

INTRODUCTION: LET'S TALK ABOUT PORN

Today there is an epidemic of pornography.

There are two factors behind this growth. The first is an increasingly permissive attitude in our society. What would have been considered porn a generation ago has become part of mainstream culture.

Women in various states of undress, or indicating sexual availability, commonly appear in music videos, television programmes, movies and advertisements. Young women wear T-shirts emblazoned with the words 'porn star' or 'sex kitten'. The number of sex scenes on US television nearly doubled between 1998 and 2005.¹ You can buy pole-dancing equipment for your home from mainstream online retailers. Softcore porn has moved off the top shelf into 'lads' mags'. Meanwhile, hardcore porn 'has evolved and is increasingly dominated by the sadomasochistic themes of forced sex, ejaculations on women's faces, and angry anal sex, all involving scripts fusing sex with hatred and humiliation.'²



Pamela Paul talks about a ‘pornified’ culture.³

Not only is pornography itself more ubiquitous, the entire culture has become pornified. By that, I mean that the aesthetics, values, and standards of pornography have seeped into mainstream popular culture.⁴

Jonny describes it like this:

Imagine being an alcoholic and everywhere you go they use free beer to sell things. I’m free from porn at the moment, but it’s a constant battle. I feel like I’m constantly being offered this drug that I know can destroy my life.

There was a time when sexual addiction was strongly correlated to childhood abuse or trauma. But the saturation of our culture with sex and pornography means this is no longer the case. Many people from good families are nevertheless mired in porn.

The second factor behind the acceleration of porn comes in the form of new technologies that can deliver porn into the home. A few centuries ago, the wealthy few bought salacious books and illustrations. Then magazines turned porn into a mass-market industry. Videos and DVDs took it to another level. But, more than anything else, the internet has accelerated its spread. The internet not only brought a virtually unlimited supply of porn directly into the home, but also took away the point of shame. Previously, you had to buy a porn magazine from a real person across the counter and risk being seen by someone you knew; now, porn can be consumed in secret. Again and again, people talk about the internet accelerating their involvement in porn. The following statements are typical:



It was at university that things got much worse. I had my own room with a fast internet connection so there was nothing to hold me back.

At seventeen I became a Christian and the addiction began to weaken. For a few years it had virtually no hold over me. However, with access to the internet it became a problem again. Since then I was accessing porn on an almost daily basis.

When internet came [to the theological college where I was], it was like the child in a candy store with no parents around.

Psychologist Dr Alvin Cooper talks about 'the triple-A engine' that drives cybersex and make it so enticing:⁵

- accessibility
- anonymity
- affordability.

One in three

Not only is our culture becoming 'pornified'; so too is the church. A recent survey found that 50% of Christian men and 20% of Christian women are 'addicted to porn'.⁶ That means that, in a church with 100 adults, twenty-five men and ten women are struggling with porn: one in three. I'm suspicious of sex surveys, because people so often lie about sex – either exaggerating their sexual activity or hiding their sexual secrets. This survey of 1,000 people was conducted online, which might suggest that these figures are higher than the norm, since internet users are obviously more likely to view porn. On the other hand, Christians are likely to understate their problem; to view it as a past problem or a temporary issue. So the shame factor suggests that the figures may



be understated. So perhaps, overall, taken on balance, the survey results are close to reality. *Christianity Today* reported one evangelical leader who was sceptical of the survey findings, so he surveyed the men in his congregation. He found that 60% had looked at porn within the past year and 25% within the past thirty days.⁷

Think about your own church or house group. It's possible that *one in three* people is struggling with porn. And if you find that unlikely, then the chances are that most of these people are struggling alone, feeling unable to talk about it.

Another survey reported that 33% of church leaders and 36% of church members had visited a sexually explicit site in the past year.⁸ An internet survey conducted by Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in the USA found that 30% of 6,000 pastors had viewed internet porn in the last thirty days.⁹ The same proportions again: one in three.

Among young Christians, the proportion is still higher. A student worker ministering with young Christian men in a British university emailed me, saying, 'I have only come across *one* person who does not struggle with porn and addictive masturbation . . . I also spend time mentoring single young men in [a well-known mission agency] and I would say the porn addiction rate is about 60–70%.' Another minister reported to me that *every* man under forty in his congregation has struggled with porn. A student in 'a large and well reputed Bible College' reports that a counsellor to whom he went to talk about his struggle with pornography told him 'he was seeing a vast number of both married and single men from the college about the same issue'.

Let's talk about porn

We need to start talking about porn in the church. Martin Luther is reported to have said, 'If you preach the gospel in all



aspects with the exception of the issues that deal specifically with your time, you are not preaching the gospel at all.’¹⁰ Al Mohler describes what he calls ‘the pervasive plague of pornography’ as ‘one of the greatest moral challenges faced by the Christian church in the postmodern age’.¹¹

In our churches we need to talk about porn. Don’t assume people are free from porn until they tell you they’re not. Ask the question. Ask everyone you disciple or pastor whether porn is an issue for them.

I suggest we need to teach on sex in our churches at least once a year and to apply other sermons to sexual issues. And we need to do so without being too coy. It’s not enough to talk about ‘maintaining sexual purity’ – many people don’t know what this involves. Jesus and John made repentance specific for people (Luke 3:10–14; 18:22). We have a generation of young people for whom the call to repentance must include a call to turn from porn.

