

Adventists and Sex: A Therapist's Perspective

by Alberta Mazat

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Deane Nelson is an assistant professor of church and ministry in the division of religion at Loma Linda University. He received his doctorate in the field of pastoral counseling.

Nelson: Alberta, I have in my hand your book entitled *That Friday in Eden* published by Pacific Press Publishing Association. What were you trying to say in this volume?

Mazat: I was trying to give people a feeling of joyousness about God's plan for their sexuality. In my counseling I had come across many people who weren't sure if sexuality was a perfectly good and holy

pursuit. They spent much time wondering if they were really fitting in with God's plan when they were having such a good time and enjoying their sexuality so much. That distressed me because I perceived from my own study that God meant sex to be a transcendently wonderful experience for husbands and wives. My hope was to get husbands and wives to talk, to loosen up so that they could enjoy what God had planned for them.

Nelson: I noticed that on the back cover you, or perhaps the editors, wrote: "Despite the bad press He has been getting, God is no Victorian prude."

Mazat: Exactly. After reading *Song of Solomon* many, many times, I formed the opinion that God did intend sexuality to be a gloriously sensual and erotic experience. You can't retain the impression of a quiet, passive experience when you get involved with the joyousness of Solomon and his bride. That is what I hoped to get across.

Nelson: You obviously wrote this for an Adventist audience. Why?

Mazat: I felt it was necessary to put the things that people were reading by Ellen White in proper perspective. People can read a book like Ed Wheat's *Intended for Pleasure* and then still ask, "But what about what Ellen White wrote?" I felt that people needed to get a new perspective on what she actually said.

Nelson: In one of your chapters you ask, “What went wrong?” What *did* go wrong?

Mazat: Early in Christian history we had a movement that divided things of the body from the things of the spirit, and one was seen as very good and the other as very debasing and very bad. Anything that had to do with bodily processes was immediately assigned to the evil column—so much so that one church father declared that the Holy Spirit had to leave the room when a husband and wife had intercourse even though they were doing it within the church’s requirement of allowing for procreation.

Nelson: This reflected the prevailing philosophy of dualism—the body being evil and the soul being good?

Mazat: Precisely. It must have been confusing to hear that one must have children and yet at the same time to feel that the act that produced children—which was God’s plan—was so vile and so horrible. There’s no doubt that some of this philosophy is still present today. Much closer to our own history is the experience of the Victorian Age—Ellen White’s own era—which believed that women should not enjoy sex. A woman who truly enjoyed sexuality was seen as loose and very ungentile. Men, of course, were not supposed to enjoy it any more than they had to either; women were instructed not to let men enjoy it any more than necessary. When you consider that these were our great-great-grandparents speaking, you know that such thinking can still be present today.

Nelson: Seventh-day Adventists have moved away from the dualistic thought that was present even among some of the churches of the Reformation. Obviously, this should affect the issues of sexuality and marriage. Is the Adventist Church making a contribution in this area?

Mazat: Not as effectively as it should, probably. Not as successfully as it should. But I have stopped being as paranoid about this as I used to be because I have counseled people from other denominations, and I’ve discovered that our feelings about sexuality

really aren’t very different from theirs. I have clients from a number of different faiths, and they have the same feeling that such joyousness must somehow be suspect.

Nelson: As I page through the book and look at some of the titles, the thought occurs to me that some might view your work as a Seventh-day Adventist sex manual. But, you were trying to do much more than that.

Mazat: Yes. I brought out the idea that there are three main aspects to sexuality. One of them is our attitude; the second is our knowledge; and the third is our commitment. I think our attitude is not only what we experience culturally, but the ideas that come to us from our church. Some, of course, come almost out of the air. As I travel around, I talk to people who tell me

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things that they know are in church writings that simply aren’t there. But they become myths, Seventh-day Adventist myths. The idea of knowledge is important too, not simply knowledge of what the sex act entails physically, but also knowledge of what makes it a better experience for both men and women emotionally. I really sense a need for such knowledge. It’s distressing to hear what goes on between some men and women in their sexual relationships: a poverty of freedom, and a poverty of creativity.

Nelson: Meaning that couples are rather rigid in their sexuality?

