot of an individual's specific, yet-to-be-detected sin followed by a chapter focused on treating that sin. Eliza is addicted to the rumor mill; Carl is slothful; Kristen is insensitive to others.

This creates anticipation for how the chapter will apply various aspects of the gospel to that particular sin. Furthermore, it draws readers in so that they might see themselves in these composite characters.

### ***2. It's theologically solid.***

This book feels accessible but does not shy away from the significant doctrines of the faith like total depravity (89–90),

providence (46), and positional and progressive sanctification (58–59). Witt excels at demonstrating both what the doctrine is and why it matters in the fight against sin.

For instance, he illustrates how our sovereign God even uses our sin to bring about good in our lives. After defining the doctrine of providence, he explains why it is important saying, “In a mysterious work of God’s providence, he uses trials, troubles, temptations, and even our diehard sin to stir a Godward dependence in us” (46). Every tributary of this book leads to Christ.

### ***3. It’s gospel-centered.***

Don’t be fooled by Witt’s three-step method; this book is thoroughly gospel-centered. Witt says, “Carrying divine authority and power, the good news of Jesus delivers transforming grace to those who may escape from the clutches of sin—not only from the flagrant forms of spiritual slavery like alcoholism, but from the less obvious forms as well” (112).

The whole book reflects this same confidence in the gospel. In fact, each chapter ends with a section called “Reflections for the Fight,” which lists questions that will point people toward Christ. Here are a few examples:

- “In Christ, grace abounds to you. How well do you know this?” (100)
- “How would you describe your identity in Christ?” (114)
- “Read 2 Peter 1:2–15. Notice how many times Peter emphasizes the importance of gospel reminders” (51).

### ***4. The appendices are a gold mine.***

You may be tempted to skip appendices, but don’t skip the ones in this book.

Appendix 1 provides a step-by-step guide for utilizing the provisions listed in Part 3, followed by a recommended reading list.

This treasure trove of practical applications will assist any Christian in their fight against sin. This would also be a great resource for pastors, counselors, and other church leaders to provide others with their fight against sin.

### **ONE SMALL QUESTION**

I don't have any negatives, but I did leave with a small question. Why does Witt separate the provision of the church from the provision of the ordinances? This is small because I found Witt's focus on the need for the local church refreshing, thoughtful, and thorough. Maybe he simply needed to divide the sections up because of his already robust treatment of the need for the local church in fighting sin. I simply would have listed the provision of the ordinances as a subset of the provision of the church.

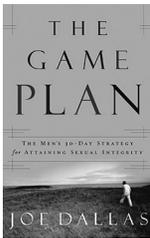
### **CONCLUSION**

I happily recommend this book. I plan on using it in my church, and I believe it will be a helpful resource for Christians seeking to fight sin.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Josh Vincent is the senior pastor of Trinity Bible Church in Phoenix, Arizona.

# Book Review: The Game Plan, by Joe Dallas



Reviewed by Nate Keeler

## WHO SHOULD USE IT

When a member of your church confesses habitual sexual sin, do you have a process of discipleship in place? Throughout my pastoral ministry, I've not found the magic program that works for everyone. However, I have found a few tools that provide a pathway out of habitual sexual sin. One of those tools is the book *The Game Plan* by Joe Dallas. *The Game Plan* is geared toward Christian men who have a genuine desire to live in repentance and are ready to fight for integrity.

After reading this book, my first thought was, "I wish I read this 15 years ago." My teens and early 20s were marked by habitual sexual sin. Even after I became a follower of Christ, my pornography use didn't immediately go away. My faith and knowledge of God was growing, and I was astonished at the amazing grace

of the gospel. And yet, I'd find myself going to an all-too-familiar place for sexual gratification. Afterwards, I felt horribly guilty, confessed my sin, and recommitted myself to trying harder and *never* doing that again. But in moments of weakness and isolation, I'd give into temptation. While there were month-long periods of purity, inevitably I'd slip back again into old habits.

