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Theologically-informed Education About Masturbation: A Male Sexual Health Perspective

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The Bible presents no clear theological ethic on masturbation, leaving many young unmarried Christians with confusion and guilt around their sexuality. Moreover, with only a sin-based vocabulary for discussing masturbation, those with compulsive masturbation patterns are apt to avoid disclosing problems because of shame and thus risk escalating in compulsivity. We present a discursive educational approach for talking to college-aged Christian men about masturbation. Utilizing theological, psychological and sociological perspectives, this approach equips college-aged Christian men with the knowledge and critical thinking ability to work out an informed personal position on masturbation. We consider these perspectives followed by preventive and therapeutic implications for young men dealing with the early stages of sexual compulsivity.

Among some Protestant and Catholic young people, the issue of masturbation evokes considerable discomfort and even distress because of the stigma that is attached to this behavior. Informed in part by the Church's historic position on non-marital sexuality, this stigma is exacerbated by the modern Christian emphasis on sexual purity, of which an unfortunate byproduct is the experience of misplaced guilt over a behavior that is arguably developmentally normative. Much of our work as therapists is dedicated to sexuality education and the prevention and treatment of sexual addiction among Christian men. Of the many aspects of human sexuality that we address in our work, masturbation ranks as the most misunderstood for the lack of open, rational dialogue about this topic within the Christian community. Among Christians in general, masturbation generates a unique discomfort and ambivalence—more so than even homosexuality—precisely because masturbation, unlike homosexuality, is quite prevalent in the general population (we will discuss prevalence and temporal frequency estimates of masturbation later in this article). Under the assumption that false guilt about masturbation is inextricably bound up with misinformation and a general lack of clarity, this article aims to bring informed biblical interpretation, sociological realities, and psychological facts to bear on the topic of masturbation. Our objective is to present a way of helping young Christian men to resist emotional arguments based on false facts and the misuse of Scripture, and to approach masturbation with a critical and discursive mindset to arrive at a well-reasoned personal viewpoint on the matter.

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Sexual health and information about masturbation

Within evangelical frameworks of sexual ethics—those articulated by Grenz (1997) and Jones (1999), for example—there has never been a well-defined theological ethic of masturbation, in contrast to the ethics of pre-marital sex, marriage, and divorce that are worked out from foundational Christian anthropological assertions about gender, sexuality, and their relationship to the *imago Dei*. Good attempts have certainly been made by Sanford (1994) and Smedes (1994), among others, but these are good attempts precisely because they do justice to the moral ambiguity around the issue of masturbation. Masturbation falls thus within the proverbial grey area of evangelical sexual ethics. Therein lies the source of the vexation among countless numbers of

young unmarried Christians: Even though masturbation is a morally ambiguous issue that seems to be theologically peripheral to the main body of Christian sexual ethics, it is developmentally a very salient issue for these individuals who are trying to understand the place of sexuality in their lives, and perhaps to reconcile their sexuality with a value system that eschews pre-marital sex.

Broadly speaking, the purposes of sexuality education are twofold: the promotion of healthy and responsible sexual choices through the dissemination of accurate information, and the prevention of undesirable outcomes stemming from ignorance. Accurate sexuality education is ultimately empowering. Specific to masturbation, Christian youth and singles are in need of accurate information to empower them to overcome the false guilt and unnecessary anxiety that they may experience over this behavior. Furthermore, for men who are in the early stages of a sexual addiction, education can help to reduce compulsivity by defusing shame and allowing the therapeutic disclosure of potentially problematic patterns of behavior (Kwee, Dominguez, & Ferrell, 2007). Specifically, theologically-informed education about masturbation can benefit unmarried Christian men who are confused by the lack of direct instruction in the Bible concerning this behavior. The purpose of theological information about masturbation is not to provide morally prescriptive instruction, but to help confused young men to thoughtfully engage Scripture and work out an informed personal position on masturbation that they can reconcile with their faith and values. We believe that this is in and of itself therapeutic.

The psychoeducation curriculum that we use is a module within a therapeutic protocol that one of us co-developed called Single Minded (Kwee & LePage, 2006), a structured early intervention program for evangelical men identified as early stage sex addicts. These are college-aged men who do not engage in partnered sex, but whose masturbation and pornography use may be classified as compulsive because they engage in these behaviors for mood regulation and self-soothing, consistent with etiological models of sex addiction proposed by Goodman (1993) and Schwartz and Southern (1999). The Single Minded program reached students from four Chicago-area Christian colleges, and the educational unit on sexuality has been employed as well in discussion groups outside of counseling.[1]

Masturbation as a developmentally normative behavior

Thematically speaking, we find that the questions that Christian young people ask about masturbation can be reduced to two essential queries. Christian youth want to know whether masturbation is "right or wrong" (i.e., what is the "correct" moral stance to take based on what the Bible says?), and whether masturbation is "normal" (i.e., what can we say about the psychological dimensions of masturbation?). For now we address the latter question and defer discussing the morality of masturbation to a later section in this article.