Mazat: Right! Many couples report that in all the years they’ve been married they’ve only made love in one position at one time of the day, doing the same things, in the same way, in the same order time after time.

Nelson: Almost as if God likes things done in decency and order!

Mazat: Well, you might say that, except that I don't see God as that rigid. I see him as extremely creative and extremely interested in variety. Because I can look out my window from here and see the variety of greens and leaves and trees and colors and textures, I can't believe that God wants us to express our sexual love in only one way.

Nelson: So love is dynamic? It's explosive? It's powerful?

Mazat: It's changing! It's creative! It's innovative!

Nelson: What about these Seventh-day Adventist myths regarding sex?

Mazat: Well, one of the myths of older Seventh-day Adventists particularly is that sex is for procreation only. The way God created us denies that idea because women can enjoy sexual expression long after they are no longer able to have children; in fact, some women enjoy sex even more when they don't have to worry about that anymore.

Another Seventh-day Adventist myth is that you shouldn't have sex on Sabbath. That comes up repeatedly. I had an interesting comment from a gentleman in one of my seminars. He said, "But the Bible says you're not supposed to do your own pleasure on the Sabbath day." I said, "Sir, if you're having sex only for *your* own pleasure, don't have it Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday either." That didn't suit him very well. It was a facetious answer, and wasn't exactly helpful, but I couldn't resist it.

Still another myth is that masturbation consists of husbands and wives touching each other genitally. Of course, that idea is certainly false because masturbation is a solitary pursuit. It has nothing to do with what a husband and wife do to please one another during the sex act.

Another myth probably would be that you don't tell your children about sexuality because it will get them too interested too soon. You might want to tell them about the birds and the bees, but don't start talking

about sex until they are ready to get married. Of course, that's far, far too late. Interestingly enough, statistics now show that it's usually the girls whose mothers and dads don't talk to them about sexuality who become not only promiscuous but frequently pregnant.

Nelson: Your book has been out about two years. What has been the response to it?

Mazat: It's really been very positive. I've had a number of people tell me that it's made a difference in their relationships. I haven't received any mail that was negative. Everything I've received said, "We're glad you wrote it and it's been helpful. It came too late for me, but I'm giving it to my children"—that kind of thing. I've been particularly pleased about the response from older people because we sometimes think that they're kind of dyed-in-the-wool and won't change. A number of older people have said, "Hey, this is a real revelation to us, and we wish we'd had the book sooner!"

Nelson: In your clinical experience and also in your speaking engagements, especially with Adventist audiences, what are some of the most common issues that are raised?

Mazat: The questions I hear over and over again concern masturbation, oral-genital sexual expression, having sex on Sabbath, and the questions of people who are concerned because they don't see sex as an expression of beauty: "How can I enjoy sex more? What can I do to like it better?"

Nelson: I understand that during the last couple of years you've prepared a number of papers for the Biblical Research Institute Committee of the General Conference (BRICOM) regarding sexual issues, especially for Adventists.

Mazat: That's right.

Nelson: Let's take, for example, the issue that you mentioned first: masturbation. What is the basic problem here?

Mazat: I think that people are confused because the Bible says nothing about masturbation, even though it does speak forthrightly about things that God has proscribed

sexually, while Ellen White seems to say quite a bit against it.

Nelson: This would be in her *Appeal to Mothers*?

Mazat: Yes, that type of thing. I spent a lot of time researching and thinking about it. When I discovered the virtual hysteria of her culture about masturbation, I concluded that she was probably not as extreme as a lot of the other people who were writing then. I find it difficult to use the word “masturbation” when I talk about what Ellen White says because she never uses that word. She uses the words “self-abuse,” “secret vice,” “pollution.” As I read everything she wrote, I was struck by the idea that she frequently refers to the mind when she is talking about the effects of masturbation. I then thought about the different types of masturbation I had encountered in my clinical experience. It seemed to me that in discussing masturbation we weren’t talking about one solitary thing; we were talking about many different expressions of sexual behavior. One of them might be a youngster who’s just learned that it feels good to rub in a certain way when he’s lying in bed with his pillow between his legs. Then another might be a young man who has just started dating. He’s got some values about how he wants to experience sexuality, but he’s really turned on. He comes home after a date, and he masturbates. And then there might be a man whose wife is pregnant, and the doctor has told her she has to stay in bed and can’t have sex for the eight months of her pregnancy so he masturbates occasionally. We have all kinds of things on this continuum of masturbation clear up to the person who is obsessed with masturbation, who masturbates six, eight, 10 times a day, of which there are cases. Some place along this continuum masturbation isn’t a good thing to be doing. In my research I found that this conclusion was corroborated by many resources. When masturbation becomes obsessive—when it keeps a person from social contacts, when it makes a loner out of him or her, so that all he or she wants to do is to masturbate—we

