

# The lamp of the body

## A sermon on Internet pornography

Andrew Kreider

**I**t is notoriously difficult to say exactly what pornography is. The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as sexually explicit pictures, writing, or other material whose primary purpose is to cause sexual arousal; it is also the presentation or production of this material. Back in 1964, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart gave up the attempt at precise definition and said of obscene material, “I know it when I see it.” Now we’re discovering that the Internet is giving a lot of people a lot of opportunities to recognize pornography when they see it.

### Pornography statistics

Some facts that I’ve gathered from reports or studies this week:

Pornography is a \$57-billion industry worldwide. The U.S. is the

**“Isn’t a little pornog-  
raphy okay? It’s not  
a big deal. Especi-  
ally if it means I’m  
not *really* cheating  
on my spouse—just  
looking at pictures.”  
I think Jesus would  
say *pornography is a  
big deal; your eye is  
the lamp of your body.***

primary producer and consumer of pornogra-  
phy. There are 4.2 million pornographic Web  
sites. Forty million Americans regularly view  
Internet pornography at home or at work. At  
least three times as many men as women view  
pornography. Ninety percent of eight- to  
sixteen-year-olds in the U.S. have viewed  
pornography online, usually while doing  
research or homework on the computer.

According to surveys, trends among  
Christians parallel those in the rest of society.

A couple of years ago, 50 percent of clergy  
responding to a pastors.com survey admitted to having accessed  
porn in the past year. Forty-seven percent of Christians who  
responded to another survey said that pornography was a problem  
in their home. Within a week of a major Promise Keepers gather-  
ing, 50 percent of the men who had attended reported that they  
had gone to pornographic Web sites.

Now I hear these statistics and I immediately want to argue. I can't imagine that these numbers would apply to our churches. Can you? One Colorado pastor said he couldn't believe these statistics would be accurate for his congregation. The men in his church are successful; they are hard working; they have families; they help with the congregation's ministries. He said, "I wanted to prove this wrong, so I went to the leadership of my congregation. I said, 'Let me do a survey of the men in my church.'" Of those who responded, 25 percent had looked at porn within the previous few days, 44 percent within six months, and 61 percent within the last year. The real statistic is probably higher; some men admitted they didn't fill out the survey because they were afraid about how the results would be used.

### **What we gaze on fills us**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples that "the eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matt. 6:22–23). Jesus is talking about the corrupting power of wealth here, but he could as easily be referring to anything in our life that wants to reach out and grab hold of us: that is the thing that we worship. Jesus is saying here that what we gaze on begins to fill us.

If you're looking at pornography, what's going in through your eyes is beginning to fill your being. "If the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" A bit earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his followers, "You have heard that it was said, 'You should not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27–28).

What goes through your eyes fills your heart. Jesus is really radical on this. He goes on, "If your right eye causes you to sin . . ." He doesn't say you should stop looking. What does he say you are supposed to do with your eye? "Tear it out!" He says it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. As I read this, I don't think Jesus is just talking about what will happen after we die; I think Jesus is talking about the hell we can build for ourselves and our families today.

And you can't start making exceptions. You can't say, "Isn't a little pornography okay? It's not such a big deal. Especially if it means I'm not *really* cheating on my spouse—just looking at a few pictures." I think Jesus would say pornography is a big deal; your eye is the lamp of your body.

### **A positive framework for talking about sex in church**

Mennonites have said little about pornography. One exception is a new (2008) pamphlet from Faith and Life Resources: "Close to Home: Dealing with Pornography." In addition I have heard about two occasions when Mennonites have talked about the subject, at the last two big Mennonite conventions in the U.S., at Charlotte (2005) and San Jose (2007). In Charlotte, the organization called Mennonite Women called on the denomination to wake up and look at this issue. Two years later at San Jose, Mennonite Women met with Mennonite Men in a joint session in which they talked about pornography. Then they had breakout

**If naming the issue of pornography can be a way we are drawn into a healthy conversation about sex in the church, then what is a scourge in our society could end up being a gift.**

sessions. The men and the women went to separate spaces to gather things they wanted to say to each other about pornography.

