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5-18-2019

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Recommended Citation

Fogle, Hannah, "Pornography in the Church: Spiritual, Relational, Economic and Social Implications" (2019). *Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate*. 194.

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Pornography in the Church: Spiritual, Relational, Economic and Social Implications

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Pornography in the Church: Spiritual, Relational, Economic and Social Implications

Knowing our media-saturated culture, it's not surprising that in 2018 Hollywood, Netflix, and the NFL snagged some of the top revenues of America's entertainment industry (estimates of \$11.1, \$11.7, and \$14 billion, respectively) ("Estimated US entertainment-industry revenue in 2018"). However, a little-reported dark horse lurks as another major player in the entertainment industry: pornography. Due to the taboo nature of the industry as well as private ownership of firms, concrete data is hard to solidify (Pinsker, 2016). Low-ball estimates of the porn industry's revenue fall in the 6 billion range, right behind the NBA at \$7.4 billion. A mere mid-estimate of the industry's revenue weighs in at \$15 billion, surpassing Netflix (\$11.7 billion), Viacom (\$13.3 billion), and the NFL (\$14 billion) ("Estimated US entertainment-industry revenue in 2018"). Clearly, the pornography industry is a legitimate economic contender in the United States (Benes, 2018).

How did it come to this? According to the academic definition of pornography, which involves both the violation of taboos and the intention of arousal, the content has been around since the 1600s (Pinsker, 2016). In the mid-20th century, publications such as *Playboy* and *Hustler* turned porn into a corporate industry which has continued to thrive, mostly unchecked, behind the veil of social taboo. In 1997 porn began migrating to the internet and has since exploded even further (Castleman, 2018). On the consumer end, patterns of pornography use have been likened to fast food: you "get in, get out, do what you came to do" (Pinsker, 2016). Pornography is thus celebrated as a means of personal gratification or "safe sex" for consumers and a route for money and fame by those in the business.

Because the industry is typically followed by a niche trade audience (as well as heavily stigmatized), Christians often fail to talk about the economic, let alone spiritual and relational

implications of the porn industry. However, this is not an issue on which the church can afford to stay silent. According to data from Covenant Eyes (2018), 64% of Christian men and 15% of Christian women watch porn at least once a month. Additionally, one in five youth pastors and one in five senior pastors use pornography on a regular basis. The most troubling statistic, however, is that only 7% of pastors report that their church has a ministry program to help those struggling with porn. As imitators of God's love and design for human flourishing, the spiritual, relational, economic and social implications of pornography's creation and consumption should be problematic for Christians, who should in turn seek to educate the church about these implications and minister to those who are struggling.

First I will grapple with the spiritual issue of pornography consumption on the individual's end. William Cavanaugh (2008), whose ideas are rooted in the work of St. Augustine, explains that the free market defines freedom as pursuing whatever one desires without interference from others (so long as you yourself do not interfere with others by violating their personal rights). Augustine, on the other hand, sees freedom not as freedom *from* coercion but rather freedom *for* worthwhile goals. In his view, the key to true freedom is not just following whatever desires one happens to have but cultivating the *right* desires instead. Augustine understood that humans are creatures of desire, which is all well and good when our desires find their end (*telos*) in a right relationship with God. However, because of sin, humans fall prey to decisions that separate them from this good end. Detached from their ultimate worth in God, desires become destructive.

Related to the issue of pornography, the logic of the free market would claim that individuals have the freedom to pursue their desires (in this case, sexual arousal) in any way they see fit as long as it does not violate others' personal rights. In this view, pornography is an easy,

efficient way to “get in, get out, do what you need to do” (assuming the pornography was ethically sourced, a topic to be explored in more depth later). Augustine, however, would argue that humans find true freedom when their goals align with a right relationship with God and his design for human flourishing (Cavanaugh, 2008). All things that exist (such as sex) are good, but only if they participate in God, the source of their being and all goodness. In other words, humans were created with a desire for sex (inherently good), but when sex is desired outside of God’s will it becomes destructive and meaningless. Although a robust Biblical theology of sex is beyond the scope of this paper, let us briefly visit some Biblical messages regarding sex.

