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DARKENING OUR MINDS: THE PROBLEM OF PORNOGRAPHY AMONG CHRISTIANS

by Joe Dallas

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SYNOPSIS

Millions of people view pornographic magazines, videotapes, DVDs, and Web sites each month. What appears to be a secular problem, however, is also prevalent among Christians. Because pornography has a *dependency* that weakens the individual; it causes a *disruption* of the "one-flesh" union that weakens marriages; and it results in a *distortion* in thinking that weakens the ability to relate and function.

Bondage to sexual sin is a tyrant that will demand more and more territory. It can be overcome, however, by choosing to take three steps of action: First, truly repent of the sin and separate yourself from it. Second, establish a pattern of discipleship through Bible study and prayer. Third, establish a relationship in which you can be accountable to another believer. By choosing to do battle now, you can avoid a full-scale war later.

"The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matt. 6:22-23)¹

I remember clearly, and with inexpressible regret, the night I walked into an adult bookstore and entangled myself in the use of pornography. I was a 23-year-old former minister at the time, well on my way toward a fully backslidden state, and I was considering whether to indulge in the many sexual sins that I had, at that point, only allowed myself to imagine. That evening in the spring of 1978, my decision was sealed when I embraced what I now call the "dark magic."

The "magical" qualities of pornography were obvious and immediate. One glance around that roomful of graphic sexual images sent a rush through my system very much like a narcotic response. The longer I gazed, the more intoxicated I became, and over the next few hours the porn brought me temporary escape and exhilaration. I'd found a new drug, and it seemed to work beyond my expectations.

The darker aspects of this newfound magic soon became clear to me. I revisited the same porn shop nightly for the next two weeks. I then spiraled into the use of prostitutes, an affair with a married woman, homosexuality, and a five-year habit of reckless, degrading sexual practices. It began with the use of pornography, a product I continued to consume during my backslidden years, and which I have come to regard much the way an addict regards a drug — a destructive vice I have to strenuously avoid, always remembering its lethal impact on my life.

THE PROBLEM THAT GROWS UNNOTICED

That same lethal impact is being felt on a broader level today as pornography's availability has reached levels unimaginable 25 years ago. Through cable, videotape and DVD products, and the Internet,

virtually anyone wanting to view porn is able to do so with minimal effort. The statistics on porn usage, therefore, while tragic, shouldn't be surprising:

- During the single month of January 2002, 27.5 million Internet users visited pornographic Web sites.²
- Americans spent an estimated \$220 million on pornographic Web sites in 2001, according to a New York-based Internet research firm. (The same firm, Jupiter Media Metrix, noted that the \$220 million figure was up from \$148 million in 1999; Americans are expected to spend \$320 million annually on porn sites by the year 2005.)³
- In a national survey polling 1,031 adults, Zogby International and Focus on the Family found that 20 percent of the respondents had recently visited a pornographic site.⁴

Every month millions of people stop what they're doing to look at erotic images and, in most cases, pretend that they are sexually interacting with the women or men on display. It makes St. John's description of the world — a place dominated by the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes (1 John 2:16) — chillingly relevant.

What, at first glance, appears to be a secular problem is, in fact, a problem more commonly found among Christians than any of us would care to admit. Over 18 percent of the men polled in the Zogby/Focus survey cited above, for example, identified themselves as Christian believers.⁵ The Promise Keepers Men's Conference conducted an informal poll during its 1996 rally and this poll yielded even more dismal results when one out of three men in attendance admitted they "struggled" with pornography.⁶ Finally, the Colorado-based Focus on the Family organization reports that 7 out of 10 pastors who call their toll-free help line claim to be addicted to porn.⁷

The use of pornography is not restricted to men, either, as is often assumed. Thirty-four percent of the readers of the popular magazine *Today's Christian Woman* admitted to the use of Internet pornography,⁸ and the Zogby/Focus poll indicated one out of every six women surveyed viewed pornography regularly.⁹ James P. Draper, president of Life Way Christian Resources, was hardly exaggerating when he stated, "It appears the sin of choice among Christians today is pornography."¹⁰

Considering the prevalence of pornography use among Christians, it's time we examine the effect it's having on individuals and families within the church and on our Christian witness in a secular and increasingly sexualized culture.

