



WHAT DOES THE BIBLE REALLY SAY ABOUT

MASTURBATION?

BY DAVE ROBERTS

IF YOU HAD BEEN AN ADOLESCENT GROWING UP IN THE 1950S, you might have had a Christian book given to you to help you cope with your new “feelings.” They were often referred to euphemistically because if one was polite, one didn’t talk explicitly about such things, despite the detail lavished on them in the Song of Songs with all its talk of “breasts like two fawns,” “navels like rounded goblets that never lack wine” and even more explicit actions.

But no, these were evil passions to a Church riddled with the body-denying, fear-of-the-sensual theology of classical Greek thought. Banish those thoughts, keep sex for procreation only, and ignore any part of the rather earthier Hebrew Bible that messed up your tidy scheme of thought.

One classic of the '50s sex-advice-for-Christians genre was even worried about male nocturnal emissions. While the more thoughtful conceded that they were a creational convenience given by God to release physical and sexual tension, this particular writer was not keen. He urged young men to tie a thread around their waists with a cotton reel on it so that they would not end up on their backs, a position deemed most likely to allow for what many know as a “wet dream.”

So what can the postmodern, emerging Church, Generation Y, mosaic, millennial evangelical Christian say about that most taboo of subjects—masturbation? Bear with me for the next few paragraphs, as those with over-sensitive heretic meters will virtually convulse with indignation. I will arrive back on safe ground.

The Church has traditionally warned of the dangers of masturbation, with voices lost in history but not popular mythology, suggesting that it made you go blind, mad, or both. The reality, however, is that there is no explicit biblical injunction against it.

The Bible does refer, however, to Onan spilling his “seed” on the ground in the book of Genesis. This is, however, a reference to his unwillingness to honor the traditional commitment that a brother would make to marry his sister-in-law, should she become a widow. It was his refusal to honor this and fulfill his marital commitment that angered God and caused him to come under judgment. Even our friends at www.apuritansmind.com agree with this. They suggest in the midst of a 20,000-word romp through the 17th century divines writings on lust that linking

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Onan with masturbation was bad exegesis.

James Dobson, hardly a posterboy for the liberal left, is unconvinced that there is a biblical case against masturbation and writes in *Bringing up Boys*, “The Bible is silent. It is my opinion that masturbating is not much of an issue with God. I’m not telling you to masturbate, and I hope you won’t feel the need for it. But if you do, it is my opinion that you should not struggle with guilt over it.”

Other questions arise. Did the young men of biblical times have such a long wait for marriage as most do today? Is the Bible silent because many would marry soon after becoming sexually aware?

Others link their worries about masturbation to concerns over the classification of nocturnal emissions as ritually unclean in Leviticus 15:16. The man was to bathe and to not engage in worship or sacrifice until the evening. The ritual laws are often interpreted as relating to God’s holiness, and in this view, sexuality is sometimes perceived as less than holy. Most admit, however, that many of the ceremonial laws had an underlying wisdom with respect to hygiene and health and that some of the prohibitions with respect to semen and blood residues may have related to containing disease in environments where many may have gathered, such as the temple or tabernacle.

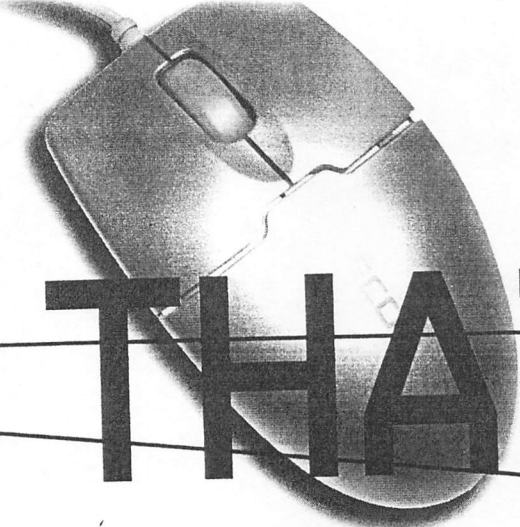
So a Christian approach to this delicate subject can’t rely on “chapter and verse.” We can understand this issue best if we look at what the Bible infers. Inferred theology is fairly prevalent in the Church. We infer the doctrine of the trinity from Jesus’ words about the Father and the Spirit, but it is only explicitly stated in Matthew 28:19. Meeting on Sundays is another inferred doctrine. Marriage is biblically mandated, but the nature of the ceremony of commitment is also inferred because Scripture doesn’t spell it out.

