



Is Viewing Pornography Adultery?

A Position Statement

NOTE: This Position Statement is intended to be included as an Appendix to the existing Position Statement on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage.

Adopted by the Elders on October 11, 2012
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Preamble

At Providence Baptist Church, the elders and pastors recognize that the Bible is the very word of the living God to us, His people. We understand the priority of knowing and obeying biblical truths. For this reason, Providence's elders and pastors are deeply committed to studying and teaching Scripture with diligence and authority. Providence's Statement of Faith is taken from a detailed look at the Bible, and the first two of the church's twelve core values embrace "the centrality of Jesus Christ" and "the inerrancy of the Bible."

In today's culture, pornography viewing and usage is sadly very prevalent and common place in lives of many men and women in the community and also in the church. This position statement addresses the question of whether pornography viewing is considered adultery, and therefore possible grounds for divorce. The Scriptures permit divorce for only two reasons: 1) fornication – Matthew 5:32, 19:9 (covers a variety of sexual sins including adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest) and 2) abandonment – 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 (when a non-believing spouse decides to leave the marriage relationship with a Christian).

This statement presents the agreed upon position of the elders and pastors of Providence Baptist Church. We realize that there are differing interpretations of Scripture regarding what constitutes adultery among Christians equally committed to the authority of God's Word. We have considered the most prevailing interpretations of Scripture in this area and we have agreed that the position stated herein represents a minimum standard from which we will not support a less restrictive position to be taken in our church. Although, based upon an individual's convictions before the Lord on these matters, we would respect those who have a more restrictive position as their personal conviction.

The purpose of this position statement is to provide a guide to our congregation, staff, and leaders regarding the issue of pornography use as it impacts the covenant of marriage. It is our

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prayer that this information would be an encouragement and challenge for those with any engagement with pornography to seek help and turn from this devastating addiction that so wars against healthy lives and the sanctity of marriage. We also pray that divorce, for any reason, within the Providence congregation would cease, and that the sanctity of marriage would capture the hearts of church members to the point that they would pray for and encourage one another to pursue healthy, growing marriage relationships.

The Issue

Is willful exposure to pornography a Biblically permitted basis for divorce?

First, it may be helpful to define what is meant by or included with the term “pornography.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines pornography as “the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement; or the depiction of acts in a sensational manner so as to arouse a quick intense emotional reaction.” Such depiction is generally of nudity or other erotic behavior. According to the web-based encyclopedia, Wikipedia, pornography is “the explicit portrayal of sexual subject matter. Pornography may use a variety of media, including books, magazines, postcards, photos, sculpture, drawing, painting, animation, sound recording, film, video, and video games. The term applies to the depiction of the [*erotic*] act rather than the act itself ... so as to arouse quick intense reactions.” The usage of pornographic materials afflicts both men and women in significant numbers.

For pornography use to be considered a Biblically permitted basis for divorce, it would need to fall under the meaning of “fornication” by which it most often would be viewed as an act of “Adultery”. In considering the question of willful exposure to pornography being a Biblically permitted basis for divorce, two primary passages of Scripture require consideration: Matthew 19:9 and Matthew 5:28-32.

Examination of Relevant Scriptures

Matthew 19:9

In the first 9 verses of Matthew 19, Jesus is addressing the matter of divorce by correcting the spiritual leaders of Israel regarding their interpretation of the laws Moses recorded in

Deuteronomy 24 – specifically verse 1. Deuteronomy 24:1 states: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house”. The Pharisees based their position on the phrase “some indecency” or “something improper” as grounds for dismissing a wife from a marriage with a “divorce certificate.” While the Jewish rabbi’s differed in their understanding of this passage a prevalent view was that a husband could dismiss his wife with a divorce certificate for virtually any reason. As they often did, in this passage the Jewish leaders publically questioned Jesus so as to find out how he opposed Moses’ authority in order to discredit him in the eyes of the Jewish people.

In responding, Jesus states in Matthew 19:9: “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (ESV). In this verse, Jesus indicated that there was only one exception (“pornea” translated as “sexual immorality”) and not a long list of things that can nullify the permanency of the marriage relationship. Jesus thus indicated that Israel’s spiritual leaders were in error in understanding Moses to have implied that a man could divorce his wife for any reason.