The most reliable population-based surveys indicate that masturbation is neither particularly rare nor particularly universal as a practice. To the conflicted Christian young person, what might we say, then, about masturbation in a psychological sense? Typically, we will respond to the question in terms of what is behaviorally or developmentally normative, and make an appeal to research findings to show that despite the scruples Christians may have about masturbation, studies suggest that masturbation occurs at a fairly high frequency for unmarried young people. Our response is informed by findings from reliable large scale sexuality studies as well as smaller studies that pertain to the demographic group that we work with (college men). In the most comprehensive representative sexuality survey conducted to date, Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) estimated that approximately 63% of their probability sample (consisting of over 3,000 individuals) reported masturbating in the past year. Of unmarried, non-cohabitating people, 68% reported masturbating once or more in the past year. Because

[1]We should acknowledge at this point the caveat that our discussion is limited to men. This is not to ignore or minimize the struggles that unmarried Christian women experience in trying to reconcile their sexuality with their faith. Our focus reflects the reality that male sexuality issues, particular struggles with compulsive pornography use and masturbation, present themselves much more frequently in Christian college counseling centers than the female analog of problematic sexuality. This itself reflects the higher prevalence of masturbation among males compared to females both in the general population (Lauman, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) and within a college demographic (Schwartz, 1999). Moreover, as male clinicians, we have greater access to a male clinical population because clients generally prefer to work with a therapist of the same gender when it comes to sexuality concerns. We would therefore fail to do justice to the reality and complexity of sexuality concerns among young Christian women due to the gender specificity of our clinical experience in this area.

this subgroup contains individuals who are concurrently sexually active, it is reasonable to conjecture that the reported prevalence is understated for unmarried people who are not sexually active.

Smaller scale surveys suggest that masturbation is common among male college students. In one study of undergraduates' pre-coital sexual behavior, 85% of the male sample reported ever masturbating (i.e., at least once); the actual percentage rating the frequency of masturbation as either moderate ("occasionally") or high ("frequently" or "very frequently") was 71% (Schwartz, 1999). Pinkerton, Bogart, Cecil, and Abramson (2002) reported that 98% of men in their college sample reported having ever masturbated, and that the frequency of masturbation averaged 12 times per month for college males. These estimates suggest that masturbation is behaviorally normative among unmarried college-aged men, and that completely apart from moral considerations, it is a behavior that religious college men must contend with because it is part of a typical developmental trajectory.

Discussing information about the prevalence and frequency of masturbation is therapeutically beneficial in that it can have a normalizing effect for Christian young men who struggle with misplaced guilt feelings. We developed this approach in response to an observation that male clients at a Christian college counseling center had a tendency to attribute unwanted sexual thoughts and behaviors to sexual addiction (Kwee, Dominguez, & Ferrell, 2007). From our standpoint, then, this aspect of psychoeducation is necessary to (1) calm fears that one has a problem of sexual compulsivity (by showing that not everyone who masturbates is a sex addict); (2) convey that masturbation can arguably be part of a healthy developmental trajectory; and (3) help the client to realize that he is certainly not alone in his guilt and confusion.

In this discussion, our clients will as a matter of course raise the question of what "healthy masturbation" looks like. In the literature, this appears to be an ill-defined standard, and perhaps it is a highly subjective and idiopathic one. The first author belongs to a professional organization of sexual health clinicians and educators, many of whom feel, contrary to his opinion, that masturbation to pornographic stimuli is not a problem. An objective standard of "healthy masturbation" is close to impossible to nail down because it exposes those who define the standards to accusations of moral policing against those who do not comply with the standards (e.g., Levine & Troiden, 1988; Saulnier, 1996). Furthermore, we believe that it is simply not clinically helpful. Here is an instance where the best answer may lie in the opposite definition: Unhealthy masturbation likely entails a pattern of using autoeroticism for self-soothing and mood regulation in the absence of adaptive coping skills, consistent with emotional disequilibrium models of sexual addiction (e.g., Goodman, 1993). A standard of masturbation that is not unhealthy does exist, we argue, because of the discrepancy in the general population prevalence estimates of sexual addiction and masturbation: 3-6% for sexual addiction (Carnes, 1991; Coleman, Miner, Ohlerking, & Raymond, 2001) compared to 63% for masturbation (Laumann et al., 1994). In the spirit of helping our clients to be more thoughtful and discerning, we eschew stating any objective standard of healthy masturbation that clients may perceive as prescriptive. Instead, we prefer to use our phrase "developmentally normative masturbation" to distinguish pathological patterns of masturbation from a pattern that does not raise concern because it is part of the developmental trajectory and does not cause functional or psychological impairment. We discuss further the clinical benefits of educating our clients about this contrast in the section on therapeutic implications.

