



Fight Porn In Your Church

What Works and Why It Matters





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Introduction

The Porn Pandemic

“The soul tends to shrink to the size and quality of its pleasures.”
– John Piper

Dead. That’s exactly how Michael felt that morning as he faced the platform. He was singing along with the music, eyes closed, trying to focus on the lyrics, trying to lift his heart to God as best he knew how. But like many Sundays before, Michael’s heart felt shriveled and uncomfortably numb.

If those who stood around him only knew the depths of his sin, how would they treat him? If they knew about the websites he visited the night before, what would they say? What would his wife say?

Men like Michael are all too common in the church today. According to a recent Barna Research study, nearly two-thirds of self-identified Christian men and nearly one in six Christian women view pornography at least once a month.¹

Some in the pews are addicts of the first degree: their sexual compulsions have brought them to unfathomable depths of deviancy. But others have lusts that are less noticeable and less obviously damaging. They have convinced themselves they don’t have a problem, and it’s no one else’s business even if they did.

Ted Roberts of Pure Desire Ministries says some of these men and women are like “dry drunks.” They don’t watch porn, but they want to. They white knuckle their way through life, filled with loneliness, bitterness, and lust. Their marriages are far from intimate. Their fellowship with others is shallow at best. Their joy in the Lord is gone.²

Others enjoy the occasional porn binge. They turn to porn to alleviate stress, or out of boredom, or to combat sadness or loneliness, but it doesn’t consume their mind. Their

1. 2014 Pornography Survey and Statistics. Proven Men Ministries.
<http://www.provenmen.org/2014pornsurvey> (accessed Dec. 29, 2014).

2. The quotes in this e-book came from personal interviews unless otherwise noted.

marriages seem intact. Their church attendance is decent. They don't seem withdrawn. But inwardly they wrestle with guilt and shame—at times defending themselves, other times living in self-loathing. They are surrounded by sexualized entertainment and believe, “Why fight it? This is just the way the world is.” They've become so awash with lustful culture, they've become like fish who don't even dream about air anymore.

Dr. Tim Clinton, president of the American Association of Christian Counselors, says he believes “the porn pandemic” is destroying us. “I don't think we've yet to begin to see the tidal wave of effects of what's going to happen in our relationships.”

Can churches become communities where people like Michael find repentance, hope, and healing? If there ever is a time to take action, that time is now.



Chapter 1

Taking On Taboos

Often, before porn is discussed in a counseling setting or in a private conversation it is addressed in the pew. For many, the pulpit will be the first place the Holy Spirit inspires people to action and repentance.

James Reeves, senior pastor of Celebration Fellowship in Fort Worth, likens the damage of pornography to a coming tsunami. “The issue of sexual addiction caught us unaware at first,” Reeves writes. “All around us marriages began to fall apart, husbands started getting caught with pornography, in affairs, and visiting prostitutes, and we knew we had to do something. Although we were heavily involved in recovery ministry already, we knew very little about how to deal with the specific issue of sexual addiction. So we got informed, educated, and went to work.”

On September 21, 2003, his church devoted a special Sunday to the issue, entitled, “The Day Celebration Told the Truth about Pornography.” They had a panel discussion where six couples and one man, all of whom were in recovery, told their stories. They spoke about the shame, frustration, and despair that comes with this addiction, and they talked about their path to recovery so far.

Pastor Reeves didn’t announce the topic beforehand to his congregation so people would not come up with convenient excuses to miss church that morning. “From that day forward,” says Reeves, “we were off and running in ministering to men, women, and families caught in this area.”

Overcoming Obstacles to Preaching About Porn

Sadly, churches like this are the exception, not the rule. Dr. Sam Serio, founder and director of Ministry of Mending, says, “When it comes to preaching about porn, you have one of three choices: ignore, abhor, or restore. Most pastors will do only the first two.” The problem is many pastors have never been taught how to do the third.

Preachers face impediments when it comes to addressing the subject of pornography from the pulpit.

1. “I’ve never seen this done before.”

Many pastors—many *people*—must see something embodied before they can envision themselves doing it. This is especially true for something that feels awkward, uncomfortable, or unfamiliar.

Fortunately, we live in an age where there is abundant access to living, breathing examples of preachers talking boldly and compassionately about pornography. Covenant Eyes has a growing library of video and audio sermons and short clips available to watch for free. We’ve also prepared “A Bird’s Eye View of Lust and Pornography,” which can be used as a starting point for your own sermon series. This resource is available for free at www.covenanteyes.com/birds-eye-view/.

2. “How do I deal with children in the congregation?”

Many parents will simply not be ready to let their children listen to a sermon about pornography. There are different ways to address this concern:

- a. **Allow for child-friendly options.** Many churches host regular children’s programs during worship services, but even churches that don’t still might offer this kind of programming in special cases. Commission some volunteer children’s workers in your church to hold a special program on the occasions you preach about these subjects.
- b. **Equip the parents first.** Before doing a church-wide initiative, consider holding a special parenting class or series of classes about teaching children on matters of sexuality. Inform the parents, “The Bible is a sexual book, filled with all kinds of information about human sexuality. While it is never my goal to be crass, in the coming months and years, I plan to preach more from the pulpit about matters of human sexuality that impact our culture, and this means your children might hear me talk about pornography and other sexual sins. The reason for this class is so you can be equipped to educate kids at home about God’s good design for sex. This is a needed thing in our society, but especially if you’re going to be attending a church that will be addressing these subjects head-on.” As an additional resource for parents, download *Parenting the Internet Generation* from www.covenanteyes.com/parenting-the-internet-generation/.

3. “How do I awaken people to the evils of pornography?”

For many people, lust—and especially how they spend their time online—is seen as a private matter or an excusable vice. How can you effectively communicate the sinfulness of pornography?

