

Sex Trafficking and Slavery in the Christian Church: A Call to Repentance and New Life in Christ

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study article is not to condemn but to exhort Christians, churches, denominations, and Bible colleges – all of which are called by God in Scripture to equip other Christians as Disciples in spiritual growth. Many professing Christians, however, are living lives of contradiction and silent enslavement. Cognitive dissonance is rampant, with many claiming to be delivered and empowered by the Lord yet living dysfunctional lives of habitual bondage. Instead of embodying dynamic new life, they remain carnal and powerless. This dilemma is either the result of unbelief or the lack of discipleship. Sexual sins are often not just a problem but also symptoms of even more serious underlying problems of unbelief. Only when believers are empowered would they be unfettered servant leaders who guard their hearts and are fully devoted to Christ without bondage to sexual immorality.

Key Words: sex addiction, slavery, porn, pornography, sin, deliverance.

INTRODUCTION

The authors previously researched and wrote the article, *Sex Trafficking and Slavery in Southeast Asia: To Free Captives* (Langteau & Dunham, 2021). The article was published during 2021 in the peer-reviewed journal, *The Journal for Statesmanship and Public Policy* (see <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jspp/vol2/iss1/4/>). Since then, the publisher reported that the article was downloaded thousands of times in over 90 countries. The article was also re-printed by permission in two other journals, the *Asian Missions Advance* and the *Journal of Biblical Missiology*. This previous article generated much interest and rightly so; the topic is immediate, urgent, and disturbing. This previous article contextualized a review of sex trafficking in Southeast Asia and the impact worldwide, conveyed a presentation of the findings and implications, and it provided recommendations for proactively addressing sex trafficking in our societies. Specific attention was given to the gap in the available literature pertaining to the process and dynamics of psychological coercion within a given culture as it relates to people involved in human sex trafficking. Many cultural and psychological ramifications were noted which create complexities when seeking to effectively make a difference. Much can and should be done about the regional and global issue of sex trafficking and

slavery.

Now, however, the authors recognize the need to also address the issue much closer to home. We do not need to look into global, regional or national issues of sex trafficking and slavery before it is apparent that many in our own communities and often our own homes are in bondage to sexual addictions and sexual immorality. The victims of this slavery are less apparent, for they are not physically constrained or forced, though the bondage and the consequences are often equally devastating. Failed relationships and marriages are frequently traced back to the introduction of pornography that resulted in alienated relationships, often escalated to physical sexual impropriety, leading to ever-increasing aberrant behavior and, ultimately, either the dissolution of marriages or the maintenance of dysfunctional relationships. Almost invariably, relationships are so strained that dysfunction becomes the norm. It is not uncommon for individuals involved in sexual sins to even lose their careers, income, and homes. Tragically, many of these people are actually unaware that they are in bondage of any kind. When deception and bondage are most effective, the victim is deceived into thinking their lifestyle is normal and their souls are healthy.

If one were to scan the globe in order to evaluate the health of the Christian Church, there would no doubt be many good reasons to celebrate, as the Gospel is clearly being proclaimed by many local expressions of the Body of Christ across a number of diverse Christian denominations. A closer look, however, would also reveal that denominations, churches, local groups of believers, families, and more than a few individuals who call themselves by the name of Christ Jesus are not doing well. A good deal of dysfunction exists at both an organizational and individual level.

Perhaps dysfunction is not surprising since those who call themselves Christians are just people, fallen creatures who have presumably been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Nevertheless, it would be biblically correct to expect that those who profess to have met and to know the risen Savior would themselves be transformed into new creations (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). Christians must represent the name of Jesus well and set the example that Christ has commanded and empowered us to set (see 2 Corinthians 5:17).

PROBLEM

God created sex, God defined it, and God blessed it within the context of marriage between a man and a woman. The Bible declares that God intentionally

created male and female and established that a male and a female were to be joined together in marriage (see Genesis 1:27; Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6; & Hebrews 13:4). What God designed as beautiful and holy, the enemy distorts to dishonor and enslave people. People's hearts then become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (see 2 Corinthians 4:4; & Hebrews 3:13).

