The sin that so easily entangles

By Bill Hybels
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"For 25 of my 34 years, I was in bondage to desire, " began the letter from the man in my congregation. "It all started when I was six years old and I would sneak peeks at our neighbor's *Playboy* magazines. I became so enamored with the female anatomy that I used to cut out advertisements from traditional magazines and carry them with me. Adults thought it was cute and funny that I had the desire to look at pictures of nude women. It was just further evidence that I was all boy.

"This seemingly innocent practice continued for several years. But everything changed dramatically when I was 12 and I discovered sexual self-stimulation. It was like going from cigarettes to heroin. Even though I had some clumsy sexual experiences early on, they were, frankly, disappointing compared to my sexual fantasy life.

"In my midteens I was no longer just looking at pictures. I began to read *Playboy Advisor* and *Penthouse Letters.* They helped me to develop what I call my fornication philosophy.

"At the age of 16 I met the girl who would become my wife. It was love at first sight for both of us, and the combination of her beauty and her unselfish love kept me from diving headfirst into the sexual underworld.

"However, even though we enjoyed lovemaking with daily frequency at 16, my appetite only grew more and more insatiable. After a couple of years of marriage, I became obsessed with the need to act out the experiences that were so common in my reading. When those desires went unfulfilled, I turned to X-rated movies and films to supplement my magazine habit. My mind was so filled with these images that even when I was making love to my wife, my thoughts were continually flooded with other images.

"After a while I found myself occupying private booths in the X-rated movie arcades, vicariously participating in sexual acts that would never be fulfilled at home. I began putting enormous pressure on my wife to grow with me sexually or I would leave her. I also had several hundred magazine mistresses along with regular trips to the video arcades just to keep my interest up. But nothing satisfied me sexually. Nothing.

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"About a year after our first child was born and after several divorce threats, I read a book that led me to Jesus. I genuinely wanted to clean up my act, but I knew that after 20 years of addiction I couldn't go cold turkey. But I figured if God wanted me to, He would provide me with the strength eventually, and He began to soften my heart, opening my eyes to the wonderful gifts He had provided for me, my wife, and my child.

"After five years of prayer, I was given the strength to throw away my previously prized magazine collection. Over the next few years I was finally able to stop visiting the X-rated arcades and, ultimately, after 20 continuous years of habitual self-stimulation, I was able to stop. The Lord has now made our marriage what it was meant to be. Praise God for His miraculous work! He is faithful!"

Pornography has changed

This man worships regularly with us at Willow Creek Church. But isn't he the exception? Aren't we making too much hoopla over pornography? I have hundreds of concerns more pressing than taking *Playboy* out of the hands of those who buy it occasionally. Besides, I viewed some of those airbrushed centerfolds when I was in junior and senior high school, and it didn't ruin my life. I'm happily married, with two wonderful children. What's the big deal?

In the past few years, I have heard the cries of people claiming that pornography is proliferating and that we should do something about it. Area leaders even contacted me to help them close down the adult bookstores in our community. And all along I have found myself asking. **Why all the drama?**

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One of the rudest awakenings of my life came when I researched this subject. I had lunch with James Dobson shortly after he finished serving on the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography. He asked me what I was doing about the pornography problem.

"I'm intending to do a message on it in the fall," I said.

"How are you going to prepare for it?" he asked.

"I haven't really determined that yet."

He looked me in the eye and said, "Get yourself educated, young man, firsthand. Get educated and then just do as God leads from that point on."

So I did. And I confess that when I began my study, a little voice told me that this might even be interesting. After all, I'm as red-blooded as the next guy. But it wasn't interesting. It was disgusting, depressing, and filthy. Pornography has changed.

First, I got copies of pornographic magazines, and I found out that the kind I used to sneak peeks at in high school doesn't even exist anymore. I couldn't locate one magazine with partially clad women—the mild kind of pornography that was the standard 15 years ago.

Instead, I learned that today's mild form of pornography—the stuff we can buy in area convenience stores—contains photo layouts that defy the imagination, including pictures of women being bound and gagged, raped, whipped, and abused. Standard fare includes an array of multiple sexual partners in heterosexual, homosexual, and lesbian photo poses. The underlying theme is usually domination or violence.

The rougher magazines depict scenes of gang rape, torture, and bestiality. Some of the most popular magazines show men and women having sexual relations with children ranging in age from three to eight years. I was appalled and outraged.

Next, I had my assistant rent some adult videos. I saw a steady stream of sexual perversion, including fathers having sex with daughters, sons with mothers, siblings with each other, adults with children, and children with children.