Perhaps one of the best ways to communicate this is to talk about pornography as something exploitative. It is both outwardly exploitative—it contributes to the actual ill-treatment of women and men—and inwardly exploitative, training viewers to objectify

others. It is the antithesis of the love seen in the gospel. The face of the gospel says, “This is my body given for you”; pornography says, “This is your body taken by me.”

Much of mainstream pornography is outwardly and directly exploitative. Pastors should highlight how pornography is, in many instances, simply another form of prostitution: the sale of someone’s body for sexual purposes. It uses someone else’s powerlessness and forgotten dignity for pleasure. With this comes all the typical abuses that come with prostitution: drug abuse, manipulation, physical and emotional abuse, and in some cases, illegal activity like sex trafficking. Pastors can present this kind of information as a way to wake listeners up to the reality that pornography is not merely a private sin with private consequences.

Pornography is also inwardly exploitative, encouraging an attitude of objectification. Instead of expressing sex in a loving, marital context, pornography rips sexual acts from the intimacy of partners and puts them on display as a commodity to be consumed. Regular consumers are then trained to see sex as something on-tap and made-to-order, warping their standard of beauty around heavily edited and scripted photographs and films. Pornography doesn’t enhance our sexuality—it cheapens and dulls it.

Sin turns sex into a idol—something to be worshipped and loved above all other pleasures.

All of this, of course, needs to be contrasted with a vision of the beauty of human sexuality as God designed it. Sin turns sex into a idol—something to be worshipped and loved above all other pleasures. The answer to this is not religious moralism, merely repressing our sexual desires. The answer is to esteem sex as God does, as something wonderful and powerful, created by Him as a means to intimacy and creating new life.

4. “How do I inspire people to true repentance?”

While you can’t do the work of the Holy Spirit, you can, through your preaching, put Christ on display in a manner that prompts listeners to consider the biblical motivations to turn from sin. This is not primarily done by talking about how pornography is evil but by talking about how Christ is better.

It is not sin’s ugliness that leads us to repentance, but God’s kindness (Romans 2:4).

This is what 19th century Scottish minister Thomas Chalmers called “the expulsive power of a new affection.” Chalmers argued that if we simply focus on the vanity of worldly desires, if we simply try to convince ourselves that the world is not worthy of our desires, we would be like empty machines.³

3. Chalmers.

If we communicate that overcoming lust is merely about trying harder and white-knuckle strategies, people will either experience miserable failure or joyless living.

Pastor Tim Keller says this is why the gospel of “costly grace” is so important for those struggling deeply with pornography.⁴ In the sufferings of Christ on the cross, we see both God’s repugnance of sexual sin and we see God’s love for sexually broken people. This is why the message of the cross is so powerful to those ensnared in habitual sin: it teaches them to both hate their sin and to love the God who so ruthlessly comes after them despite that sin. Thomas Chalmers says by preaching about the cross, listeners see with their mental eye “the blended holiness and compassion” of God.⁵

4. Gilkerson, Luke.

5. Chalmers.



Chapter 2

Safe Place, Safe Process

For many men and women who deeply struggle with sexual sin, a feeling of shame clings to them like a wet blanket and often becomes the biggest barrier against seeking help. Biblical counselor David Powlison says shame and guilt are related but distinct experiences. “Guilt is an awareness of failure against a standard,” such as a rule or a code of conduct. But shame, says Powlison, is “a sense of failure before the eyes of persons”—whether that person is oneself, a family member, a friend, a spouse, a church, the community, or God. Shame is overtly relational.

The problem is not the sense of shame *itself*. Shame is the natural reaction when sin collides with creatures created in the image of a relational God: something in our conscience recognizes we are failing in the eyes of others. Shame is meant to wake us up to the relational breaches caused by sin and push us toward restoration.

But that is not often what happens. Shame gets mixed with the false belief that we are too broken or too wicked for God to accept or change us—much less other people. Then shame becomes toxic. Then we hide.

For many porn and sex addicts, toxic shame is so acute, being open and honest in a spiritual community sounds like the last thing they want to do. So for churches that are proactive about this issue, disinfecting the shame-dynamic is a constant battle.

Disinfecting Shame at Hospital Church

Religious environments often encourage masks and pretension. A few decades ago, Pastor James Reeves came to believe that the church (as he experienced it) was not a safe place to talk about real problems.

Reeves was saved at age 18 right off the street. He grew up, as he says, “poor white trash in a tin-roof house.” He was no stranger to drugs and alcohol. His own father died a penniless alcoholic in a flop house. Coming to Christ brought about a radical change in his life and eventually, after college, he entered a life of vocational ministry.

The church has to be a safe place for people to tell their secrets and has to have a safe process for people to experience emotional and spiritual healing.

However, six years into his pastoral career he sunk into an inexplicable and deep depression. His fellow church leaders gave him a short sabbatical, during which Reeves discovered how insufficiently he had recovered from the hurts and sins of his past. He returned to his church not only refreshed, but with a new vision for what he wanted his church to become. He desires his church to become a place where people felt free to bring their deepest hurts and their biggest secrets.

He calls it “Hospital Church.”

The church, says Reeves, is meant to be like a hospital gown. “The hospital gown is designed not for concealment but easy access.” Reeves dreams

of a church where people can be completely transparent, warts and all. For the past 20+ years, Reeves and the leaders of Celebration Fellowship have worked hard to intentionally create an atmosphere of grace to make transparency possible.

Similarly, Dr. Bill Berry of Central Church in Collierville, Tennessee, says battling the shame-orientation is crucial to helping men and women come out of hiding. Dr. Berry has been the director of Battle Plan Ministries for over a dozen years in his church, and through this program he has watched scores of men walk out of the darkness of porn addiction and into the light.

He knew men and women were seeking private counseling for these problems—a tactic he calls “covert warfare”—but he wanted his church to be a place where men could be honest publicly about their struggles. Berry says he started Battle Plan for this very reason: to change the culture of his church and give men a safe forum for being honest without fear of condemnation.