have a problem of some magnitude. Where on this continuum did Ellen White locate the problem? Is there a practice somewhere on that continuum that makes some of these things she warned about possible?

Nelson: But you’re not saying that what she said about masturbation in *Appeal to Mothers* is supported today by research?

Mazat: It is *not* supported today by research. But I’m not sure that we correctly understand what she was saying. Consider an adolescent who is obsessed with masturbation, who doesn’t even want to have any friends, who separates himself from others, who is so timid and shy and afraid that the only good feeling he can find in his world comes from masturbation. This practice might have some harmful physical effects due to his preoccupation, and as a result of his intense feelings of guilt.

Unless we educate for sexuality in a loving, forthright, caring way, we open the door for all kinds of problems.

Nelson: So you’re saying that she seems not to be talking about the whole spectrum of masturbation, and that we should not apply what she says to the whole spectrum of masturbatory activities?

Mazat: I don’t see how we can.

Nelson: According to your paper for BRICOM, if I remember correctly, there are certainly a lot of instances today where masturbation might be justifiable.

Mazat: Certainly understandable. I think I make the point in the paper, as I do in the book, that the ideal sexual relationship is between a man a woman in the committed love relationship in marriage. That’s the ideal. We don’t always meet the ideal. But far too many young people have actually given up their faith because they thought they couldn’t overcome this problem at

some point in their lives and so they said, "What's the use?"

Nelson: Feelings of guilt?

Mazat: Right. And helplessness and hopelessness.

Nelson: What is your advice for a problem like this? What about a young person who has tremendous feelings of guilt about masturbation but obviously doesn't want to go to a therapist. It's very hard for him or her to say, "Well, look it's okay."

Mazat: Here's the ideal. This is where God wants you to be. At some point in your life God's plan for you is to experience your sexuality in this setting, this symbolically beautiful setting. You're working toward that goal. Meanwhile, things are going to happen in your life. Perhaps you're not always going to be able to meet that goal. Rather than making masturbation seem like the worst possible thing in the whole world, we need to look at the goal and try to mature toward that ideal.

Nelson: If one has to err in this matter, would it not be better to err on the side of love and concern?

Mazat: Certainly. Parents who worry about a child masturbating need to look at their own relationship with the child. They need to see what they can do to establish a good relationship with the child so that he or she can make good social contacts. They should become a part of the child's world and consider what they can do to make him or her feel more comfortable, more loved, more accepted, and have more self-esteem.

Nelson: You mentioned oral-genital sex as another question. I understand you also did a paper for BRICOM on that. What basically did you say?

Mazat: Whenever a number of people have a question, we need to explore it and we need to have some guidelines for thinking about it. This is what I tried to provide—some way of thinking about oral-genital sex in their own experience, what it means to them, what their feelings are about it. Again we notice this dichotomy where the mind is good and the body is bad and some parts of

the body are even worse than others. Couples should understand why they are interested in oral-genital sex, what they hope to gain from it, and their feelings of comfortableness with that expression. I am always deeply concerned when a couple comes to me and one of them is demanding oral-genital expression and the other angrily refuses. That really isn't a sexual problem at all; it's a power problem. They need to work through the *real* problem. I think that if a husband and wife enjoy one another's bodies entirely, and they both feel very comfortable and very free about stimulating one another entirely, they should be able to feel good about that.

Nelson: Recognizing that we don't have good solid data on Adventist sexuality, from your own clinical experience is this a particularly popular or common practice in our denomination? Could you hazard an educated guess at the prevalence of oral-genital sex in the Adventist Church?