Early on in Genesis, woman is created as a partner for man. After Eve is presented to Adam, Genesis 2:24 explains that “a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (ESV). Upon leaving their families of origin and becoming a new unit as husband and wife, the two are *then* joined together as one flesh. As the Bible progresses, fidelity is of utmost importance not only among the Israelites themselves but between God and his people, as God is often likened to the husband of the unfaithful nation. Adultery is outlawed by one of the ten commandments (Exodus 20:14) and carries severe punishments as well. In the New Testament, Jesus raises the bar one step higher by explaining that “everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 6 that any who becomes joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her (v. 16). He also explains that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, thus believers should glorify God in their body. All these passages can help Christians understand how God views sex and under what circumstances it promotes human flourishing.

As noted by the language of Genesis 2:24, sex is a unifying act (“one flesh”) that is initiated when a couple unites in marriage. Fidelity is highly prized in the Bible, thus the only appropriate context for sex is in a marriage relationship. Sex does not have uniting properties for just man and wife, however. According to Paul, those who engage in sexual contact with a prostitute become “one flesh” with her as well (1 Corinthians 6:16). It can be concluded that sex is a uniting act in any situation but has met its *telos* in God when it is between a married couple. When Jesus made the audacious claim that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her, he insinuates that any unchecked sexual desire directed towards another is equivalent to the physical unity of sexual intercourse. Following this line of logic, seeking sexual arousal/fulfillment through pornography causes an individual consuming the material to become one with the content they are viewing. This distorts the *telos* of sex, which in turn limits human flourishing and stunts humans’ relationship with God.

Human flourishing is not limited to the individual’s well-being, however. Relationships between humans are living entities as well. Although some claim that using porn does not seem to alter a person’s sexual behavior pattern in the long run (Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, 1970; Money & Anthanasiou, 1973), other studies confirm the harmful relational effects that correlate with pornography use. For example, Albright (2008) found that women who intentionally viewed pornography reported lowered body image, their partner being critical of their body, increased pressure to perform acts seen in pornographic films, and less actual sexual behavior. Men who intentionally viewed pornography were more critical of their partners’ bodies and less interested in actual sexual behavior. Similarly, Sun, Bridges, and Johnason (2014) found that increased porn use in men resulted in less enjoyment of sexually intimate behaviors with a partner. These correlations are not coincidental. As desires are separated from their *telos* in God,

they become destructive and limit human flourishing. Pornography use has the potential to cause partners and individuals alike to become critical of the body God gifted them with. It can place life-sucking pressure on women to perform for acceptance. And most insidious of all, it can take away the joy of sexual intercourse between partners in real life. Thus, although Christian restrictions against pornography may seem harsh or judgmental, finding sexual *telos* in God ultimately seeks to *promote* human flourishing and foster more fulfilling, joyful, life-giving sex between partners in the context of marriage.

When desires do not find their *telos* in God, they can quickly turn into bondage. These disordered desires can be considered sinful and are evidenced by our dys-relation to God. However, sin has a communal aspect as well and ends up taking on a destructive nature of its own. Richard Crane (2019c) explains that “While sin often involves wrong choices made by humans, more fundamentally, sin has the character of bondage. We find ourselves in bondage to addictions, fears, insecurities, etc.” In this way, pornography consumption can become an addiction, characterized by “an obsessive need to view sexually enticing images to the detriment of actual human interaction” (Recovery Connection). Scientifically speaking, viewing pornography alters the chemical makeup in the brain, connecting the “feel-good” chemical dopamine with pornography consumption (Fight the New Drug, 2017a). When the brain eventually becomes overloaded with dopamine, another chemical (CREB) is produced which slows the pleasure response. This means porn that used to arouse the user stops having the same effect. This phenomenon is called “tolerance,” which is characteristic of any addiction. Because of the brain’s built-up tolerance, pornography consumers must keep increasing their porn use and intensity to become aroused. Essentially, the consumer becomes enslaved in a cycle of needing more in order to be satisfied. As we discussed in class, for Christians the only acceptable

insatiability is in our relationship with God (Clapp, 1996). Any other desire only produces bondage and meaninglessness.