The Internet has fueled an alarming increase in the number of people viewing pornography and entangled in sexual addiction. Before the Internet, purchasing pornography was much more public and involved interactions with a real person while under the gaze of others standing in line to make their purchases. Now one enters the vast world of porn in complete privacy with the simple click of a keyboard button. This ease of access has taken the porn industry to a whole new level, and with it has swept millions of men and women into its web. The numbers are staggering. In 2014 the anti-porn group "Proven Men" along with the Barna group surveyed 1,000 American men. The findings revealed that 97% of the men had viewed pornography, 78% viewed porn before turning 16 years old, 77% of those ages 18-30 view porn at least monthly, 65% viewed porn at work in the last 90 days, and 64% of men view porn at least once a month. What is most concerning is that this problem of pornography is not limited to those outside the church. The survey confirmed that those who claim to be Christians view porn at the same rate as those who do not claim any Christian affiliation. The Proven Men survey found that "Approximately two-thirds (64%) of U.S. men view pornography at least monthly. The number of Christian men viewing pornography virtually mirrors the national average." (see <https://www.provenmen.org/2014PornSurvey/>).

In 2019, the Freedom Fight (see <https://thefreedomfight.org/>) conducted a survey of more than 1,300 practicing Christian college students from over thirty different campuses across the country. These students were not just casual Christians but those described as being "involved in a campus ministry, and they considered their faith in Christ to be very important to them. Many of them were leaders in their ministries." But even among these Christian leaders and serious Christians, 89% watch porn at least occasionally and 61% viewed porn at least weekly. Fully 51% of these people said they were addicted to porn (see <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/life5/relationships/porn-is-rewiring-a-whole-generation-christians-included/>).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this article is to challenge and encourage local church and Christian servant leadership to:

1. Have and apply a sound understanding of God's call in Scripture to a restored relationship with

Him and others, which is also demonstrated in sexual morality;

2. Have a clear vision for the vital role of the local church in intentionally discipling Christians to be equipped and prepared for life and ministry; and,
3. To both apply this for their own lives and to encourage others they interact with.

In our lives, we should not grumble and complain about all the problems in modern Christian families and in individuals who claim to follow Christ. Rather, it is important to take a serious look at the problems that exist and to examine realistic solutions. What are the problems and issues that are widely evident in the lives of Christians and in Christian churches relating to sexuality today? What might be some of the root causes underlying these issues? More significantly, what can be done to help Christians be strong, healthy, and liberated from the bondage of sexual immorality?

The intention of this article is not to condemn or reject, but to encourage, and to promote restoration and empowerment. Bad news is rampant in our world today, but if we are willing to face it and address it, there is also the promise of Good News.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question for this qualitative case study was: What strategies can be used to address problems in the use of pornography or with sexual addiction of some type?

THE SYMPTOMS

In one of Jesus' many encounters with the Pharisees, he made the point that healthy people do not go to the doctor, for it is sick people who seek a physician's help (see Mark 2:17). If modern Christians, their families, and their churches are in a state of relative health and vitality, then there is no reason to seek the great physician for help and healing. If, however, we take an honest assessment of those who claim to be Christians, what do we find? Is the patient healthy, or are there symptoms that would indicate the need for a doctor? A quick survey can reveal a number of symptoms that are prevalent among those who claim Christ's name which indicate the need for attention.

1. Is there someone in your family who spends an inordinate amount of time on the internet alone in their room?
2. Do they get angry with other family members if their privacy is interrupted?
3. Do they display negative emotional responses if their behavior is questioned?
4. Do they encourage others to have access to their electronic devices to see what they are viewing, or does it seem more like they are hiding something?
5. Would they rather be alone than join together in

family activities?

6. Are there any other issues that concern you about this family member's activities or failure to accomplish things that they should be mastering?
7. Is there a problem here that needs to be discussed and explored in more depth with a mentor that could be helpful in dealing with these issues?