He now oversees four Battle Plan groups around the Memphis area.

Safe Place, Safe Process

Pastor Reeves says churches often make two mistakes when they reach out to sexually broken people: their church is either not a safe place, or they do not create a safe process. You need both, he says.

“The church has to be a safe place for people to tell their secrets and has to have a safe process for people to experience emotional and spiritual healing,” says Reeves. You can preach about grace and transparency, but if you don’t provide a forum for people to be disciplined, learn, and grow, you will never see change. Similarly, you can create groups where sexual strugglers can go, but if the church is not a safe place to be a sexual struggler, very few people will take advantage of these ministries.

The Safe Place: A Church Without Masks

Psalm 89 offers a powerful example for us. Even though this psalm was written to be sung aloud by a congregation, it is a powerful lament that ends with the tension unresolved. After the psalmist celebrates God's promises and acts of deliverance, he turns a corner in his mind and faces his current situation with nothing but disappointment. His enemies have breached the walls. His king is totally defeated in battle. Exile is immanent. The psalmist is reaching the end of his life, and there is no sign of hope. He cries out to God, "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?" (v.46), but God is silent. There is no answer.

Are our churches
places where it is
okay not to be okay?

Of course, that is not the end of the psalter—nor the end of the story. God did deliver them from exile. God did vanquish the enemy. God did resurrect David's dynasty—in the person of Christ. But at the moment the psalmist put down his pen, there was no resolution. There were no sugar-coated maxims to lighten his spirit. Only questions.

Are our churches safe places where people can admit to being in the ugly stage of a long process—full of thankfulness for the gospel, yes, but still feeling the weight of our present sinful age? Are our churches places where it is okay not to be okay?

Jon Acuff says this kind of transparency starts when Christian leaders give "the gift of going second." When one brave soul speaks first, when he or she shares the raw and dirty details of his or her life, others in the room are given the priceless gift of going second.

It's so much harder to be first. No one knows what's off limits yet and you're setting the boundaries with your words. You're throwing yourself on the honesty grenade and taking whatever fallout that comes with it. Going second is so much easier. And the ease only grows exponentially as people continue to share. But it has to be started somewhere. Someone has to go first, and I think it has to be us.⁶

In practice, Acuff says, this means not just confessing our "safe sins," like "I don't read my Bible enough." To the guy or gal who just spent an evening binging on hardcore porn, this is not an invitation to confess taboo problems but an invitation to hide.

In the New York metropolitan area, Grace Community Church reaches thousands with its weekend services. Nearly every week Pastor Jarrod Jones will stand on the platform and remind his congregation, "This is a church where it's okay to not be okay." Jones, himself, is no stranger to the struggle of sexual sin. He both writes and speaks candidly about what he has learned from his own struggles.

6. Acuff, Jon.

This environment of grace is one of the reasons why Grace Community's Men's L.I.F.E. Accountability Group is as strong as it is. Mike Pagna, who leads this Saturday morning fellowship, believes strongly that leaders need to set the pace when it comes to transparency. "I don't care if I'm labeled a sex addict," he says. Wanting more guys to come clean about their struggles, he would create venues to tell his story: men's breakfasts, youth group events, anywhere he was given a platform. This not only drew guys to his group, but it also empowered men to be honest when they got there. "The leader needs to really, really lay it out. I need to lead with my junk so other guys can talk about theirs."

This is the same approach used by Pastor Darrell Brazell of New Hope Fellowship in Lawrence, Kansas. Brazell struggled with pornography since he was 10. He pursued a career in ministry believing if he devoted his life to God in full-time service, God would make his sexual struggles go away. When this did not happen, his heart was eaten alive with shame, and the addiction only became worse.

Brazell started to find freedom when he opened up about his struggle to other fellow pastors. Because of his willingness to share his story with others, more and more men came to Brazell for help for their sexual sins. In October 2003, Brazell founded New Hope Fellowship, and to this day its sexual addiction recovery ministry is the church's largest outreach to the surrounding community.

Brazell knows his situation is unique: not every pastor's story is like his own. But he believes strongly that pastors need to be honest about their own weaknesses. "If the teaching pastors do not understand their own brokenness and constantly proclaim grace, no recovery ministry is going to thrive."

The Safe Process: Wisely Led Support Communities

Church leaders might preach grace and model transparency, but if we don't provide a forum where people will be disciplined, counseled, and restored, we will never see change. Worse yet, we create an environment where people get burned by their own confessions.

In some church circles, it has become fashionable to be transparent, to be "raw and real." Church leaders with the best of intentions plan a special service or men's breakfast where they are going to showcase their most eye-opening and broken-hearted testimonies. They open the can of worms for all the closet porn addicts in their midst—only to realize that they have nothing in place to deal with the worms.

Churches must put safe processes in place where sexual strugglers are given the hope of freedom.

There are three essential ingredients to any safe process: *counsel, coaches, and community*.

Counsel: Personally Grasping Immortal Truths

Someone who struggles deeply with pornography needs to understand why. They have tried to repent of the behavior but they have yet to unearth and repent of the *sin under the sin*. They need to understand the war they are fighting and the two primary fronts where the battle is fought: the body and the heart.

The Body – For the Christian, one of the primary footholds where sin has deep roots is our bodies. Paul writes that the law or power of sin dwells in our *members* (Romans 7:23). Sexual sin in particular, Paul says, is sinning against one's own *body* (1 Corinthians 6:18). Today, we can actually see porn's imprint on the human brain, the way habitual porn use rewires our brains and hijacks our mental circuits. For many Christians, an understanding of how pornography does this can help them understand the reasons why they feel so physiologically drawn to porn. It can also give them hope that God can bring life to their mortal flesh. For more information on the physiology of porn addiction, download *Your Brain on Porn* from www.covenanteyes.com/brain-ebook.