Then they came back together. The women said to the men: "We are devastated by our partners' use of porn and its damaging effect on our relationships. Women portrayed in porn are our sisters and we care about them. We want to be in solidarity with them. They are someone's wife, daughter, mother, sister." The men said: "We want women to

know how powerful and important sex is for us and how strong the sex drive can be. Male sexuality has become muted in our society. Sexual energy, even the positive kind, has come to be seen as bad or wrong. We want women to know that we want to reclaim our sexuality as a gift from God."

I am especially grateful for two things that happened at the 2007 gathering. First, Mennonites were willing to talk to each other about sexuality. They were willing to look at the questions raised by pornography and name them. And second, the conversation didn't end with finger pointing and condemnation; it pushed ahead to a call for a positive framework for talking about

sex in the church. We need to have a way of naming what is reality for men and for women. Instead of just talking about what's bad and wrong, we need to find positive ways of celebrating each other as male and female, of rejoicing in the gift of sexuality we've been given. If naming the issue of pornography can be one of the ways we are drawn into a healthy conversation about sex in the church, then what is a scourge in our society could end up being a gift.

### **Three proposals**

Now, I have three suggestions to make.

**Fill your eyes with good things.** Men and women, listen to Jesus telling us that our eyes are the lamps of our bodies. If you want to be filled with light, then think—gaze on—these things: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasant, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise” (Phil. 4:8). Don't put yourself in the position of looking at pornography. If you know it is a temptation for you, and even if you don't know it is an issue, get some filtering software for your computer. Consider getting software that will simply say, “I am not able to go to sites that can put me in harm's way.”

**Be accountable.** Talk to each other about this issue. If all this sermon does is encourage you to talk to one other person about the problem of pornography, we are getting somewhere. Especially if you know pornography is a temptation for you, find someone you can tell who can help hold you accountable. This week Katie and I were talking about this sermon, and she looked at me and said, “Andrew, do you do Internet porn?” We've been married eighteen years, and that is the first time she has ever asked me about whether I use pornography. I was able to say, “No, I don't do it, and after the work I've done this week, I really don't want to start.” Accountability is critical because of the kind of pull pornography has, the addictive quality. Talk to your spouse, to your housemates. Choose to make yourself accountable.

**Don't just turn to other people; turn to God.** Using pornography is not an unforgivable sin. This activity is not something that leaves you beyond hope. Bring it to God and ask other people to pray for you. Remember the encouragement in the book of James.

“The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (Jas. 5:15–16). The power for a changed life comes ultimately from God and from the cross.

Internet pornography is a big problem, and it is growing larger. I think this is a more serious issue for the Mennonite Church than homosexuality, or divorce, or most other hot-button issues, because Internet pornography is going to affect a lot of people in our pews, including some of us sitting in this room today. It is important for us to name the issue, to talk about it, and to use that conversation as an entry into a positive discussion of sexuality.

Let’s commit ourselves to one another. Let’s commit ourselves to Jesus. Let’s commit ourselves to having pure eyes that give light to the whole body.

## Notes

These online resources were helpful in shaping this sermon:

Mike Genung, “How Your Church Can Help Those Who Struggle with Porn or Sex Addiction,” <http://www.urbanministry.org/bg/howtodeal>.

Mike Genung, “How Many Porn Addicts Are in Your Church?” <http://www.crosswalk.com/1336107/>.

Brenda Martin Hurst, “A Call for an Impassioned Response to Pornography,” <http://www.emu.edu/seminary/features/response.html>.

Laurie Oswald Robinson, “Pornography: Candor and Pain,” <http://www.sanjose2007.org/mpress/thursday/pornography.html>.

Amy Frykholm, “Addictive Behavior: Pastors and Pornography,” *Christian Century*, September 4, 2007; <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3629>.

Triple X church: [www.xxxchurch.com](http://www.xxxchurch.com).

## About the author

Andrew Kreider is pastor of Prairie Street Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Indiana. This article is adapted from a sermon he preached there on June 15, 2008, as part of a series on healthy relationships. At the close of the service, he invited the men to gather at the front of the sanctuary. He handed out one-inch lengths of electrical wire, to remind them all of the power of sexuality, and of the need to stay grounded in God in order to avoid getting burned. Each man was to tell his family or friends about the wire and its significance, and tape it to his computer monitor as a reminder.