

**BEYOND PORNOGRAPHY:
SPIRITUAL FORMATION STUDIED IN A PARTICULAR CASE**

I decided to discuss the use of pornography [(porne = prostitute) + (graphy = drawing)] because (1) it presents us with a peculiarly vivid case of spiritual formation and possible spiritual **trans**formation, and (2) it is such a wide spread problem for people today, and also among Christians and those in ministry—and, moreover, a problem which generates a lot of hopelessness in those involved.

What is pornography? It consists of writings, drawings, images and pictures for use in arousing sexual desire, and frequently in stimulating the body to achieve sexual discharge or release. It is on a continuum with viewing actual people around you in order to stimulate, foster and cultivate lust, which Jesus warned against in Matt. 5:28. The production of pornography and its use involves the degradation of human beings and cannot be an act of love, which wills the good of all involved.

The use of pornography is rooted in the fundamental role of **desire** in human life. Desire, on the biblical understanding, is not in itself bad, but it is dangerous because it has the tendency to take over one's life. Desire must be subordinated to what is good, and it is the role of the **will** to see to it that it (desire) is subordinated to what is good. But the will can do this only if it understands what is good and is strongly oriented toward it. This is definitely not the case with those unaligned with God. In them **the will falls captive to desire: they live to do what they want.** Their condition is repeatedly addressed in the scriptures.

The general condition of fallen humanity is carefully laid out by Paul in Ephesians 4:17-19 and Romans 7:15-23. The will is, in the fallen personality, enslaved by desire, and so "I am doing the very thing I hate." (vs. 15) This is a precise picture of the person in some degree of bondage to pornography.

We really must pay attention to desire ("lust," "longing," επιθυμία) if we are to understand spiritual formation. The primary role of desire in human life is to impel us to action. If action were solely under the direction of thought, we would never survive infancy, and life would be an intolerable burden in which much that is good would not be realized. Lusting itself gives pleasure, because it **thrusts us** in a direction and **makes us feel alive**. We are "moved," hence we speak of "passion." Thus we get pleasure from desiring itself, and we desire to desire. The gratification of desire gives us a sense of completeness and power—for a moment or so. A depressed person is typically one who has little or no desire and "doesn't want any thing."

Thus we do many things just to excite desire. Flirting (of various kinds) and titillation are major parts of life in fallen humanity. Temptation to sin is exciting because it plays with desire. Sports provide interesting cases where one **chooses** to desire things of no significance whatsoever: crossing a line with a funny shaped "ball" in your hand, or seeing someone else do it, for example. Drugs, food, work, and violence also brings

feelings that give a sense of being alive. Pornography is **only one** of many ways in which the will can be enslaved. It can be enslaved to getting what one wants, looking good, or dominating others. Many are enslaved to simple rebelliousness: the will enslaved by the will. Thus John says that there are three things that are in the world: The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life.” (I John 2:16)

Now you may know of my “VIM” formula for personal and spiritual growth. (See chapter 5 of *Renovation of the Heart*.) That is, spiritual **trans**formation into Christlikeness results from getting the right **Vision** of reality and goodness, the right **Intention** and decision (to actually become like Christ), and adequate **Means** to carry out the intention. In fact, however, everyone has had a spiritual formation—including those involved with pornography, or gluttony, or...—and it incorporates **a** VIM. “VIM” is the key to understanding whatever condition one is in. What is the “VIM” of the person engaging with pornography? Or wedded to work?

Involvement with pornography is not an ultimate, undefinable fact that simply falls upon a person and there it is. It is rooted in a VIM. **If you want to get out of such involvement, you work on replacing the VIM that put you there and holds you there with a godly VIM oriented to what it is good to desire.** That is something you can do. God will help you, but he will not do it for you.

So what is the “V” of pornography use? It is a vision of women (for simplicity sake) as something to be used to stimulate and/or gratify sexual feeling and desire. That is what they are here for. Usually this is accompanied by contempt for women, which makes it easier to treat them as “sex objects.” In most cases this will be accompanied by a vision of one’s own body as a source of and means to pleasure. It may be that this is prior in time, in child development, to the pornographic view of women. These foundations of pornographic involvement easily develop further into various forms of perversion, as one pursues sexual stimulation and satisfaction. This prurient “V” must be replaced by a vision of women and of oneself as creatures of God for his blessing, walking the hard path of life where they suffer afflictions and death, but by nature made for an eternity with God or under God. A similar change has to be made in the vision of oneself.

