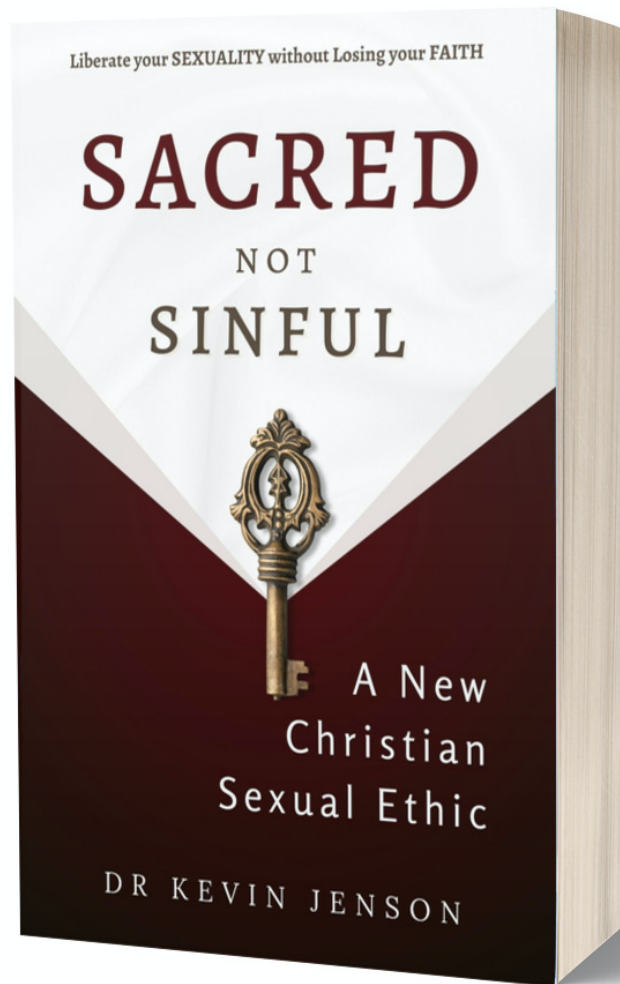




Welcome to the free Sampler of
“Sacred not Sinful:
A New Christian Sexual Ethic”

Here you can read 4 of the 26 chapters to get a feel for what this book includes. If you enjoy what you read or have any questions, please send a message to the author at www.drkevinjenson.com or purchase the full book at www.sacrednotsinful.com

Feel free to download, copy, share this sampler with your friends, family, church group, etc...but please be sure to link them back to my website where they can read the whole story and find all kinds of resources to continue growing in spiritual and sexual maturity!

Much Love,

-Kevin J

God is One

I believe that the nature of God is love and that love is a creative force. Just as creation often takes place through a process of division, so love grows through diversification of its expression. All that we know of as earth or even cosmos comes from a single point of origin in love; separated only so that the relationship between the parts might make the whole of love into a visible materiality. You might want to read that sentence again!¹

In this section, I will explore how the duality inherent within the material world (heaven/earth, positive/negative, good/evil, neutron/proton, yin/yang, masculine/feminine, in/out, up/down, light/dark, etc.) creates the potential for love to manifest in the meeting of apparent opposites. All are separate but equal expressions of the same Source, divided so that they might come together in love and reveal the mystery of God.

So far as I can tell from my study of religion, philosophy, metaphysics, and especially the Judeo-Christian tradition, nothing in this material universe exists apart from God - though who, what, and where this Ultimate Existence might be seems to vary in the diversity of stories. Although there is diversity in

¹ If you find anything in this chapter confusing, or if you want to chat further about these ideas, please visit my website for more resources and opportunities to connect.

explanation, the fundamental principle of a divine source or original being remains the same. The Bible itself does not suggest another point of origin for anything, including Satan or whatever else may appear contrary to the nature of God.

My transition to this biblical way of thinking came about slowly because the majority of Christians I grew up with held a deistic and dualistic assumption about reality. These assumptions are hidden deep beneath the surface of theology and most people are not aware of them or of how they shape belief systems. However, deism and dualism both have a profound impact on how people in the Western world choose to live their everyday lives.

Note: The rest of this chapter explores some philosophical foundations of modern Christian thinking. If you love philosophy, there is more like this on my website. If you feel stuck reading through this section, skip to the next Chapter and come back later.

Deism²

Deism could be summarized as a belief that God made the world and left it to function on its own. The world is like a clock that was created by the clockmaker who wound it up and then left it to wind down on its own. One day, it will quit, and that is the end of time.

² For a visual illustration of this concept, visit my website www.drkevinjenson.com and search my blog for “deism.”

Christians who believe God is not present in the world feel it is dangerous to experience a sense of awe and wonder at creation because it is a distraction from the awe and wonder they are supposed to feel toward God (who is somewhere else). The only way to find God in the world is to examine how creation was made (usually through Science) and then worship the intelligent being who made it function at the beginning.

Because of this, deists are often afraid of a close relationship with the earth, with pleasure, with beauty, or with any part of the physical realm. But I was discovering God in all of these things! Whether I was eating, drinking, working, or sleeping, I believed it was possible to do everything for the glory of God³ - not by saying words, but by relating to life as though it were sacred.