Masturbation in a sociological perspective

When clients express concerns about masturbation, clinicians can show support and empathy by validating the religiously-mediated value framework on which these concerns are based. It is just as important, however, to acknowledge broader cultural currents that inform the client's concerns: A highly sexualized popular culture and easy access to pornography simply do not make it any easier for faith-oriented young people to heed the call of Christian sexual morality. Another compelling sociological factor is the reality that, due to the dynamics of an industrialized economy, the length of singleness is increasing. Young adults are waiting longer to get married because of increasing spans of education and of the time that they need to establish their professional identity and financial foothold. This has led to a peculiarly modern phenomenon known as "emerging adulthood," a new stage in the lifespan between adolescence and the full responsibilities of adulthood and family life (Arnett, 2004).

The median age of marriage had been steadily increasing over the twentieth century so that in 2000

it stood at 27 for men and 25 for women (Arnett, 2004). Juxtaposed against this modern development is the fact that for much of human history, a protracted transitional period did not exist between the attainment of sexual maturity and one's initiation into the responsibilities of adulthood. During the recent flurry of renewed evangelical interest in the person of Mary, the mother of Jesus–an interest that yielded magazine articles, popular books (e.g., McKnight, 2006) and the film *The Nativity Story* (Hardwicke & Rich, 2006)–Christians were surprised, and not a few scandalized, to learn that Mary was likely just a pubescent girl of around 14 when she gave birth to Jesus and was married off to Joseph. This reflects a historical reality, as true for the ancient Near East as elsewhere in the world, that sexual maturation at pubescence marked the time that a girl could be ready for marriage and childbearing. This stands in stark contrast to our modern understanding of adolescence as a period during which sexual drives are supposed to be sublimated to education, self-application, and continued emotional maturation in preparation for adulthood and its attendant responsibilities of marriage and family life. As Moran (2000) has noted, adolescence, unlike puberty, is less a biological reality than a socially constructed notion that gave rise to the very dilemma necessitating the social hygiene movement of the early twentieth century, followed by its modern descendant, sexuality education.

A confusing personal struggle with masturbation is rendered more explicable when we can help the client to locate it within a broader social current that affects his entire generation. With a college demographic, we find that it is particularly appropriate to dialogue about sociological trends that influence unmarried young adults' struggle with masturbation and unfulfilled sexuality. This helps to normalize the tensions that the client may experience in his sexuality, and to bring home the point by Smedes (1994) that such struggles are produced precisely because of the "unequal tempo of … biological, personal and social growth" (p. 139).

Theologically-informed education about masturbation

By now it can be seen that intrapersonal conflict about masturbation represents a broader tension that may not be simplistically resolved because it is constructed around several realities operating in the life and experience of the Christian young adult: (1) The reality of physiological and sexual maturation, (2) the sociological currents of an industrialized economy, (3) the cultural reality of an increasingly sexualized society, and (4) the control beliefs of one's faith-based value system. This section addresses the fourth reality and examines the interpretation of "difficult passages" that provide the purported biblical basis for a blanket condemnation of masturbation. The Bible does not directly address masturbation, leaving Christians to articulate a moral stance from various scriptures that in our view cannot support a deontological prohibition of masturbation. In the following discussion, we do not intend to exhaustively address all scriptures of any relevance to masturbation. We have chosen rather to focus on two key scriptures, Matthew 5:27-30 and Leviticus 15:16-18, that taken together are sufficient to support a neutral theological ethic of masturbation (all passages cited are from the New International Version).

We preface this discussion, however, by briefly considering the "baggage" connected to one particular passage, Genesis 38:6-10, that provides a historical context for modern Christian tensions around masturbation. "Onania," the archaic term that historically was synonymous with masturbation, is derived from the biblical character, Onan, who the passage tells us was put to death for disobeying a law to produce a child with his widowed sister-in-law by "(spilling) his semen on the ground" (Genesis 38:9). The religious and medical hysteria surrounding onania, which peaked around the Enlightenment era, was to leave its imprint on medical thought and social attitudes about masturbation well into the 20th century (Gerali, 2003; Stenkle, 1950). The medical hysteria can in large part be attributed to Samuel Tissot, the Swiss physician who claimed in his influential mid 18th century treatise that masturbation led to insanity, nervous exhaustion, "melancholia," as well as a host of alarming physical afflictions (Patton, 1985). Writing in the late 1940s, the psychiatrist William Stenkle (1950) has documented the residual impact of Tissot's beliefs on medical thought well into the last century. No doubt it took the advent of scientific sexuality research, led by the groundbreaking studies of Kinsey and his colleagues (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; 1953), as well as the cultural upheaval of the sexual revolution of the 1960s to begin shifting social attitudes about masturbation towards something like acceptance.

