

The following paper was presented as part of the CCCU Consultation on Human Sexuality held at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI, in November 2004. Over 40 leaders from 30 CCCU institutions, plus experts in their fields participated in this important dialogue.

---

**Self Control in an Over-Sexed Culture:  
Embracing Intimacy in a Broken World**

Lisa McMinn, Wheaton College

Ideas about sex and sexuality have changed since the 1960s. Many of us grew up watching movies and television where the mere magical meeting of lips was the common expression of passion, while our students grew up with open-mouthed, drawn-out first kisses that set a different standard for what to expect. We have this notion that the world outside of our evangelical institutions has become rather over-sexed—a notion that may well be correct. We sometimes respond by trying to build hedges around our students and our institutions, protecting us all from what we fear may undo us otherwise.

We get the idea that our culture is oversexed from billboards using female anatomy to sell beer, cars and jewelry, and from movies and television shows. “Master of My Domain,” an episode of the long-running television series, *Seinfeld*, brought masturbation into our living rooms as an ordinary topic for conversation. Sex comes uninvited into our cyberspace enticing internet users to explore pornography and selling men (though women get them too) products promising to enlarge that particular domain men master.

If we didn’t know already we are also learning that the world outside evangelicalism finds us rather ridiculous for our traditional views on sex and sexuality. The 2004 movie, “Saved,” gives us one such picture. The movie is about a girl’s examination, and ultimate rejection of her faith—which is celebrated in the movie. She’s a high school senior who attends a Christian school, perhaps not unlike many of our own, and thinks God told her to save her Christian boyfriend from his homosexual orientation by having sex with him. Assured her virginity would be restored, she instead finds herself pregnant. The movie stereotypes Christians as repressing anything having to do with sexuality, judging each other harshly, and oppressing those who deviate by ostracizing them, or sending them to Mercy House for “healing”.

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine and author of *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, writes:

The spiritual life is not achieved by denying one part of life for the sake of another. The spiritual life is achieved only by listening to all of life and learning to respond to each of its dimensions wholly and with integrity (Chittister, 1990:16).

What does it mean to listen to, rather than deny, and respond wholly and with integrity to our sexuality as one of life’s dimensions? What does it mean to be a sexual being, especially in an “over-sexed” culture?

Exploring that question is the focus of this paper. I hope to cast a vision for responding wholly and with integrity to our sexuality in ways that are neither reactive nor simply suppressing it. The paper considers how students view their own sexuality, and what might be done differently as we work with them.

### **What is Means to Be Sexual and Single**

The first day of my Sociology of Sexuality class I have students write an in-class response to the question, “What does it mean to you to be a sexual being?” They write anonymously and then turn in their responses. One student wrote:

It seems to me that there isn't really a way to be a sexual being at this point in my life, mainly because there are very few ways to appropriately express my sexuality since I am single. I know this probably isn't completely true, but I feel as though sexuality is about repression rather than expression, especially in the Christian subculture. I cannot just go out and have sex, pornography is out of the question, and masturbation is taboo in most cases. So mostly, my sexuality is about repressing the hormonal urges and battling all the media and culture that says sex is important. I really don't know how to be a sexual being at this stage in my life.

This student doesn't know, because our Christian subculture hasn't offered other ways to think about it. While we all know that sexuality is about more than sex, we don't know what it looks like to be sexual people—especially if we are not having sex.

We are made for relationship, and our sexuality keeps us striving for relationship, longing for connection, pulling us toward, rather than away from others. In our maleness and femaleness, in our embodied aloneness, we are drawn toward others (McMinn, 2004). It is in relationship that our most fundamental longings are met. Eugene Peterson writes, “The self is only itself, healthy and whole, when it is in relationship, and that relationship is always dual, with God and with other human beings” (Peterson, 1985).

I suggest we come at the issue of self-control and sexuality from an angle that embraces sexuality—one that focuses on this part of life as a gift for students today, not just as a struggle until they get married. The Protestant church honors sex as gift within marriage, but does not leave much room for giftedness in sexuality for those outside marriage.

A good beginning point is to explore what women and men students identify as their greatest personal struggles regarding sex and relationships. British Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship explored this in the late 1990s (Pollack 1998). The list for students in our North American colleges and universities would likely be similar. Below is a list of their top five responses.

**Women**

1. fear of singleness
2. not having a boyfriend
3. memories of the past
4. pressure from one's boyfriend
5. masturbation

**Men**

1. masturbation
2. images on film, videos, magazines
3. the way women dress
4. memories of the past
5. not having a girlfriend

**Some Observations About Women**

The women's list is relational. Women intuitively recognize that human sexuality is relational and they are keenly in touch with what it means to be made for relationship. They desire and long for it, because it is a good and holy longing. God made us for relationship, and our sexuality ensures we will keep striving for it.