I began to wrestle with deism when I realized the moments I felt closest to the presence of God were those in which all of life seemed to come together as one. I could see God in the trees, in the sky, in the water...and it was not through intellectual analysis, but through some indescribable mystery of relationship.

I also questioned the assumption that there are places God might not be, because that seems opposite of the nature of God as revealed in the scripture.⁴ Where would such a place come from? If God left the world to itself, where did He go? I could

³ 1 Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

⁴ e.g. Psalm 139:7-12

understand the presence of God being hidden from our awareness, but not gone!

As I transitioned in my thinking from *deism* to what I would call biblical *theism*, I was sometimes accused of *pan-theism*, or the belief that every *thing* is God. Pantheism is most often associated with earth-based animistic or polytheistic religious contexts. Deism supposes that the world is not God and at the opposite end of the deist perspective is the pantheistic tendency to look at creation (or part of creation) as though it were God.

I think the pantheist framework is biblical in the respect that it recognizes nothing exists which does not exist in, through, and for God. The Apostle Paul agreed with the Greek sages saying, “In him we live and move and have our being”.⁵ Even more personally, James wrote, “He yearns jealously over the spirit [that part of God] He has made to dwell in us [humans].”⁶ However, that which we perceive in the world is not God - or at least not the totality of God.

God is not contained within the creation itself, nor can God be somehow disentangled from His creative expression. I do not think everything is God, but I cannot imagine how it might be anything other than God. If God is all that is, then He cannot create anything that is not of Himself, nor put the world anywhere that is not within Him. In contrast with deism, I began to think of the material world itself as a dimensional

⁵ Acts 17:28

⁶ James 4:5

manifestation of deity that cannot be separated from God without ceasing to exist altogether.⁷

Dualism

The second hidden assumption many Christians make about reality is closely related to deism but has more ancient roots. Deism emerged late in time from European enlightenment philosophy, which separated the material from the spiritual world (and questioned whether anything nonmaterial even existed or *mattered*).⁸ Although its philosophical origins were rather recent, deism reflects much earlier dualistic assumptions that can be found in writings as ancient as the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh or some of the gnostic Greek philosophies that now pervade modern Christian thought.

It took me longer to challenge the dualist assumptions of my Christian practice because most people in the church are unaware of them or find them incredibly uncomfortable to address. The dualist philosopher imagines that good and evil have two distinct sources, which makes it easy to blame Satan for all of the pain, suffering, and ignorant abuses that powerful humans and materialist economics impose on other people and the natural world.

Taking personal responsibility for social problems is difficult...but I didn't yet understand this implication of my shift

⁷ See Colossians 1:15-17 for a similar thesis

⁸ Notice the origins of modern materialism.

in thinking. Like most Christians, I held to a dualist perspective because I could not imagine evil being a part of God. It must come from somewhere or something other than God.

Unfortunately, a view that places the source of evil outside of God presumes some other self-existing entity from which evil might come. This perspective makes both God and Satan into equal superpowers who are at war with each other. Some parts of our world come from God; other parts of our experience come from Satan. The classic image of the angel and the demon sitting on opposite shoulders of a confused human is the epitome of this dualist philosophy. Humans are caught somewhere in the middle of a huge cosmic war waiting helplessly for the day when the good guy finally wins.

I don't think this is a helpful resolution to the theological problem of evil. The dualistic assumption creates the gnostic question about which entity is the good god and which one is the evil god. Gnostics must use human reason to cast judgement on a malevolent being they call the Demiurge, which is foolish in my opinion. If there is an evil being in the universe of the same self-existent power as that which is good, there is no way for human limitations to discover which one is good and which one is evil. There is no capacity for hope.

For this reason primarily, I hold a non-dualist perspective that assumes that there is only one source from which all things come and to which all things go. That source must include all things -

including those I judge as evil. In other words, Heaven and Hell are both found within God.

All kinds of religious traditions recognize this nondualist assumption in their own way. For example, the Buddhist acceptance of that which is, the Hindu origin of all things in Brahma, the Native American sense of brotherhood with all creation, etcetera. Fundamentally, they all align with the premise of The Great Shema: “Hear O Israel, The LORD our God, The LORD is One!”.⁹ Therefore I assume that all created things¹⁰ are but the multiplied expression of *one* self-existent singular Source.

Non-dualism and Duality

As I slowly released the dualistic assumption that good and evil come from two different origins, I realized the Bible tells a much different story than I had ever expected. The whole of the Old Testament is a historical unveiling of one God who is unlike any of the others and who appears in the opening verses of the Bible as the source from which *all* things come.¹¹

The revelation of this God began with the speaking of light into existence, the communication of self out of the darkness and void that was the water and spirit at the beginning of time.¹² In

⁹ Deuteronomy 6:4

¹⁰ See Romans 8:38-39

¹¹ Colossians 1:16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

¹² See Genesis 1:1-3

contrast with other creation accounts from that day, Genesis did not describe the darkness as a powerful force of evil, but rather a place where the presence of God hovered awaiting materialization through union with the word.¹³

The poetic emphasis of Genesis 1 shows how the original elements, described as spirit, water, and darkness became a revelation of God through a process of division. God separated the light from the darkness, the day from the night. The next days, God separated the firmament from the water, and then the land from the water. Following three days of division, three days focused on multiplication. God filled the sky with divisions of light, and the water and land brought forth living creatures each according to their kind (division) who received a command to be fruitful and multiply.