The pornographic “I” is the intent and decision to use sexual sensuality as a major source of gratification. Often this is supported by the view of oneself as deprived or hopelessly burdened. In fact, it is rooted in a Vision of God and of God’s world as a place of bitter disappointment where humans must “go for” what is available and somehow endure the rest. Thus **the wrong vision of God lies at the foundation of pornographic practice.** Needless to say, a right view of God and God’s world would of itself break the grip of a life of sexual sensuality. The work to be done here should be obvious: the transforming of the mind by the truth about God and his world. But one also has to come to grips with the fact that **they do intend and decide to use pornography** (food, violence, whatever). Then the intention and decision not to use it must be formed. That will not be possible until the Vision element is transformed along the lines suggested. But then the correct intention and decision can be formed. It is possible to deceive oneself about what one **really does** intend, so one must be very careful and

searching and honest in dealing with what one does and does not intend: what they have and have not decided to do. The fact is that people engaged with the use of pornography have decided to be there and have not decided not to be there. But “will power” alone will not solve the problem. The Vision must be right and appropriate Means will have to be employed to extricate oneself from pornographic use.

Now among the primary Means to deliverance is taking care to see pornography in all of its dimensions for what it really is. For many people, just to see the terrible degradation of others and oneself involved in pornography will strongly bolster their will to have no involvement with it. This is important. It is an application of the general truth that temptation of all kinds is defeated by “broadening the view” and looking at the solicitation in the larger context of life and of God. ***Desire overpowers the will primarily by obsessing the mind.*** What many think they experience as inevitability depends entirely upon their failure to see things as they really are. Will (human “spirit”) in its very nature seeks alternatives and the best of alternatives. But when the person has conceded desire the right to rule, desire blinds the mind and appears to give the will no alternatives. (I have *got* to have that donut, see that picture, etc.)

But other Means must be employed in most cases. Two of the most useful are: openness to others and resolute avoidance of situations in which pornography can be indulged. As for openness, this may involve confession (to appropriate persons in appropriate ways), sharing with others in the same difficulty, a “buddy” (accountability) system with a small group of others (not all necessarily in the same difficulty) that allows you to meet and discuss regularly and to call on others for prayer and support in the hard times. Another measure that can be taken here is to kneel down publically and pray out loud for deliverance from your temptation. Perhaps “in church.” (St. Benedict threw himself into a briar patch upon the occasion of salacious thoughts, and it seems to have done wonders for him.) Now at this point one might say: Are you serious? My answer would be: Are you?

With respect to “resolute avoidance,” make sure that pornography is not within your reach. Get rid of it, and when tempted to replace it resort to the helps mentioned in the previous paragraph. Someone will say: “I just can’t do that.” But anyone who says that has not decided to break the involvement, or still has the poisonous vision, or probably both. You cannot do the work at the “Means” level that must be done at the “Vision” and the “Intention” level. And if you do not do the prior works, Means will certainly fail to help you. Of course you can get rid of pornography, and you can avoid replacing it. It’s not like fighting gravity. You are in a process of breaking habits that possess all dimensions of your being: will, thought, feeling, social context and soul. It will impose some serious difficulties. But you can do it, and you will be aided if you are practicing a sensible schedule of spiritual disciplines—solitude, silence, study, fasting, worship, etc.—that are not focused upon the avoidance of pornography, but upon the healthy fulfillment of your life under God in the dramatic goodness of God’s world with others you love and serve. ***Pornography involvement is a sure indicator of the impoverishment of life.*** (Remember Philipians 4:8.)

Jesus promised that “whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become a well of water springing up to eternal life.” (John 4:14; cp. 6:35) By “thirst” I believe he refers to unsatisfied desire and its ravages upon people, such as the poor woman by the well to whom he spoke. With reference to pornography or other enslaving fascinations, we are not talking about repressing desire or denying its reality. We are talking here about not having the desire. The person who would change must desire to not have the desires they now have, and be willing to do the things on the VIM pattern that will eliminate the desire or render it of no influence. Although there may well be cases where medical treatment, specialized counseling, or deliverance ministries are required, most people involved with the use of pornography have not come to the place where they desire not to desire it. For whatever reasons, they think it is too important to them and that they would be “missing out” if they did not have the desire for it. That concession traps them into continued use.

Anyone who follows the path of VIM outlined above will receive Divine and other assistance to step out of involvement with pornography. What that means is that when something like the occasion to indulge in pornography presents itself to them, their first thought will be: **Why would anyone want to be involved with that?**

What we have said here in relation to pornography can be generalized, with appropriate modifications, to apply to all issues of spiritual transformation into Christlikeness, both negative and positive. The field of Christian Spiritual Formation is an area of reality that lends itself to knowledge and to practice governed by knowledge. One certainly understands this from reading the Bible, and especially passages such as Colossians 3 and 2nd Peter 1:2-11. That field is a field of play for grace, the actions of the Holy Spirit, and all of the instrumentalities of the Kingdom of God. But it also requires well-directed effort on the part of human beings. “Add to your faith virtue, and to your virtue knowledge...” (2nd Peter 1:5)

Dallas Willard
University of Southern California