In identifying what they struggle with, women differentiate between *fear of singleness* (am I fated to be single or will I eventually get married?) and *not having a boyfriend* (am I loveable? Can I be in an intimate relationship with another?). Women do not feel they have much control over singleness, nor having a boyfriend--and with reason. Historically women were perceived as property, and could be given by their fathers to other men as wives. While we have progressed far in most parts of the world in that women are no longer considered property and now have right of refusal, for the most part women are not granted the legitimacy of being initiators in relationship.

An implication of this is that women have to get noticed to be chosen. They have to be appealing and attractive to get pursued. Women are bombarded with media messages that suggest to be lovable is to be wanted, and one must be attractive to be loveable. Their self-worth comes to depend on it. Advertisements often reinforce the importance of their beauty over achievements as female bodies are used to sell products. But beyond that, advertisements shape ideas women have about their value, their assets, and their worth. Jean Kilbourne has analyzed media's role in shaping ideas about personhood over the last several decades. Her documentaries, beginning with *Killing Us Softly*, tell an on-going story of women being encouraged through advertising to be silent, vulnerable, childlike, and to remember above all that their physical appearance matters most.

Women engage in a subtle, damaging competition with other women for the male gaze, more broadly understood as the cultural gaze. If women can get men and other women to notice them, to find them attractive and worth looking at, then women can believe that they are worthy, acceptable, and loveable. This undermines women's relationships with other women, and it distorts women's relationships with men—putting them in a manipulative relationship, rather than an honest and authentic one.

Third on the women's list was *memories from the past*. These bother her more than current pressure to be sexually involved that she may be feeling from her current boyfriend. Perhaps she hopes or assumes that this one will be the one, and so rationalizes her guilt of going too far physically with him. She has often been taught that he is the leader and she is supposed to follow his lead. Women are often taught to be the "moral gatekeepers" in physical relationships, even though encouraged to be the follower in

other arenas. The effect of this incongruence was studied by researchers on a college campus who found a correlation between unwanted sexual experience and how traditional the gender roles were in the students' families of origin. Their conclusion: women taught to be followers are more likely to experience a *lost voice*, and were less able to say "no" to unwanted sexual advances (Neal & Mangis, 1995).

While the guilt of not coming to her present relationship pure and undefiled appears to bother her, she also feels pressure to be sexually involved in some capacity in her current relationship. She wants to belong, she desires love, and she appears to feel conflicted about physical boundaries it may be necessary to compromise in order to keep it.

Finally, *masturbation* shows up on her list. Women are unsure what to think of female masturbation, receiving messages that normalize it in the dominant culture and an absence of conversation about it from within their faith communities. Over half of the women in my sexuality courses have or are masturbating, but do not find places to discuss positive or negative aspects of masturbation in their premarital lives.

### **Some Observations about Men**

The first three items on the men's list are about sexual responses males find troubling that are not directly linked to relationships. Non-relational sexuality is a significant issue and Christian males identify it as problematic for them.

Human sexuality is both embodied in physical, biological bodies that have been ready for sex for at least five years before entering college, and embedded in a culture that gives meaning to, legitimizes, and dictates acceptable ideas about our sexual behaviors. A pull toward non-relational sexuality comes from both embedded and embodied aspects of male sexuality.

The embedded, or cultural aspect promotes a form of masculinity epitomized by the Marlboro Man—the rugged, autonomous individual who needs nobody, and who is happiest alone on the range with his cattle and pack of Marlboro cigarettes. Jackson Katz's documentary, *Tough Guise* offers a corollary to Kilbourne's work on women and advertising. In *Tough Guise* Katz demonstrates how the media and sport cultures largely socialize males to be tough, invulnerable and autonomous.

When combined with the embodied dimension—the reality of living in a body that has been ready to engage in sex since puberty, it is no surprise that living with integrity is defined by males themselves as a struggle. It is healthy that finding appropriate expressions of sexuality is problematic and challenging. To *not* be struggling should be more worrisome.

There is also encouragement in learning that men identify these three issues as struggles, in part representing awareness that pornography use, and the tendency to objectify women is offensive and potentially damaging to current and future relationships. Escaping into pornography or compulsive masturbation as a way to deal with sexual

desires represents non-relational sexuality—an anti-sexuality if sexuality is about longing for, and being drawn to relationship. Non-relational sexuality is isolating and anti-relationship as it substitutes real relationships for a self-involved way of experiencing sexuality (Van Leeuwen, 2002). It gives males a sense of control over women—they don't have to interact with them in real life, rather they can interact with female bodies as objects. Non-relational sexuality keeps males from having to be vulnerable, or in relationship. It is a poor substitute, but functions for many men as a substitute for relationship.