This opening story of the Bible thus sets up the idea of polar opposites inherent within creation itself: God/creation, light/dark, day/night, sky/water, land/sea, etc...ultimately reflected in humankind who were created as one and divided into male and female.

Although I use the word polarity, it would be helpful to think of these examples as dual expressions emerging from a singular source; two sides of the same coin, two poles of one magnetic field. I have come to believe there is one source of all that is, but the revelation of that source becomes apparent through its

¹³ An extraordinary allegorical description of sexual reproduction

separation into distinct expressions. In short, all is one, but the material world reveals the mystery of oneness (of God) through duality.

Each of the divisions of creation can be traced back to a singular source: the Word of God, which someone has said “divides like a two-edged sword.” In the Christian tradition, God is revealed through the Word (the logos, mathematics, the wisdom of God, etc.) through which all of creation came to be and continues to exist.¹⁴ That word took human form in the person of Jesus, who is called the light or the revelation of God - the embodiment of the Creator in creation.¹⁵

The Judeo-Christian tradition thus provides a stark contrast to Gnostic teachings and Platonic thinking: The image of God, the human being, is not a spiritual form corrupted by its physical expression, but the unity of heaven and earth, sea and sky, light and darkness, earth and breath! The primordial vibrating essence of life united with the static material of earth in a divine creature called Adam or “of the earth.”

¹⁴ See John 1:1-5

¹⁵ John 1:18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Beyond Biology

The goal of sex education should be to prepare people to express their sexuality in a way that allows them to access its full breadth of beauty - but most of the people I've talked with are grossly misinformed, even about the biological aspects of sexual connection. It is true that sex can bring individuals into a deep sense of oneness with each other and with God, but this does not happen by accident. The magic of sex has significant implications and is not always a positive experience for those involved - especially when they are not aware of the powerful forces at play in their connection. As I learned through my journey of becoming sex positive, the challenge I faced was never one of the body or even of sex, but one of ignorance about the spiritual, physical, psychological, and social dynamics of sex. I had refused to learn anything about them because of fear that knowledge would lead to sin.

Physical

For religious reasons, I was never taught to understand or respond to my body and its desires in a healthy way. The physical abuse called discipline that I received as a child was specifically designed to destroy any sense of self-agency I might have tried to develop. I was not in control of my body, and those who raised me

believed that it would be unwise for me to be in control because my desires and my sexualized body were fundamentally evil.

Thus, there was no way for me to navigate physical contact of any kind in a way that felt aligned with my needs and desires. The body felt untouchable because there was no way to experience the pleasure of touch without the risk of unwanted sex or arousal. This lack of agency and understanding about the body may partly explain why it is rare to meet someone who can ask for what they truly desire in a physical connection.

The context of sensual or erotic touch has been so tied to sex that it is difficult to distinguish one kind of desire from the other. An example of this confusion can be seen in the reservations many people have in responding to a friendly offer of cuddling. Unless they are also open to erotic play or even to sex, it is rare that they will accept the offer. And sometimes when they do say yes, it is with the intention of sharing erotic arousal or sexual union, not just a sensual snuggle.

Miscommunication or lack of transparency can lead to a violation of body sovereignty when touch takes on an unexpected meaning for one person that the other person did not consent to share. Even though I value the experience of all kinds of human connection, I sometimes end physical contact with people before I would like to because they are unable to meet me in a way that I find welcome and enjoyable. As described earlier, a hug is not just a hug. Touch is not just touch.

The physical body is a gateway between my universe and the mystery of another being. External expressions of love require some understanding of how humans interact on an physical level, an energetic or spiritual level, a personal or psychological level, and a social or relational level. If I cannot understand and regulate my own experience, there is little hope that I can navigate sharing it with someone else.

As seen in the taxonomy of touch, physical contact will vary in its appropriateness and ability to convey sentiment depending on the context, the people, their history, and the significance they give to particular types of touch. Different people have different thresholds of meaning for different activities. Some people will not cuddle with a person unless it is an expression of affection. Others cannot cuddle with a person in spite of feeling affection because cuddling is a sensual experience or one that they only share with a romantic partner.

A kiss provides a great example of thresholds of meaning. For me, this exchange can fall into any of the categories from playful affection to sexual union depending on the context and the connection I feel with another person. Kissing is different from cuddling, however, because the biological union of kissing has an internal effect. To put it crassly, there is an exchange of body fluid and DNA as the biological ecosystem of one body opens to the ecosystem of another.

Internal touch creates a profound sense of energetic openness that is mirrored in the physical sharing of DNA, bacteria, illness,

and most importantly, pleasure. In my experience, kissing often includes a short time period of a several days following the connection where something profound happens: I see and experience the world through the eyes of the person I kissed. For this reason, I have learned to ask myself before a kiss whether this is somebody I would like to experience more deeply. Is there some part of them that I want to invite to become part of my own body and life?

Spiritual not Religious

My philosophy and life experience alike suggest that connecting deeply with another person through eye contact, proximity, touch, or more intimate forms of contact is not just physical. Because I am deeply sensitive to energetic vibrations (moods or intentions), I am usually aware of whether or not I want to connect with another person through an exchange of energy facilitated by touch, eye gazing, or even conversation. My actions need to be aligned with my being or I will feel like something is “off.”