By God's grace, he has since given me victory, but it came through many defeats. The process I followed for sexual purity came from a mentor who helped me overcome this stronghold of sin.

This is where a resource like *The Game Plan* can be very effective. Joe Dallas walks step-by-step through a plan from brokenness to sustained sexual integrity. I found his book to be strong in practical theology and highly accessibly for men at any level of spiritual maturity. Furthermore, the prescribed process to sexual integrity follows the redemptive narrative of Scripture and captures the essence of gospel restoration.

Throughout the book, Dallas describes the nature of true repentance, and wisely balances dependence on the Holy Spirit and grace-driven effort. In particular, the section on restitution is one of the highlights of this book. I've found few resources that teach why and how to make restitution a part of repentance. This is the hardest part for many because it requires rigorous honesty, humility, and the loss of trust. But the fruit of restitution is well worth it.

## **THE AUTHOR'S CREDIBILITY**

One of the greatest strengths of the book is the author's credibility. Dallas speaks as an authority on the subject both from his personal story and his work among the sexually broken. Throughout the book, he shares his own experience with sexual brokenness that began with pornography exposure at the

age of eight followed by many years of sexual abuse. This trauma led to a variety of sexually deviant behaviors throughout his teens and 20s.

He shares honestly about his successes and failures. Dallas is highly relatable for those who are familiar with sexual struggles of all kinds, especially those who feel they're alone. While reading his story you'll inevitably say, "If there's hope for him, then there's hope for me."

## **HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED**

*The Game Plan* is meant to be studied more like a playbook than a textbook, hence the title. Each chapter gives the reader a basic understanding of the step-by-step process of repentance and restoration followed by specific action items. I particularly love the prayers at the end of every chapter.

After 30 days, the reader will have biblically understood sin, repentance, and sanctification—and Lord willing, they'll have caught a vision of integrity and created attainable, healthy, and lifelong habits. While it certainly requires consistent discipline and effort, it doesn't set the reader up for failure by setting the bar too high. Such a turnkey approach may seem too cookie-cutter for some, but I've found it to be a helpful baseline for a number of people struggling with sexual sin.

## **HOW TO USE IT**

Use this book as a tool in your discipleship process, particularly in one-on-one or one-on-few settings. I've used this book as the next step for those who have recently confessed sexual sin, but only if I discern genuine sorrow and a willingness to follow in obedience. This isn't a book for those who are hard-hearted toward their sin, or just sorry they were caught.

Although it's designed for 30 days, I've found it wise to double or even triple the time it takes to go through the material and put each chapter into practice. The book can be highly tailored to meeting frequency. I've seen men do a daily check-in for accountability, and I've seen them meet weekly.

While frequency might not be important, I do believe it's necessary to go through the whole study. In my experience, those who have followed the plan in its entirety more likely experience continued success.

Depending on the depth and complexity of someone's sexual brokenness, your discipleship plan may need to include specific counseling or other supplemental resources. For example, I wouldn't recommend exclusively using *The Game Plan* for someone struggling with gender dysphoria, sexual abuse, child pornography, or homosexual identity. But for those like me who had a fairly normal childhood, didn't experience abuse, and struggled with heterosexual pornography, this book is very helpful.

## SHORTCOMINGS

Additionally, *The Game Plan* lacks a deeper theological treatment of sexual sin that one gets in a book like John Piper's *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*. But again, I don't think this is necessarily a negative if we understand the intent of the book.

That said, I do have a critique of the book. Dallas distinguishes between sexual sobriety and sexual purity. According to Dallas, violating sexual sobriety requires "acting out" (e.g., watching porn, visiting a strip club, or committing adultery). Therefore, even if it's not sexually pure, you can remain "sexually sober" while carrying out sins of the mind and heart (e.g. lusting, fantasizing).