And then I learned about the seedier side of the pornography industry—the adult bookstores. There are more adult bookstores in this country than there are McDonald's—20,000. They sell sex magazines and sexual paraphernalia, but their major attraction is the film booth. A police officer in my church infiltrated these bookstores and told me things not fit to print.

No, pornography isn't anything like it was 15 years ago. But what concerns me most is the damage it does to the people who get caught up in it.

When we indulge our sexual appetites and begin viewing explicit videos, movies, and magazines, we find that pornography is addicting. It makes us want more, more, more. And like alcohol and drugs, pornography shatters lives. This week I received a letter from someone in my church who is struggling with this addiction. He wrote:

"I am an emotional invalid. My addiction to pornography paralyzes my spiritual life, perverts my view of the world, distorts my social life, and destroys any possibility of God using me, and I just can't stop. Lust eats me up, yet it doesn't satisfy. Pornography promises me everything; it produces nothing."

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Some time ago, I tried to help a woman whose husband was addicted to pornography. She brought in a phone bill of more than $300—he was making 20 to 30 dial-a-porn calls a night. He also had a stack of magazines four feet high and boxes full of pornographic films.

Those of us who have never been addicted to anything will never understand the intensity of desire that an addict feels. But we must be as understanding and as compassionate as we can be, because people who matter to God and who sit next to us in church have unintentionally crossed that invisible line. They are enslaved to a pattern of life that leads to heartache and ruin, and they don't know how to stop.

Degrading to women

Showing women being seduced, stripped, and handled like farm animals is a hideous assault on their dignity. Jesus elevated the role and dignity of women. So Christians are disgusted when a women's dignity is assaulted in pornographic material.

But I'm even more concerned about pornography's subtle assault on the nature and character of women. Pornography depicts women as having an insatiable appetite for sex. If there is a common thread that ties pornographic content together, it is the continual emphasis, made in dozens of ways, that even though women indicate they are not interested in a man's sexual advances, really they are.

I have a beautiful wife and a vivacious 10-year-old daughter, and I'm living with the keen awareness that there are thousands of men in our community who are addicted to pornography, who are wandering around in public places, convinced that all women are craving sex all day. If a woman resists, she really wants him to overpower her and take her forcibly.

That's a lie from the pit of hell. And pornography feeds men those lies in living color with music in the background. But rape is no glamorized production. Rape wounds a woman as deeply as anything can.

I know that many married couples in my church routinely view adult videos to add some spice to their sexual lives. Initially, viewing pornography may excite and stimulate marriage partners. But it's not the initial results I'm concerned about.

I counseled with a woman recently who is a leader in her church. Her husband is an elder. The two of them began using pornography as a marital stimulus some years ago. She came to see me because her marriage is in a shambles.

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God designed marital sexuality to flow out of the context of a living and intimate relationship where nurturing, communication, serving, and tenderness go on. When those values are cultivated in a marriage, they arouse sexual interest. Sexual intercourse then becomes an expression of caring, of loving, a way of saying, "You matter to me. I love you and I want to communicate that to you tenderly."

Pornography short-circuits all of that. It reduces the sexual dimension of marriage to a biologically induced athletic event, and eventually there is no longer much emphasis on the loving part of marriage. Once that is drained out of a relationship, the heart and soul of marital sexuality is gone. The woman starts feeling used and abused, and the man starts feeling frustrated and empty.

A women told me, "My husband and I can't have a sexual experience without pornography to get us started. But then we feel filthy and guilty and empty."

Devastating to children

Pornography inevitably falls into the hands of children and often leads to misguided sexual experimentation. The results are shattering.

One woman said she has spent the past 20 years trying to recover from damage caused by her brother. He began viewing pornography as a 12-year-old and didn't know where to focus his sexual excitement, so he used his 10-year-old sister.

Anybody who says, "I can experiment and handle it," should know that this stuff is highly addictive.

If pornography distorts the sexual perspective of adults, think what it must do to children who are incapable of making wise decisions about simple things, let alone something as complex as human sexuality.

Children become victims of pornography in another way. They fall prey to adults whose use of pornography has awakened in them a sickening interest in the sexual exploitation of children. A man from my church, in an unsigned letter, admitted that he is addicted to pornography and that he made advances toward a 12-year-old girl.

A group on the West Coast has this motto: "Sex before eight, before it's too late." Books on the market give explicit instructions to child molesters, describing in detail how to seduce children.

Producers and merchants of pornography are focusing their marketing strategy for the next wave of explicit materials on children between 12 and 17. Who's going to stop them?

Husbands who are toying with pornography need to admit their