For me, the spiritual dimension of sex has to do with the immaterial parts of the human experience and can be incredibly significant. I have seen that it is possible for someone with enough control over their energetic vibration to use their voice in a way that carries the energy of sexual union, or to stimulate erotic energy in the other person’s body without the need for

physical contact. Some people will describe this magic in terms of energetic frequency or intention.

For the sake of clarity, I consider the spiritual aspect of sex to be the opposite pole from the material or physical aspect.

However, I also recognize that everything is spiritual. I like to imagine that the pole has been bent into a circle until the two opposite ends of physical and spiritual are so entangled it becomes hard to tell one from the other. For me, the physical truly is spiritual and the spiritual truly is physical. They are hard to distinguish, but I try not to confuse spiritual with intellectual, psychological, or social norms disguised as religious tradition.

Some people call the influence of religion a “spiritual” influence, but I think it reflects a psychological or social aspect of community or tradition. For example, I grew up in a church where kissing on the lips was reserved for one’s wife or fiancé and sex was not supposed to happen outside of marriage. Anyone who had a baby without being married was considered to have a bad relationship with God and may have struggled to maintain their standing in the religious community. Although these beliefs were related to ideas about God, I don’t consider them to be spiritual, but to reflect a religious practice that had traded truth for tradition.

Perhaps the most devastating sexual tradition among Christian- and Muslim-influenced cultures is related to the value of virginity or a woman’s lack of sexual experience. This tradition

comes from the days when women were treated as property of their fathers and husbands. The value for female virginity is not always explicitly stated in the Western world. It has been hidden in language with words like slut or whore used to label someone whose value has been used up on the marketplace of sexual exchange. Because of their origins, these unfortunate terms are used primarily for women and keep many people from enjoying the beauty of a sexual expression free from fear of cultural repercussions.

Psychological Challenges

Sex reaches into every part of life: physical, spiritual, psychological, and social, opening up each of these areas for expression, examination, and change. It sits at the intersection of life and death, a powerful vehicle of personal transformation or tragedy. For this reason, sex is one of the most stimulating activities that humans can engage in.

Yet, because of ignorance and silence on the subject of sex, few people are self-aware or practiced enough to share the more intimate forms of energetic or physical touch in a way that aligns with their own desires and those of another person.

In addition to the physical, and social risks of navigating touch in a spiritually blind world, there are also psychological challenges to overcome in embracing an intimate encounter. For many people, the mere act of exposing their body to someone else's gaze is an extraordinarily vulnerable experience. Then there

is the emotional experience of connection that comes from sharing deep physical intimacy with someone. Self-acceptance, confidence, the ability to value one's own priorities over social expectations, and especially the sense of trust, are key psychological attributes that are essential to a healthy sexual interaction.

Without these foundational skills, it can be difficult for people to navigate any form of touch in a way that is healthy, honest, open, and a free expression of their desire to connect with others through the body. Touch in all of its forms can feel confusing to share and its meaning will be imposed by cultural expectations rather than by personal choice. On the other hand, when an individual has done the internal work necessary to align themselves with their needs, desires, and ability to communicate these to others, the psychological thrill of releasing one's physical agency to a lover can be an extremely satisfying experience!

Some people talk about self-marriage, the union of different parts of self that have been disconnected. This is a pursuit of integrity, of wholeness, of life. Internal union is also the starting point for a life of external union. Sex touches both aspects deeply calling those who embrace its mystery to cultivate a deeper sense of personal union.

Social Customs

Connection with another human being on a physical or energetic level is a beautiful gift that can feel rare to find, but

when such a meeting does occur, the greatest hindrance to intimacy is often social convention. How many times have you heard of someone avoiding some kind of touch because of what others will think? The lovers may be aligned, the context may be ideal, but they will not act on their desire because of the potential judgement of a faceless and brutal society.

Similarly, sex implicates most forms of touch and is such a sensitive subject in modern American culture, making it rare that someone has the courage to directly request the kind of physical experience they desire with another person. Unless they have an intention to connect sexually, there is little chance that most people on the American continents will share sensual or erotic touch.

Other places around the world reflect healthier assumptions about touch. Northern European cultures seem to value openness and communication about sexuality that does not inspire the shame-based secrecy and mind games that dominate hook-up culture in the United States. Chinese men and women will hold hands while they walk down the street as a sign of friendship and affection. American men and women would not do this unless they were also romantically or erotically involved with the person. Arab greetings involve a kiss, which men in the United States will not exchange with each other outside of a sensual or erotic scenario.

If some kind of touch beyond affectionate or friendly contact will take place, many people prefer it to “just happen” so they

don't have to take responsibility for a desire or behavior they cannot publicly embrace. Is this an indication that people are engaging in behaviors they do not desire or are not ready for? Is it because of shame around asking for something good that culture perceives as inappropriate?

Because of the social hazards of physical connection, many people will stay in unhealthy relationships simply because they provide access to forms of intimate touch that can be hard to find anywhere else. Those without a partner often find that their bodies are starved for touch, and this starvation is translated into a desire for sex, because that is the only context where many humans feel they can receive the kind of touch that bodies are designed to share much more freely.

