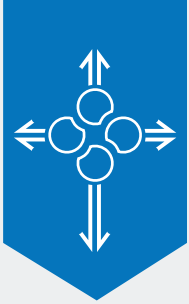


SEX, GOD, AND THE GOSPEL



Tim Chester





YEARNING

SEX, GOD, AND THE GOSPEL

A recent survey suggested that one in two evangelical men and one in five evangelical women are struggling with pornography. Other surveys bear out these proportions. This means that when you look out on your congregation on a Sunday morning, one in three people are struggling with pornography. What good news are you offering them?

The chances are many of them think they're the only ones who are struggling. They may think they're disqualified from Christian service by their sin, perhaps even from the Christian family. They hide their guilt, terrified of being exposed. Yet at the same time they may long to share their problem. What good news are you offering them?

Or maybe they've told someone and were met by barely masked repulsion. Or maybe the person they told was sympathetic, but didn't know how to bring hope to the situation or how to offer accountability. What good news are you offering them?

Christians need to hear a positive Christian message on sexuality because they are called to follow Christ in a sex-saturated culture. It's not just the proliferation of explicit images, but the slow drip feed of non-explicit material which nevertheless assumes sex outside of marriage is not only a norm, but a moral good.

Unbelievers, too, need to hear the positive Christian message on sexuality. If they don't, then any call to repentance will lack content. Jesus repeatedly makes his call to repentance specific. The rich young man whose heart is set on wealth is called to give his money to the poor. The woman who seeks fulfillment in sexual intimacy is offered living water.

Most unbelievers are sinning sexually as a matter of course. Christian sexual ethics are a mystery to them. They either know nothing of what will be entailed

in following Christ or they find our ethics bizarre. If we don't present a Christian view of sex as good news then our sexual ethics will be a barrier that prevents people professing the lordship of Christ. If you don't address sexuality as part of your evangelism then you'll either store up problems for future discipleship or you'll never win people for Christ in the first place. This doesn't mean you need to talk about sex whenever a gospel opportunity arises. But any ongoing conversation with an unbeliever and any balanced pulpit ministry must regularly address the topic.

Biblical ethics are always gospel ethics—good-news ethics. This means they should always come as good news. Many people seem to think that we have to put up with the restrictions of Christianity because of the compensations of heaven. But the truth is the godly life is the good life. It is the life of joy and fulfillment and freedom. We need to show how Christian sexual ethics are good news.

So let's talk about sex. That means sermons on the subject of sex. It also means that even when sermons are not specifically on the topic of sexuality, illustrations and applications routinely reference sexual issues.

Paul warns us: "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret" (Eph. 5:11-12, NIV). That means we need to avoid talking about sex in a way that might titillate or provoke. But it doesn't mean keeping silent. Our goal is to expose sin as sin; to show that sexual sin is idolatrous (5:5).

It also means celebrating sex as a good gift from God. Earlier in Ephesians 5:3-4 Paul says: "Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving" (NIV). So, "no" to obscenity or coarse joking. But "yes" to thanksgiving—and in the context of Ephesians 5, that means rejoicing in sex.

TALK ABOUT GRACE

We need to talk not only about sex, but also about grace in the context of sex.

Sex is powerful. It binds two people together in a deep and profound way. The two become one. Indeed it is not sex per se that binds us, but God binds us through sex (Mark 10:9). It is a beautiful and precious thing.

But when this power for good is misused it becomes dangerously destructive. Sex gone bad causes intense hurt and shame. Many people in your congregation will have sinned sexually—many before conversion, some after conversion. Still others, too, will have been sinned against.

This means that to talk about the wonder of sex within marriage will provoke deep shame in the hearts of some people. So alongside your talk about sex needs to go talk about grace. And not just grace in the abstract, but the grace of God in the death of Christ. Christ dies in our place, bearing our guilt so that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). There is no condemnation for porn users, adulterers, sexual fantasists who are in Christ Jesus. This is not being soft on sin. Quite the opposite. It takes sin seriously, so seriously that the only remedy is the death of the eternal Son of God. Look at the cross and see what God thinks of your sin—the death of his own Son is the only act that can atone for what you have done. But in the act is grace and love and forgiveness and adoption.