Based on an initial read of Matthew 19:9, it might appear that the use of pornography could fall under the category of “sexual immorality” which could then allow for a biblical divorce. The issue with this text is the meaning of the Greek word “pornea,” typically translated as “sexual immorality” or “fornication” in the exception clause. While the lexical definition of “pornea” is, “sexual intercourse performed outside the bonds of marriage” (Eerdman’s Bible Dictionary, page 391), an interpretation problem can arise because the Greek word “pornea” can be transliterated into English as “porn” or “pornography.” Based on these English words (porn or pornography), a case for divorce on the basis of pornography might then be attempted.

The question to be answered then is whether “sexual immorality” in this passage includes pornography as experienced in today’s culture. The conclusion drawn will need to consider not a transliteration but an actual translation required by the lexical usage of the Greek word “pornea” and its use in a variety of New Testament passages.

To interpret a Greek word with a definition derived from English usage would lead to an illegitimate conclusion. For example, 2 Corinthians 9:7 states that “God loves a cheerful giver.” The Greek word translated “cheerful” is “hilaros” which can be rendered in English as “hilarious.” Unfortunately, the English word “hilarious” gives us no legitimate help in understanding what Paul had in mind as he addressed the subject of giving in this verse with the Christians in Corinth. Therefore, our interpretation of the passage would be erroneous if the transliterated English word was used to define the Greek word used in the text. A similar inappropriate interpretation would result from trying to understand what Luke had in mind by his use of the word “power” in Acts 1:8 if we use the transliterated English word “dynamite” to render the Greek word “dynamis.” The Acts 1:8 verse states: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...”. D. A. Carson discusses these passages and a number of others “semantic anachronisms”, in his book, Exegetical Fallacies (pages 33-35). Therefore, it is essential to use appropriate translation, not transliteration, of the Greek words of the New Testament to properly understand God’s message of these Scriptures.

In Matthew 19:9, the word used by Jesus, “pornea”, translated “sexual immorality, fornication,” is a word that addresses a range of forbidden sexual behaviors including sexual unfaithfulness to a mate (adultery), homosexual sex, incest, prostitution, sex among singles (fornication), temple prostitution, and sexual intercourse with a divorced woman or man. Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 addresses and censures a situation in Corinth that concerned a man who was sexually immoral (“pornea”) with his stepmother. Thus, “pornea” (sexual immorality) could refer to any illicit sexual intercourse. When used in the context of a marriage it is adultery. “Pornea” is best understood as an act or acts of physical sexual immorality or infidelity outside of the marital relationship. Such violation would indicate that the sexually immoral married person has willfully abandoned their marriage covenant. This is the behavior that Jesus said was the only behavior that permitted a divorce to occur.

Viewing pornography is not the physical sexual behavior envisioned in the 24 passages that use “pornea” which is translated as “sexual immorality.” Thus, pornography usage, as experienced today, is not the “pornea” stated in Matthew 19:9.

However, the willful viewing of pornography is most definitely sinful and, in the context of marriage, is a violation of the trust essential to a healthy marriage. This practice is demeaning to the spouse and family and destructive personally and relationally. It should be repented of, forgiveness sought, and sexual purity pursued. The nature of pornography usage is so pervasive and insidious that, in time, adultery as expressed in “pornea” may well occur. When it does, a physical relationship will have been initiated. According to Jesus, the party in the marriage against whom this adultery was committed is permitted to divorce.

Matthew 5:27-32

In the Matthew 5 passage, Jesus is seeking to illustrate the universal sinfulness of mankind in a variety of ways to help every person understand that they indeed are a sinner, and in need of a Savior. In the “Sermon on the Mount,” which is the context of the Matthew 5 passage, Jesus gives six examples that contrast what the Jewish spiritual leaders were teaching their people with His teaching that calls them to committed, heart-based discipleship. Each of the six subjects addressed has a single purpose and needs to be interpreted in similar ways. At the time of Jesus’ teaching, the Jewish religious leaders were notorious for giving too much emphasis to the externals or outward appearances to the neglect of the inward thoughts of the heart. So the issue for Jesus, in each of these six cases, is not the external letter of the Law but what begins in the heart long before it is expressed in overt behavior.

