
A Physician Reviews Adventist Sexual Advice Books

by Roy G. Gravesen

Harold Shryock's *Happiness for Husbands and Wives* (1949) educated a whole generation of Adventist couples about sex; however it was wholly inadequate as a sex and marriage manual. But, since the 1950's, Seventh-day Adventist publishers have greatly improved the quality of their publications on sexuality. This improvement really began with *God Invented Sex* (1974), Charles Wittschiebe's daring effort, while a professor at the SDA Theological Seminary, to discuss human sexuality explicitly and accurately. Progress has continued with two well-written books by Adventist psychotherapists, *That Friday in Eden* (1981) by Alberta Mazat and *The Complete Courtship* (1982) by Nancy Van Pelt, but more is needed.

Despite increasing openness and accuracy, significant errors and myths still exist in Adventist publications on sex. As a sex and marital therapist, I am even more

concerned by the judgmental preconceptions of these books. On the basis of these two major criteria—informational accuracy and judgmental tone—I will evaluate the sexual advice books that have been published by Adventist publishing houses and are currently available in most Adventist Book Centers.

The importance of both criteria needs to be explained because assessing the information provided by the authors of these books is difficult for the average reader. Most readers examine the credentials of the author, peruse the index, and look at the bibliography in order to gauge the trustworthiness of the book's information and conclusions. Had I followed these steps, I would not have read any of the publications under review. Van Pelt's are the only books that have a bibliography, and none of the books have an index. It seems inconceivable that of all the authors, only Mazat's professional credentials are cited. Unfortunately, this cavalier attitude toward credentials is also reflected in the attitude of several authors who suggest that people who have sexual problems should see their pastors for counseling. All too frequently that is a poor choice. Pastors, usually poorly trained in human sexuality and often uncomfortable with the topic, should face their limitations and refer their parishioners to competent

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sex counselors, or at least to specially trained colleagues in the pastorate.

My second basic concern in evaluating these publications centers on their moralistic preconceptions when they deal with the controversial issues of premarital sex, masturbation, and homosexuality. On the subject of premarital sex, the other authors could learn from Van Pelt, who does an exceptionally good job in *The Compleat Courtship*. She identifies the pros and cons, takes a stand, but is not condemnatory of others. She basically gives the readers the facts and lets them make decisions on their own. This is good sexual education. In fact, she goes a step further and advises double contraceptive protection if one has premarital sex. This is wisdom.

Most of the authors, probably following the sexual advice of Ellen G. White condemn masturbation. Wittschiebe calls it a vice, and John F. Knight calls it unnatural or artificial sex, although Knight and Van Pelt are less condemnatory in their more recent books. Most Adventists would agree that Mrs. White denounced masturbation and considered it a sin, but Mazat states that "either Ellen White didn't know what she was talking about when she made the statements on self-abuse, or we do not know what she was talking about" (p. 148). She then covers the topic in a beautiful way that may help a lot of people in their interpretation of White's statements about "self-abuse." Describing a continuum of motives for masturbation, from simple physical relief on one extreme to pathological obsession on the other, Mazat appears to condone masturbation when performed for physical relief. Even though I do not accept Mazat's understanding of White's advice, I admire Mazat's approach and congratulate the Pacific Press Publishing Association for printing it. It no doubt will help readers to make their own decisions—which is what sex education and counselling should encourage.

Unfortunately, in discussing homosexuality every one of these books, except Wayne

Judd's pamphlet, is condemnatory and judgmental. Again, Knight and Van Pelt, possibly reflecting a growing maturity, are less condemnatory in their later books. Judd ends his very short discussion of homosexuality by stating "Let me add that I hope people who read this will remember that homosexuals are people—people who need Christian love and support rather than prejudicial hatred and rejection" (p. 21). This attitude is enlightened and valuable. We should remember that approximately five to 10 percent of the population is homosexual—a percentage that probably accurately reflects its incidence in the Adventist population.

Traditional Adventist understandings of biblical Sodom and Gomorrah and of Paul's writings have contributed to a condemnatory attitude that drives many of our homosexual members away from the church. (John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* and Walter Barnett's *Homosexuality and the Bible: An Interpretation* provide different biblical understandings that might be worthwhile counterpoints to include in an Adventist book on sexuality.) Both Knight and Wittschiebe, unfortunately, strongly advocate psychiatric treatment for the homosexual. Wittschiebe states that such treatment successfully cures one out of three or four homosexuals and Knight gives the impression that treatment is highly successful. Both authors apparently understand little about homosexuality or have read little by experts. Such inaccurate "success rates" can only create false hopes for the homosexual and his or her family.