The communal nature of enslavement to sin distorts our relationships with others and those closest to us. When one is addicted to pornography, the need for sexually stimulating images takes precedence over real relationships. This can damage crucial relational ties by diminishing trust between intimate couples and decreasing attraction to family and child raising (Covenant Eyes, 2018). Prolonged exposure to pornography can also distort the physical sex act. Dr. MaryAnne Layden explains, “Having spent so much time in unnatural sexual experiences with paper, celluloid and cyberspace, [pornography viewers] seem to find it difficult to have sex with a real human being. Pornography is raising their expectation and demand for types and amounts of sexual experiences; at the same time it is reducing their ability to experience sex” (Covenant Eyes, 2018). Thus, pornography detracts from the joy meant to be found in physical sex with another person, who is also affected by the effects of the addiction. Family life is also disrupted as feeding the addiction is placed above responsibilities to others. Hence, this bondage to arousing material and unrealistic expectations is not merely a personal issue also traps those close to the user.

Thus far the concerns regarding the pornography industry have mainly been theologically-based and supported with interpersonal expressions of fallen humanity. Now I would like to turn to broader economic and social concerns surrounding pornography. These include the issues of monopoly, skewed views of sex, and human trafficking.

The death of capitalism at the hands of monopolies has been lamented in recent years, with the consolidation of industries resulting in less competition and higher market power for corporate giants (Tepper, 2018). The strangling grip of these monopolies results in less

competition, lower investment in the real economy, lower productivity, less economic dynamism with fewer startups, higher prices for dominant firms, lower wages, and more wealth inequality. Monopolies such as airline industries as well as corporate giants like Apple and Google are chastised for controlling too much of their domain. Interestingly, the pornography industry operates under a monopoly of its own: it is estimated that MindGeek owns 8 of the 10 largest tube sites in the industry. The company controls the pornographic empire by directing the entire flow of valuable currency: audience attention (Bui, 2017). Due to the taboo nature of the industry, the monopoly power goes unchecked (Benes, 2018; Pinsker, 2016).

Because fighting a monopoly takes a great deal of effortful competition, pornographers try to outdo each other to produce the most extreme images. This is problematic for many reasons. First, due to the addictive nature of pornography content, users already need more and more extreme pornography to get the same level of satisfaction. Continuing to fuel that insatiable desire desensitizes dopamine receptors in the brain to average, safe sexual practices. The brain has a hard time differentiating between pain and pleasure, thus violent porn is found arousing and violence is in turn confused with sexual arousal (J. Ransil, personal communication, April 18, 2019). This puts others in danger: individuals might want or expect their partners to act out dangerous or degrading sex acts seen in pornography. Prolonged exposure to pornography also warps ideas about sex: individuals believe that group sex, dangerous sex acts, etc. are more common than they really are. Healthy and realistic sexual relationships are rarely featured in public television, let alone pornography, which should be a societal concern regarding the population's physical and mental health.

The technology and algorithms behind the industry also determine much of what visitors consume, which in turn shapes their attitudes and beliefs. According to Pinsker (2016), the

industry uses data such as keywords searched and geographic location to spoon-feed users a limited range of pornography to meet their assumed desires. On a larger scale, this spoon-fed data is then assumed to be what is popular. This ends up shaping peoples' views on female sexuality, race, gender, trans status, and how agency and desire is understood. Shira Tarrant, professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Cal State Long Beach, suggests that there is a possibility of moving towards more adventurous, ethical, non-sexist, non-racist porn that would combat the negative effects of the industry's monopoly (Pinsker, 2016). Similarly, Greenberg, Bruess, and Conklin (2017) assert that the answer to bad porn is good porn, not no porn. However, this does not take into account the pornography industry's direct correlation to human trafficking.