The Heart – Sin ultimately flows from the heart, the core of our being (Mark 7:21-23). In the Bible, “the heart” is the seat of what we trust the most—our deepest commitments, our greatest treasures. Ultimately, people are drawn to porn not just because of the naked bodies but because it promises to give us something we long for, something we have positioned as an ultimate good in our life. The Bible calls this heart-attitude idolatry, and it is the wellspring of every kind of sin. The one who is hooked on porn needs to ask him or herself the question, “Beyond the obvious physical enjoyment, what is the fantasy world of porn offering me that I find so appealing?” Is it a place of refuge to relieve my stresses? Is it the illusion of respect or intimacy? Is it the place where I play out my anger at God or the world? Repenting of porn is not about white-knuckle, try-harder strategies, but about identifying the idols of the heart, turning from them, and turning to God who offers us better promises than what porn can offer.

The body and the heart are not distinct parts of the struggle. They are rather two perspectives on the fact that pornography (like all sin) impacts the whole person. We are not just enfleshed souls, nor are we just really smart animals with a spark of divine life. We are creatures made in the image of the Living God, and when we sin, it impacts the whole of our lives—mind, body, soul, emotions, and intellect.

Any safe process must be a forum where these truths can be learned—not just intellectually, but personally and emotionally. There are dozens of wonderful resources available to the church today that communicate these truths (found in resources section in the back of this book).

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Coaching: Mentors Who Embody Wisdom and Grace

Jesus did not disciple his followers from a distance. He did not come to earth to sit in an office and write curricula for his disciples to read. Jesus was the curricula. He was their model, their mentor, their shepherd.

While we know this, we might think, “Well, good for Jesus, but I’m not the sinless Son of God.” The fact is, neither was Paul, but he could say, without reservation, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul, the one who also called himself the foremost of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), didn’t just call men and women to believe what he taught; he called them to imitate his thoughts, actions, and attitudes (Philippians 4:9).

Those hooked on porn don’t just need truth: they need *embodied truth*. They don’t just need an information download; they need the wisdom that can only be imparted through walking with the wise (Proverbs 13:20).

This does not mean a church’s safe process should only recruit former porn addicts as mentors. Certainly, men and women with experience in this area of temptation are helpful. However, more than this, the leaders who mentor others should be wise leaders who know their Bible, know how the human heart works, and care deeply about those trapped in sin.

- + They should be men and women of prayer, experienced in helping to heal the hurts caused by sin and living in a broken world (James 5:13-16).
- + They should be mature, self-controlled, and tender (1 Timothy 3:1-7).
- + They should be men and women led by the Spirit who know how to restore and mend the shattered thoughts of those caught in sin (Galatians 6:1-2).
- + They should be “men of understanding” who know how sin works in the heart and can draw up the hidden motives that often drive our sinful dispositions and habits (Proverbs 20:5).

Raising up good coaches is a matter of careful selection and training, but there are resources today that can help (found in the back of this resource).

Community: A Context to Know and Be Known

Support groups for sexual struggles, sometimes called “recovery” communities, “freedom groups,” or “healing groups,” vary from church to church. A church’s safe process needs to involve the formation of smaller communities where the express purpose is the dismantling of shame and offering support and accountability.

There are common features you are likely to find in most successful formal groups.

1. Setting expectations

After newcomers are welcomed, support group leaders set the tone by telling all attendees what to expect. What will be the format of the meeting? How long will it be? Will what we say be kept confidential? This is also a time to get any necessary announcements out of the way.

2. Large group teaching

Battle Lines, a ministry of Second Baptist Church in Houston, has been in existence for eight years. As many as 70 attend on a Tuesday night. Benno Bauer, who counsels men in the church with sexual addictions, leads these groups. For the teaching portion, he asks specific men who are further in their recovery to present what they are learning, usually based on written material the group is using.

Often these lay leaders will use stories from their own lives to supplement the material in the curriculum. “One time a guy brought in his wife’s personal journal, and he read portions of her words aloud to the group about the pain and confusion she felt because of his sexual addiction,” says Bauer. “This totally set the tone of the group that night.”

In some groups like Battle Lines, the large group teaching ends with a circle of prayer.

Offering some kind of teaching is critical for a number of reasons. Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling at The Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, says the teaching and large group discussion times ease attendees into the subject matter.

The teaching portion is a time to “use third person pronouns,” he says. Often people do not want to discuss their personal problems right away, and the teaching portion allows all to participate without feeling a need to be completely transparent.

The teaching time also helps attendees reframe how they understand their sinful behavior. Ted Roberts believes the breaking of “denial structures” is one of the most important things that needs to happen in recovery. Often those who are ensnared in sexual sin are also entrenched in denial. They deny the strength or perversity of their sin (“I’m not an addict”). They deny the extent of their sin (“This doesn’t hurt anyone”). They deny their helplessness (“I just need to pray more, read more, and try harder”). These denial structures need to be dismantled by good teaching.

The teaching time also lays out God’s means of sanctification provided in the gospel. Pastor Hambrick has developed a comprehensive video and written curriculum called “False Love: Overcoming Sexual Sin from Pornography to Adultery.” This nine-step curriculum presents sexual sin through a gospel framework and it is used in their healing groups for sex addicts. These steps, Hambrick says, “present the gospel in slow motion,” outlining how the good news of Christ frees us not just from the guilt of sin, but also from its grip.

3. Small group discussions

Depending on the size of the meeting, participants break off into smaller huddles where they can discuss how the material they are learning applies to them specifically.

At New Hope Fellowship these are called “check-in groups.” Pastor Brazell insists the groups be only three or four people. “Two isn’t safe, and five takes too long,” he says. The purpose of these check-ins is to talk about how each person is doing: sin is confessed, new goals are set, and members are prayed for.

The key to these smaller huddles is quality leadership dispersed throughout the room. John Doyel runs a group of 40-50 men at Vineyard Columbus (Ohio) called “180.” Leadership development, Doyel says, is the most important issue for starting a quality support group. “Good leaders are very hard to find.”

