



Crucifying Pornography in Masculinity

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ANYONE SEEING TELEVISION TODAY, or picking up lifestyle magazines will notice the volume of content that includes showing a lot of “skin” in both male and female representations. Now am not a prude by any measure, but what’s repeatedly caught my eye is the suggestiveness of many of the displayed bodies. Of course, “*it’s on purpose*,” and “*sex sells, Vince!*” We all know that.

What we don’t see is the *other* underbelly, how much of our social life has become *voyeuristic*, and I mean by that, infused with encouraged *peeping-tomness*. It isn’t just a scene or two: We started

by seeing people, actors, carry on with intimacies; seeing their romantic come-ons on our wide screens. We were then invited into their living-rooms, their bedrooms. Shows like *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, notched it up further, introducing the notion that you should “try your available flavors,” much like we sample frozen yogurt before we fill the cup.

Voyeurism has a long history, a visual habit that has gone from the forbidden to a staple of our everyday life. If we peel back this onion, we do find that historically, **men**, and **male socialization** have always been given a greater license to indulge in the looking. As a matter of fact, boys are *encouraged* to look, while girls are often *protected* from looking. Yes, I’m aware: “*Things have changed*,” and there’s lots of “women’s porn” out there for women to view and indulge in. But overall, women aren’t *socialized* into visual stimulation as significantly as are men. And, I say that with some authority:

If we look at the research for a minute (just a minute), we see several contributing elements:

- *Men and women do respond differently to visual stimuli, and men in particular, more to items coded ‘sexual’ by the brain’s learning. Some researchers feel it’s due to how their amygdalas (the emotion control center of the brain) processes sexual stimuli differently.*¹
- *Male socialization introduces and encourages males to look at women in predominantly sexually objectifying ways (i.e., body shapes, preferences, even body parts vs. the whole). Women do more of the same now, but there is still a preponderance more looking and dissecting by men than there is by women.*
- *Most males, by age 12, have been exposed to, or indulged, in some form of visual sexual imagery. It is also not uncommon at an early teen, even pre-teen age, for boys to masturbate with the inclusion of some imagery as a stimulus.*

Is it any wonder, then, that the male experience *includes* and *encourages* the objectification of women? Early on, women become objects of interest, because by ages 11-14 boys have already learned that (a)

¹ Emory University Health Sciences Center, "Study Finds Male and Female Brains Respond Differently to Visual Stimuli." *ScienceDaily*, 16 March 2004.

Photo ©2018 Vincent E. Gil. Door of the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels and Martyrs, Rome, Italy. The two bronze entrance doors are important works of modern sculpture by the Polish artist Igor Mitoraj, and were completed in 2005. The door pictured depicts the Resurrection.

females are to be objects to be looked at, examined, and even *compared* as to their body form and what is coded *sexy*; and (b) *dissecting the female* and *talking about the female* is yet another way that boys solidify their masculinity. Men are men because they “like women,” and are *sexualized* by the female.²

So what does all of this have to do with *Christian men*? These have been washed clean and sanctified, no?

Studies from reputable organizations who do research on Christians (e.g., the Barna Group), show us some staggering statistics: In their *Proven Men Porn Survey*, Barna Group reports (via self-reports) that 64 percent of Christian respondents viewed porn “at least monthly” (54 percent for born-again Christian men).³ If that’s not enough, other Barna studies reveal that over 50 percent of Protestant *pastors* admit to seeing porn “on a regular basis.” And, of young Christian adults (18-24), 76 percent actively search for porn. In 2019 *Freedom Flight*, a porn recovery program and ministry, ordered a survey of more than 1,300 Christian college students. Mind you, these were involved in campus ministries, and considered their faith in Christ an important component of their life. Many were leading into ministry. Of these, 89 percent watch porn “occasionally.” Pressed further, 61 percent admitted it was “at least weekly,” while 24 percent watched porn “daily or multiple times a day.”⁴

The collective take-away here is that porn involvement (and we don’t know exactly whether it’s “*soft*” or “*hard*” porn), is a continuing and growing problem—especially for men. Over 57 percent of congregational leaders say **porn addiction** is the most damaging issue in their church body, and claim 51 percent of marriage problems stem from men indulging in it. Sixty-nine percent say porn continues to adversely impact the church. Add to that the fact that porn has almost gone exclusively “digital,” and you have access, portability, and invisibility heretofore not available.

Add one more here: BarnaGroup reports from their opus 2016 research, *The Porn Phenomenon*, most Americans believe porn is “bad for society,” but those attitudes are shifting toward neutrality or “good for society” among younger generations. Thus, only a small minority of adults who use porn report much “guilt” about porn.⁵

The title of this piece implies we need a radical fix to help stem porn involvement by men, especially. As well, it implicates *masculinity* in the elements needing change. The Apostle Paul, in his personal testimonial in Galatians 2:20 uses severe imagery to get his point across: **dying to self**. Such requires the “crucifixion” of our will, our desires, so that we too can have Christ live in us—so that the life we live *in this body*, we live by faith in a Christ which enables *a new creation*.

Doing so requires purposeful dying. But before we die, we are born and grow. **And it is here—with that birth and in that growth—that masculinity takes its hold. Let’s address that part before we go crucifying later.**

² Joe Carter, “Fact Checker: Do Christian Men Watch More Pornography?” *The Gospel Coalition*, June 8, 2020.

³ Barna Group, “Proven Men Porn Survey,” for Proven Men Ministries, 2014. Proven Men Ministries is a non-profit Christian organization aimed at helping men with an addiction to pornography.