THE IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES

Pornography is clearly a powerful temptation that seems all but impossible to resist, though 1 Corinthians 10:13 promises that God is faithful to provide a way to resist all temptations. Some may say that in the end it is really not such a big deal; pornography is just pictures and images. Some have argued that God created many beautiful things to look at and enjoy, so porn is just people enjoying beauty. A list of at least some of the many reasons why pornography and sexual addictions are problems should be considered. For many, the main problem with getting caught, is that it is embarrassing. The embarrassment of getting caught and publicly exposed brings shame if you are a pastor, in ministry in your church, if you claim to be a Christian, or are a church member. Yet there is a much greater danger in porn than merely damaging one's reputation. Pornography is not honoring to God, to our wives (if we are married), to our future spouses if unmarried, to our mothers, to our sisters, to our sons and daughters, to our sisters in Christ, or to women in general. Porn is dishonoring to women because porn takes the wonder and beauty of a woman and the wonderful gift of sexual intimacy as a way to build the deepest connection and expression of love and affection, and turns it into something cheap, uncaring, and devoid of the quality of a meaningful relationship. The use of porn turns people into things and toys for one's own self-gratification. Porn is using another person for one's own selfish gain. Porn diminishes the honorable place and role of women and instead relegates them to merely objects for selfish pleasure without the committed relationship of mutual care and concern. One may argue that viewing porn does not reduce them to seeing all women that way, but evidence reveals that the experience of viewing porn changes the way men look at and see women. Research supports this reality. "With regard to the effects of partner use, Zillmann and Bryant (1988) found that viewing pornography led to decreased satisfaction in one's partner, increased callousness toward females, distorted perceptions of sexuality, and decreased values related to monogamy and marriage. Research also has shown that viewing pornography increases one's judgment of non-monogamous relationships as normal behavior" (Drake, 1994). (see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5370376/>)

Further, pornography contributes to human trafficking, and victimizing women and even children. Many, but not all, of those creating pornographic

content do so of their own choice and free will. But porn, by its very illicit nature is constantly pushing the envelope for more deviant sexual behavior. Consequently, there is a growing market for sexual content that is illegal. Children are specifically at risk for being coerced or forced to perform for the camera. The National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction, a 2010 report to Congress, concluded that, "offenders have been able to master Internet technologies to better mask their identities." The report focuses on interviews and research covering child exploitation problems over a 12-month period by the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC). The NDIC's research determined that there have been "dramatic increases in the number, and violent character, of the sexually abusive images of children being trafficked through the Internet" and that there is a "disturbing trend of younger children depicted in these images, even including toddlers and infants." (see <https://www.thorn.org/blog/child-sex-trafficking-child-pornography-aided-internet-anonymity/>)

Since viewing porn and sexual addictions results in attitudes that fail to honor women and can lead to the trafficking of women and children, it must be said that viewing porn is neither loving God, nor your neighbor as yourself. Porn is a serious sin that is ultimately treating others in a way that is unloving. The Bible is clear that the failure to love others is no small matter, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 John 3:14).

Finally, all sexual immorality is a sin against our own body. Flee from sexual immorality. "Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 Corinthians 6:18). We do damage to our body and to our own life when we allow the cancer of lust and sexual impurity in any form to take root in our lives. Sexual immorality is a spiritual assault on our own body, and there are significant consequences to all sins when the wages of sin is death (see Romans 6:23). An increasing body of research reveals that widespread and frequent use of pornography is making it difficult for men to have sexual encounters with a real woman. "Porn's rewiring of the brain is behind the phenomenon of Porn Induced Erectile Dysfunction (PIED) among young men and teenagers." A 2016 TIME magazine article shared the stories of several twentysomethings suffering from PIED. The authors of this article reported that before internet porn, only five percent of men under forty had erectile dysfunction. Today, 33 percent of men under forty report some degree of ED. Surprisingly, this is an issue we are increasingly seeing among teenagers. A 2016 study of Canadian adolescents showed that 45.3 percent admitted to problems with erectile dysfunction. (see <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/life5/relationships/porn-is-rewiring-a-whole-generation-christians->

included/) (<https://time.com/magazine/us/4277492/april-11th-2016-vol-187-no-13-u-s/>)

THE ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES

Pornography is idolatry. Christians are people who claim to love the Lord God with all their hearts and souls, but pornography is a false idol that usurps God. A Christian may claim with his lips that Jesus is Lord, but he who seeks pornography reveals that something else actually has first place in his heart. Do we seek first the Kingdom of God (see Matthew 6:33), or have we been deceived into seeking instead after what tantalizes the flesh? Could the King of Kings overlook such treason and betrayal?