Fight the New Drug (FND), a non-religious and non-legislative organization, has championed the cause of raising awareness regarding pornography's harmful effects by drawing on science, facts, and personal accounts. One of their main arguments against pornography is that it fuels sex trafficking, a claim explored in detail here. FND (2017b) asserts that sex trafficking is inseparably linked to the problem of pornography. There are an estimated 21-32 million modern-day slaves in the world (such as the children forced to work on cocoa plants that we discussed earlier in class) and roughly 22% of these human trafficking victims are exploited for sexual purposes. Of the sex trafficking victims, nearly half report that pornography was made of them while they were in bondage. This means that any pornography consumed may or may not have been made by a sex trafficking victim or someone else who was induced by force, fraud, or coercion. In the Christian faith, love of neighbor requires us to actively seek the well-being of others, who are infinitely loved by God (Moe-Lobeda, 2013). It follows then, that as

Christians (and moral human beings in general), we should be troubled by consuming material that serves our own gratification at the expense of others.

Pornography has other connections to human trafficking as well. Cruelly ironic, exposure to pornography has been shown to decrease compassion toward victims of sexual violence and exploitation (Fight the New Drug, 2017b). According to FND, there are three additional correlations between pornography and human trafficking, referred to as the “supply-and-demand,” “training manual,” and risk factor connections. The “supply-and-demand” connection asserts that viewing pornography increases the demand for sex trafficking because more and more viewers want to act out what they see with other people, often in risky situations. The “training manual” connection explains that traffickers and sex buyers get ideas from porn and force their victims watch it to show them how they’ll be expected to perform. In this way, what was once a violent fantasy of a porn director and their actors/actresses is now a lived reality for trafficking victims (Fight the New Drug, 2017b). The risk factor connection illuminates the fact that a child growing up in a home where pornography is regularly consumed is far more likely to be trafficked at some point in his or her life.

From both a Christian and secular perspective, I find it problematic to assert that “ethically sourced,” non-racist porn, etc. would simply solve all the negative effects of pornography consumption. As the trends above suggest, pornography and human trafficking are so intertwined that even “ethical porn” can fuel the demand for human trafficking. As Fight the New Drug asserts, people are not products. However, as long as pornography continues to be consumed, the demand for sex trafficking and the further objectification of people will continue. It can be concluded that pornography use is not only a mental bondage for the consumer but also

a perpetrator of literal slavery of more vulnerable, unseen populations. Disordered desires continue to be destructive to self and others as long as they fail to find their *telos* in God.

Based on the theology and research explored above, the church *could* have much to say on the issue of pornography and its relational, spiritual, economic, and social impacts. Stigma, however, often causes the church to take an unspoken or harsh stance on the issue, both of which are harmful. In order to constructively grapple with pornography in the church, two mindset obstacles must be overcome: the notions of accountable free will individualism and anti-structuralism.

Accountable free will individualism assumes that individuals exist independently of structures and institutions. People are also accountable for the choices they make since they are moral agents with free will. In this view, individuals are personally responsible for, and fully in control of, their own decisions and destinies (Emmerson & Smith, as cited in Crane, 2019a). In this line of thinking, those who struggle with pornography (even those who are remorseful and wish to change their habits), are looked down upon as weak or morally inferior because they struggle with such a taboo issue. This compassionless approach to sin fails to recognize that people do not live and develop in a vacuum. Contrary to anti-structuralism, which proposes that systems themselves are not corrupted, culture is indeed a profoundly powerful force in shaping our views of beauty, sexuality, etc., and these views can certainly be antithetical to the Christian faith. We must consider that America is an increasingly sexualized society and children are socialized into this culture from the time they are born. It's not surprising then that the average age of first exposure to pornography is 12 years old for boys (Covenant Eyes, 2018). It cannot be assumed that each of these individuals seek out porn because they are morally bankrupt children purposefully making such decisions. Rather, the reasons children are exposed to pornography are

complex and often involve older figures such as parents or friends. Thus, the church needs to take a more compassionate approach to the issue of pornography that allows for the collective and systemic nature of human sin.

The notion that human sin is collective and systemic might be foreign to those who take a more individualized approach to religion. In order to understand this phenomenon better, we must go back and understand the goodness of original creation and how sin and the fall collectively altered the human experience.