For example in Matthew 5:21-26, anger is the focus: ²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” (ESV)

In this passage, Jesus' purpose is not equating anger to murder or addressing anger in terms of the Law's prescribed death penalty for murder. Instead, He is addressing the heart attitude as the environment where anger surfaces and needs to be addressed at its roots.

One of the six examples that Jesus uses in Matthew 5 is the subject of lust in verses 27-30:

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” (ESV)

What is the correlation that Jesus is drawing in this passage between “lust” and “adultery?” Is willful exposure to pornography a form of adultery since willful exposure to pornography necessarily includes lust?

The Jewish leaders again emphasized the external behavior (“...Do not commit adultery....”) whereas Jesus was concerned about what was actually going on in a person's heart. As with His address of anger, Jesus here is not equating lust to adultery. But He taught that “lust” or “seeing a woman with a view to desire her” indicated that “adultery” had been committed in the heart when a man's heart is intentionally desirous of pursuing a sexual relationship with someone beside their wife. Translators often bring this out in interpreting Matthew 5:28: “anyone who looks at a woman and wants to possess her” (TEV); or “if anyone looks at a woman and wants to sin sexually with her, in his mind” (NCV). It is the mental contemplation of desiring and pursuing a sexual relationship with another person other than your wife that is Jesus' concern – to show this to be as sinful as an act of physical adultery.

This concern harmonizes with the New Testament emphasis of the heart as the origin of what appears in a person's behavior as noted in Matthew 15:18-20: ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what

defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.” James 1:14-15 also describes this promulgation process of sin growing from thought into action by using the analogy of pregnancy (a progression from conception to birth).

Jesus’ purpose in these examples was to show that no one can be called righteous, even those who are not guilty of murder or adultery. But that our hearts are thoroughly polluted with sin; even our thoughts make us guilty. Therefore, all are guilty before God and all need His grace.

The seriousness of this “heart adultery” (lust as defined above) as a precursor to physical adultery is given by Jesus as a hyperbole or intentional exaggeration to make a point (vs. 29-30). The implication is to do whatever is necessary to deal with your heart so that an adulterous physical act does not follow. It is instructive that Jesus solution to this “heart adultery” is not divorce but a serious, radical pursuit of sexual purity.

The “heart adultery” of Matthew 5:28 is no more equating it to physical adultery than Jesus’ discourse of plucking out the eye or cutting off the hand that causes a person to stumble. “Heart adultery” does not involve the physical act of adultery, for it takes place in the heart (the mind and emotions), not the body. The adultery committed in Matthew 5:28 is figurative, not real or physical, yet nevertheless is a sin, an offense to God – and that is Jesus point.

This leads us to conclude that even though there is sinful lust taking place in pornography use, the Bible does not equate it with actual physical adultery.

In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus addresses the matter of divorce in very similar manner in which He does in Matthew 19:9 by stating: ³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Therefore, the explanation for these verses are essentially as described in the section on Matthew 19 above.

Practical Considerations

Not only does sound biblical interpretation guide us to that conclusion, but the practicality involved in applying this biblical standard supports it. If “heart adultery” were allowed to stand as a biblical basis for divorce, what would be the deciding factor that would determine that actual adultery has been committed? How will a person know, for certain, that he or she has a biblical right to divorce his or her spouse?

“Heart adultery” as a basis for divorce is too subjective. First of all, such a standard puts the husband or wife in the inappropriate and impossible position of “searching the heart” of his or her spouse. Scripture is clear that only God has the power to search a person’s heart and know exactly what it contains. But also, even the observation of actions that might indicate “heart adultery” would offer only subjective standards by which to judge. For example, suppose you catch your spouse looking at a pornographic web site or magazine just one time, would you then feel justified to divorce him? No? How about twice, maybe three times, or four? Suppose you catch him or her flirting with another, will you then file for divorce? Maybe him watching a sensual TV show or browsing a women’s lingerie catalog will be enough to provide just cause. Such examples demonstrate that mental or “heart adultery” as a cause for divorce is left up to the flawed choice and opinion of the individual, rather than the authority of Scripture. Such a standard would be based not on the Word of God, but on the degree of emotional hurt of an offended spouse.