Today the general consensus in the Christian community is that Genesis 38:6-10 is irrelevant to masturbation. Modern readers of course understand Onan's act not as masturbation but as *coitus interruptus*. The technical designation of the act, however, is unimportant compared to the ethical violations manifesting through the act. The interpretive context for Genesis 38:6-10 is found in the ancient Israelite law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) that required Onan to marry and impregnate his sister-in-law after the death of his first-born brother in order to continue his brother's name and family possession of their land (Capps, 2003; Jones & Jones, 1993). Whatever his reasons for not consummating intercourse, Onan was punished for violating a specific Hebrew law and for failing in his covenantal duty to his deceased brother. Onan was judged for undisclosed but probably exploitative intentions[2] and certainly for his callous repudiation of his traditional obligations of familial care and responsibility. The idea that it is the ethical principle motivating the act, not the wrongness intrinsic to the act itself, is central to a reading of the following passages in evaluating the morality of masturbation.

Matthew 5:27-30. The biblical passage that is by far the most frequently evoked by clients to support a prohibitive stance against masturbation is Jesus' teaching on adultery and lust in Matthew 5:27-30. This passage states:

> You have heard the commandment that says, "You must not commit adultery" (27). But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart (28). So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell (29). And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell (30).

The exegesis of this passage that leads to the prohibitive stance against masturbation generally takes the following form: Here Jesus is condemning lust, and because one cannot masturbate without lusting, masturbation is therefore unquestionably a sin. We believe that the basis of this interpretation, that lust and the sexual desire that motivates masturbation are equivalent, is seriously flawed both psychologically and theologically. This interpretation can be challenged by unpacking it along three principles of criticism that we call the *principle of intention and context*, the *principle of telos* (or ultimate ends), and the *principle of interpretive accuracy*.

The principle of intention and context. To assume that all masturbatory acts stem from lust is an example of absolutistic thinking, which is employed whenever some Christians wish to avoid exercising the faculty of moral discernment. The principle of intention and context recognizes that why and in what situation a person masturbates should matter in our moral evaluation of masturbation. The sin of lust has a particular moral quality about it. At the very least, sexual lust connotes self-centered entitlement, covetousness and, within the context that Jesus is referring to (marriage), infidelity at least in spirit, if not in actuality. Do all instances of masturbation reflect such grave moral failures? The intentions behind masturbation are varied and, arguably, not always of a lustful nature. A contrast of scenarios commonly encountered in the counseling office may help to illustrate this. In the first scenario, a young man and his girlfriend make out during a date but, out of respect for their shared Christian value system, they abstain from intercourse. The young man is nevertheless sexually aroused and on returning home, he masturbates to alleviate his pent-up sexual tension. In contrast to this is another young man who masturbates regularly to pornography and is desensitized to the way pornography objectifies women.

We raise this contrast to suggest that masturbation is not categorically lustful but is nuanced by the intention of the person who is engaging in the behavior: There is a moral difference between masturbation done in the presence of pornography or the phone sex service (inherently selfish and exploitative mediums), and masturbation as the sexual expression of a fuller yearning for connectedness, i.e., connectedness that is not primarily sexual. We certainly recognize, however, that absent the contrasting counterpoint of the pornography user, the moral gradations of masturbation are challenging to distinguish. To nuance our example further, the young man who masturbates to fantasies of loving intimacy with his fiancée probably has an easier conscience than the young man whose masturbation involves fantasies of a woman with whom he is in a courtship or dating relationship. Is the latter individual committing more or less lust than the former? One client suggested that the "lust guilt" of the latter person

[2]Jones and Jones (1993, p. 191) speculate that Onan may have had about two possible motives: He may have wanted the pleasure of the sexual relationship without the responsibilities of parenthood, or he may have wished to seize his brother's land and cheat his sister-in-law of her rights under Israelite law.

would depend on how serious his romantic relationship is. Another client suggested that it would depend on whether there is an intention to marry the girlfriend (a principle that obviously opens up further ethical difficulties). We have no doubt that some lust is present in both scenarios in our example, if only because sexual desire has been tainted by the Fall (see our discussion of the second principle, *telos*). While it is tempting to identify and classify by "degrees of lust" all possible scenarios of masturbation, this effort leads dangerously down the path of pharisaical legalism that Jesus opposed. We raise this example to underscore the point that masturbation is a moral gray area. Private motivations, however mixed, do matter in a moral evaluation of the behavior, but grace is also never far off for the confused young man.

Interestingly, it is the client who uses pornography addictively who typically claims that he cannot imagine masturbating without committing the sin of lust. This is likely because the intentions of the habitual pornography user cannot help but be colored by the particular context of his participation in a medium that distorts human intimacy into raw sexuality, and reduces human beings to sexual objects. However, for the person who masturbates but eschews pornography, it is a different matter: He is more open to the reality that the intimacies of sex, emotions, and spirit are intertwined. Although he may not experience fulfillment from masturbation, he is at least striving for a deeper level of connectedness to another human being. This difference again underscores for us that masturbation is invariably embedded in intentions and contexts that differ in their moral quality. We believe that it is important for Christians to recognize these differences if they are to overcome the false guilt that alienates them from their God-given sexuality.