One of the most well-known aspects of the Genesis creation account is that all was deemed “good” by God. This means that materiality, matter, and embodiment had no negatives, defects, or problems. Even human nature, with all its desires, creativity, and curiosity, was good. Another interesting insight into the creation story proposes that God’s creation was not static but dynamically oriented (Crane, 2019b). In other words, part of the goodness of creation was that humans can make, construct, and create. However, once sin was introduced through the fall, everything human-related became distorted and disfigured. Now, instead of making, constructing, and creating things that are consistent with the love of God and neighbor, humans “mis-make” (Crane, 2019b). Pornography can be seen as one of these “mis-makes” that attempts to satisfy sexual appetites. Pornography is inconsistent with the love of God because it encourages sexual thoughts and behaviors that do not find their *telos* in God. Equally troubling is that pornography muddies the love of neighbor. Negative effects on individuals and their partners are problematic, but even more pernicious is the industry’s undeniable links to human trafficking. Yes, some porn stars have consciously chosen their way of life and are happy with their decision. However, this cannot be said of all actors/actresses. Other troubling issues in the production of pornography include the spread of STIs, instances of physical and verbal

aggression, and drug use. Of course, no industry is without its flaws, but pornography can hurt individuals on both ends of the transaction and is consequently inconsistent with the love of neighbor and God's design for human flourishing.

Another collective and systemic aspect of sin is that fallen systems can socialize and shape us in ways that are antithetical to God's good purposes (as mentioned before in response to anti-structuralism). Christians should not be surprised or discouraged when some individuals find no problems with pornography creation or consumption. A testament to our fallen individualist and sexualized society, Covenant Eyes (2018) reports that teens and young adults ages 13-24 believe that not recycling is worse than viewing pornography. Armed with this understanding, Christians should seek to openly embody and explain why sexual gratification should find its freedom and *telos* in a right relationship with God as well as outline the relational, economic, and social implications of the industry.

Considering the myriad of problems with pornography's creation and consumption, how should the church respond? There is too much at stake for more silence or condemnation. Churches must first understand their place in the cosmic struggle of this world. Now that Christ has initiated the kingdom of God on earth, God has begun to heal and transform all things and people who respond in faith and loyalty to his cause (Crane, 2019b). Believers are still living in the distorted and mis-made world, but we have the power and task to put all things right and whole again. Thus, Christians are called by the power of the Holy Spirit to be agents of creative healing, reconciliation, and transformation. We do this by refusing, reimagining, and resisting different aspects in the world (Crane, 2019b). In regards to pornography, Christians must refuse to consume it because of its destructive spiritual, relational, economic, and social consequences that defy love of neighbor and distort our relationship with God. Christians must reimagine

healthy sexuality by living it out as a “demonstration plot” for the rest of the world to see. Lastly, Christians must resist the bondage of pornography and struggle against it by educating their congregations in preventative efforts and offering support groups/healing (intervention) in hope of transformation for those who are already enslaved. Christians should be eager to align their sex lives with the will of God and be open, humble, and remorseful when they fall short.

A study by White and Kimball (2009) is helpful in identifying how the church has failed to help members refuse pornography and what can be done to improve this line of communication and support. The researchers worked with three Christian couples affected by sexual/pornography addiction and examined how the addiction began (in each couple the husband held the addiction but this is not universally true for all couples), how it affected both partners, and what the couple needed and wasn't receiving from their church. One of the main issues addressed by the couples was the lack of healthy sexuality education taught in the church. The researchers explain that normal, healthy sexuality is considered taboo in the church and has no definite consensus (White & Kimball, 2009). This lack of education is evidenced by one of the couples who admitted that “they did not know how to have an intimate relationship that honored their commitment to God” (p. 354). Equally problematic, then, is the fact that pornography addiction often begins during adolescence, a time of life in which the incompatibility of porn consumption and marriage is not a consideration. Adolescents, who are in the heat of developing sexual attitudes and behaviors, remain ignorant of the church's beliefs and reasonings regarding healthy sexual behaviors. Knowing that the church forbids sex outside of marriage, adolescents might wonder how they can assimilate their new sexuality into their identity (White & Kimball, 2009). If they are not educated about the short and long-term affects of pornography use and the widespread harm it causes the self and others, it may be seen as a

viable alternative to sex that still provides arousal and satisfaction. From this data it can be asserted that the church needs to step up and *speak up* in order to better educate members about healthy sexuality and why deviant sexuality, such as pornography use, should be refused.