The social aspect of sex plays a significant role in the human experience that deserves more understanding, and I will explore where cultural judgement around sex comes from in the chapters on How I Became Sex Positive. For now, it is enough to recognize that the meaning and acceptability of touch can be dictated by society in ways that are healthy or unhealthy for the individual. Western culture with its isolating and hyper-sexualized view of the body seldom provides a beneficial influence. If it did, a book like this would not be necessary.

Furthermore, social customs around education have been limited to moral codes in religious settings or basic anatomy of reproduction in school. While certain practices are encouraged or discouraged for the sake of safety or holiness, the overall outcome

has not been one of empowering individuals to take personal responsibility for their choices. That is because sex is not simply a physical activity. A healthy view of human sexuality must go beyond biology to understand how the physical, spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions of sex can lead to profound experiences of pain and separation or to the kind of deep intimacy that reflects the mystery of God in its purest form.

Is Masturbation a Sin?

If my convictions toward abstinence had not changed, there is a high probability that I would be writing a different book. In fact, my book about pornography and another book I am writing about morality and ethics were both begun as I wrestled through the question of why I had chosen to avoid sex before marriage...and why it was such a struggle!

The struggle grew out of a divide I had created in my mind between the spiritual and physical world. Faith existed in the form of beliefs about God and the world while life was a constant struggle against the flesh. My body and my spirit were at war with each other - and sex was on the wrong side.

This unfortunate division had led to several beliefs about my sexuality: 1) Sex was a purely physical or “carnal” pleasure, 2) My body was a problem because it was both the source of my desire for sex and the potential means of satisfying that desire, 3) Erotic or sexual pleasure of any kind was a sin because it expressed sexual desire, an experience that was only sanctioned inside of a marriage relationship. Until then, I must struggle to turn off my sexual desire.

In short, I learned that sex was sinful but allowed within marriage because people couldn't keep themselves from it forever - and because it was necessary for reproduction. These opinions

trace their origin all the way back to early church theologians.¹⁶ Except for the sanctifying influence of marriage, sex was framed for me by the Christian world as a totally unholy exercise.

Guilt and Repression

Because they had no clear alternative model of healthy sexual expression to offer me, it was natural for the Christians I knew to encourage total sexual repression until marriage. Even so, I was not very successful at living up to their ideal standards. Sexual desire continued to find its way into my life no matter how much I tried to suppress it. In fact, my focus on sexual desire (and getting rid of it) required just as much of my attention as excessive indulgence might have.

Relatively speaking, though, the solo practice of erotic pleasure seemed less sinful than partnered sex because it kept any negative consequences of my sexual desire from affecting someone else. A majority of guys I talked with at my Christian university had a similar practice of preferring self-pleasure to mutual pleasure, thanks in part to the threat of expulsion if we were caught making love with another person.

The only variation we had in our perspective on the practice of masturbation was how guilty we chose to feel about it. The level of guilt seemed to be associated with the level of sinfulness we thought it expressed.

¹⁶ But especially to St Augustine

For this reason, I think my first intentional bible study on the question of sexual sin focused on masturbation. I had been part of several Christian discussion groups and presentations about sex and pornography, and they all brushed over the question of masturbation as though there wasn't a clear answer. Since theologians held various positions on the issue, it was simply better to avoid the activity until someone sorted out whether it was right or wrong.

My own experience with self-pleasure had begun as a child before I had any sense of its moral implications. It had never been something that bothered my conscience until I discovered in youth group that some Christians thought masturbation might be a sin. However, I continued with my habits in spite of my questions.

My whole body can still remember the frustration of sexual tension that ate its way into my bones for years and the rush of pleasure and relief that followed my discovery of intentional ejaculation. And after that point, I needed a good reason if I was going to consider a change in my behavior. On the other hand, if my study of the Bible provided no evidence for such a change, I hoped it would challenge the sense of shame that was creeping into my life around this activity.

The Story of Onan

I opened my exploration by looking through the Bible for any passages that referred to masturbation. There is only one story

that is consistently cited by Christian teachers. The story is derived from a cultural tradition known as levirate marriage.¹⁷ According to this tradition, a woman whose husband died without giving her a child was supposed to get pregnant by having sex with the brother of her deceased husband. The purpose of this tradition was to perpetuate the name of the dead man and to support the widow in her old age.¹⁸

Genesis Chapter 38 tells the story of Onan, whose married brother died without having children. This meant it was Onan's duty to impregnate his dead brother's wife. But when he had sex with the widow, he pulled out to climax and ejaculated on the ground. The next thing recorded in the story was that God killed him.¹⁹

Somehow Onan's story became the basis for a prohibition of masturbation (and birth control) by much of the church. The story is not clear, though, about whether the problem with Onan's behavior was one of letting his semen come into contact with the earth or one of using the woman for erotic pleasure while failing to fulfill his social obligation to give her a child.

A straightforward reading should make it apparent that the story has nothing to do with masturbation - or even with

¹⁷ Apparently, this practice still existed in the days of Jesus. See Matthew 22:25

¹⁸ Genesis 38:8 Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother."

¹⁹ Genesis 38:9-10 But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also.

ejaculation. It did not seem logical to me that God would kill a man for the release of semen outside of a female body. The natural function of the male body gives teenage boys the thrill and confusion of wet dreams through which semen is ejaculated and dies without producing a child. However, before dismissing this flawed interpretation of the story, I want to recognize there is a mysterious relationship between bodily fluids and the earth present throughout the writings of Moses.

