

# The Problem of Pornography: A Faithful Response for Parents and Church Leaders

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*A mother goes into her 15-year-old son's room to put away some laundry. She notices that he has left his computer turned on. Before shutting it off she sees that he is still connected to the Internet. Her curiosity gets the best of her and she looks at the record of websites that he has visited. She discovers that he has visited several pornographic sites.*

She is not alone. It has been estimated that up to 90 percent of all young people have access to the Internet. While the Internet has changed the way many things are done for the better, it has also created concern. One large concern is the easy access to pornography that adolescents now have. Doing a Google search on the term "sex pictures" brings up 486 million results in 0.24 seconds. Each year about 40 percent of teens and preteens visit sexually explicit sites.<sup>1</sup> Pornography is both extensive and easily available.

The mother mentioned above might first be tempted to take away her son's computer or to install software that limits access to sex-related sites. However, both responses are problematic. Computers are only one source of Internet access. Many teens can connect to the Internet through their smartphones, so limiting access on a home computer blocks only one avenue. Today's teens are also technologically savvy and may get around access barriers or they can simply have access at a friend's house. Finally, this behavior in adolescents is occurring at a time when it is developmentally appropriate to be curious about sexuality.

While it is almost impossible to stop a determined teenager from looking at pornography, parents who give up and acquiesce are not doing their children any favors.

## The Sacredness of Life Is Lost

Pornography is an activity in which the sacredness of life is lost. As believers in the Reformed tradition, we know that God freely created us and gave us life. We are also told in Genesis that God made us in God's own image. When human beings are reduced to physical objects for someone else's pleasure, part of God's image is being destroyed. God is more than sensuality or pleasure and thus so are humans. We are able to relate, love, make commitments, be mindful of others, see the spiritual dimension of life, and act with care and compassion toward one another. When we substitute a truncated version of humanity for God's vision of us, we trust our own ideas, choices, and creations and have fallen into idolatry.

1. Janis Wolak, Kimberly Mitchell, David Finkelhor, "Unwanted and Wanted Exposure to Online Pornography in a National Sample of Youth Internet Users," *Pediatrics* 119, no. 2 (February 1, 2007): 247–257.

Pornography exploits women by defining them as merely objects for man's pleasure. Women in pornography are often portrayed as sexual playthings with few other redeeming values. Any regard for the whole person is lost. The Reformed tradition holds strongly that we are called together into community. Being in community means that what one person does affects the whole. As much as we would follow our own desires at times, the Reformed tradition offers no such option. In Romans we are taught, "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Romans 12:4–5). Thus the devaluation and objectification of women affects us all. When a distorted image of another human is presented and believed, we all suffer. It sows the seeds of confusion, inequality, and injustice.

Christ came into the world that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Abundant life doesn't come from the satisfaction of physical desires but through our relationship of love with God and our living and sharing that love with one another. Life lived with God includes so much more than the sliver of existence that pornography elevates to the ultimate. In the end, pornography becomes a cheap if not laughable imitation of God's true intention for us and holds the loneliness of worshipping a graven image.

## Harmful Effects

Pornography has a number of potentially harmful effects on adolescents. Young people who view pornography are likely to have sex at an earlier age. They are more likely to assume that unprotected sexual intercourse has no consequences. Internet pornography has the potential of becoming addictive and thus requiring greater and greater amounts of novelty and sexually acting out to satisfy the sense of compulsion. Pornography promotes the myth that everyone is having sex. It can create a sense of shame and guilt. Insecurity around body image is another harmful effect. Eighty-five percent of all women in pornography have had breast implants, and 100 percent of the photos of porn actresses have been enhanced. The average length of an erect penis is considerably smaller than the average erect penis size of males in pornographic movies. The comparison to idealized bodies can create a sense of failure and loss of self-esteem.

Perhaps the most detrimental effects of viewing pornography are the myths created by the way sexuality is presented. First, pornography is presented almost solely from a male fantasy point of view. The women in pornography act the way that some men wish they would act, which bears little resemblance to an accurate depiction of the female experience of sexuality. It leaves the impression with some young women that they must act like porn stars. Young men are surprised when pornography doesn't reflect the reality of human relationships. Second, pornography shows a world where sexual gratification means everything and relationships mean nothing. The sexual activity portrayed is most often between people who are not married and have little or no commitment to each other. Sex is seen as a purely recreational activity with little or no context of love or intimate connection.