Pornography is also unbelief. Hebrews 11:6 declares, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him." Clearly, this passage reveals that if one had faith, one would please him and draw near to God, and in the process obey Him. If a person chooses instead to seek a false sense of fulfillment through pornography, he is revealing a lack of faith. You cannot claim to trust God to look out for your best interest yet seek to gratify yourself apart from him at the same time. That is in fact the opposite of faith. God has declared that without faith it is impossible to please Him. Not only that, but those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God. The Bible declares in part, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Galatians 5:19-21).

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgresses and wrongs his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).

WAR AGAINST THE SOUL

For any Christian who takes the Bible seriously, the most significant factor that warns against getting tangled up with pornography is that it is an abomination to God. "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy" (ESV Bible, 2001, Romans 13:13).

The serious implication of sexual immorality, which includes pornography, stands in conflicting contrast with God's word. "But now I am writing to you

not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler — not even to eat with such a one" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 Corinthians 5:11). Also, Scripture commands, "do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 Corinthians 6:9). To the Ephesians Paul warns "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints" (ESV Bible, 2001, Ephesians 5:3). Lest we think this is only a concern of Paul, the author to the Hebrews writes "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous" (ESV Bible, 2001, Hebrews 13:4).

If this assessment is not bad enough it does get worse. For some men and women, it does not end with simply viewing porn. For some, it opens the door to a dark and deeply perverted world where people seek real life encounters to fulfill every kind of sexual fantasy, often involving children. Since there is a market for it, children are being trafficked into this horrible industry and professing Christians are not immune even from this. All too often the news reports some pastor or church leader who is convicted of sexual abuse of a child or youth. One account from a recent headline involved a man we will call "Participant 1" who was arrested for sexually assaulting several under-aged girls. One victim alleged that she had been sexually abused by Participant 1 since the age of 11 when they met over social media. She reported that he would provide money, drugs and other gifts in exchange for sex. The abuse went on for over 4 years. The sexual activity would take place at his home and he would often record the sexual assaults on video. (see https://dailyinterlake.com/news/2022/jan/06/columbia-falls-man-accused-child-sex-abuse/?fbclid=IwAR3865Jo1eMGGGK4wU-AT9miILO4W5iFxD1Dv_rMS1a8NQpZ27bhf5D8sKE).

Participant 2 shared a very dysfunctional story. He had an experience with Christ as a teen and went to Bible College. He served at his local church and at youth camps. Eventually, he served as a church youth pastor. His faith in Christ and his desire to see youth reached with the gospel seemed genuine. It did not appear at the time that his motive for ministry was to sexually abuse young people. He was married with young children and appeared to have a sincere heart to follow Christ. At the same time, it was discovered he was already viewing porn. Participant 2 then revealed that he had been sexually assaulted as a child and he was struggling with the wounds from those experiences. Thirty years later, he had gone so far down a road of sexual perversion and bondage that he committed unthinkable acts toward innocent children with a blatant intention that is mind boggling for one

who claimed to know Christ (Personal Conversation, 2020). What began as occasionally viewing porn turned into an addiction to porn which eventually led to physically abusing children. If left unchecked, this is a genuine risk for anyone who opens their heart and mind to pornography.

COMMONLY SUGGESTED CAUSES

How can so many professing Christians be struggling with such a horrible sin and one that the Bible speaks so strongly against? Some might argue that both access to and acceptance of porn have put this temptation before people in a new way that is so powerful it is impossible to resist. This argument does not consider the situation in the Roman Empire at the time of the early church. Temple prostitution was widespread and, while the internet did not exist, it is naive to assume that sexual addictions and temptations were any less rampant or pervasive as the sexual temptations of the modern world. At the Jerusalem counsel recorded in Acts chapter 15, Gentile converts were expected to abstain from sexual immorality (see Acts 15:20,21). The New Testament presents the view that any disciple of Christ can and should experience freedom and deliverance from bondage to any sin, including sexual addictions (see Romans 6:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 6:13; 1 Corinthians 10:13; & Ephesians 5:3).