There is no condemnation. Churches are full of people desperately trying to self-atone for their lust, desperately trying to sort themselves out, desperately trying to prove they are good enough for God. Our message must be, “It is finished.” Christ has done it all.

So we need to talk about grace because people need grace. But there are two further reasons why we need to talk about grace.

First, we need to talk about grace so people access the help they need. We cannot change ourselves. None of us can break the bonds of sexual sin in our own strength. Many of us know that from personal experience. Rules, vows, software filters cannot do the job on their own. We need God. We need to come to him for help in our need.

But you’ll not come to God if you think he’ll reject you or rebuke you or begrudge you. You’ll not come to God if you think of him as a stern judge, waiting to punish you. You’ll not come to God if you think that, while technically he forgives you because of the cross, he does so reluctantly without rejoicing in you.

This is why William Romaine, one of the leaders of the Great Awakening in Britain, said: “No sin can be crucified either in heart or life unless it first be pardoned in conscience, because there will be want of faith to receive the strength

1. William Romaine, *The Life, Walk and Triumph of Faith* (1771, James Clarke, 1970), p. 280.

of Jesus, by whom alone it can be crucified.”¹ No-one will come to God for the help they need unless they think of God as a gracious Father who is ready to receive them.

Hebrews 4:16 says: “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (NIV). We need mercy and we need help from God if we are to change. The good news is we can find help at God’s throne because it is a throne of grace. The good news is we can come with confidence because “we have a great High Priest who has gone through the heavens” on our behalf and who can “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:14-16, NIV).

Second, we need to talk about grace if we want a conversation about sex. It’s all well and good talking about sex. But if you want people to talk back to you about their sexual problems then you’ll need to talk about grace. They need to know you will hear them as a fellow sinner. They need to know that when they share their problems you’ll not be horrified, nor will you reject them.

We need to foster a culture a grace in our churches of grace. Too often we create a culture of performance in which everything and everyone appears successful. It’s a tough environment for sinners.

Creating this culture of grace will mean talking about your own struggles. Don’t be too specific—for most people hearing the details of your own struggles with lust will not be helpful. Tell everyone that you struggle, but tell only a few what you struggle with. Talk about your failures more than your successes. Your job is not to preach you, but to preach God’s grace. Talk about how you failed to change, but how God is changing you. Talk about how you failed, but how you are finding comfort in God’s grace and Christ’s finished work. Talk about your struggles, but do so in a God-centered way. Your congregation’s hope is not in following you and your steps to success. Your congregation’s hope is in God and his gracious, liberating power.

TALK ABOUT GOD

A life-with-porn verses a life-without-porn is a poor choice. A life-with verses a life-without. If you set it up in these terms then you won’t produce lasting change. We need to set it up (as it truly is) as a choice between life-with-porn verses life-with-God. We need to show how God always offers more than porn.

This begins with exposing the lie of porn. Behind every sin is a lie. We sin because we have “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Rom. 1:23-25, NIV). Porn is no different. Porn makes false promises.

For some porn offers respect: a fantasy world in which I’m potent or admired by others. For others porn offers intimacy: substitute relationships without the risks. For others it offers escape: when life is daunting or boring we turn to porn for quick satisfaction. For some porn may offer revenge: a way of getting back at our spouse who hasn’t delivered the sex we want or at God who hasn’t delivered the life we want.

But it’s all lies. Porn is a performance—carefully cut and edited to create the illusion of power or pleasure. We need to look beyond the frame of the camera. Porn sex is never real sex. It distorts our expectations of relationships, marriage and sex.

And porn never delivers. Whether it’s respect, intimacy, escape or revenge, it’s not the real thing. It’s a cheap fantasy that only leaves us wanting more. People move from softcore to hardcore looking for what porn cannot deliver until they’re enslaved.

We need to expose these lies. Then we need to show how God promises more.

If porn offers respect, then the good news is that you don’t need to be controlled by the opinion of others. Compare those whose approval you want with God. Who matters most? Whose affirmation really counts?

If porn offers risk-free intimacy, then the good news is that God is in control. Relationships are risky, but God promises to care for those who trust him. He may not provide a spouse, but he will provide himself—a chance to know the Creator.