DEFINING PORNOGRAPHY

Webster defines pornography as "obscene literature or art." This leaves the term "obscene" open to interpretation since a good deal of socially acceptable material may be obscene to some while artistic to others. The legal definition of obscenity, however, as established by the U. S. Supreme Court in 1973, narrows the term:

1. While applying contemporary community standards and taken as a whole, it is something that the average person would consider appeals to prurient interest.
2. The work (or material) depicts or describes sexual conduct in a patently offensive way as specifically defined by the applicable state law.
3. The work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, and scientific value.¹¹

By this three-part standard, sexually explicit videotapes, DVDs, magazines, and Web sites qualify as porn. Honesty and common sense will also allow that any visual material used to incite an erotic response, even if the material is not generally considered obscene, becomes a form of pornography to the individual who uses it to that end. For the purposes of this article, however, we'll use the Supreme Court's definition as a reference point.

THE LETHAL EFFECTS OF PORNOGRAPHY

The use of pornography, I believe, weakens the church today in three significant ways: First, it creates a *dependency* on pornography that weakens the individual believer. Second, it causes a *disruption* of the

“one-flesh” union that weakens Christian marriages. Third, it results in a *distortion* in thinking that weakens a Christian’s ability to relate and function.

A Dependency That Weakens the Individual Believer

The value of personal freedom is an ongoing biblical theme. Adam was created under God’s authority with the freedom to choose, manage, and procreate (Gen. 1:27–30); Israel’s slavery was an evil that God sent Moses to confront and dismantle (Exod. 3–15); Jesus began His public ministry by announcing He had come, among other things, to set captives free (Luke 4:18); and Paul asserted that liberty is what God has called us to, that Christian liberty should be protected, and that bondage is to be avoided (Gal. 5:1, 13). The Judeo-Christian ethic places a high premium on personal freedom and condemns anything that restricts or prohibits a person from reaching his or her God-given potential. If liberty is good, it stands to reason that addiction — a dependence on a certain behavior or experience — is bad; and if something can be shown to be addictive, that in itself becomes a strong argument against it.

There are limits to this argument, to be sure. Most would agree that caffeine is an addictive substance, and yet coffee drinking is generally not frowned on; nor is the use of sugar, which many consider a relatively addictive substance. What distinguishes these substances from cocaine or heroin is the degree to which their use impairs a person’s freedom and productivity.

A woman who drinks three cups of coffee daily, for example, is different than a woman with a thousand-dollar-a-day heroin habit. Both of them may be, in the strictest sense, dependent on their drug of choice, and so their freedom is impaired. The coffee drinker is not, however, in virtually all cases, *significantly* and *functionally* impaired by her drug. She can operate on the job, maintain focus and stability, and manage personal responsibilities quite well despite her habit. The heroin user, in contrast, is rendered largely dysfunctional by her drug, will often resort to illegal activities to support her use of it, and is affected by heroin in such a way that it becomes increasingly difficult for her to sustain even the most primary human relationships. Both women are in bondage to some degree, but there’s a huge contrast in the nature of their bondage and in its impact on their general abilities.

The nature of immorality and its impact on a person’s abilities are described in Scripture as “enslaving”: “His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins” (Prov. 5:22). Peter described the false promise of freedom through immorality: “They allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness...While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption; for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage” (2 Pet. 2:18–19).

Bondage to a sexual sin — a growing dependency on the sin, similar to dependency on a drug — often goes unrecognized because addiction to a behavior is a relatively new concept to many people. Most mental health professionals agree that people can become addicted to chemicals. Many of them also recognize the possibility of becoming addicted to an experience. Those who believe in this possibility — myself included — believe addiction to an experience, such as gambling or the use of porn, follows a threefold pattern: the *discovery* of a hyperstimulating experience, the *repetition* of the experience, and an eventual *dependence* on the experience as a means of functioning or coping.