A proper response to the often fierce and guilt-ridden debate over masturbation lies in a proper understanding of sexuality within the wider picture of creation. The classic creation/fall/redemption/restoration framework will help us here.

CREATION—Erotic love was to be both pleasurable and procreative. The Song of Songs is a testimony to this.

FALL—People began to seek the pleasure while avoiding the consequence. Some societies practiced infanticide and abortion. Others offered children as sacrifices, this being a principle problem with the Baal worshipers of the Old Testament times. Our society sees sexual gratification as the primary goal.

REDEMPTION—The metaphor of marriage is used by the biblical writers to describe the relationship between Christ and the Church. The Bible also echoes the themes of covenant, commit-



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ment and trust. From this it follows that God honors marriage and that it can be modeled on the covenant relationships of God.

RESTORATION—The people involved in a sexual relationship should be in covenant commitment because the fruit of their activity might be a child. The child needs many different levels of nurture, from feeding to affection and on into social, educational and spiritual nurture. The mother and father bring different skills, which complement each other and create a healthy climate for the growth of the child. Clarity about family relationships had a bearing on land and property and the overall stability of local society.

The injunctions of Scripture often have a three-fold aim—the maintenance of order, the promotion of wholeness (or shalom) and the regulation of that which gives life or brings death. Not masturbating then becomes an issue of avoiding behavior that will make it difficult to maintain sexual self-control before marriage and avoid adultery within it. Anything that destroys the covenant relationship between man and woman in marriage and undermines the stable parenting of a mother and father is to be viewed with suspicion.

How we then respond to masturbation and the wider issues of fantasy and pornography will be rooted in the overall value system above. Masturbation is not a sin management issue (I'm a nasty, weak person—how can I control myself?); it's a values for life issue (I'm a child of God—what aspects of His life will guide my daily decisions?). When our values are clear, the ability to resist sexual temptation and stop sinning is more apparent.

Masturbation is more often than not accompanied by sexual fantasy. That fantasy is often provoked by pornography. Here are four reasons to question the role of masturbation and pornography in our sexual lives.

It's the ugly face of consumer capitalism. The disease of materialism is nowhere more explicit than in the pornography that infuses much of contemporary culture. It turns people into objects to be consumed and disconnects a person from the intimacy and friendship that is vital to a healthy marriage and a vibrant sex life.

It creates unreal expectations. The elevation of a certain type of figure, bedroom attire or sexual activity to the pedestal of sexual perfection creates a cancerous unreality. Why doesn't she look like that girl on the Internet? Why doesn't she do what I imagined the other night? Why can't I find a woman who will? It destroys respect, self-esteem and the dignity of sexual discovery that is not prompted by a desire to mimic something seen elsewhere.

It's adultery. Thinking of anyone but your wife in a sexual

fashion is adultery. Jesus said to avoid the thought as well as the act. While conceding that a woman is attractive is not a sin, letting your mind develop that thought is. God gave the command to help maintain relational stability within creation. He didn't give it on a whim because He hates pleasure. If you have spent your adolescence mentally undressing women, how are you going to stop when you get married?

It undermines self-control. How are you going to avoid sexual intercourse before marriage if you have spent years fantasizing

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about the details of it with the help of a pornographic culture? Obsessing about sexual activity makes it that much harder to stop. Your value system may help you avoid promiscuity, but your sexual fantasies may undermine your ability to maintain control within a more trusting relationship.

Christian teaching in this area can appeal to the big picture of biblical wisdom and suggest that an avoidance of masturbation is helpful. It can't, however, appeal to a chapter and verse biblical denunciation.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that although the law could not save them, many of its provisions remained vital to a healthy life (Hebrews 13:4). He also remarked that some things might be permissible, but they were not beneficial (1 Corinthians 10:23). A Christian response to masturbation will want to take account of Paul's words.

You won't rot in hell if you've masturbated. But if you indulge in it habitually and feed the habit with pornography or fantasizing, you will find it very difficult to be the person you could be—living a life marked by purpose, integrity, intimacy and respect. ☹

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