The principle of telos.[3] The study of theological anthropology, an inherently teleological endeavor, helps to further illuminate the distinction between sexual desire and lust. The Creation account tells us that sexual desire preceded and is not a product of the Fall. It is a function of each person being endowed with a sexual nature and is therefore intrinsic to human experience, even though it is corrupted by the Fall. Too many Christians, however, focus on the corruption of the sex drive while forgetting that sexuality retains an essentially sacred dimension that reveals something vital about personhood. Theologians suggest that sexual desire resides within a deeper, divinely placed longing for communion with our fellow humans and with God (Grenz, 1997; Smedes, 1994). Moreover, by using sexual desire as a metaphor for God's pursuit of his people, Scripture suggests that our deep longings for intimacy somehow reciprocate, as much as sinful humans are able to reciprocate, God's own longing to be in communion with us. The interpretation of *Song of Songs*, of course, is steeped in this metaphor. Romantic and in parts even erotic, this book is read by Christians at two theological levels: first, as a celebration of sex and marriage, and, second, as a metaphor for Jesus Christ's deep love for his Church. The sexual longing of a wedding night takes on eschatological significance in the book of Revelation, in which the resurrected body of believers, purified and redeemed by Christ, is depicted "as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Revelation 21:2). Such themes in Scripture lead us to conclude that although tainted by the Fall, the sexual longing of the person who masturbates does reflect a divinely placed, holy hunger for intimacy that speaks to his ultimate hope of communion with God. Theologically, then, masturbation may be approached as a behavior that has its place in the development of the whole person, and in promoting right relationships among humans and between humans and God. Nevertheless, this understanding of masturbation must be tempered by the principle of intention and context. We must be careful not to overstate the place of masturbation in a teleological perspective and recognize that an unhealthy pattern of masturbation can just as well impede personal, relational, and spiritual development.

The principle of interpretive accuracy. Our final objection to using Matthew 5:27-30 as a basis for the blanket condemnation of masturbation is that such an interpretation can only be supported by de-contextualizing this passage from Jesus' overall message. Biblical texts need to be interpreted according to their communicative intent, which requires taking the historical and cultural context of a text into consideration, along with the purpose of its message as it pertains to a particular issue or audience. Vanhoozer (2000) notes: "The task of biblical theology … is to present the theology of the Bible—the parts and

[3]"Telos" is a Greek word that is defined as the end of a goal-oriented process. Deriving from this word is teleology, the branch of philosophy that holds all things to be designed for or directed toward a final result.

the whole–in a manner that lets the texts, in all their peculiarity and particularity, set the agenda" (p. 53). This principle informs a closer reading of Matthew 5:27-30 that considers the overall context of Jesus' message and audience.

Scholars regularly note that Jesus employed the linguistic device of antithetical speech in order to emphasize the need for a radical reorientation of one's heart towards God (see, for example: Buttrick, 2002; Talbert, 2004; and Vaught, 2001). Along with the teachings on anger and murder (5:21-22), turning the other cheek (5:38-39), and loving one's enemies (5:43-48), Matthew 5:27-30 makes its main point through antithesis and hyperbole. Talbert (2004, pp. 32-43) argues that such teachings are not legalistic directives but part of the overall plot of the Gospel as they draw attention to the futility of a Christian's moral efforts and, thus, the need for continual dependence on God's grace, forgiveness, and "enablement of obedience" in the journey of character formation.

The context of Matthew 5:27-30 is, of course, the Sermon on the Mount, which is organized as a series of blessings on the poor and marginalized (known as the Beatitudes), Jesus' statement of his relationship to Jewish law, followed by a series of challenging moral directives. Anticipating his moral teachings, Jesus upholds the ultimate purpose of religious law, declaring, "I have not come to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). He goes on to state hyperbolically that people must in fact exceed the exacting requirements of the law in order to enter Heaven: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:20). These statements, which would have been shocking to his listeners, set the stage for Jesus' moral teachings and suggest that his message was aimed not just at the common people but at the religious authorities as well.

Jesus was critical of the religious establishment because of the yoke that it placed on people by appointing itself the arbiter of morality and judgment through a complex code of religious regulations and customs. Guelich (1982) and Vaught (2001), among others, suggest that through antithetical teachings like Matthew 5:27-30, Jesus is declaring his opposition to Pharisaical self-righteousness by stating that true morality exceeds the behavioral standard of keeping the law to the unseen attitudes and motivations of the heart.[4] Through his unequivocal moral directives, Jesus is effectively raising the bar so high as to make God's ethical standard humanly impossible to attain. His purpose was to remove the unforgiving yoke of religious law from the people by offering himself as the ultimate source of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God. This view suggests that those who use Matthew 5:27-30 as the biblical basis for condemning masturbation are missing the main point of this teaching, which, interpreted in the context of Jesus' overall message and reason for his ministry, is not to add condemnation but to free people from the condemnation of religious law.