Discovery, Repetition, Dependence

When pornography is viewed for the first time — discovered, as it were — the viewer experiences a unique rush, accompanied by a strong sexual fantasy. The viewer is not, after all, simply enjoying the sight of another person’s body, potent as that pleasure might be. He is also creating an imaginary bond with the image he’s viewing, enjoying a false but potent connection in which he orchestrates and controls the entire sexual encounter. He has, in short, discovered a powerful and rewarding product, and like any consumer, he will be inclined to repeat its use until he no longer simply enjoys it but becomes dependent on it.

Christian counselor Robert Ellis describes this hyperstimulating experience much as one would describe a narcotic rush: “Use of pornography creates an exotic combination of internal stimulants which cascade through the bloodstream like liquid flesh. They create a sense of relief, excitement, exhilaration or

pleasure — when these pleasurable, relieving surges get grooved into association with pornography, the flesh gains control over the spirit and the problem becomes one of addiction. It is not uncommon for pornography to elicit internal surges as addictive as cocaine.”¹²

This “addictive as cocaine” experience is shared by millions of pornography’s consumers, as evidenced by the National Council on Sexual Addiction Compulsivity, which estimates between six to eight percent of Americans display symptoms of sexual addiction (percentages that translate into 16 to 21 million citizens).¹³ Indeed, an MSNBC poll showed that in a sampling of 38,000 respondents, one out of every ten persons surveyed indicated they were addicted to sex on the Internet.¹⁴

Any form of sexual sin is serious, whether or not the person committing it is “addicted” to the sin or indulging it only on occasion; but when a person becomes dependent on that behavior as a source of comfort or relief, the problem of sin is now accompanied by the problem of bondage. When numerous Christians have come under such bondage, the entire church, like a body with parts that are diseased or crippled, must suffer.

A Disruption That Weakens Christian Marriages

Further problems are created when the use of pornography invades Christian marriages. It will eventually disrupt the unity, both sexual and emotional, that is vitally crucial to stable marital life.

When a group of Pharisees questioned Jesus on the ethics of divorce (Matt. 19:4–6), He articulated a basic standard for the human sexual experience: sexual union is to be heterosexual (“He made them male and female”), independent (“a man shall leave father and mother”), and monogamous (“one flesh”). Paul added that within the sanctity of a monogamous and permanent commitment, husband and wife are to attend to each other’s sexual needs (1 Cor. 7:4–5) and reserve their sexual energies for each other, thus preserving the uniqueness of their bond and avoiding moral transgressions (1 Cor. 7:2).

The benefits of a “one-flesh” union are confirmed elsewhere in Scripture. A cursory look at Old and New Testament figures confirms the wisdom of monogamy and the chaos introduced by infidelity, polygamy, or loss of sexual control, all of which play key roles in some of the Bible’s greatest tragedies. Witness the bitter rivalry between Abraham’s wife and her maid and the painful repercussions that result, the foolish loss of judgment that came with Herod’s sexual obsession with his stepdaughter, the death of a child and permanent family curse caused by David’s adultery, and the spiritual decline of Solomon’s faith because of his appetite for foreign women. A fundamental lesson emerges: The one-flesh union provides psychological safety to individuals, stabilizes the family, and enhances productivity and order within the community.

Jesus further clarified the concept of the one-flesh union when He declared that adultery is not limited to actions but can also occur in the heart: “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:27–28). Pornography, which necessitates lusting after strangers, accordingly disrupts the one-flesh union, depriving husband and wife of the very benefits the Bible promises to those who remain monogamous.