Mazat: I think it's quite prevalent. I would probably guess, and of course this is only a guess, that well over half the Seventh-day Adventists engage in this expression. I think that it's more common among younger people than older people, although not exclusively. Some older people enjoy the pleasure of touching and kissing the whole bodies of their partners.

Nelson: You don't see any particular medical problems associated with this?

Mazat: No. There appears to be no medical problem associated with oral-genital sex that anybody has been able to demonstrate. Of course, we're talking about two healthy people. Someone who has an infection should use restraint whether it's oral-genital kissing or mouth-to-mouth kissing.

Nelson: You also emphasize that from a wholistic view of the body and of the individual, there's no part that is somehow evil.

Mazat: No, no part defiled. If we come back to the hygienic aspect of it, the oral cavity probably produces more disease

micro-organisms than the genital-urinary system.

Nelson: You're certainly not talking about anal sex.

Mazat: No. There is a distinction. When I read my paper at BRICOM I discovered that that was a question in the minds of some. When I make the final draft, I'll have to be very sure I indicate what oral-genital sex is *not*—and that it is not the same as the practice of anal sex.

Nelson: Let me go on to some of these other papers that I understand you presented. One was on incest.

Mazat: Yes, and that was the most difficult to listen to. It's difficult for all of us to accept the idea that an adult would force sexual activity on a small child, or even an adolescent child. That adult could be the father, the step-father, the grandfather, the brother, cousin, or uncle. That's just difficult for us. We don't want to think about it. That's why for so many years incest was almost a taboo word, not just a taboo act.

Nelson: We usually deny that it even occurs.

Mazat: Right. In my own caseload, I have women 20, 30, 40 years old who have a history of incest, sometimes beginning at the age of five and continuing until they left home. The time varies in different situations. These women have kept this horrible secret for all these years. They have either shared it with no one, or the person they did try to share it with didn't believe them or gave them no support whatsoever. They've lived with horrible "guilt," with fear, and with a distinctly lowered self-concept because they felt they were bad and horrible for having experienced incest. Many of them have a sense of guilt because only rarely is incest wholly forced. The perpetrator begins by gentle innocuous touches and then proceeds on to more frankly sexual touches and then by that time the child, who is always taught to obey his or her parents, is locked into a difficult situation. Daddy says, "If you tell Mommy, I'll have to go to jail," or "This is just our secret—don't tell any-

body or something terrible will happen," and children continue to be victimized.

Nelson: As a marriage and family specialist, do you see any kind of family or marriage that is more prone toward incest?

Mazat: There's a profile of the incest family. The father is usually a loner. Many times the man feels that he's the boss in the family, that he's the patriarch, that he tells people what to do, that they do what he tells them. He is actually covering up his feelings of ineffectiveness and low self-esteem. He very often comes from a home where he may not have been sexually abused, but was abused physically or verbally and made to feel like a "nothing." He very frequently marries a woman who is very dependent and clinging and passive, a woman who feels that she has no way of getting out of a bad relationship. She herself was frequently a victim. Almost always their own sexual

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relationship is either non-existent or very poor. So sometimes he imposes upon his daughter. He, in effect, says, "This is something I should get from my family. Your mother won't give it to me so it's your responsibility." One young lady said her father told her, "If you don't let me do this I'll have to go to a prostitute." She felt she was saving her family from something very bad.

Nelson: The daughter takes the place of the mother?

Mazat: That's right. It starts with the oldest daughter and sometimes goes down through the family. This oldest daughter has been seen as a mother substitute, doing a lot of the things that the mother should have

done in taking care of the rest of the family or household duties. Frequently, the mother will be gone from her home, maybe taking a job late evenings or nights, so that the girl fits into the spot of taking mother's place. Then she takes it in *every* respect.

Nelson: I suppose it would come as a shock to suggest that this happens within Adventism.

Mazat: It is hard and painful to think of it, but it does happen. As a matter of fact, in our own county one of our Marriage and Family Therapy Department graduates is a specialist on incest. She tells me that the Seventh-day Adventist population in our county is well-represented statistically among those who practice incest—as frequently as any other church community.

Nelson: What does a therapist do in a situation like this?