Leviticus 15:16-18. In light of the belief that Christians are "under grace," the Pauline expression conveying the theological understanding that the penalties of religious law have been negated by the fulfillment of Jesus' ministry, many Christians struggle with the relevance of the Old Testament law for their personal morality. Part of the confusion is that Jesus, while claiming to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament, did not abrogate the law but emphatically upheld it (Matthew 5:18-19). To make sense of this apparent contradiction in light of the New Testament's emphasis on grace, biblical scholars point to the distinction between the ceremonial and moral aspects of the law: The law continues to be an important moral guide for Christians even though its ceremonial requirements have been rendered redundant by Jesus' death and resurrection (Gerali, 2003; Johnson, 1982). This moral/ceremonial distinction must be borne in mind when approaching Leviticus 15:16-18, a passage that is sometimes viewed as supporting a condemnation of masturbation. This passage states:

> When a man has an emission of semen, he must bathe his whole body with water, and he will be unclean until evening (16). Any clothing or leather that has semen on it must be washed with water, and it will be unclean till evening (17). When a man lies with a woman and there is an emission of semen, both must bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening (18).

[4]Specific to Jesus' teaching on lust and adultery in verses 27-28, theologians generally interpret this passage through the legal and judicial perspective of Old Testament laws that stipulate the prohibition and punishment of adultery. Space constraints preclude us from providing an expanded discussion, but the reader is referred to more specific theological treatments of this teaching in Guelich (1982, pp. 193-194) and Vaught (2001, pp. 73-77). We are more concerned with the overall interpretive context of Jesus' moral directives in the Sermon on the Mount.

The specific reference to seminal emission "when a man lies with a woman" (verse 18) and the separate reference in the unspecified context of verse 16 suggest that this law does intend to distinguish two contexts in which seminal emissions occur: the context of sexual intercourse, and the context of non-intercourse which Johnson (1982) argues must allow for masturbation. The question that then arises is whether the law does cast God's disapproval on masturbation, as some of our clients claim. Johnson (1982) and Gerali (2003) argue that this passage treats seminal emissions in the solitary context (whether masturbation or nocturnal emissions) as purely a matter of ceremonial, not moral, cleanliness. Gerali (2003) provides three arguments in support of this view. First, two types of offerings were required by Mosaic law—offerings for atonement for sin and offerings for ceremonial cleansing—and the law required only the latter type of offering for non-intercourse seminal emissions. Second, by requiring cleansing from seminal emissions occurring in both solitary and coital contexts, the law puts no more disapproval on solitary emissions than on intercourse; moreover, the same cleansing ritual is required for women after menstruation (Leviticus 15:19-24). Third, this law was located in a specific cultural context of Hebrew belief that procreative fluids are symbolic of the transmission of sin from generation to generation through childbirth (Gerali, 2003). A proper contextual interpretation of Leviticus 15:16-18 would therefore support the view that masturbation in and of itself is morally neutral, and that a moral evaluation of masturbation must take into account the intentions and contexts that are attendant to a specific instance of the behavior (see our above discussion of Matthew 5:27-30). We thus agree with Johnson (1982), who concluded from his exegetical study of Leviticus 15:16-19: "God tolerates masturbation when it does not conflict with the moral and ethical principles He has elsewhere revealed. Such tolerance must likewise be foundational in a fully biblical approach to masturbation" (p. 144). Nevertheless, our agreement must be qualified by our recognition that the distinction implied in Johnson's statement is not always clear in the minds of our clients, as we discussed in the previous section.

Sexual Health Implications

Subjective distress around masturbation can lead some Christian young men to believe falsely that they have a sexual addiction just because the masturbation is unwanted (Kwee, Dominguez, & Ferrell, 2007). As we have seen, this distress can be mediated by a value system that eschews pre-marital sex, sociological trends towards longer spans of singleness, and misinterpretations of Scripture around the issue of masturbation. Utilizing a constructivist approach, Kwee (2007) has proposed that among sexually compulsive Christian college men, the phenomenology of addiction can be constructed around a religiously-mediated attitude towards masturbation that is condemning and prohibitive. Constructivist forces play out, for instance, among guilt-prone young men who tell us in counseling that they believe that they are sexually compulsive because it is impossible for them to conceive of appropriate or healthy masturbation under any circumstances. By this rationale these clients justify their all-consuming efforts to cease masturbatory behavior, giving rise to what Jones and Jones (1993, p. 192) have referred to as a "compulsion to stop": a positive feedback cycle by which masturbation is reinforced (indirectly through intense emotional conflict) rather than eradicated.