In concurrence with the Bible, a growing number of secular theorists are also celebrating the wisdom of monogamous commitment. Studies show that it enhances the life span of men and women who practice it¹⁵ and that the quality of life improves in proportion to the practice of fidelity. Drug and alcohol abuse dropped significantly among married test subjects in a University of Chicago study, and monogamous individuals made more money, had twice as much sex as their nonmonogamous counterparts, and experienced half the domestic violence of those studied who either lived together unmarried or lived alone.¹⁶

In light of this, pornography is shown to be especially crippling to marriages, as it damages the ability of its users to maintain an ongoing, committed union. The claim that it is a harmless product and practice belies the biblical and secular evidence that it violates the one-flesh standard. The man using pornography violates this standard, whether he is married or single. If he is single, he violates it by engaging in random sexual fantasies with the innumerable women he views in magazines or

pornographic Web sites. He is, in essence, attempting to enjoy the ecstasy of sexual union without any of its commitments or responsibilities and thus creates a false, temporal bond with phantoms. Since a one-flesh union is both authentic and exclusive, he is falling far short of the biblical standard.

When a married man uses porn, he violates the Matthew 5 standard as well: the sexual energy he has pledged to reserve for his wife is now being invested into his private fantasies. He is, in essence, embezzling from his spouse what is rightfully hers, and is instead spending it irresponsibly, much as a gambler steals funds from his employer to support his habit. What properly belongs to one person is thus stolen, making the term “cheating” all the more applicable.

Secular studies confirm the crippling effect of pornography on a person’s ability to maintain a monogamous bond. Researchers Dolf Zimmerman and Jennings Bryant, for example, noted that continued exposure to pornography increased its user’s desires for sexual contacts and behaviors outside their marriages,¹⁷ and author Diana Russell found that pornography leads men and women to experience conflict, suffering, and sexual dissatisfaction.¹⁸

Common sense would lead to the same conclusion. Each of us contains a limited amount of sexual/emotional energy, which will either be reserved for a monogamous bond or spent elsewhere. Our ability to sustain a bond with one partner cannot help but be impacted by the level of energy we’ve reserved for that partnership.

As a counselor, I see this principle played out repeatedly. When a husband engages in the use of pornography, his wife almost always notices a certain detachment on his part: less time, less sexual interaction, less attention. She suffers; he embezzles; everyone loses. Pornography systematically weakens marriages within the body of Christ, for it disrupts the bonds crucial to a healthy marriage.

A Distortion That Darkens the Christian Mind

The eye is indeed the lamp of the body (Matt. 6:22–23). If a person’s eye is perpetually exposed to darkness, there comes an inevitable distortion in that person’s thinking. It is in this darkening of the mind that pornography makes its leap from an act that is morally repugnant to one that has frightening consequences. “Evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33), Paul warned, and the impact on the mind of a Christian consistently exposed to the wrong types of communication is immeasurable.

Zimmerman and Bryant, for example, found that continued exposure to pornography affected a male viewer’s basic beliefs about sexuality in general and women in particular.¹⁹ They likewise noted that exposure to porn increased its viewers’ desires for deviant behaviors, such as sado-masochism, and also desensitized their attitudes toward rape. Psychologist Edward Donnerstein of the University of Wisconsin came to similar conclusions, noting that even brief exposure to violent forms of pornography led to antisocial attitude and behavior.²⁰ Clinical psychologist Victor Kline concurs, noting that men who consume pornography on a regular basis experienced increased aggression in attitude and behavior, noticed an increase in “rape fantasies,” and felt increased indifference toward women in general.²¹

Like any drug, pornography’s effects vary according to the general health of the individual who uses it. In other words, while a person will be adversely affected by using an illegal drug, the specific effect will probably vary from person to person. A person already predisposed toward violence may well become more violent when intoxicated; a person more inclined to depression may find himself acutely suicidal when under the influence. Similarly, not every porn user becomes a rapist or sexual deviant, but there can be no question of its adverse effects on the user’s thinking.

I can testify to this first hand, both as a former user of pornography and as a counselor. Having discovered the “dark magic,” I found myself increasingly withdrawn from genuine interpersonal relationships and more isolated, defensive, and detached. Accustomed to the false world of phantom relations, I found real relations less and less tolerable. I also developed a callousness toward women, which I repeatedly see in my clients. They existed for me — I visually used them daily via magazines and videos; I controlled them in my fantasy world; and I became less tolerant of any defects in real women as I spent more time in the company of unreal, though perfect, images of women. I had discovered a world

in which both I and all around me would be perfect. In the shadowlands of pornographic imagery, people existed for my pleasure, and I existed to rule and indulge. In short, I had adopted a mindset so far away from the mind of Christ that I decided to usurp His authority for my own, thus completing the darkening of my mind.