Perhaps the problem is that we are merely broken people and it is to be expected that this kind of struggle and defeat is just a normal part of the Christian life. Wasn't it this very kind of person that Jesus spent most of His time with, that is, prostitutes and sinners? It is true that Jesus came to help the sick, the broken, and the unrighteous. In His grace He does accept me "just as I am," but it is a defective and false theology that teaches people are to remain broken until arriving in Heaven. Jesus came to save broken and sinful people, and His grace is sufficient no matter how much we sin and struggle with temptation. Yet it is God's plan and purpose, not only to forgive our sin, but also to heal our brokenness. Scripture is clear that salvation also involves the transformation of our broken and sinful lives into a people who are conformed to the image of his Son (see Romans 8:29). This means that the character and conduct of a Christ follower needs to be transformed to the standard of Jesus's character and conduct.

Our study also included findings from Participant 3, who voiced the presumption that sexual immorality is caused by poverty, negative influences, pornographic films, internet sites, excessive use of alcohol, and the use of marijuana or other drugs. These claimed causes, however, are themselves just symptoms. Further, in contrast, there are many examples of those who lived in poverty among negative influences who nevertheless avoided bondage to sexual immorality (International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research 8(2):37-44, April-June, 2020

© SEAHI PUBLICATIONS, 2020 (see www.seahipaj.org ISSN: 2354-2926). This participant loved telling his story about the background problems in his family growing up and how they influenced him in the wrong way. Yet when he was asked what the flaws were behind his story and what the underlying causes were to these symptoms, he admitted he never considered deeper implications and had no understanding of his own contribution or volition.

Perhaps the problem is that some pastors and seminaries are not giving church leaders the counseling tools and resources to deal with these kinds of issues. Sadly, though, the church's increased dependence on psychology has not reduced the spread of sexual addictions among members. Instead, the problem has exploded over the past 15 years despite an increasing number of churches offering counseling services and addictions support. While there are undoubtedly benefits of counseling and tools that psychology offers that are of some help, in the end our hope for life transformation cannot be found in a better counseling model. The popular idea that the real solution to the problem is found in modern psychology and not in the Bible is in fact part of the problem. The Bible teaches clearly that we have access to an incredible power to overcome temptation and defeat sin. This power is available to every follower of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 10:13; Luke 22:40,46; & 1 John 5:4-5). What is need most are not better counseling techniques from the world of psychology but better teaching about the powerful provisions God has made available through a dynamic relationship with Him to overcome every sin, and which empowers a person to live a life that is pure and blameless before Him and before the world! Both strategies in tandem can work in bringing about desired changes in this world.

UNDERLYING REASONS THAT CAUSE SYMPTOMS

So then, how is it that many professing Christians today are no different than lost people when it comes to viewing porn and being held in the grip of sexual addictions? Cognitive dissonance is evident, with many claiming one thing yet living in opposition to their own stated convictions.

A lack of true conversion. One answer that must be considered and taken to heart is that many of those claiming to be Christians are not. Jesus declared that many would claim to believe but be exposed as pretenders: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (ESV Bible, 2001, Matthew 7:21-23). Even those in positions

of Christian leadership and pastoring churches should take a serious look at the true state of their soul, if they are living under the bondage of sexual addictions. “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (ESV Bible, 2001, Ephesians 5:5-6).