Having provided an overview from the perspective of two criteria, let me rank the sexual advice books among these publications, noting the peculiar strengths and weaknesses of each. Combining both factual misinformation and harsh judgments, *I've Got This Problem With Sex* by Dan Day and *Sex is Not to Lose Sleep Over* by Dick Jewett

are the worst Adventist sexual advice books currently available. Day emphasizes sexual "temptations" and sets young people up to feel guilt and shame. He even goes so far as to state that sexual dreams are a sin. (I, for one, have never found a way to control my dreams, but it may comfort some that God can "forgive" dreams.) Jewett's book spouts so many cliches and adulterated cliches that one literally loses the book's arguments and wonders if it ever had a meaningful thesis.

A cut above Day and Jewett is Raymond Woolsey's *Christian Sex and Family Planning*. It contains an excellent discussion of family planning, contraception, and abortion, and includes a valuable chapter on the history of marriage and marital customs from the time of Adam and Eve to the present. In his well-written chapter "Sex Can Be Good," Woolsey rightly states that sex is an integral

part of marriage and that a better marriage equals better sex. But he fails, as do most of the other authors, to mention that sometimes sex can be just plain fun. Unfortunately, in his chapter on "Sex Standards," he descends into a cold, judgmental tone, in discussing adulterers and divorcees.

John Knight's three very similar books especially disturbed me because of their informational inaccuracies. They provide informative and explicit discussions of sexual foreplay, but intermingle information with much medical and anatomical fiction—more than the other authors do despite the fact that as a physician he should know better. Knight misdefines dysmenorrhea, includes a hodgepodge of unrelated symptoms, and incorrectly prescribes a high protein-vitamin diet (preferably vegetarian), lots of fluids, and eight hours of sleep.

Adventist Sexual Advice Books

Dan Day, *"I've Got This Problem With Sex."* 32 pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1973. 75¢ (paper).

Dick Jewett, *Sex is Not to Lose Sleep Over.* 224 pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1979. \$3.95 (paper).

Wayne Judd, *Kissing, Hugging, And . . .* 29 pp. Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1980. 75¢ (paper).

John F. Knight, M.B., B.S., *What a Married Couple Should Know About Sex.* 235 pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1979. \$5.95 (paper).

John F. Knight, M.B., B.S., *What a Young Man Should Know About Sex.* 223 pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1977. \$5.95 (paper).

John F. Knight, M.B., B.S., *What a Young Woman Should Know About Sex.* 231 pp.

Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1977. \$5.95 (paper).

Alberta Mazat, M.F.C.C., *That Friday in Eden: Sharing and Enhancing Sexuality in Marriage.* 160 pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1981. \$4.95 (paper).

Nancy Van Pelt, *The Compleat Courtship.* 202 pp. Washington, D.C.: Southern Publishing Association, 1982. \$6.95 (paper).

Nancy Van Pelt, *The Compleat Marriage.* 159 pp. Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1979. \$3.50 (paper).

Charles Wittschiebe, *God Invented Sex.* 256 pp. Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1974. \$6.95 (paper).

Raymond H. Woolsey, *Christian Sex and Family Planning.* 64 pp. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974. 95¢ (paper).

He correctly suggests exercise, aspirin, and hormones, but women should know that dysmenorrhea also can be controlled, in the vast majority of cases, by orgasm or the new anti-prostaglandin medications. He also errs when he describes the Bartholin's glands as the cause of vaginal and vulvar lubrication.

Apparently not realizing that the female orgasm is a mentally controlled response to the direct or indirect stimulation of the clitoris, Knight describes the female orgasm as a result of intercourse and advises couples to "strive for simultaneous orgasms." Correctly, Wittschiebe states: "Coming to a climax together is a pleasing experience, but having orgasm before or after one's spouse is not an undesirable second best. When the husband reaches orgasm first, the wife can share his pleasure and anticipate shortly having a similar reaction herself" (pp. 108-109). Strangely, Knight believes in the myth that masturbation, practiced regularly, can predispose the male's prostate to hypertrophy. Does he also believe that ejaculation during intercourse, practiced regularly, can do the same? Furthermore, he states that masturbation fosters an undue preoccupation with sex, while most sexologists believe that it relieves the preoccupation caused by sexual tension.