On one level, I understand why Dallas is making this distinction. But I found it both unhelpful and potentially even disastrous. Jesus says that if my eye causes me to stumble I should pluck it out

(Mark 9:47). I know my own nature, and if I make provision for my flesh by saying I'm still "sexually sober" even if I'm lusting, I will inevitably get as close to the line as I can, promising myself I'll never go over. This is indeed sin. It's destructive, and it grieves the heart of God.

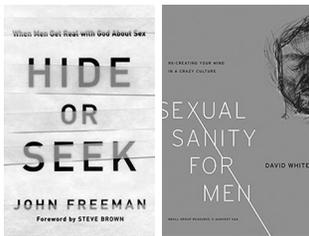
Overall, I would strongly recommend *The Game Plan* as a tool for discipling men through habitual sexual sin, especially pornography.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nate Keeler is the Lead Pastor of Brandywine Valley Baptist Church in Wilmington, Delaware.

# Book Review: Hide OR Seek by John Freeman

# Book Review: Sexual Sanity For Men by David White



Reviewed by [Raymond Johnson](#)

**I**n our sexually charged, pornified world, I see sexual wholeness as a “mission-critical” objective for my congregation—for both men and women.

As a pastor, I have the responsibility of leading men, in particular, who walk into my study on a journey toward sexual wholeness. They need to experience the power of the gospel to heal their brokenness and to apply Scripture to this area of their lives. Then they become more effective ministers of the gospel to others.

As I've traveled this path with men, I've found Harvest USA's *Hide OR Seek: When Men Get Real with God About Sex* (by John Freeman) and *Sexual Sanity for Men: Re-Creating Your Mind in a Crazy Culture* (by David White) to be invaluable resources. These books approach areas of sexual brokenness candidly and graciously while pointing men to the Bible and to Jesus Christ as the only one capable of satisfying them. They are powerful tool—particularly when used with others in the context of the local church.

### **WHY THEY'RE USEFUL**

Lying just beneath the surface of our hearts is an often unconscious desire for the sexually illicit and explicit. Many of us carry the shame and sorrow of memories of failed purity. And this is where these books are so useful. They've helped me learn how to identify the warning signs of uncontrolled desire, what God's Word says to those oppressed by misplaced affections, and how churches can help strugglers recalibrate their recalcitrant hearts. As a pastor who faces many challenging counseling issues, books like these are invaluable.

Though I recommend both resources without reservation, I find myself regularly returning to two quotes in particular. The first challenges sexual strugglers who base their confidence in their own self-righteous attempts to stay pure rather than on Christ. Freeman writes,

Most of us have that slink-back mentality toward God and not an attitude of faith and repentance. Strugglers, especially those who have not come into the light with God or other people, don't usually rush into God's presence. We wait . . . and wait . . . and wait, until the opportune time. We wait until we "feel" better, until we think we have the right words, until we've worked up our courage, until we convince ourselves that this time was the last time we'd fail like that, until we've put enough distance between us and our last acting-out event, whatever form it may have taken.

We wait until we've appropriately punished ourselves in a variety of ways. But, the truth is that there's usually no repentance in any of that. It's primarily a form of penance and reparation. And, that means that there's little of the gospel in it.<sup>18</sup>

Even as Christians, we gravitate toward a cycle penance and self-atonement. But it will never work. When we're full of unbelief, when we refuse to believe that God is enough, he calls us to himself. So, in 1 John 1:7, God offers us a formula of sorts when the Scripture says,

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

Honest confession leads to fellowship *and* freedom from sin. John helps us see that the “gospel is all about seeing what happens when you quit hiding [sin] and start to discover the love of the Savior for you—in the mess!”<sup>19</sup>

But what about those who seem incapable of reorienting their misplaced affections? Or, on the other hand, those who are white-knuckling it and trying to endure until heaven? White offers insight:

We are men who have been slaves to our appetites. When we're honest, we acknowledge that we're characterized by weakness and folly. We've been utterly confounded by our inability to stop doing things we don't want to keep doing. Yet when we begin to improve, we often grow proud. We actually begin to pat ourselves on the back because we no longer masturbate daily (or multiple times a day), that we haven't picked up a prostitute recently, that we've been staying away from the rest areas.<sup>20</sup>

Too often men live “failure-filled, shame-filled, and guilt-ridden lives. Reticent to admit [their] sexual temptations and stru-

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18 John Freeman, *Hide OR Seek: When Men Get Real with God About Sex* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2014), 91.