In addition, observation indicates that in the initial stages of exposure to pornography, married men are typically not pursuing a physical, sexual relationship with another person. They are seeking to address personal, emotional pain or confusion in sinful and trust violating ways. Therefore, the viewing of pornography in this stage would not be a permissible basis to divorce. The difficult issue here is the progressive heart to an overt behavior path. The spectrum of viewing pornography- from the occasional, curious, “soft” variety to the compulsive, addictive, increasingly risky and even illegal variety is a sinful, one-way, descending path to personal and relational destruction ending in physical unfaithfulness. The lifestyle of deception and violation of trust that emerges from continued pornography usage moves increasingly along this demeaning spectrum in the heart toward physical sexual immorality or adultery. At that point the

“exception clause” Jesus mentioned becomes the basis for a Biblically permissible divorce but, never a necessary one.

Conclusions

The use of pornography in our culture and sadly in the church today is prevalent. It is sinful and the church should stand strongly against it by offering teaching and resources to combat it, as well as help to promote healing from its detrimental impacts on individuals, marriages and families. While there is no question that the use of pornography is demeaning and devastating, an appropriate evaluation of the Biblical passages that speak to grounds for divorce by adultery reveals that pornography usage does not come under the Biblical standard of adultery given for divorce. A proper translation of the Greek word “pornea” reveals that Jesus’ exception to the permanency of marriage involves physical sexual intercourse with someone outside the marriage. Based on these considerations, lust or the “seeing a woman with a view to desire her” (literal rendering of the Greek text), which is involved in the viewing of pornography does result in “heart adultery” but this is not grounds for divorce that physical adultery (pornea) is. Pornography usage encompasses a wide range of attitudes and behaviors which if persisted over time may involve physical, sexual contact with another person and thus rise to the level of adultery addressed by Jesus in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. However, mental or “heart adultery” through the viewing of pornography is not a biblical bases for divorce.

Application

Pastoral implications: Pastoral / Elder intervention should be initiated as early as possible after the discovery and reporting of a believer’s willful pursuit of pornography. Where the individual presents himself or herself on the spectrum described above would shape the intervention plan. The goal is to encourage repentance, the seeking and granting of forgiveness, encouraging and equipping the sinful party for the pursuit of purity and faithfulness, and coming alongside of the offended party with whatever encouragement and resources are needed for healing and restoration of trust. This process may require various resources, such as teaching, counseling, accountability, and ministries focused on addiction recovery and healing for wounds of rejection and other such issues.

If a spouse is truly repentant of pornography usage (see Psalm 51), meaning he or she is willing to take full responsibility for the sins committed, if (s)he is willing to humble himself by submitting to his spiritual leaders and get the help that he needs, there is absolutely no reason why this couple should file for a divorce—especially if they are both professing Christians. For the essential message of the gospel is a message of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. However, they will need the help of the church and its ministries over a course of time for recovery.

If a spouse is engaged in pornography and does not exhibit a repentant heart by turning from the practice, by taking steps to safeguard themselves from that activity and by taking full responsibility for the sins committed, then they should be confronted and counseled by the Elders and Pastors. Such disregard for the effects of sin are subject to church discipline for willfully refusing to turn from blatant sinful activity and rejecting the counsel of God's Word to abstain from such actions. Ephesians 5:3-5 and Colossians 3:5-6, as examples, are both passages that implore us to turn from such sins as sexual immorality ("pornea" as described above), but also sins of sexual impurity, covetousness, idolatry, evil desires, and worldly ways that result from the usage of pornography. The church discipline procedure is described in Providence Baptist Church's statement on Church Discipline Guidelines which follows Matthew 18:15-18. While this discipline process, if taken to the full extent, would result in the offender being removed from church membership and treated as an unbeliever, the desire and efforts that motivate the process would seek to result in the offender turning from their sin and being restored in vibrant relationship with Christ and their family.

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