Charles Wittschiebe's pioneering book, *God Invented Sex*, although somewhat dated, still presents a fairly accurate and even-handed discussion of sex. Primarily, a question and answer book, it leaves many questions unanswered, but Wittschiebe's underlying value system is clear enough to allow the alert reader to fill in his own conclusions.

Like many of these authors, Wittschiebe makes the obligatory references to Ellen G. White and provides glosses and harmonizations when her pronouncements seem to differ with modern understandings. His discussion of "animal passion" illustrates his reinterpretive efforts. Most Adventists, still familiar with the perspectives of Victorian

Americans, understand Ellen White's references to "animal passions," "animal propensities," and "abusing marital privileges" as anti-sexual and in basic opposition to normal sexual desires and drives. In his chapter "Sex and the Church," Wittschiebe, as does Mazat, redefines animal passion as copula-

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tion unconnected to a pleasuring, endearing love relationship. Both of them do a good job of reinterpreting Ellen White's words but thereby, I think, fail to accurately reflect her intended meaning.

I support Wittschiebe's effort to withhold dogmatic answers to ethical or moral questions, but in at least two important cases he should have answered questions that required only factual information. In his chapter "Sex and Marriage," Wittschiebe tries to unravel the "hows" of sex by asking "How does a woman have an orgasm?" But he never answers the question. Only as an afterthought does he suggest the use of manual stimulation by her partner; even then he never mentions the clitoris, which God gave to the female solely for her pleasure, nor the fact that many women cannot have orgasms by intercourse. (Two years after the publication of Wittschiebe's book, *The Hite Report* relieved many women when it showed that only 30 percent of women have orgasms during intercourse.) Wittschiebe condemns oral sex and quotes *Ministry* magazine's remark that such practices are "immoral and perverted." This is unfortunate.

He also fails to answer "How old are you when you begin to learn about sex?" Children are sexual and begin to learn about sexuality at birth, depending on home,

church, and school to provide responsible sexual education. Wittschiebe does, however, state one important truth here: "Even saying nothing about sex is sex education" (p. 199). Many parents do not realize that children develop dirty attitudes toward sex and think sexuality taboo when it is not discussed in the home.

I have saved the two best books for last. In *The Compleat Marriage*, Nancy Van Pelt provides excellent advice on acceptance, communication, and pleasure in marriage, though she is sometimes sexist. She states that both husband and wife should "appreciate" their mates, but the female, in addition, should "admire" the male; she also expounds on the "needs" of the wife but says nothing of the "needs" of the husband. Her advice on sexual fulfillment fails to emphasize that partners need to communicate to each other what feels good, and her description of the female sexual response appears misguided in at least two ways. First, she bluntly states that ". . . the clitoris should never be touched directly" (p. 123). This certainly depends upon the specific woman, as some women need to have the clitoris stimulated directly to be responsive. Second, when describing female orgasms she states: "Certainly no Christian wife should settle for less, for she owes it to both herself and to her husband" (p. 132). Through time, experience, education, or sex therapy many women can become orgasmic; however, some women for physical or deep psychological reasons will not and false hope can only do them harm.

However, despite these faults, this is an excellent book overall.

Alberta Mazat's *That Friday in Eden* is probably the best book on sexuality in Adventist Book Centers. Her dedicatory statement, "To my husband who has shared and enhanced my own sexuality for 37 years," when complemented by her excellent credentials, enhanced my respect. Her first chapter, "It Was on a Friday," lets readers know that God had an extraordinarily beautiful idea when he created sex and that it can still be beautiful today. Only Van Pelt and Mazat discuss sexual dysfunctions, and with only minor exceptions I highly recommend Mazat's discussion to the average reader, especially since Masters and Johnson have demonstrated that 50 percent of couples have sexual dysfunctions of one kind or another.

Adventist sex manuals are improving but Adventist publishers would benefit from editorial consultants with expertise in the field of human sexuality to improve future publications. (For example, such consultants could direct their attention to Bernie Zilbergeld's discussion of sexual myths in *Male Sexuality*, the sex manual most recommended by American sex therapists and educators.) Future books must present accurate information, and although authors have a right to express their own values, they need not, via judgmental and condemnatory attitudes, turn their values into laws for everyone. If Wittschiebe's suggestion of having a top-level conference on the theology of sex became a reality, then such a theology, joined to accurate scientific data, could truly help each member of the Adventist church establish his or her own value system in the area of sexuality.