19 *Ibid.*, xvii.

20 David White, *Sexual Sanity for Men: Re-Creating Your Mind in a Crazy Culture* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012), 236.

ggles, [they] hope will somehow just all go away.”<sup>21</sup> White helps us see that recurring patterns of sexual sin are intimately wed to pride. Because we hate to see how bad we truly are and we want to be better, we take pride in modest gains and, therefore, put ourselves in grave danger.

The first step to take in defeating pride is to find someone you trust from your church and share with him what’s going. As Ed Welch says, “Though we might think that real help comes through dramatic and new insights, most help tends to come in more ordinary ways. It comes through our personal engagement with each other, our attention to Christ, and prayer.”<sup>22</sup>

## HOW TO USE THEM

What’s the best way to use these two resources? For those wrestling with how to go public with their sexual struggles or for pastors contemplating how to establish such small groups, I recommend Freeman’s book. For those entrenched in cycles of sexual addiction or seeking to lead groups focused on sexual purity, I recommend White’s. I’ve found much fruit in my own ministry and in the lives of those in my congregation from using these resources in the above manners.

The pervasive and oppressive nature of sexual brokenness is wreaking havoc in our culture. More than ever, local churches need trusted partners who will help them in their work of mending lives with the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Harvest USA is that partner: Christ-centered, church-focused, and committed to the authority and power of Scripture.

These books move beyond mere surface matters to the chronic sin patterns endemic to all human hearts. Sexual wholeness is vital to healing, and these resources will help pastors better

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21 Freeman, *Hide OR Seek*, 8.

22 Edward T. Welch, *Caring for One Another: 8 Ways to Cultivate Meaningful Relationships* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 43.

structure small groups in ways that facilitate a more open and safe place for people to come and share their experiences and struggles.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Raymond Johnson is Lead Pastor of The Journey Church, West Chester, PA

# Book Review: Wired for Intimacy, by William Struthers



Reviewed by Deepak Reju

**T**alk to ten males, and you shouldn't be surprised to discover that a strong majority of them struggle with internet pornography.

Sex seduces. Sex sells. And sex powerfully affects the male brain. Now William Struthers, associate professor of psychology at Wheaton College, has helped us to better understand *why* sexual images so powerfully affect men in particular with his book *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*.

## HOW PORNOGRAPHY REWIRES THE BRAIN

Struthers begins the book by helping us understand why something as harmful as pornography can be such a fixture of our society (ch. 1). Three factors keep the pornography industry alive.

- First is the definitional dodge. The porn industry starts with a game of semantics, making it difficult to define pornography.
- Second is the constitutional dodge. Proponents argue that the U. S. Constitution protects the freedom to produce, market and distribute porn because of the rights of free speech and free press.
- Third, the industry hides behind the causal dodge. Because of the ethical quandaries which surround researching porn, correlation research (in which the relationship of one variable to another variable is traced out using mathematics) is the only possible way to research porn. The porn industry quickly and easily debunks correlation research because it cannot establish a direct causal relationship between pornography and its effects.

After this introductory chapter, Struthers explains that men and women were made for relationship, and so they crave intimacy. Yet the power of the image of a naked woman is more than just the illusion of intimacy. A woman's willingness to expose herself is "hypnotizing" to men. The more lifelike the image, the more it creates a "hormonal and neurological tsunami" in the man's brain. But it is not just the actual visualizing that causes problems. The male brain's one-track and visuospatial traits make it the "perfect playground for sexual fantasy...As porn and fantasy take control of the mind, it becomes a dream theatre that is transposed over the waking world" (44-45).