Those who show no fruit of repentance have reason to doubt their true salvation. Salvation is not merely the forgiveness of sins, but a work of God that makes us new persons in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). The power of sin should no longer have dominion over the lives of those who have truly been “saved.” Does this mean anyone who views porn cannot be a Christian? No! Certainly, the process of sanctification is just that, a process and not an instant and complete change in the life and conduct of the believer. Struggling with sexual temptations, and occasional moral lapses into sin, are not proof that we are lost and without Christ. Nonetheless, at the very least it is a mark of significant immaturity and hypocrisy. At worst, if it is chronic or habitual, it may be a sign that one has never experienced the regenerating work of Christ in their life (see 1 John 3:4-9). For any person caught in the trap of sexual addictions, the first step in being set free is to examine their heart and ask if they have truly been born again (see 2 Corinthians 13:5-6). This will be marked by a genuine confession and turning away from sin (see 1 John 1:9), including sexual immorality of every kind, and a life that demonstrates the fruit of repentance. If repentance and cleansing are lacking, then turning to God and seeking His saving power and grace over your life is the first essential step toward freedom.

Genuine and saving faith results in God transforming people into new creations (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus is relational and restorative, and this is a game-changer. A.W. Tozer observed that if people are not changed by grace, they are not saved by grace (Tozer, 2015). Jesus explained the parable of the Sower and the Seed in Mark 4. The seed, which is the truth of God’s Word, was the same in every example, but was received quite differently on four diverse soils representing four different types of hearts. What is remarkable is that only one soil (or heart), the good soil, proved to be authentic. The seed within the good soil produced abundant fruit, in contrast to the seeds that fell on hard, rocky, or thorny soil. Though the plants that grew in rocky and thorny soil appeared alive, they produced no fruit and were ultimately cut down and burned (see Mark 4:3-20). “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen” (ESV Bible, 2001, Jude 1:24-25)

Tragically, false Christians are deceived and completely unaware they are unsaved. John MacArthur stated, “No one is harder to reach than a false Christian” (Personal conversation, 2021). In the words of C. S. Lewis “The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. . . . For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to overcome. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither” (Lewis, C. 1957).

A lack of life-changing discipleship. A second cause that must be considered is that we are failing in the task of making true disciples. In his book, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Godsey quoted Bonhoeffer, “Christianity without discipleship is Christianity without Christ” (Godsey J.D., 2015, p. 28). If this is a factor contributing to the rampant spread of sexual addiction in the church, then it is the church and its leaders who must take responsibility to address and remedy the problem. This is not to say churches do not already have a vision for making disciples, or have no concern to train and develop their members to walk with Christ and know Him. However, it is clear that if such a large swath of people are held captive to porn and sexual addictions, then whatever the church thinks is being done to make true Christ followers is inadequate. We are not teaching and equipping people to walk in victory and to be set free from the death grip of sin over their lives, though called by God to teach and equip members (see Ephesians 4:11-12).

Do we focus so much on making converts that we are failing to train and equip people to observe all that Jesus has commanded (see Matthew 28:18-20)? If we take discipleship seriously, we need to evaluate how effective we are in making genuine disciples. Are we equipping people to walk in genuine relationships with Christ through the supernatural power promised in Scripture to defeat the sins that bind them? At the heart of discipleship is growing people into a life of faith that results in obedience to God. This is not legalism if one’s obedience flows out of personal love for God and from seeing God’s great sacrifice in giving His Son to redeem us (see John 15:9-13). Genuine faith “leads to changed beliefs, changed thinking, and changed behavior and relationships. Then all things can become new” (Langteau, Blankenship, Dunham, Jun, 2021, p. 1).

The wrong measure of success. Lastly, it is possible that churches are so focused on how many views they get on their social media or how many attenders arrive on Sunday morning that they have lost sight of the high calling of seeing people radically transformed by the Gospel. At times professing Christians may value the valueless while denigrating the precious.

The Apostle Paul's various descriptions of putting off the old and putting on the new indicate that there is a strong expectation from Scripture that people will live very different lives as a result of meeting Christ (see Colossians 3:1-17; Ephesians 4:17-32; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:6-18). The very purpose of God's salvation is that we would be conformed to the image of his Son (see Romans 8:29). These passages could be mistakenly taken as the responsibility of the individual and not the mission of the church, but no such escape is possible when we read God's call on the church. "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Ephesians 4:11-13). The God-given mandate for the church then is nothing less than a ministry of radical transformation from a life under the bondage of sin, to a life characterized as "the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ." The church that is effective in seeing two lives changed into the likeness of Christ is vastly more successful than a church that preaches to thousands but sees no one changed by the message. Lives that are experiencing this kind of radical transformation will not be trapped in the chains of sexual addictions.