This means proclaiming life without porn as good news. Porn is providing the sex education for a generation of young people, setting their expectations for sex and marriage. This represents a huge challenge for our society. But I also believe it is an opportunity for the church. For years, our culture has found the biblical view of sex prudish and old-fashioned. But a time may come when a strong positive message about the joy of sex as an expression of covenantal fidelity may be what people long to hear.¹²

This book is an attempt to start that conversation. It aims to give hope both to those struggling with porn and to those helping others who struggle. I’m generally addressing it to those who are struggling, to avoid repeating myself. But those helping others should readily be able to adapt what I say to those whom they are helping.

What is porn? And when does porn become art? These

questions are not always easy to define when framing public policy. But that is not the concern of this book. I'm interested in people who use porn but who want to be free of it. 'Porn', for our purposes, is anything we use for sexual titillation, gratification or escape – whether it was intended for that purpose or not. Much of the time, this will be sexually explicit material in magazines or movies and on the internet. But it can also involve looking at adverts or catalogues to stimulate your lust, or 'undressing' people with your eyes, or fantasizing about sex with someone who's not your spouse. We will not concern ourselves with the intention of the person who created the image or narrative or look. We're concerned with the purpose to which you put that image. We'll take as our starting point the words of Jesus: 'You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matthew 5:27–28).

Most of my examples are of men. I don't tend to talk to women about their sexuality, except together with their husbands in the context of marriage. But women also struggle: 28% of people visiting pornography sites are women. As we've noted, one survey found that 20% of Christian women struggle. Women's use of porn is generally different from that of men – less visually oriented, with a preference for erotic fiction or erotic sections in romantic novels. Women are also twice as likely as men to favour chatrooms.¹³ Sue writes:

I would really like it to be acknowledged that this can be a problem for women as well as men. For me, pornographic images are not particularly erotic, but erotic fiction is extremely powerful. Female masturbation is a genuine issue too – perhaps especially for single women – and again, something that I've



never heard acknowledged. These issues are always assumed to be gender specific and, as such, it makes it even harder for women to admit when they're struggling in these areas.

It can be especially hard for women to talk about an issue that is often seen as a 'male weakness'. Jackie says, 'I've never told another Christian. I think we're told so often that this isn't a problem for women and this makes it even harder to admit that actually it is a problem for me.' In the church we all too often put women in one of two categories. We have the chaste vision of beauty, refinement and godliness epitomized by the Virgin Mary. On the other hand, we have the seductress leading men astray, epitomized by the harlot. We don't have much in between. But 'in between' is where real women actually live.

In researching this book I conducted an anonymous online survey through my blog, www.timchester.co.uk. Thank you to everyone who took part. There were 108 responses, half from the UK, a quarter from the United States, a tenth from Australia and the rest from 13 other countries in six continents. Of these, 93% were men and 7% were women. Just under half were in their twenties, a third were in their thirties. The survey was aimed at Christians, so 99% currently attended a church and 57% were in some position of church leadership. Two-thirds were married and a third were single, with three widowed or divorced respondents. The vast majority thought using porn was sinful. Of all respondents, 30% no longer used pornography, 50% continued to struggle and 20% didn't specify.

Most of the questions asked for open-ended text responses. I've woven many of those responses throughout the book. I've often attributed names to the quotes I've used, but none of those names is real.



A warning and a reassurance

Reading about porn is dangerous. Describing sexual activity provokes thoughts of sexual activity, which create temptations. I'm grateful to those who have prayed for me as I've written this book. And I pray that readers too will be kept from temptation as they read. Not without reason does Paul say: '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' (Ephesians 5:11–12). I will be frank in this book. There's no point writing a book on pornography that's so coy that its central challenge is missed. But I will avoid unnecessarily describing 'what the disobedient do in secret', even as I 'expose' 'the fruitless deeds of darkness'. I suggest that, whenever you put the book down, you spend a few moments in prayer and praise. Make sure when you finish reading that you're thinking about Christ and not about porn.

I want you to read this book without fear. If you yourself struggle with porn, then your heart will be exposed. And what you see will be ugly – very ugly – unbearably ugly, but for the grace of God. This book will probably condemn you, but it ought not to leave you condemned, for 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1). The central chapter is on God's grace for porn users. Whatever we discover about our sin, we will discover that God's grace is sufficient.

At the cross we see the horrible extent of our sin. When we get the chance, we kill our Creator. Martin Luther says:

You must be overwhelmed by the frightful wrath of God who so hated sin that he spared not his only begotten Son . . . Take this to heart and doubt not that you are the one who killed Christ. Your sins certainly did, and when you see the nails driven

through his hands, be sure that you are pounding, and when the thorns pierce his brow, know that they are your evil thoughts.¹⁴

Yet at the very same time we see in the cross the amazing love of God towards sinners. The sight that exposes our sin is the exact same sight that reveals God's grace. The moment of despair is the moment of hope. Jesus cried from the cross, 'It is finished!' It is finished. There is nothing left to do; nothing left to pay. The guilt of your porn habit is cancelled if your faith is in Christ and his cross. Our sin is great, but God's grace is always greater. 'Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord' (Romans 5:20–21).