A properly oriented human conscience will feel guilt for such immoral behavior. But with enough time and exposure, a porn addict's conscience becomes seared and loses its ability to signal trouble. I've sat with men who have viewed pornography for years. The warning signs they experienced when they first started viewing porn had long since been obliterated. As fixation on sexual gratification grows, tunnel vision causes the addict to focus

more on his pursuit of arousal and less on male-female relationship. This leads to the objectification of women and the tragic loss of real intimacy.

In chapters 4 and 5 Struthers goes on to provide a staggering amount of detail related to the biology and neurochemistry of porn addiction. This portion of the book will definitely require patience for those who didn't like biology in high school.

Struthers doesn't go the way of most biologists by assigning a fatalistic, powerless future to the addict. Instead, he argues that redemption can counter this biological rewiring through the process of sanctification (ch. 8). Confession, repentance, understanding, and accountability all serve to counter porn's harmful effects.

### **LOTS OF BIOLOGY, LITTLE THEOLOGY**

While Struthers makes a noble attempt to talk about biology and theology in the same book, his theological material is sparse and biology too often dominates the book's agenda. One might ask, "What's the point of the book?" If Struthers is trying to sort through the biological, social, cultural, and personal implications of pornography, he does a good job collating a lot of data into one book. If he is trying to help us think through the problem using a biblical and theological lens, then Struthers fails. The problem is that biology *without theology* is dangerous for Christians. Our doctrine of creation tells us not to be afraid of the sciences, but our understanding of biology and the other sciences must reside within biblical and theological framework. In that way, Scripture remains our authority over every realm of thought and life, including biology.

Another, less significant, issue with the book is Struthers' discussion of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in chapter seven. While

no one will deny the essential human needs (water, food, etc.), Struthers should have debunked more biblically questionable categories like self-esteem or self-actualization (156).

### **HELPFUL FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM**

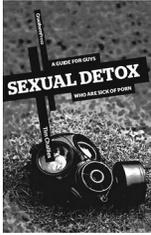
Struthers' research helps us to understand how pornography rewires the brain. Those who want to understand the biology that contributes to porn addiction will be well served by Struthers' book. All told, I'm grateful for this book, because it's one of the only popular-level resources of its kind written by an evangelical Christian.

However, be forewarned that his discussion of theology and sanctification is sparse. He also leans heavily on the side of trying to understand the problem but offers very little in the way of how to fight it. Understanding is important, but it's only the first step.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Deepak Reju is an associate pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D. C. He has a PhD in biblical counseling from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

# Book Review: Sexual Detox, by Tim Challies



Reviewed by Justin Perry

**A**larming statistics. Plagued generations. Devastating consequences. Confusion about sexuality. Shame and guilt. In the world and in the church. This is the pornified world we live in, and the appetite of pornography is matched only by the carnage left in its wake.

In his book, *Sexual Detox*, Tim Challies commends combating the deadly evils of pornography by the healing process of detox. However, unlike most detox processes, the aim isn't merely abstinence. Challies writes, "I want to help you track down the lies you have believed about sex and I want to help you replace them with truth that comes straight from God, the one who created sex for us" (4).