Ideally Doyel looks for men who have had at least six months of “sobriety” from their own sexual sins (no masturbation, no pornography, no sexually acting out) and have taken the Vineyard’s Healing Prayer course. If an established leader stumbles once or twice, this is not a problem. But if a habit reemerges, they are removed from leadership for a season so they can receive help.

At Celebration Fellowship, leaders are selected from among group members who have been involved for at least a year and have shown personal growth. After they are selected, they are placed into an intensive mentorship for another year with one of the established leaders in the program.

The result of these smaller huddles is real community. Friendships are forged. People experience genuine care and compassion.

In these smaller groups, members also find accountability and encouraging relationships. If Internet pornography has been a stumbling block, many of these churches recommend members use Covenant Eyes Internet Accountability software to assist them in their accountability conversations.

If the pastoral team isn’t ardently behind making the church a safe place, recovery ministries will always be limited.

Getting Started: Pastors and Champions

Creating a safe place and safe process involves both pastors and champions.

If the pastoral team isn’t ardently behind making the church a safe place, recovery

ministries will always be limited. If the local churches lack champions—people who rise in the morning and lay down at night with a fire in their bones to help others—then safe processes will never be fully formed. Churches need both, and this is where every local congregation must start.

Yes, it is hard work, but the business of setting captives free is also amazingly rewarding.



Chapter 3

The Healthy Tensions of Good Small Groups

Good recovery groups usually do not operate perfectly from Day 1. They are forged and re-forged over months and even years.

Proactive churches that are delving into recovery ministry will face a number of tensions. Wise pastors and group leaders will anticipate these tensions and navigate them intentionally.

Tension #1:

How do we make specific groups for those who struggle while not stigmatizing the sin?

If church leaders are not conscious of this tension, the result may be a poorly executed, poorly attended group.

“Recovery is not a program; it’s a paradigm shift,” says Pastor Reeves. “Everyone needs it, not just the so-called addict.” All of us, he says, are sin-addicts. All are broken and in need of repair. When we create sin-specific groups but we do not communicate this truth to the church community, we end up creating a segregated group that’s just for the perverts.

One of the ways Celebration Fellowship communicates this message is by offering marriage enrichment ministries for all the couples in their church. These enrichment classes utilize the same principles used in their Freedom Groups. This backdoor approach, he says, helps men and women to realize: Hey, “this stuff” is for everybody, not just the so-called sickos.

The Summit Church takes a similar approach. All Freedom Group materials are presented through special seminars that are made available to the whole church. All small group leaders, not just those involved in the recovery ministries, are encouraged to attend these seminars. Freedom Groups are formed based around this material,

but all small groups in the church are encouraged to make use of the material. The curriculum then becomes a part of the DNA of Summit's small group life. This de-stigmatizes the sin and helps many small groups to become hubs of healing.

At Grace Community, group leader Mike Pagna navigates this tension by changing the format of his accountability group on the last Saturday of each month and invites as many men as he can for a fellowship breakfast. Pagna hits up as many of the elders and leaders in his church to come and invite other men. During this breakfast he picks a willing guy to share his story of sexual brokenness and recovery in front of the whole group. They have already started seeing this change the perception of the group in the church overall.

Tension #2:

How do we form a group focused on a specific sin and not become sin-centered?

The first tension addresses how the church at-large stigmatizes a specific sin or problem. This second tension deals with how group members can tend to identify themselves with their own sin.

"Hi, I'm _____, and I'm a porn addict."

To a group leader, hearing this honest admission from a new member sounds like progress. But hearing this from a group member whose been around for years is a sign that he or she has developed a struggle-based identity.

"This is a tension to be managed, not a problem to be solved," says Pastor Jason Albello of East Hill Church in Gresham, Oregon. Any time a church develops a recovery ministry for a specific issue, this tension will present itself. He says their church is constantly relearning this lesson. "We must strive to be Christ-centered," Albello says. "We see guys able to grow in their capacity to manage porn or lust, but then totally lose it in other areas or atrophy in their knowledge and experience of God."

Pastor Brad Hambrick says Christians all have a trifold identity:

- + Sinner: we sin against God
- + Sufferer: we are sinned against
- + Saint: we are children of the living God

While it is normal for recovery-style groups to be formed under the premise of a common sin or a common suffering, a group should mature to embrace the identity of saints. If we are in Christ, we are not merely sinners or sufferers. We are saints who sin, saints who suffer.

At The Summit Church, involvement in all Freedom Groups is designed to be short-term for this very reason. “We don’t want these groups to allow people to say, ‘I am my sin or my suffering,’” says Pastor Hambrick. “We don’t want that identity to replace who they are in Christ.” Summit’s Freedom Groups are specifically modeled to look and feel similar to the rest of their small groups. Members work through the steps of the program, and as they near completion they are encouraged to get involved in another group. “We tell our graduates, ‘We have 50 of our small group leaders who’ve all gone through this same material. We can direct you to any of those groups if you are interested.’”

East Hill experienced rapid growth in their healing groups early on, but some of them very quickly became “binge and purge” groups, Abelo confesses. Members were becoming myopic, focusing merely on breaking free from acute sins and white-knuckling it all the way. Pastor Abelo says, “The right focus is Christ himself, His grace, and the total life-change He is asking each person to make.”

Even in a church like New Hope Fellowship, with a large and thriving sexual addiction ministry, the focus is always intimacy with Christ, not just breaking free from pornography. As one of their church member states, “I came to New Hope wanting to not look at dirty pictures, and instead it has impacted every aspect of my life, all my relationships. It’s a whole new paradigm.”

Tension #3:

Do I make the group open to all or do I have some kind of selection process?

Many churches opt for an “open group” where new members can come at any time, but doing this, good leaders still recognize that real life change will not happen for those who aren’t committed.