In their recovery manual for Christians, Laaser and Machen (1996, pp. 181-184) speak of "spiritual abuse"—the misuse of theology to induce feelings of shame, guilt, and worthlessness among religious sex addicts. While we see shame as interacting with a wider confluence of risk factors in the organization of addiction (per other proposed etiologies, e.g. Goodman (1993) and Schwartz & Southern (1999)), we agree with Laaser and Machen's (1996) conceptualization of shame as a fundamental emotional driver of a self-perpetuating addiction cycle. The basic goal of theologically-oriented discussion about masturbation is thus shame reduction through the creation of a safe forum in which young men can thoughtfully engage Scripture, psychology, and sociology on the issue of masturbation. In the following paragraphs we consider three therapeutic implications of this discursive educational process. Examples of actual questions we use to facilitate critical thinking and dialogue are included in Appendix A.

Identity integration. Masturbation is an extremely salient behavioral issue for young Christian men who must struggle with unfulfilled sexuality for as long as they are unmarried. Among some men, sexual shame results in an irrational and usually unsuccessful avoidance of masturbation. We find that the intrapsychic tension of this dynamic is dealt with by compartmentalizing one's sexual identity so that

development of a well-integrated self is stymied. By normalizing and validating their struggles, we can help young Christian men to defuse sexual shame and close the rift between their sexuality and other parts of their identity.

Central to this process is a non-judgmental dialectical approach that helps young men to critically examine their presuppositions and beliefs about sexuality, and to develop an informed personal viewpoint on masturbation. The dialectical approach helps to shape a more rational personal response to sexuality, displacing emotional and self-punitive reactions that are characteristic of those who have grown up around heavy religious anti-sex moralizing. This is possible because the discursive educational process helps to substitute an expanded vocabulary for talking about masturbation for a limited vocabulary that is oriented around sin. It is simply unprofitable to approach masturbation, a theologically grey issue, with a morally absolutistic mindset, and this expanded vocabulary makes it possible to consider masturbation in a more nuanced fashion that befits its moral ambiguity. For the same reason, we eschew being prescriptive or authoritative and encourage every client to develop an informed personal stance on masturbation after considering the theological, biological, psychological, and sociological dimensions of this behavior. This process leads men to take different moral positions on masturbation: Some will decide based on their personal situation and convictions that this is a behavior they should avoid, whereas others will decide that God gives them the freedom to engage in it under limited circumstances. Because we believe, following Gerali (2003), that different views on masturbation can be tolerated within a Christian moral framework, what matters to us is not the conclusions our clients come to, but the process of rational engagement and theologically-informed discernment by which they arrive at their conclusions. We believe that having the knowledge and freedom to think independently about sexuality and masturbation is part of the client's healing experience of being reconciled to his sexuality.

Confronting denial in cases of sexual compulsivity. Sexual compulsivity or addiction[5] is characterized by the use of masturbation or sex to cope with dysregulated emotional states (Goodman, 1993; Kwee, Dominguez, & Ferrell, 2007), such that the compulsive person uses sexual self-stimulation to deal with unpleasant affective states such as anxiety or depression, in the absence of other adaptive coping skills. Traditional models of sexual addiction, which have the implicit assumption that sex addicts engage in partnered sex (e.g., Carnes, 1989), do not adequately account for cases where addiction consists exclusively of compulsive masturbation, an expression mediated by religious value systems that disapprove of sex before marriage. There is a need for new theoretical models of driven sexual behavior that account for unique expressions within special populations. Specific to religious populations, interventions also need to be contextualized to salient characteristics that mediate expressions of sexual addiction that are less common among general population sex addicts (Kwee, Dominguez, & Ferrell, 2007).

Sexual shame may cause young men to avoid disclosing problematic patterns of masturbation and pornography use, allowing sexual compulsivity to escalate by dint of not being dealt with. The preventive dimension of *Single Minded* aims to help those who do display compulsivity in solitary sex behaviors to deal with their problems before the consequences catch up to them. Discussing the developmentally normative dimensions of masturbation provides a framework for raising awareness about the unhealthy and compulsive dimensions of solitary sex. The theological educational module aims to counter reductionistic thinking by revealing sexual morality to be a much more nuanced and complex matter than can be dealt with by simplistic solutions. These solutions reflect a mindset of denial because they avoid the true psychological roots of the problem. For example, one of the more common beliefs rooted in denial is that getting married will permanently resolve a problem of compulsive pornography use and masturbation. Moreover, the thinking that problematic sexuality is a spiritual issue alone leads to overspiritualized answers: pray more sincerely, fast longer, rededicate oneself to God, go to seminary, and so on. Without other interventions, these well-meaning resolutions are likely to be ineffective and lead to a sense of failure. They are also likely to drive the addiction underground and intensify it,