Mosaic Law

Israelite men who experienced ejaculation in sex²⁰ or in a nocturnal emission were required to wash their bodies and wait a whole day before entering a war camp²¹ or the temple. The reason given was that they had become unclean and could not enter the presence of God. A similar status of unclean came about for women through menstruation and childbirth,²² and for anyone who came in contact with diseased skin, or dead animals. Because God is the source of all life, the ceremonies of worship

²⁰ Leviticus 15:16-18 If a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water and be unclean until the evening. And every garment and every skin on which the semen comes shall be washed with water and be unclean until the evening. If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe themselves in water and be unclean until the evening.

²¹ Deuteronomy 23:10-11 If any man among you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he shall go outside the camp. He shall not come inside the camp, but when evening comes, he shall bathe himself in water, and as the sun sets, he may come inside the camp.

²² See Leviticus 12:2-5

could not permit anyone to be present who had just come into contact with death.²³

The loss of vital force through blood or semen provided an antithesis to the source of life that was present with the people in The Ark of the Covenant. Though it does not explain why childbirth made a woman unclean, the release of menstrual blood and semen may both indicate that the human body has not consummated its potential to create life. The female body is releasing an egg and the male body is releasing sperm, but they are not united in the creation of life.

It didn't matter whether the outcome of ejaculation came through sex, through nocturnal emission, or even through masturbation. There was a ceremonial significance to the loss of semen that made an Israelite man unqualified to participate in sacred practices until he had washed his body and waited a whole day (about the time it takes to ensure that all sperm have died).²⁴

There was no mention of sin related to ejaculation in the law of Moses, nor anywhere else in the bible. The issue of clean and unclean was related to ceremonial practices around the temple and the particular covenant the Jewish people were making with God. It had nothing to do with the human enjoyment of pleasure, eroticism, or even of sexuality, for both male and female bodies

²³ Leviticus 22:4 None of the offspring of Aaron who has a leprous disease or a discharge may eat of the holy things until he is clean. Whoever touches anything that is unclean through contact with the dead or a man who has had an emission of semen,

²⁴ Note: Sperm can live up to 5 days inside of the vaginal canal which is why unprotected sex prior to female ovulation is more likely to result in pregnancy.

are made unclean by their natural function, not by choice. The outcome of ejaculation was the same for nocturnal emission as it was for sexual emission, or for the unmentioned practice of masturbation. All of the emissions made the man unclean, but this status had nothing to do with sin and does not suggest any way to read the story of Onan as a problem of masturbation.

This study of the Mosaic covenant and its relationship to blood and semen does little to suggest that God might have been displeased with Onan's ejaculation itself and there are no other biblical references to "Onanism," which is the old English term for masturbation. Furthermore, it is clear from the story that Onan was having sex and not masturbating, which makes the traditional Christian interpretation even more odd. It does not seem that masturbation has any relevance to the story of Onan, especially if it does not involve ejaculation.²⁵ The status of masturbation as a sin instead of a potentially healthy human behavior seems to come from tradition and social conformity rather than a straightforward reading of the Biblical text.

Justice

The more appropriate answer to the question of why Onan was killed would have been obvious to the ancient readers of Genesis. The sin of Onan was a violation of cultural practice and family obligation. Onan did not want to give the widow a child -

²⁵ It is possible for a male to orgasm without ejaculation...and this learnable skill has many benefits.

possibly because that child would receive more family money than his own children would. It was his older brother's wife. His actions were selfish and potentially even harmful to the woman because her lack of children meant she would have no financial support in her old age. The problem of Onanism is a problem of selfishness, injustice, and economic violence toward women, not a problem of masturbation, ejaculation, or sexual pleasure.

I could still see how masturbation could be used in unhealthy ways, though, so I began to ask what a healthy practice of masturbation might look like. All of the Christian resources I looked at simply replied, "don't do it."

I had found a gray area that religion didn't want to touch and began to wonder what other "sinful" activities fell into the category of social conformity rather than biblical morality.

Freedom

When the first church council asked new gentile Christians to abstain from porneia, they did not make their request to keep the new believers from something sinful, but to keep them from violating the cultural sensibilities of their Jewish brothers (which were based on the law of Moses). Each of the requests for abstinence was based in the writings of Moses and were part of the ongoing Jewish tradition. The apostles explained their rationale in Acts 15:19-21

Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from porneia, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. *For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”*

Transition from Tradition

Paul was one of the people chosen to deliver this message and he spent much of his teaching and writing career helping the new church understand how the Christian way made it possible to fulfill rather than follow the law of Moses. The book of Acts records a different set of expectations for Jewish people (who needed to keep the law as part of their culture) and Gentile

people (who were asked to honor four traditions out of love for their brothers).

It is interesting to me that circumcision, which was key to the Jewish identity, is not a practice the Christians were asked to continue. In fact, Paul honored this practice as a Jewish cultural symbol but argued throughout his letters that it had no spiritual significance²⁶ for the new Christians.

Participation or abstinence in modern cultural practices did not make a difference spiritually for the Gentile Christians, who were free from the law. Instead, the request had another purpose. The purpose of the four requests for the Christians was to enable an ongoing relationship with people from the Jewish tradition who would have been appalled by certain practices.