Benno Bauer at Second Baptist intentionally makes his group meetings 90 minutes or longer, followed by smaller accountability discussion groups. He believes this is one factor that helps to weed out those who are not serious about recovery from those who are.

Mike Pagna’s group meets on Saturday morning at 7 o’clock. “If you are willing to come then,” he comments, “then it means you’re serious.”

Dr. Berry from Central Church and Darrell Brazell from New Hope take the approach of personally interviewing prospective members who are interested in attending. These interviews are partially for diagnostic purposes: they want to hear these men’s personal testimonies and histories. But these interviews also help to give each man clear expectations about the recovery ministries. These groups are first and foremost not just support groups: they are holistic discipleship ministries.

Tension #4:

Should we devote our time to helping sexual strugglers or should we help their spouses, too?

Pornography and other sexual sins are not just “personal problems.” Ted Roberts says these are “family systems” problems. Neglecting care for the families of sexual strugglers is categorically one of the worst mistakes a church can make in this area.

Churches with thriving sex addiction ministries quickly learn the importance of ministering to spouses. Some churches minister to women through pastoral guidance or personal counseling. Others offer complementary groups for wives betrayed by sexual sin: Partners in Purity. Begin Again. Wounded Women: Mended Hearts. Faithful Warriors. Betrayal and Beyond. These are just a few of the groups that have cropped up in churches throughout the country.

Pornography and other sexual sins are not just “personal problems.” They are “family systems” problems.

While Troy and Melissa Haas were missionaries in Africa, Troy committed adultery. This not only ended their missionary career, it shattered Melissa’s world. Upon returning to the United States she got involved in a wives’ support group, and through this a vital change took place in her.

It was a very sad time for me, because I realized there was not one person I felt like I could call and say, “This is what has happened in my life.” I had, in ministry, isolated myself from others because I thought spiritually mature believers didn’t need anybody. So when I walked into my first spouses’ group and was just one of “them,” something happened in me that transcended anything that I had every felt in the church. That was this whole idea that we were created for the “one anothers” in Scripture, that community is vital to our healing and our souls. And I had missed that. I didn’t even know how starved I was for that.⁷

Having been a missionary, on many occasions, Melissa watched the lone wildebeest at the back of the herd being eaten. She knows now that women isolated from a supportive community are just as vulnerable. Melissa now runs wives’ support groups through HopeQuest. “I say this to spouses all the time: When we are not alone, we often have the strength to make choices that would have terrified us before. When we are not alone, it somehow gives us the strength to face our greatest hurts.”

7. Gilkerson, Luke.



Appendix A

Should We Speak of Pornography “Addiction”?

At Covenant Eyes we hear from hundreds of people every week whose lives have been impacted, at varying degrees, by pornography. We’ve listened to countless men tell us about how porn hooked them at a young age and followed them like a merciless bloodhound into adulthood. We’ve heard the tear-filled stories of women whose husbands continually and stubbornly sought out porn against all admonitions to quit. We’ve cried with parents who just found hardcore material on their child’s tablet and don’t know what to do next. We’ve heard from young women about how they believed they were the only females on the planet who felt compelled to seek out porn—women who hid until their obsessions became unbearable.

It is not uncommon for these people to describe this problem as an “*addiction*.” In fact, it may be the most common descriptive term we hear.

For any Christian communicator, words matter. How we label a problem impacts how we approach it. Since pornography use is at an all-time high, it remains a critical question for Bible teachers today: *should I encourage others to label their problem an “addiction” and if so, what does that mean?*

Sin or Sickness?

“Addiction” is a loaded term with many nuances. It is also a fluid term. Colloquially, it is used for nearly anything that human beings relish. “I’m addicted to caramel macchiatos.” “I’m addicted to Katy Perry music.” Clinically, it enjoys a long and turbulent history, and today “sex addiction” and “porn addiction” have earned somewhat canonical status among psychologists, despite the much resistance to it as an official diagnosis.

The word “addiction” has been part of the English language for more than 400 years. Long before the word “addiction” was adopted by 20th century medicine, the word had a different flavor. It was not necessarily medical in nature. The 1884 *Oxford English*

Like a disease, sin affects our entire being, it is painful, it leads to death, and it is absolutely tragic.

Dictionary said addiction was “the state or condition of being dedicated or devoted to a thing, esp. an activity or occupation; adherence or attachment, esp. of an immoderate or compulsive kind.”

The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) defines “addiction” as something neurological: “a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry.” Our brains are designed to give us neurologically feel-good “rewards” for certain behaviors through the release and triggering of different neurotransmitters and hormones. According

to the ASAM, addiction is what happens when someone pathologically pursues these rewards by compulsively or impulsively using substances and engaging in various behaviors.

Because of the medical associations with the term today, Christians can have mixed feelings about the word “addiction.” More often than not, when Christians respond negatively to recent developments in neuroscience, the fear is that by dissecting the organ of all our feelings, thoughts, and decisions, we will somehow lose our belief in moral responsibility. If I come to believe that porn has warped my brain, I can eventually say, “I’m not responsible for this problem. My brain made me do it.”

However, this conversation predates modern neuroscience. It is a conversation that has been present in addiction recovery circles for the better part of 80 years: *is addiction a “disease”?*

Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, was among the first who likened alcoholism to a disease. He didn’t actually believe alcoholism was a disease, but that it was *like* a disease. It was a pragmatic description: he felt the disease metaphor helped men and women open up about their problems. Once you were in the doors of many AA meetings, however, it was clear that while the problem could be described as a sickness, moral responsibility was not lost. The men and women at AA still felt the moral weight of their decisions.