⁴ Ted Shimer, “The Coming Tsunami of Porn Addiction: Freedom Flight Student Survey Early Results” *Campus Ministries Today*, May 13, 2019.

⁵ Barna Group, *The Porn Phenomenon*, 2016. BarnaGroup@barna.com.

What kind of a world would it be if we could help rid from our male children notions of gender that create hierarchies, and differences so great that *one* is better than *the other*; one is *more sexual* than the other; one is suited more for *objectification* than the other?

We start the process of change by altering the way we socialize our men. And the perfect example to view is Jesus:

Born a man due to the necessity of that birth for that time and in that place, God Incarnate shows us a different visage of masculinity: Jesus displays more *androgyny* than any other testamental entity: Jesus is tender and kind-hearted; he weeps readily when consoling Mary and Martha (John 11:35). He didn't take a wife, as per male Jewish custom. He traveled with both male and female followers. He is *homosocially* intimate with his beloved disciple John, who customarily rests on his chest. He was gentle with children, and admonished his followers to be as them. He surrenders to his eventual death without any adrenalin- or testosterone-infused fight; and scolds his disciples for showing aggression to his arresting soldiers. He even takes time to heal the ear of the one cut off by Peter!

Most important, we see Christ's testimony in his attitudes toward women: always including them (despite a culture that segregated and demeaned them); always healing them; always talking to them, seeing them as the other necessary half of the human potential. To cap his inclusion of women and honor them, Jesus *first appears to women* and *entrusts them to carry the message forward*. In all this, Jesus demonstrates a selflessness (that "dying to self" as a male) that had not been part—at all—of male socialization.

We start the process of change by altering the way we socialize our male children. Provide them male models of *servanthood*, not authoritarianism. Give them means by which they can test out their *kindness*, their *inclusion*, their ability to *love unconditionally* and *not judge*. And, as is very necessary, **give them examples of how good men treat women!** Refrain from sexualizing women through comments when your adolescent boy reaches his pubertal perk. It doesn't help him *not* objectify women!

And if you men reading this have daughters, treat them the same as you would your son(s). Don't demean their capacity and their ability by "feminizing" them, over-protecting them as if they were frail vessels; noticing only their "prettiness," but not giving praise to their smartness and self-confidence.

To become models for our children, then yes, we must return to Paul and crucifixion, especially if *our own socialization* puts us in peril of believing women are so fundamentally different, that men (of course) appear superior. We've all grown up with biases, some unconscious. These are, however, the most difficult to recognize and delete. Being honest with ourselves, recognizing the necessity for purging our biases, de-activating objectification, all will go a long way in allowing us to become the type of Christian where "Christ in us" becomes the dominant figure seen.

Porn often becomes an addiction. But a crucified male who lets Jesus do his resurrection, won't have a problem ridding themselves of the urge to use porn. That is, if "...the life I live [now] *in this body*," "I live by faith in the Son of God..." That crucified male has allowed his mind to be renewed—"transformed"—says Romans 12:2, enabling the body to become "*a living sacrifice*" pleasing to God. If you were raised with Sunday School as a child, you may remember the children's chorus, "O Be Careful..."

Oh, be careful, little eyes, what you see,
Oh, be careful, little eyes, what you see.
There's a Father up above looking down in tender love,
Oh, be careful, little eyes, what you see.

It's not so far off a fundamental truth: Visuals generate strong impulses, chemical signals that then generate (here's the neuropsychology) *somatovisceral responses*. In a word, visuals stimulate the body, even before the mind can judge them inappropriate. Somatovisceral responses are “neutral,” in the sense that the brain doesn't react by *evaluating them first*. To the contrary, the brain sends a signal to the “visceral” body part where the stimulus is best received, and “activates it.” If you repeat the visual stimulus, those signals become *imprints*, which then resurface as *memories* and reactivate the neural circuitry that arouses—again.

All the more, do scriptural teachings point us in the right way here:

- *“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”* (Matt 6:22–23).
- *“Be careful, then, that the light within you is not darkness”* (Luke 11:35).
- *“Therefore, beloved, since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from everything that defiles body and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God”* (2 Cor 7:1).
- *“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal”* (2 Cor 4:18).
- *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy— think on these things”* (Phil 4:8).

For Christians, crucifixion includes a resurrection. And resurrection implies a new beginning, a brain re-wiring in this case! Paul understands that this renewal isn't a “one time thing,” since he underscores *dying to self is a daily venue* (1 Cor 15:13), which brings on a *daily renewing* (2 Cor 4:16). We are human, and we are forever in need of redemptive grace. But we also need to help ourselves *get to that place, that altar of sacrifice*, where renewal and rebirth can take place. That happens with daily surrender, a daily invitation to have Christ “walk through the mud with me.”⁶ And he will!



We've come full circle. We've tied the fundamentals of a now social ill to the historic way men, especially, are socialized. We've stated we need to root out *voyeurism*, voyeurism that assists in pornographic involvements. We must then change some basic habits. The root of the male problem is fixed on how we socialize, and thus perpetuate, a male penchant for objectifying women. Teaching male children a different course of becoming will require you—father, brother, uncle, nephew, whatever—to exemplify with your life a different course; *a different mindset*. **Teach by example. They'll learn by watching and imitating!**

⁶ Francis Schaeffer, *No Small People*, Chapter 5, “Walk Through the Mud (with Me)” 2003.

And you, Christian man, are urged here to enter that space of sacrificial *giving up of self* that enables Christ to be *engendered in you*, to such a point you no longer will live for yourself. It's hard work at times, I grant you that. But it is necessary to achieve the fullness of Christ, a fullness that renders *porn*, and everything else "from below," worthless pursuits. **You'll have a renewed mind.**

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