Often, we are busy doing what we we're not called to do and failing to obey the Lord (see Luke 6:46). Could it be that we do not actually believe what we claim to believe? We can also fear the wrong things while neglecting the needful thing. "Never fear dying, beloved. Dying is the last, but the least matter that a Christian has to be anxious about. Fear living...that is a hard battle to fight, a stern discipline to endure, a rough voyage to undergo" (Spurgeon, 1988). Sexual addiction and porn are complex issues that both Scripture and the data strongly suggest need to be addressed even in our own congregations.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO BE SET FREE

What can and must the church do to help people truly overcome sexual sin that has so captured and enslaved the professing church? What message can we offer to help people in our churches to be truly set free and walk in the righteousness that the Bible expects of the Lord's saints? The strategies that may be helpful to you and your congregation based on our research and experience with this topic are the following:

FIRST, we need to preach the Gospel of Salvation to those in the church as well as those outside the church. If the first problem is that many of those who claim to be followers of Christ are not, then the first step is to, as it were, preach to the choir. Books like, *Conversion: How God Creates a People*, by Michael Lawrence (Crossway/Good News Publishers, 2017) teach a great deal about the vital importance of setting the bar high

for those who would claim Christ as Savior. In far too many places the message of salvation is inadequate and misleading, failing to include the biblical requirement of repentance from sin (see Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8; Acts 11:18; Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 7:10; & 2 Timothy 2:25). In our eagerness to see people come to Christ and be saved, we may give people a false hope that is not rooted in the work of Christ, but in their own prayers, or religious experiences. We must firmly reject a false salvation that rests on anything other than the exclusive and finished work of Christ on the cross. We need to care much more about teaching people what God declares in holy Scripture concerning genuine saving faith based on repentance and total surrender, rather than giving people a false confidence that they are saved when in fact they may not be! "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11). The church environment described in the New Testament is one in which the weak are not shunned but receive instruction and encouragement, and provided discipleship with accountability.

SECOND, church leaders that rightly emphasize salvation through Christ alone, by faith alone, based on the word of God alone, may still fall short in equipping people to overcome sin. The problem here is not a deficient Gospel. A person may profess to have faith in Christ yet still lack the right teaching and understanding to overcome sin. The problem here is that some churches are proclaiming an incomplete Gospel. This message is incomplete because it only tells one part of the work of the cross - that Jesus died to forgive their sins. This is true, and it is vital that we teach the work of Christ as the means of justification -making us right with God. However, this is not the whole Gospel. The power of the cross of Jesus not only cleanses us from sin but also breaks the power of sin in our lives. That is why the Bible speaks with such force that no one who is truly saved should live in bondage to sin -whether it is sexual addiction or any other bondage. The work on the cross defeats the power of sin that would hold us captive. The book, *Every Man's Battle* illustrates how this incomplete Gospel plays out in daily life. The book's main point is that it is our battle, our duty, and our work to defeat sin, especially sexual sin. Hence the title, *Every Man's Battle*. We would contend that it is this very message that is contributing to the problem rather than solving it! The book makes the case that the cross made it possible for you to be in a relationship with God and to be forgiven of sin, but then, falsely implies that the battle over sin is now solely up to the individual. Overcoming sin then becomes a private battle one must fight on one's own. This is an incomplete Gospel and contrary to the teaching of Scripture. This error is based on a humanistic notion that people are essentially good and have the power to conquer sin. This flawed thinking also greatly misunderstands the purpose of the cross. Scripture, in contrast, teaches

that we are helpless to live a godly life on our own. In fact, our own efforts to be righteous apart from Christ are called filthy rags (see Isaiah 64:6). It is through Christ Jesus alone that we receive supernatural strength to have victory over sin (see Philippians 4:13). The Lord is faithful to give power to overcome sin (see 1 Corinthians 10:13). God is looking for the humble soul who knows how to be totally dependent on Him for everything.