Christian counselor Ed Welch points out, the Bible itself uses the disease metaphor when talking about sin. Citing passages like Isaiah 1:5-7 and 53:6, he states that Scripture emphasizes that sin has many things in common with a disease. Like a disease, sin affects our entire being, it is painful, it leads to death, and it is absolutely tragic. However, the Bible also never loses sight of moral responsibility. Alcoholism and porn addiction are a lot like diseases—they feel as if we have been taken over by a virus, making us spiral out of control—but it is a *voluntary slavery*. Dr. Welch calls this the dual nature of sin:

This enlarged perspective indicates that in sin, we are both hopelessly out of control and shrewdly calculating; victimized yet responsible. All sin is simultaneously pitiable slavery and overt rebelliousness or selfishness. This is a paradox, to be sure, but one that is the very essence of all sinful habits.⁸

The disease model, additionally, is not just a convenient metaphor; it reflects a genuine reality: *sin impacts us physically*. When speaking of “all kinds of lusts” that he struggled with, Paul said the law of sin “dwells in my members” (Romans 8:23), i.e. the physical members of his body. Elsewhere he says “the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18). It should not be surprising, therefore, that modern neuroscience finds evidence of how pornography use can warp the brain.

It is important, therefore, we not get trapped in either/or thinking on the matter. Is addiction a sin or a sickness? It is both. It is a sickness for which we are responsible; it is a sin by which we have been enslaved. It is a condition from which we must be healed and overt pattern of rebellion from which we must be forgiven. And only the Great Physician can bring us complete redemption.

Four Common Approaches

Still, the question remains, even if the word “addiction” is often used of those who are entrenched in pornography, should the church use it? If so, when?

There are four different approaches to this question in the church. For the sake of simplicity, we’ll call these schools of thought (1) the Redeemers, (2) the Clinicians, (3) the Prophets, and (4) the Contextualists.

1. The Redeemers: Addiction to Self Is the Root of All Sin

There are some in the church who, regardless of the nuances in the diagnostic literature, think the term “addiction” should be usurped or “redeemed” by the church at large as something to describe all habitual sin. As these people see it, standard clinical stipulations of addiction are unhelpful, relegating “addicts” to those at the far end of the spectrum, when the word should apply to anyone who fails to stop sinful behavior—which is everyone.

By redeeming and reimagining the term “addiction,” churches can level the playing field among their members, breaking down the us-them mentality. When church members are taught that “addiction to self” is the root of all sin, then porn addicts, alcoholics, and drug addicts are not a stigmatized few—they are no longer a lonely group of perverts and lost causes. Rather they can be easily embraced by the body of Christ.

8. Welch, Ed. *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave*, p.34.

You may ask, “Why redeem the term ‘addiction’ from the culture and from medicine?” *Why not*, the Redeemers ask. It gives people a vivid picture of the seriousness of sin: something enslaving, habitual, and requiring the help of a Power greater than oneself.

2. The Clinicians: All Sin Is Serious, but Addiction Is Rare

There are others in the church who take their cues about addiction from the diagnostic literature and the medical community. For the Clinicians, “porn addiction” is a real problem, but is overused in the church.

For the Clinicians, all use of porn is clearly sinful, but not all who use porn should be labeled as addicts. Classic indicators of addiction need to be present: tolerance, withdrawal, compulsion, craving, progression, and unsuccessful attempts to quit.

“Addiction” is a diagnostic word, so use it that way; don’t apply the addict label to just anyone who says he or she looks at porn. The term comes with a long history of medical and therapeutic baggage, insinuating the addict has no control over his or her actions and requires specialized help. Clinicians don’t want to see Christians pathologize themselves needlessly and would like to see addiction language used minimally.

3. The Prophets: “Addiction” Is Confusing; Stick to Bible Terms

Some in the church want to see Christians get back to biblical categories for describing sin, no longer depending on modern psychiatric terms. Not only is there no universally recognized clinical definition of “addiction,” they argue, the term also has a broad and ambiguous use in the culture. Calling something an “addiction” is confusing at best and deceptive at worst.

The Prophets rely on the Scriptures for their categories and nomenclature. It isn’t “addiction,” it is slavery to sin. Porn users don’t need to “recover,” they need to repent and be restored by spiritual leaders. It isn’t “dependency,” it is idolatry. It isn’t “psychiatric help,” it’s discipleship and biblical counsel.

Don’t confuse the Prophets with moralists. The Prophets are not the just-stop-it crowd. These are not the suck-it-up-and-repent crowd. They intimately understand there are a variety of heart attitudes, family histories, and environmental concerns that go into our porn obsessions and confusions about sex. They know the church must give good counsel, restoration, love, and admonishment. But they also think biblical categories and terms are one of the primary means God uses to renew the mind. Modern psychiatric terms, at best, only serve to distract us from what is really going on: sin, hardness of heart, and a dire need to surrender to God.

4. The Contextualists: “Addiction” Is Helpful for Some, But Not for Others

“Addiction” can be a loaded term. For some, the term is used casually and simply means enjoying something a lot. For others, the term invokes an image of a dimly lit church basement where men and women, 20-years sober, show up for a meeting and still identify themselves through the lens of their formerly compulsive habit.

Like it or not, addiction means different things to different people. The Contextualists say we need to recognize this, using the term when it is helpful and refraining from use when it is harmful. For some, calling the problem an “addiction” is a relief because it finally gives them a label that makes sense of the madness of their condition; they can finally move on and make progress. For others, it trivializes the problem as something medical and therefore excusable. For others, it imprisons them in hopelessness, for they believe that once you’re an addict, you’re always an addict.

Don’t confuse Contextualists for relativists. Viewing porn is sinful no matter how you slice it or what you call it. But Contextualists understand that words have power, and terms like “addiction” and “addict” can sometimes come with great potential or unexpected baggage. Since the medical community does not have a monopoly on these terms—as is evidenced by the colloquial use of “addiction”—the church has every right to appropriate the terms how it likes. But this, of course, must be done with great care and precision, because words have meaning.

Use “addiction” when the label will help, but refrain when it will harm.

Being Wise with Our Terms

The above groups are generalizations, to be sure. In fact, some intentionally blend these approaches into new approaches. There is also considerable overlap among these perspectives.