C. S. Lewis alluded to this self-idolatry when he described the world of sexual fantasy as being “a harem of imaginary brides. And this harem, once admitted, works against a man ever getting out and really uniting with a real woman. For the harem is always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifices or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attributes which no real woman can rival. In the end, they become merely the medium through which he increasingly adores himself.”²²

PIERCING THE DARKNESS

When a person is angry enough, scared enough, or frustrated enough, that person will take action. So it is with pornography. If you recognize its impact on your life, and you are sufficiently concerned to take action, that is the beginning of true change.

The journey away from pornography, like the journey away from sexual sin in general, is so simple it escapes many people. It can be reduced to three simple principles: repentance, discipleship, and accountability.

Repentance: Reject the behavior by separating yourself from it. If you have not separated yourself from it, you haven't repented. In practical terms, that may mean purchasing a filtering device (or switching to an Internet service provider that prohibits pornographic material from coming through), or doing away with the Internet altogether. It may mean discontinuing the cable service on your television. In short, do whatever is necessary to separate yourself from the behavior on which you've become dependent.

Discipleship: Establish yourself in the daily discipline of prayer and Bible study. If you do not have a regular devotional life, begin *now* by naming a book of the Bible you can begin reading *today*. If you haven't read the Bible before, or you've been out of the habit for a while, let me suggest the following books, and read them in this order to get you started: the Gospel of John, Romans, Ephesians, James, and Proverbs. Follow up these daily readings with a time of prayer, following the model of prayer Christ taught in Matthew 6:9–13. Prayer and the reading of Scripture are requirements for anyone wanting to renew his or her mind; they will diffuse the power of deeply ingrained sexual images.

Accountability: Start a relationship with at least one believer who knows about your use of pornography. Have this person ask you, on a weekly basis, whether you've repeated this behavior and how well you've resisted the temptations to repeat it. Remember, sexual sin thrives in the dark. A large part of recovery from it lies in your willingness to keep your private behavior in the light of another believer's scrutiny and prayers. This, like the daily discipline of prayer and Scripture reading, is required if you're serious about your repentance.

A BATTLE WORTH FIGHTING

After the English Parliament's 1938 appeasement in Czechoslovakia, Winston Churchill saw the danger of choosing peace when honor and common sense called for battle. “You have been given the choice between war and dishonor,” he said. “You have chosen dishonor, and you will have war!” History, of course, would confirm his prophetic warning: refusing to fight an honorable battle may afford a temporary peace, but in the long run it's too costly. Delaying a necessary battle may well result in a devastating, full-scale war.

Every person who has become involved in sexual sin makes a decision between battle and dishonor. As always, dishonor looks like an easier choice. Dishonor means making peace with your sin. It means telling yourself that after so many years, it's become such a part of your life that trying to cut it out would be too traumatic and too uncomfortable. It would mean saying goodbye to a reliable (though destructive) friend, and the battle to abstain from this “friend,” with all the temptations and struggles it would involve, seems too demanding, so a dishonorable compromise is therefore reached when a person decides to live in peaceful coexistence with his (or her) sexual sin.

Tyrants, however, never coexist peacefully; by their nature, they demand increased territory, fewer limitations, and more captives. The sin a person decides not to go to war against soon demands more territory. It begins invading career, family, health, and reputation. Now the person finds that what could have been a brief skirmish, if it had been attended to earlier, has become full-blown war. He chose dishonor over battle. In the end, he winds up with both.

If your mind has become a battlefield — darkened by the use of pornography, which has distorted your basic attitudes toward life — you have already yielded a good deal of territory, and your willingness to concede it has already cost a terrible price to you, your loved ones, and the church. God grant that today you find yourself ready to abandon the dark and see again how wonderful the true light can be.

NOTES

1. All Bible quotations are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.
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