In addition to promoting unity, I think this request also served to maintain the clarity of the Christian message. Each of these activities was potentially linked to the worship rituals of the Hellenistic culture and something that may have called into question the validity of the new Christian way.

This New Testament logic reflects the old Mosaic logic that the people of God were called to be set apart from the rest of the world in order to offer hope for a better way of life. For Jewish people, this looked like circumcision, keeping the law, and especially avoiding practices that would have appeared to honor the foreign gods. For the Christians after the days of Jesus, this

²⁶ e.g. Galatians 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

looked like abstinence from “things polluted by idols, and from porneia, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.”²⁷ But more importantly, it looked like love.

This is the context in which the New Testament writers presented their warnings about sexual immorality (porneia). Their context has been lost as the meaning of the term devolved into the modern catch-all for any sexual practices a preacher thinks ought to be avoided. I have heard the term used to condemn everything from masturbation to same-sex attraction to any sex position that is not called missionary.

However, as the previous chapter showed, porneia had a very specific meaning to the authors and readers in the early days of the church. It meant behaving sexually in a way that was not moral (aka. in a way that did not align with the values and identity of a child of God). Its two specific meanings (unpacked in the chapter, Porneia) referred to visiting temple prostitutes, and letting the sexual appetites drive the behavior of a person in ways that violated their personal integrity or social standing. *Instead of providing a new “Mosaic law” of allowed and excluded activities, the word porneia provided a guideline and a pathway toward a life of internal and external harmony or shalom.*

²⁷ Acts 15:20

Conscience and Kingdom: A New Testament Moral Framework

When I first began to study porneia, I was looking for biblical evidence to support the traditional Christian moral claim that all non-reproductive sex outside of heterosexual marriage is a sin. What I found was that the New Testament moral framework looks very different than what I had expected.

It was so different, in fact, that the Christians in Corinth were celebrating sexual behaviors that were looked upon as shameful by one of the most sex-positive cultures of that day. Paul wrote a passionate letter to them about porneia and the harm that it was doing to the Christian message.

Instead of arguing that they needed to follow the rules laid out in the law of Moses, he quoted an audacious claim and repeated it twice, adding his own conditions: “All things are lawful for me...²⁸”. He used a similar rationale when speaking about food sacrificed to idols, another one of the Jerusalem rules that the Corinthian people were not following. He follows that chapter with the question: “Am I not free?”²⁹ and a whole exposition on his “rights” as a Christian.

However, from this starting point of freedom, he outlines two constraints of his own behavior. When it came to the rule about food sacrificed to idols, the believers were encouraged to make their choice on the basis of whether their action would lead

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:12

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 9:1

another person to violate their conscience. His love for the immature believers who still thought of eating the food as somehow evil kept him from eating it. Note that this practice is one specifically requested by the Jerusalem elders, so it is significant that his rationale was not that “Peter and James said” it must be avoided, but “love should drive us to consider how we use our freedom.” His whole lifestyle was built around using his freedom for the benefit of others.

The second constraint he gave came from his pursuit of the kingdom of God. Porneia is one of a whole list of things he writes will keep people from inheriting the kingdom of God. As a younger Christian I believed the body was probably the antithesis to the kingdom of God. I held the gnostic framework that the body is evil and the spirit is good.³⁰ However, Paul argued that the body plays a vital role in a person’s experience of the kingdom as it is the “temple of the Holy Spirit.”³¹

A temple is the sacred point of meeting between heaven and earth. And for the Christian this mystery deepens with the idea that “your bodies are members of Christ.”³² Everyone in that day would have understood that the body of Christ and the body of a temple prostitute represented two competing deities, which

³⁰ See the chapter, “Who is God” for details...

³¹ 1 Corinthians 6:19

³² 1 Corinthians 6:15-17 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

would both be violated through a practice of “becoming one spirit.” The sin of porneia is a violation of the body and its spiritual dimensions, not a violation of the law.

This moral framework of conscience and kingdom presented by Paul to the Corinthians appears throughout the New Testament and is especially clear in his letter to the Galatians. When he wrote to them, he was trying to make a distinction that the Christians are no longer under the law of Moses, but this does not mean they have no need for self-rule. The Christian gets to choose whether they use their freedom for love or for something else.

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

(Galatians 5:13-14)

Galatians 5 is the chapter that includes the famous verse about the fruit of the spirit, which Paul puts into contrast with the works of the flesh - a term he uses to describe the Mosaic law and also the ungoverned appetites of a person. In Christ, there is freedom from the external law of Moses, and also from the whims of passion and instinct for the one who walks by the Spirit. And this freedom is the key difference between a Jew and a Christian, between those whose gift to humanity was the law, and those who believe Jesus' message of what the law was given to reveal.

The Purpose of the Law

Moses is best known for a list of “thou shalt not’s” and instructions about sacrifices. In my study of the law of Moses, I could not find any positive encouragement toward a particular form of sexual expression. The most significant positive commandment in the whole Torah is the one repeated by Jesus when a teacher of the law asked him to identify the most important commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

(Deuteronomy 6:5)

It would be an intriguing study to examine the contrasts made between the few positive, and the many negative commandments included in the Torah. However, the rationale behind many of the instructions was to make a distinction between the Israelites and the other nations. Many of the prohibitions and rules written by Moses were no longer practiced as early as the days of the first kings of Israel.