## A Distortion of God's Good Gifts

The myths of pornography are far removed from the intentions of God and the way God shows people to treat each other. Sex, while being a gift that can bring great pleasure, is reserved for the intimate and connected context of marriage. Christ teaches people to see the value in others not for what they offer but for whom they are as children of God. When people are presented as being valued primarily for their sexuality, they are objectified and not seen as people. Pornography values sexual desire above all else, eliminating or minimizing other aspects of life, creating a self-absorbed world that has little room for the opportunities and responsibilities of being a follower of Christ.

Pornography isolates and distorts sexuality and uses this God-given gift for its own purposes. The word *pornography* comes from two Greek words: *porne*, which means "harlot" and comes from a root word that means "to sell," and *grapho*, which means "writing." Like prostitution, gratuitous sexuality in media and even advertising, sex in pornography is being used for financial gain. It is a distortion of God's intent. God's gift of sexuality, which in the right context can offer the gift of grace, becomes an activity for profit.

## A Faithful Response

So how are parents, educators, and pastors to respond? It is important first to understand the context from which pornography arises.

Pornography works in a world where people are hungry and feel incomplete. Pornography responds to this emptiness by trying to fill it with sensual pleasure. It is using an outside solution to fill an inside problem, which almost never works. Whenever relationships (sexual or otherwise) become the goal that will fill our incompleteness in life, we have settled on a solution that will ultimately fail. We do not live by bread or relationships alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Thus, pornography works in a place of loneliness, isolation, and compulsion. Genuine intimacy is not for the faint of heart. It requires work and commitment, understanding and patience, giving and sacrifice. When pornography is taken as a shortcut to fill our emptiness, it will never satisfy and instead is not unlike an arrangement of plastic flowers instead of a living bouquet. Knowing this context can help parents create an environment of love, meaning, and intimacy where pornography would lose its appeal by becoming unnecessary.

Parents, pastors, and educators can first work at addressing the deeper longings we all have as God's children living in a foreign land. Communicate to adolescents that they are loved and valued. Show them again and again that they matter. Pornography is less likely to establish itself if there is no empty place for it to fill.

Part of creating an environment of abundance as opposed to one of emptiness is committing to work incessantly on communication. Adults need to talk with adolescents in a way that permits everyone to feel safe. Part of creating this atmosphere of trust is communicating nonjudgmentally. To do so, parents are best served by facing and soothing their own fears and anxieties and the overreactions they sometimes cause.

If an atmosphere of trust and communication is established, then true conversation about the dangers and problems of pornography can be addressed. Parents need to explain the myths, expose the fallacies, point out the dangers, and remind young people how much God values them.

Parents, pastors, and educators have a responsibility to monitor the youth with whom they are connected. Caring and paying attention are showing the love of Christ; showing the love of Christ is a commitment made at baptism. Monitoring young people and paying attention to their choices and responses is showing the love of Christ. Study after study has shown that adolescents who are monitored feel more secure and are more likely to make better choices.

Finally, those who have adolescent children or work with them should not be afraid of setting expectations and communicating them. Expectations are far more difficult to bring into being if they are only assumed and are not communicated. The only way young people can live up to expectations is for the adults in their lives to first have expectations and communicate them.

Pornography can become addictive. It stimulates the same part of the brain that is affected by compulsive gambling. If the viewing of pornography by an adolescent has moved beyond simple curiosity to a daily occurrence, or if a parent suspects that his or her youth is showing behaviors that may be indicating addiction, then professional counseling is a good option to assess the risk and determine treatment.

The battle of restricting access to pornography, while sometimes helpful, will always be a challenge. Equally important is educating adolescents about pornography. A young person who understands the myths, fallacies, and spiritually bankrupt nature of pornography will be far more likely to make good and positive decisions. The partnership between adolescents and adults who are willing to teach, listen, and care offers the best hope that relationships involving sexuality can be restored to the kind of life God has in mind for us all.

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