[5]Researchers and clinicians are not in full agreement about how to designate conditions of driven and unmanageable sexual behavior (e.g., Barth & Kinder, 1987; Goodman, 2001; Kafka, 2000; Shaffer, 1994). We use the terms "compulsivity" and "addiction" interchangeably because these are the most familiar and researched clinical designations for out-of-control sexual behavior. Qualifying our use of these terms, we acknowledge that although sexuality researchers believe that a condition of driven sexual behavior does exist, nosological and sociocultural disputes abound around how to designate it.

creating the potential for greater suffering down the road. Thus, one crucial preventive task of *Single Minded* is to confront denial when the client is young and the problem is in its early stages, a situation that yields a much more positive prognosis than dealing with the problem when it has been entrenched by time and repetition.

Facilitating helpful therapeutic strategies. By helping clients to think more realistically about masturbation, the discursive educational component of *Single Minded* facilitates the implementation of therapeutic strategies to reduce sexual compulsivity and increase self-efficacy. Many clients who struggle with compulsive masturbation initially expect to completely eliminate masturbation, a goal that is informed in part by a morally absolutistic, black-and-white view of masturbation. We believe that such a goal does not allow for very realistic therapeutic options. For example, if a depressed, socially isolated young man masturbates multiple times a day watching pornography, it is misguided of him to think that masturbation itself is the problem. Focusing on eradicating masturbation is not only unrealistic but would reinforce his sense of failure and helplessness if he were to even experience one stumble. Thus, we try to turn the focus of clients away from moral perfectionism (in this case, reflected in the ability to maintain a lily white masturbation-free record), to developing a meaningful repertoire of skills and emotional competencies to deal effectively with sexual triggers, as well as enhancing their capacity for healthy interpersonal intimacy. Whereas it is unrealistic to talk about eliminating masturbation for most compulsive clients, it is certainly possible to talk about reducing unhealthy forms of masturbation (e.g., watching pornography to deal with stress) and cultivating a healthier relationship to one's sexuality by building adaptive social, cognitive, and emotional skills. Progress may then be measured realistically in the form of (1) reduced frequency of emotionally-triggered masturbation, (2) success at building adaptive skills for non-sexual coping, (3) an increased ability to have gratifying relationships, and (4) a shift towards a pattern of developmentally normative masturbation. Ultimately, we believe that a zero tolerance attitude towards masturbation only sets clients up for failure, whereas having a set of meaningful and measurable therapeutic goals oriented around skills development reinforces self-efficacy and hope–factors that are crucial for sustaining long-term growth and transformation.

Conclusion

Scripture does not directly address masturbation, giving rise to guilt-inducing misconceptions about a behavior that is extremely salient to unmarried college-aged Christian men whose value system leads them to eschew pre-marital sex. A sin-based vocabulary and religiously mediated shame prevent many young evangelical men from approaching masturbation in a balanced and rational manner. Shame also inhibits the disclosure of problematic patterns of masturbation, increasing the chances that compulsivity will escalate because of avoidance and denial. We have presented a discursive educational approach for talking to college-aged Christian men about masturbation. This dialectical approach utilizes theological, psychological, and sociological perspectives, helping young men to develop an informed personal position on masturbation by providing an expanded vocabulary to rationally engage the moral and emotional tensions inherent to the unmarried Christian's experience of sexuality. Furthermore, we argue that for Christian men in the early stages of sexual compulsivity, a theologically-informed educational approach has preventive and therapeutic implications reaching far beyond its knowledge content.

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Appendix

Examples of questions to facilitate critical thinking and dialogue around masturbation

1. What is your reaction to the prevalence estimates and frequencies of masturbation that we have discussed?
2. Should the moral consideration of masturbation be affected by the apparent numbers of people who do it?
3. What other dimensions, other than moral, are useful for considering this behavior?
4. Given the rising median age of marriage in the U.S. over time (and the marriage age of the "historically accurate" Mary as a counterpoint), what are the implications for the sexual struggles of unmarried people?
5. Other than the expanding length of singleness, what specific cultural factors play into the struggle of young men today?
6. Discuss your reaction to the Song of Songs. You know what it means theologically, but what is your reaction to this sensual piece of work as Scripture?
7. What is your reaction to the principle of intention and context? What are the practical difficulties for you in discerning between masturbation that is not immoral versus masturbation that is lustful?
8. When does masturbation "have its place" in a teleological perspective, and when does it go against the development of right relationships (both horizontally and with God)?
9. What are the implications [of this theological ethic] for a person called to a lifetime of singleness and chastity? What challenges and dilemmas are involved for persons called to such a path?
10. According to Steve Gerali, what does masturbation have to do with the first century dilemma of eating food sacrificed to idols? Do you agree with him?