In men's fourth item relational concerns emerge—*memories from the past*. He is sensitive to, and troubled by past sexual choices and experiences. Males are not particularly worried about singleness as historically they have been granted power to initiate relationships. In some of our schools initiating continues to be a measure of his spiritual maturity. If a women initiates, how can he subsequently lead? Some worry about *not having a girlfriend*, reflecting developmental questions around one's capacity to be loved, desired, and to be in an intimate relationship.

Men are often criticized for not taking more initiative when it comes to dating on college campuses. Discussions of why men don't initiate often focus on their laziness, their refusal to accept their role as initiator, or their fear that women assume an invitation to coffee signals interest in marriage. Likely the issues are more complex. Consider this alternative explanation. Women, perhaps especially Christian women, often hold high expectations for men. They want a man who will be a spiritual leader, sexually above any impure thoughts, desires, or behaviors, and to have enough promise of success to be able to provide for her financially. He doubts he measures up to her expectation and knows or fears that she will be disappointed or disapproving when she learns that he does not. Disappearing into non-relational sexuality may seem like the lesser or two evils.

Of course women often fear men too. They fear men's very different-ness, a sexuality they don't understand, which seems "base" or crude in nature. They sometimes fear losing their own identity, or being consumed in a relationship. Perhaps that men and women manage to pair up at all is evidence that sexuality is indeed a strong draw toward complementarity in relationships that might otherwise be doomed to fail.

### **Institutional Responses**

When confronted with sexual "problems" we default toward blame. We blame the over-sexed culture, and then address women's modesty issues on our campuses as the way to make our campus life different, and/or we blame the over-sexed culture, and form accountability groups for male students.

These approaches come from a negative bent—a reactive or suppressing response that accepts the messages of the over-sexed culture that women have to be sexual to be desired, and that men are wild, rugged individuals who are always thinking about sex. Our reactive response moves us toward a denial of a fundamental part of life. Rather than "listening to all of life and learning to respond to each of its dimensions wholly and

with integrity” we join a chorus that merely tries to control or suppress it. Can we instead sanctify the yearnings as normal and offer a more redemptive, inviting approach? Can we empower women and men to embrace their sexual yearnings as good, and to thus embrace authentic relationships with other women and men that enrich, strengthen and bless our campus communities? Following are some suggestions of what this might look like.

### *Empowering Women*

We empower women by encouraging them to a) embrace relationships with each other, and to b) refuse to participate in a competition for the male (or cultural) gaze. The competition between women can be minimized as they name and then challenge a social mandate that they invest emotional energy, money and time being consumed with what they look like. If enough women on a floor, in a dorm, or on a campus begin to talk about and eventually agree to challenge a status quo that suggests they must dress and act provocatively to be loveable, then they may well begin to dress comfortably, rather than provocatively. They might begin to feel confident enough to initiate friendship with males rather than succumbing to flirtatious, coy, or “get-in-his-path” practices to get a man’s attention. I am concerned about Christian publications that encourage women to learn “acceptable flirting behaviors” to help them secure “Mr. Right.”<sup>1</sup> This manipulative way of being undermines honesty in relationship, and undermines the potential to become partners with men. Rather, from within a cooperative partnership women can honor, build, and invest in the lives of other women and men.

### *Empowering Men*

Men can also be empowered to embrace other men in honest, caring, vulnerable relationships. Conversations on a floor, in a dorm, or in the larger campus setting can raise their awareness about cultural pressures they feel to be successful, attractive, and able to provide well enough financially that the woman they marry can stay home with the children. When men are encouraged to embrace women as partners in the stewardship task, rather than as objects of their desire, or something to pursue, to woo, and to win, they begin to see how women contribute an essential piece of God’s character to understanding how to do good in the world. A byproduct of this alternative way of seeing women is to experience freedom from pressure to be and do more than God asks men to be and do.

Accountability groups are often formed for our male students, giving them a legitimate context in which to be vulnerable with other males. Many of these groups appear to focus primarily on conversations about masturbation and pornography. Can we encourage *separate* conversations about masturbation and pornography? When masturbation is only discussed in connection with pornography use, we are unable to have helpful conversations about the potentially useful role of masturbation as a

---

<sup>1</sup> “Finding Mr. Right,” by Stephen Arterburn has some good suggestions for focusing on being the right kind of woman, but I find his chapter on acceptable flirting behaviors particularly disturbing, as well as some of his assumptions underlying the argument on “finding” Mr. Right.

developmentally appropriate way to respond to prolonged abstinence. It is right and good to discourage pornography use on our campuses. Pornography is a social problem that further separates the sexes, undermines present and future relationships, and perpetuates male objectification of females.

But accountability groups can offer more than a conversation about masturbation and pornography. Other useful topics would be the pressure men feel to be successful, to be spiritual giants unaffected by the fallenness of their sexuality, how they perceive women, and their fears and hopes about relationships.