For example, Moses wrote that any altars made for God were not to have steps because God did not want the nakedness of the priests to be exposed on the altar.³³ Solomon’s temple included an altar with steps that God did not appear to have any problems with. Nor did He fail to occupy the temple built by Solomon over whose doors two pillars stood guard. Moses had made clear that

³³ Exodus 20:26 And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.

pillars³⁴ were an abomination to God since they came from the Egyptian phallic symbol still found at the heart of many ancient and modern temples.

Are these examples of not living up to the statutes of God communicated by Moses? Are they suggestions that the laws he gave to the people of Israel were more symbolic guidelines or cultural norms that applied only to the Mosaic time period? The Vatican has a very large pillar in the front courtyard of St Peter's Cathedral...

Many theologians have answered these kinds of questions by dividing the Mosaic law into three distinct sections: moral, civil, and ceremonial. They suggest that the civil and ceremonial aspects no longer apply to modern Christians. However, they fail to recognize that all three were intertwined and that many of the statutes related to sex and the body were either civil or ceremonial: for example, clean vs unclean people entering the temple, culturally significant differences in methods of worship, and ways of life.

The only aspect of the sexual statutes repeated by Jesus had to do with the way in which divorce - and his extension of adultery to include male lust - violated the sense of oneness produced by the sexual connection, even if it was legally permitted by the Mosaic law. In other words, there is a spiritual mystery in the sexual connection (what God has joined together)

³⁴ Deuteronomy 16:22 And you shall not set up a pillar, which the Lord your God hates.

that cannot be touched by formal ceremonial regulations like marriage and divorce.

The teachings of Jesus transcended the law of Moses by showing how love for God and others cannot be limited to a certain prescribed set of morally acceptable behaviors. He said that the whole law could be fulfilled by loving God with all of one's being (which includes one's body) and loving others in the same way.

Love Fulfills the Law

Jesus said, "I did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it!"³⁵ In other words, the law had a purpose and it was fulfilled by Jesus. Those who take part in his identity will find that following God may or may not include sexual intimacy, the eating of rare steaks, and other things like resting on the sabbath or giving everything to charity. 1 Corinthians 13 unpacks the idea that it is not the actions themselves but the root of love that gives them value.

In contrast with the Jew, the key distinction in the life of the Christian is not the presence or absence of certain activities, but the presence and pursuit of love in a context of freedom. This freedom is not just from the law of Moses but from the law of instinct that would attempt to drive a person toward behaviors

³⁵ Matthew 5:17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

that do not bear the fruit of love. *Marriage does not nullify this moral standard.*

The one who believes an action to be sinful and still partakes³⁶ will reap the fruit of sin whether or not that action was written about in the Bible or not (e.g. masturbation, pornography, kink, etc...). Paul writes that even the gentiles, who did not have the law, were judged by their own conscience. Sin and its consequences do not come from the law - but the law is helpful in identifying what actions have capacity to produce the fruit of sin: division, separation, violence, and death...which we see outlined in the story of the fall.

There are very few positive commands given by Moses because the purpose of the law was to identify and amplify problems. The purpose of grace is to identify and amplify love and the fruit it can produce in the life of one who chooses to pursue it.

The beauty of the word porneia (sexual immorality) is its ability to highlight this idea by placing the emphasis on a person's intentional expression of their sexual desires. Sexual morality could therefore be understood as a choice to love God and love others through one's sexual expression instead of being dominated by desire. As Paul said, "All things are lawful for me" IF they are helpful and are not making someone a slave to the law of instinct.

³⁶ e.g. Romans 14:23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

The Risk of Freedom

The fact that my identity as a son of God is a free human being who cannot be bound by laws, regulations, and external expectations does not mean that I simply want to respond to every craving and desire that arise from within me.

Aristotle described the reason for education as helping the individual tame their inner dragon and direct its energies in positive directions. Those who are set free from an external moral standard (which can be a helpful guiding compass) may just become slaves to their own instincts or passions³⁷ (e.g. sugar cravings, coffee addictions, porneia, etc.). A human being is a beautiful and powerful creature. Free, they can do anything imaginable, including bringing great harm and destruction to themselves and creation. This is the problem New Testament authors described using the word *porneia*.

Christians are called to a life of freedom, and it is possible to use this freedom in ways that are harmful. It is also possible for a free person to willingly live as though they were a slave. When the nation of Israel was brought out of Egypt it took 40 years of wilderness wandering and a whole new generation of people before the slave mindset was destroyed. Freedom requires courage, and many who are familiar with slavery find it easy to let their instincts become their new master once fear of the law has been removed.

³⁷ See Galatians 5

Destructive freedom has been the choice for many since the days of Adam, but Jesus offered a new way. Instead of external social standards, written moral codes, or even the conscience, he offered life in the Spirit. His example of this lifestyle defied the expectations of the religious leaders, political zealots, and the outcasts of society alike. It was this example that I looked to with hope that I might find a way to be a Christian with a sex drive.

The journey continues at www.drkevinjenson.com

*Equipping Christians to speak to Culture on Sex, Gender, &
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