Challies offers six short chapters that show the reality of the problem of porn and strategies for overcoming it:

- Chapter 1 captures the sobering pervasiveness of pornography among a whole generation of children who are suffocating from its deadening effects. In his words, “we must recognize it (pornography) for the monstrosity it is” (16).
- Chapter 2 highlights how pornography distorts, mocks, and rejects the God-given gift of marital sex. Challies exposes the false notion that marriage will fix a porn-sickened heart and reminds the reader that “the external battle is an outward expression of the inner, spiritual battle” (27).
- Chapter 3 discusses masturbation and demonstrates how this act undermines the mutual giving and receiving that God designed to produce unity in marital sex. Instead, masturbation reveals our self-centered, sinful, and isolating tendencies. He concludes this chapter with a helpful treatment of handling the guilt that’s associated with this act.
- Chapter 4 clarifies God’s good design for marital sex, particularly focusing on three areas: sex motivating joyful obedience, sex strengthening a husband’s leadership, and sex enhancing true freedom.
- Chapters 5 and 6 give attention to the process of detox both in the bedroom (5) and for the soul (6). These two chapters help connect the dots between doctrine and sex, temptations and struggles with pornography.

## HOW IS THIS BOOK HELPFUL?

**1. Biblically faithful.** There’s no compromise on the standard of God’s design for sex; instead, God’s standard is held up as good and desirable. Challies balances showing both the beauty of marital sex and the disgust for the soul-deadening sin of porn. The aim isn’t merely to think right about sex for sake of thinking rightly about sex, but that “in keeping with God’s design for sex, the boundaries encourage, enforce, and enhance freedom . . . true freedom” (55).

**2. Small and accessible.** To write with precision and brevity is a gift, and Challies models this well. The book's brevity makes this an easy resource to use with men who are struggling or have struggled with porn.

**3. Questions for reflection and discussion.** Challies writes, "It's far too easy to zip through information we truly need and then skip on to the next chunk of information, without ever really reflecting on what we've only halfway absorbed" (21). In hopes of preventing that, each chapter concludes with a list of questions that serve to prompt further self-reflection or group discussion. Spoiler alert: this book contains a pertinent sermon preached by Charles Spurgeon on 1 Corinthians 10:13 entitled "Comfort for the Tempted."

**4. Clarifying how porn alters one's perception of sex.** I especially appreciated Challies' emphasis on how porn rewires and trains the brain to think about sex in ways that are unbiblical and destructive. He writes, "Pornography teaches that sex is everything but intimate person-to-person, body-to-soul contact between willing spouses. . . . Young men enter into marriage with their minds full of pornographic images and their hearts filled with the desire to fulfill pornographic fantasies" (6).

**5. Focuses on the heart.** Because of the early emphasis on the mind, my fear was that the heart wouldn't be addressed. Thankfully, *Sexual Detox* connects porn's effect on the brain to its effect on the heart. For example, Challies encourages the reader to ask "What is in my heart that I want to do this?" more than "Is this particular act wrong?" We ought to consider the act, but be sure to trace our desires its source: my heart (64).

**6. Emphasis on Scripture, the local church, and the gospel.** How do struggling saints gain victory over pornography? Cha-

llies lists three necessary ingredients. First, Scripture must ground both our diagnosis of the problem and the solution. He shares a list of passages that were instrumental means of grace to him in his determination not to succumb to the allure of pornography as a young, newly married man. Second, struggling believers need the local church. Challies writes, “The local church is the ideal context for battling this kind of sin” (78). Third, the best hope for men who are sick and tired of porn is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Challies reminds his readers to “keep in the forefront of your mind that Jesus Christ had all your sexual sin loaded upon him at the cross. He faced the just punishment for that sin and he faced the full fury of God’s wrath for it; he faced the death your sin demands. By rising from the dead, he showed that he had triumphed over death. He now offers life, and he offers freedom—freedom from sin, freedom even from the desire to sin” (81).

I will use this book when counseling those who struggle with pornography.

To offer one brief critique: Challies focuses the work on young men while neglecting to address the building numbers of women effected by porn. A chapter addressed to women’s struggles or how to cope with their husbands’ struggle would be of tremendous benefit.

*Sexual Detox* is a wonderful book, and it is atop my recommended reads for those who struggle with pornography. I’m grateful for this work and highly recommend it as a trusted resource for both those who are sick of porn and those who counsel them.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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