If porn offers escape from the pressures of life, then the good news is that God is in control. The Bible describes God as a “rock” and “refuge” to his people (Ps. 18:1-3). “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7, NIV).

If porn offers you escape from the boredom of life, then the good news is that God is the source of true and lasting joy. Of course, porn is immediate, quick, easy. But its pleasures are short-lived and empty. We’re always left wanting more.

If porn offers revenge, then the good news is that God is gracious. We think we're not getting what we deserve—from our spouse or from God. In fact, we're getting far more than the judgment we deserve. God welcomes us into his family. Thinking of yourself as a son or daughter of God will set you free from resentment and bitterness.

At its root porn is about worship. I want to be worshipped. I can click between women, all of whom are offering themselves to me. Or I can think of myself as the stud sending women into an ecstasy of desire. Or I can think of myself as the romantic heroine, relentlessly pursued by my admirer. I enter a world in which people worship me. It is a world in which I am at the center.

Freedom begins when I stop trying to be at the center and let God be at the center. It begins when I stop serving myself and start loving other people.

TALK ABOUT GOOD NEWS

At the moment biblical sexual ethics seem like bad news in our culture. I believe the day is coming when people will again want to hear what the Bible has to say about sex. Sex is everywhere and is everything in our culture. But as a result it's losing its value. The Bible's restrictions are not there to protect us from sex, but to protect sex from us. The restrictions are like the banks that constrain the Niagara River so that it gushes forth in the Niagara Falls. Remove those restrictions and you're left with something more like the Mississippi Delta—wide, shallow and muddy. A biblical approach to sex is good news for married people.

A biblical approach to sex is also good news for single people. Sex has become a substitute god in our culture. It is the source to which we look for meaning, fulfillment, value, identity. People feel lost without it. They feel worthless unless they have the admiration of a lover. It's their savior. But it's a poor savior. When we find sex, we feel loved, potent, justified in the moment. But it doesn't last. Sex is not God and we're left empty, wanting more. And then when we don't measure up, failed sex leaves us crushed.

“You should not...” is not in itself good news. For sinners it's a word of condemnation. Most of the people in your congregation who look at porn know they shouldn't be doing so. If your sermon simply tells them that porn is sinful then you will only succeed in leaving them condemned. That's not gospel. If you simply tell them to stop then you will leave them condemned because they've already tried to stop. That's not gospel.

The gospel says, “You need not...because God is bigger and better than sin.”

Consider the approach of Jesus with the woman at the well in John 4. He knows she has had five husbands and the man she is now with is not her husband. He could have told her to stop her sexual sin. But instead he offers her living water. She has been looking for meaning, satisfaction, identity in sexual intimacy and not finding it. The math tells the story: five husbands plus one. She has made sex her savior and it has not delivered. Jesus gives her good news by offering meaning, satisfaction, identity in himself. He offers true satisfaction (“living water”) and lasting satisfaction (“welling up to eternal life”). Legalism says, “You should not move from man to man and you should not use porn.” The gospel says, “You need not move from man to man and you need not use porn because Jesus offers something bigger and better—he offers living water.”

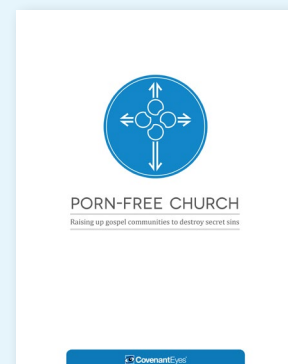
“This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32, NIV). So says Paul after talking about marriage. We’re talking about marriage and sex, but it turns out we’re talking about Christ and his bride. God gave us our sexuality to help understand his covenant love. The passions we feel around sex are a pointer to God’s passionate, jealous love for his people. Every conversation about sex is really a conversation about Christ who “loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy” (Eph. 5:25-26, NIV).

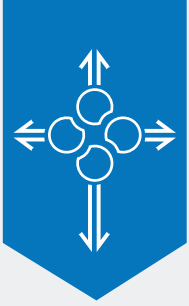
Let’s talk about sex. Our message is good news.

LEARN MORE

This article is an excerpt from *Porn-Free Church: Raising Up Gospel Communities to Destroy Secret Sins*.

Download the entire e-book for free at:
www.covenanteyes.com/porn-free-church





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