A THIRD concern that we believe contributes greatly to the current bondage of so many believers, is teaching a very man-centered theology rather than a truly God-centered theology. The book, *Every Man's Battle*, is a negative illustration of this issue as well. The book claims that we will grow in our motivation to turn away from porn and sexual addiction when we cultivate a greater passion for our spouse. This is, of course, important and should be true of every godly husband. Sadly, however, the book falls so far short of the real heart and focus that drips from every page of Scripture. The greatest motivation and reason to overcome sin is not your wife's happiness, or your own freedom, personal success, or effectiveness in ministry. Rather, the pressing motivation of our life should be our overwhelming love and affection for the Lord God. That love for God will also translate into obedience: "Jesus answered him, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me'" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Matthew 14:23-24). Any teaching that puts our spouse, our children, our success, or even our own life above God lays an insufficient foundation for moral purity and is essentially idolatry. What also about those who are single? The only adequate, rock-solid and immovable foundation for living and overcoming is our love for God and passion for His glory. A love for God that grows out of a deep understanding and experience of His love for us must be the primary motivator. The heart of the Bible, the greatest command, is not to love our wife and thereby live a godly life, but to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength (see Matthew 22:36-40). This is to be the ultimate motivation to overcome sin. Only when we love God with our whole being are we truly able to love others rightly – not because of what they can do for us, but for God's sake and His glory. What if one's addiction to porn has so damaged and fractured the marriage relationship that the kind of love and affection we need is hopelessly out of reach? The truth is, loving our wife the way she needs to be loved is only possible if we love God first. If we love our wife with all our heart, but do not love God more, our wife then has become an idol. Too many sermons and Bible studies are all about solving our problems, making life better, and fixing things so life will be easier, and far too little about the call of every believer to love

God, glorify Him, and enjoy Him forever. Those who love God with their whole being will be tempted and may struggle with sin but will no longer continue in sexual immorality. The Lord promises to give His people power to resist and overcome temptation (see 1 Corinthians 10:13).

FOURTH, only the Holy Spirit can transform and give new desires. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5). People are called to love God more than the gifts or delight that God gives. We must never love the gifts more than the giver of the gifts. We must also realize, though, that we need the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and they are essential for overcoming sin and living a life that honors God. People must realize the enemy takes what God made holy, and distorts it. The solution is to repent of idolatry and unbelief. Christ followers are called to die to self and must call upon the Holy Spirit to live within them. People of the church need the same "medicine" we offer in Scripture to those in the world. Does this sound too easy? The process of repentance and surrender are not easy, for it requires recognizing God for who He is and committing oneself and life to Him. Does it sound impossible? It is not impossible to those who know the all-powerful God! Christians are not superficial nor in love with an "ism" or ideology, but with God Himself and with his son, Jesus Christ.

God's redeemed people are called to make a priority of guarding their hearts, which is the source of all their desires and the seat of all their emotions, because the heart impacts life and eternity (see Proverbs 4:23). This is done through treasuring God's word by meditating on Scripture and applying it daily to life, which is effective in breaking the sins in one's life (see Psalm 119:9-11). This displaces all else that could otherwise distract people, consume their focus, and lead astray. We are supernaturally changed when we see God in His glory, ourselves as desperately in need, and others as valuable because God calls them valuable (see Isaiah 6:1-9). The transformative power of God's glory is awe-inspiring and humbling. The solution and the most effective strategy we have been searching for is ultimately found in a deep, personal, and authentic relationship with the living God. Christians who struggle in bondage to sin and sexual addictions often have a small, distorted view of God, and fail to repent of sin and submit to Him. When a person sees God in His glory and greatness, that person is shook to the very core of their existence. All other distractions and temptations pale in comparison and fade away. Isaiah 6 records the transformation that took place when Isaiah witnessed the glory of God. Isaiah trembled at the majesty and power of God, he then saw himself realistically as unclean and in need of transformation which came immediately from God, and finally he cared deeply about God's call to himself and for all other people.

"And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to

whom we must give account” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Hebrews 4:13).

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