Regardless of what camp we stand in, when churches use vague terms like “pornography addiction,” it is critical that we define our terms and aim towards charity to those who don’t see eye-to-eye with our definitions.

It is also critical, when employing patently psychological terms that we never “outsource” moral authority to the social sciences. In a study of the popular evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* from 1956 to 2010, Jeremy Thomas found that while outward opposition to pornography has remained steady and robust over the last 50 years, during this same time, evangelicals’ anti-pornography declarations have become increasingly secular.⁹ More than half a century ago, pornography was judged by the

9. J. N. Thomas, “Outsourcing moral authority: The internal secularization of evangelicals’ anti-pornography narratives,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52 (2013): 457–475.

moral authority of Scripture. Today, more secular forms of moral authority are used, such as psychological health or humanistic conceptions of individual rights. This, Thomas says, is evidence that the church is outsourcing its moral authority.

The church must remain clear that pornography is not essentially wrong because it is addictive, but because of its titillating and deceptive message: it rips sexuality from its relational context and presents human beings not as creatures made in God's image, but as sexual commodities, something to be bought and sold.



Appendix B

Resources for Churches

The following is a selective list of resources many church leaders find useful to help their churches become safe places for confession and have safe processes for change.

Sermon Resources for Pastors

Go to www.covenanteyes.com/pastor-resources to see video and audio sermons about the subject of pornography and sexual sin. See for yourself how other pastors are talking about and tackling these subjects from the pulpit.

In addition, join www.facebook.com/groups/christianleadersfightingforonlineintegrity/ to engage with the world's top voices on the issue of pornography and its impact on people, culture and our churches.

Books and Videos for Support Groups

Your Brain on Porn

Luke Gilkerson

This free e-book from Covenant Eyes examines five ways pornography warps the mind and 5 biblical ways to renew it.

Coming Clean: Overcoming Lust Through Biblical Accountability

Luke Gilkerson

This free e-book looks at accountability, not as a last resort against sexual sin, but as a lifestyle—a means of grace to help us overcome habitual sin.

Closing the Window: Steps to Living Porn Free

Tim Chester

Instead of being entrenched in pornography, we can be captured by a better vision—a

liberating confidence that God offers more than pornography does. Pastor Tim Chester exposes the false promises of porn and redirects us to the true promises of God.

At the Altar of Sexual Idolatry

Steve Gallagher

This book is a thorough examination of sexual addiction that exposes the inner workings of sexual sin in the heart and points to Jesus Christ as the ultimate answer.

The Game Plan

Joe Dallas

Christian counselor Joe Dallas gives men a 30-day strategy for sexual integrity, showing the R.O.U.T.E. that must be taken—repentance, order, understanding, training, and endurance.

Hide or Seek

John Freeman

Using a very conversational style, John Freeman of Harvest USA calls men to take one crucial step to reorient their hearts toward God's love for them, breaking the vicious cycle of sexual sin.

Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain

Dr. William Struthers

Neuroscientist and researcher William Struthers explains why viewing pornography changes how the male brain works, and how men form memories and make attachments, showing how proper sexual longings can actually propel men toward sanctification and holiness.

Finally Free: Fighting For Purity with the Power of Grace

Heath Lambert

Real freedom isn't found by trying harder to change a particular method or a program. Biblical counselor Heath Lambert lays out eight gospel-centered strategies for overcoming the deceitful lure of pornography.

Sex and the Supremacy of Christ

edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor

Based on presentations at the Desiring God 2004 National Conference, 11 contributors help readers to celebrate sex for what God made it to be and fight what sin turned it into.

Sexual Sanity for Men

David White

Ideal for one-on-one mentoring, college age discipleship groups, and men's small group studies, *Sexual Sanity for Men* shows men how knowing Christ breaks their chains, builds spiritual brotherhood, and helps them take practical steps to re-create their minds in a God-focused direction.

Sexual Sanity for Women

Ellen Dykas

Ideal for a one-on-one mentoring, college age student groups, and women's small group studies, *Sexual Sanity for Women* offers twenty lessons to guide participants to understand God's good design for sexuality, the underlying reasons women struggle with sexual brokenness, and how the grace and truth of Jesus Christ can be applied to their struggles.

Building a Pure Life

David Coats

This workbook for counselors and small groups helps readers get into God's Word to find His help to be pure people in a world overcome with sensuality in all its forms.

Seven Pillars of Freedom

Dr. Ted Roberts

This workbook designed to guide men through the process of addiction recognition, recovery, and restoration, with a special emphasis on what modern science tells us about "renewing the mind."

False Love: Overcoming Sexual Sin from Pornography to Adultery

Brad Hambrick

This nine-part video series features Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling at The Summit Church, designed specifically for small group use.

GroupNOW

GroupNOW is a complete program for starting a Christ-centered recovery ministry in your community. Learn more at www.route1520.com/group-now.

Books and Videos for Spouse Support Groups

Porn and Your Husband: A Recovery Guide for Wives

Covenant Eyes

This free e-book from Covenant Eyes answers some of the common questions wives have about pornography use and offers practical strategies for healing the marriage.

When Your Husband is Addicted to Pornography

Vicki Tiede

Writing from personal experience, Vicki Tiede gently guides women toward God and away from despair through daily readings and questions on six important topics: hope, surrender, trust, identity, brokenness, and forgiveness.

Healing Your Marriage When Trust is Broken

Cindy Beall

With raw honesty and intimate knowledge of pain and of God's power to resurrect something new out of the debris of betrayal, Cindy Beall reveals to women how to rebuild trust after porn, sex, and other addictions undermine a relationship. In addition, how to seek guidance, counseling, and prayer support, and how to protect a marriage from lies and unfaithfulness.

True Betrayal: Overcoming the Betrayal of Your Spouse's Sexual Sin

Brad Hambrick

This nine-part video series features Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling at The Summit Church, designed specifically for small group use.