### **Ideal Outcomes**

In an ideal world women dress modestly, not because women bear the responsibility for men's sexuality, but because women don't want to compete with other women for the cultural or male gaze, and because they don't want to participate in their own objectification, and yes, because they want to live graciously with the men they interact with every day. And men are in intentional friendships with other men, not because they have a sexuality that threatens to undo them otherwise, but because they are drawn to relationship, and resisting the message of the independent, rugged man who needs nobody. Admittedly, I don't understand men completely. As a sociologist I understand the embedded aspects of sexuality better, particularly for men. Men's physical responses and desires are not only impacted by culture, they also emerge from the physical bodies men inhabit. Nevertheless, I feel reinforced for believing that if males could be more relational, they would struggle less from the tyranny of their sexuality. The following response from a male student in my Sociology of Sexuality course reinforced my hope:

In the movie, *Mulholland Drive*, there is this scene where a woman who recently broke up with her lover is masturbating and crying at the same time. A friend of mine who had seen the movie told me that he felt like that before. His act of masturbation was a reflection of his loneliness as well as his deeper desire and yearning for love and intimacy. In all honesty, I resonate with his comment in the sense that on days when I feel connected to the world and the people around me, having intimate, spiritual, and intellectual conversations with friends and people, I do not have the desire to masturbate.

When we understand that we are made for relationship, that we are existentially alone in our embodied state, yearning for a powerful connection that is expressed in our sexuality, then we can view masturbation and efforts to strive to be beautiful as attempts to fulfill a longing for intimacy. It is good to encourage our students to embrace beauty and our unmet longings—both represent something good, a holy longing for connection.

God made us to appreciate, to be drawn to beauty. It is a tragedy that beauty is so narrowly defined by those who shape our desires through the market. We extend grace in the midst of brokenness as women learn to affirm beauty in each other, rather than to enter an internal competition with it, and as we recognize that we all struggle with fears

and unmet longings. As our students acknowledge longings as good, invite God into those longings and thank God for them, then perhaps they can work out the role of masturbation in their pre-marital lives. We can be part of these conversations. It would be good to be part of them, to find ways to facilitate them.

### **A Word about Singleness and Marriage**

Part of what is troubling in standard conversations about controlling one's sexuality is the assumption that once married all these troubles go away. Four problems come immediately to mind. First, this raises unrealistic expectations of marriage to satisfy all our longings. Second, it suggests there is no real way to satisfy sexuality needs apart from marriage. Third, it offers no legitimacy for a choice to remain single; and fourth, no hope for people with a homosexual orientation. Another challenge—also outside the scope of this paper—is to explore our views of marriage in light of Paul's teaching on singleness and Jesus' example as one who remained single.

### **Conclusion**

Our sexuality is embedded in culture, and embodied in our physical bodies. We need to keep both realities in tension, recognize how both influence how our students experience their sexuality. Because many of our ideas about sexuality are embedded in culture, we have the opportunity to shape, to cast visions, to challenge faulty ideas of sexuality and replace them with sound ones that are theologically informed, gracious, and inviting.

Catholics have historically done a better job of this—taking the task of developing a theology of the body and a theology of sexuality seriously. As Protestants the challenge is before us to offer our communities of faith the same. In *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* editors Nelson and Longfellow (1994) say:

Sexuality is intended by God to be neither incidental to nor detrimental to our spirituality, but rather a fully integrated and basic dimension of that spirituality... human sexuality ... is most fundamentally the divine invitation to find our destinies not in loneliness but in deep connection... we experience our sexuality as the basic eros of our humanness that urges, invites, and lures us out of our loneliness into intimate communication and communion with God and the world.

The issue is both about self-control and, perhaps more importantly, about finding appropriate ways to accept the divine invitation to deep connection with others.

Chittister, Joan (1990). *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco: 16.

McMinn, Lisa (2004). *Sexuality and Holy Longing: Embracing Intimacy in a Broken World*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Neal, Cynthia J. & Mangis, Michael. W. (1995). Unwanted Sexual Experiences Among Christian College Women: Saying No on the Inside," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 23, no. 3: 171-79.

Peterson, Eugene (1985). *Earth and Altar*. Downer's Grove: IVP.

Pollack, Nigel (1998). *The Relationship Revolution*. Leichester: Inter-Varsity Press: 26-7.

Nelson, J. & Longfellow, S. (1994) *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*. Louisville Ky.: Westminster John Knox, p. xiv.

Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart (2002). *My Brother's Keeper: What the Social Sciences Do (and Don't) Tell Us About Masculinity*. Downer's Grove: IVP.

Lisa McMinn, Ph.D.  
Chair, Sociology and Anthropology  
Wheaton College  
501 College Ave.  
Wheaton, IL 60187  
[Lisa.McMinn@wheaton.edu](mailto:Lisa.McMinn@wheaton.edu)  
630.752.5117