Mazat: Well, if this is a current case which we are just now discovering, we have only one resource. The responsibility of anybody in a helping profession is to report it within a certain length of time. The Department of Child Protective Services then takes over. Skilled people who are tactful and effective assist the family into treatment. The rates of recidivism are much lower for incest than for most other problems.

Nelson: This is one area in which confidentiality cannot be kept?

Mazat: That's right. Far too often people in the helping professions have talked to the man, and he has said, "I won't do it again." They have accepted this, but the same thing has happened all over again. The whole system has to cooperate in this kind of therapy. It cannot be done by a single therapist.

Nelson: What are some of the other papers that you presented at BRICOM?

Mazat: There was one on fetishism, one on voyeurism and exhibitionism, one on mutilation, one on nudity, and one on masturbation.

Nelson: Let's look at these very briefly. What is fetishism?

Mazat: Fetishism occurs when some object takes the place of another person in a sexual experience. The object might be a pair of panties or a shoe. The erotic transfer is made to that object so that to be sexually effective this fetish must be present. In other words, a male would not be able to have an erection or ejaculation if he did not have this object with him. Sometimes he uses the

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object in conjunction with the act, and sometimes he uses the object as a replacement for a person.

Nelson: What are the issues in voyeurism?

Mazat: Voyeurism is supposed to be the more laughable one. There are many jokes about men who go around looking in windows—peeping Toms and streakers. It certainly has the lowest profile as far as danger is concerned, but we must be aware that many people who go into much more destructive aberrations may have started out as voyeurs or exhibitionists. It's good even at that point to question why this happened and to have some kind of therapy so that they don't move into an even more dysfunctional activity. That doesn't happen often, but often enough so that we should be alerted to it.

Nelson: And mutilation?

Mazat: Well, that occurs when the person absolutely is dependent on pain, either inflicting pain or receiving pain, to have a sexual release. These are deeply disturbed people who have very low self-concepts. Masochists feel that they're so guilty and so awful that they have to be

punished, and, of course, the sadist feels like he has to (and he usually is the man) inflict this pain to demonstrate his power and his ability to make people submissive to him. Usually those people find each other and feed into each other's dysfunction.

Nelson: What did you say about nudism?

Mazat: The committee suggested this topic. They were trying to discover when nudism is appropriate and when it is not appropriate in the family. What about children who are found "playing doctor?" How should parents relate to nudity in the family? I proposed that nudism in marriage is completely natural and good. I hope that somehow more people—and it's usually women—will feel comfortable with nudism within marriage.

Nelson: These are rather esoteric topics for the Biblical Research Committee to be dealing with!

Mazat: I think that after I got them all written up and presented them, they were surprised by how much is involved.

Nelson: Are these esoteric deviations prevalent in Adventism?

Mazat: We have our share. I think the most important thing I gathered from my research is that unless we get better ways of introducing sexuality to our children, unless we can help our children build better self-concepts, unless we educate for sexuality in a loving, forthright, caring way, we open the door for all kinds of problems. These are exaggerated problems, yes, but I'd like to see the end to all the problems. I'd like all of our young people to get a proper understanding of the beautiful aspects of sexuality. I'd like parents to feel real joy about

sex and to be able to share this with their children. And I'd like parents to understand that they are not to function as arbitrary, heavy-handed rulers who come down hard and command the family with force. Teaching their children all they need to know spiritually, physically, emotionally should be joyous. I know that's very idealistic, but I've been called an idealist before so I can cope with that term.

Nelson: Do you think the church—I'm especially interested in the local church, having been a pastor—is the place where these kinds of issues can be best addressed? Would you suggest some ways in which this could be worked out in the local church?

Mazat: Yes, I don't think this material does any good on some professor's shelf. Sometimes people ask me a question about one of these issues, and I mention that I've written a paper for BRICOM on it. The people then ask, "When is it going to be published? We want it." I think there's a readiness and a desire on the part of the constituency. They have a right to hear something from one of their own authors whose work has been studied by a representative committee.

Nelson: Thank you very much for taking the time to speak about this. In summary, is there anything that you could say?

Mazat: When a husband and a wife are deeply committed to one another, when there's no lack of trust on the part of either, when they make a real determination to discuss these issues in a loving, caring way, and when they give themselves time to do that, they will have a good sexual relationship.