Being able to speak openly about both sexuality and pornography would be a crucial turning point that reimagines the church's role in exemplifying healthy sexuality. As White and Kimball (2009) explain, the Christian faith in and of itself does not prevent pornography use but does allow for the opportunity to change. A reasonable "first step" in acknowledging the issue could be the adoption of "Porn Sunday," a movement started by the xxxchurch ministry. Porn Sunday is service in which the church engages in an open and honest discussion about pornography use in their midst and seeks to bring hope to those who are struggling with the issue. Churches can download a 35-minute sermon from xxxchurch.com or book their own speaker. Churches could also develop comprehensive lessons and sermons tailored for various age groups and walks of life (adolescents, single, married, etc.) that teach and acknowledge the importance of healthy sexuality and its direct connection with healthy spirituality. The church should also expand the conversation regarding pornography from just a spiritual/relational issue to a broader social/economic issue as well. All members of the congregation should be aware of how pornography distorts views of sex, perpetuates human trafficking, etc. People must understand that pornography consumption does not just affect the individual but holds all kinds of greater social implications that are inconsistent with the love of neighbor that Jesus commands. With this information, members can begin to reorder their lives and seek to exemplify healthy sexuality.

Acknowledgement of the issue is certainly a crucial first step, but the church cannot stop there. Church members struggling with pornography often feel as if they are the only one or will

face harsh consequences if they confess their struggles (White & Kimball, 2009). In order to receive healing and break free of their bondage these brothers and sisters need to know that there is acceptance and help available from their congregation and need to feel safe acknowledging their struggle. People often fear that they will lose their support networks or church membership if they confess, which hinders pursuit of healing (White & Kimball, 2009). The church must then strive to resist the bondage of pornography by fostering a safe and accepting environment, which might take time and conscious effort to create. Christians tends to make victims of those with sexual sins, thus believers must come to understand that sexual sins are something to be dealt with and confessed along with any other sin (White & Kimball, 2009). Jesus' sacrifice covered *all* sins without differentiating between them. This shift in mindset will take time to develop, so fostering an accepting and gracious climate should be continually and intentionally encouraged, pursued, and exemplified by leadership.

Once a safe and accepting climate is established and church members are educated about both healthy and deviant sexuality, what can the church *practically* do to resist the reign of pornography and help those who confess its use? All church leaders should be equipped to respond to disclosures of sexual sin, including pornography use, and should respond in a gracious, accepting way. The discloser should be encouraged that confessing the problem is their first step of healing and leaders should be diligent in providing the support and encouragement they need. Counseling for either the self or couple (depending on the circumstances) can be helpful to work through the emotional and relational damage pornography inflicts. Individuals and couples might also need a facilitator to help them in the forgiveness process. 12-step recovery program and group sessions are also ways for individuals to receive the support and encouragement they need.

There is a huge need in Christian communities for ministries that facilitate healing from pornography use and other disordered sexual desires. As mentioned previously, 64% of Christian men and 15% of Christian women have watched porn at least once a month but only 7% of pastors report that their church has a ministry program for those struggling with porn (Covenant Eyes, 2018). Churches may think pornography is not an issue in their congregation but unfortunately that is not statistically realistic. I strongly encourage the church to try to overcome this ministry deficit by offering a support group or 12-step program for those struggling with pornography. This could even be a joint effort between multiple churches in a geographic area. Leaders must be sure that their congregation is at a place where they can support the ministry without being judgmental or condemning, thus the sexuality education discussed previously would be warranted before starting such a ministry. I think the church has a unique opportunity to offer healing and forgiveness to those who struggle with pornography, as well educating all members about the spiritual, relational, economic and social implications of the industry and consumption. This discussion leads back to God and his desire for human flourishing, which is what the church should strive to embrace and embody in everyday life.

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