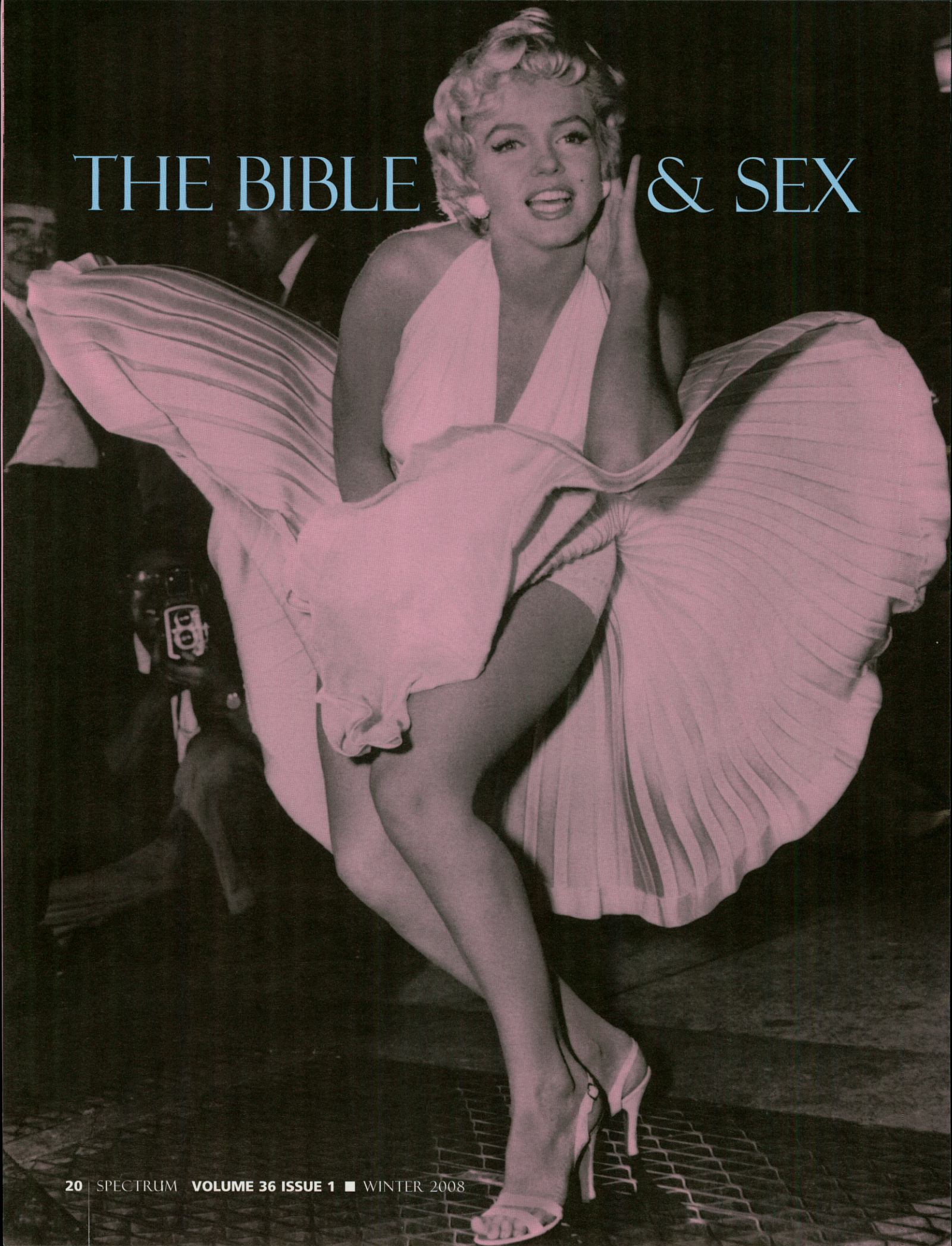


THE BIBLE & SEX



Ordinary and Dangerous:

Sex in the Christian Community | BY LOREN SEIBOLD

Because they lived on the adjacent farm, I spent a lot of my childhood at Grandpa and Grandma's house. Grandpa and Grandma always had a subscription to the big glossy *Look* and *Life* photo magazines, which I enjoyed paging through at about the age of six or seven. One evening, I voiced a totally innocent question to Grandpa as I was looking through the magazine: "There are so many pictures of Marilyn Monroe. What's so great about her?" Grandpa laughed, and said, "That's something you'll understand when you get older."



About the same time, I got my first Bible, a King James Version with a brightly colored cloth cover of Jesus holding children. Right before the contents page was a table of diacritical marks, which then hashed through every proper name in the book. I asked Grandma this time: "What are all these little marks above the letters?"

Grandma said, "That's something you'll understand when you get older."

I vividly remember thinking, "Marilyn Monroe and these words in the Bible: they must both have to do with the same secret thing that someday, when I grow up, I'll learn about!"

And I have, though it hasn't been quite what I expected. Somewhere along the line, it became apparent to me that at least some of

what people do with religion has to do with sex: to control it, justify it, suppress it, hide it, separate others on the basis of it, and manage the guilt associated with it.

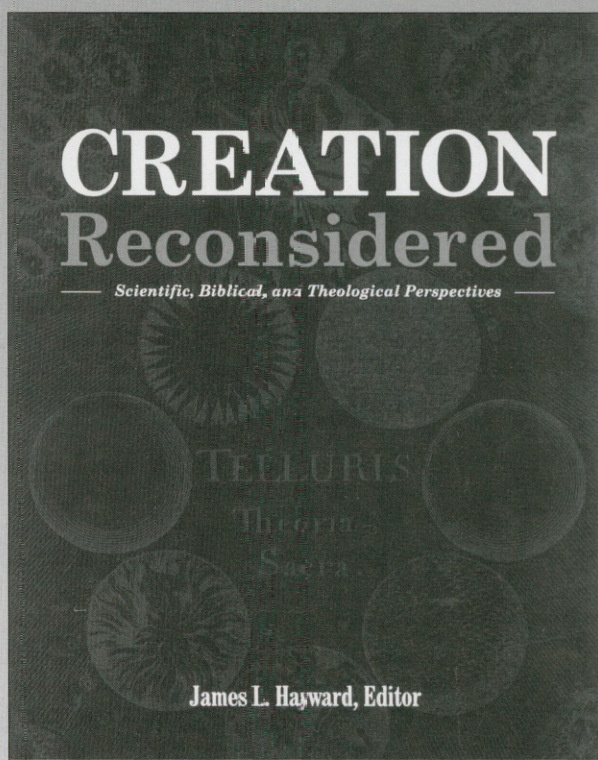
There is plenty of sex in the Bible, though as a child in the 1950s I didn't understand most of it. After I was assured that winter wasn't as cold in Eden as it was in North Dakota, Adam and Eve's doing their gardening sans clothing became a source of titillating curiosity.¹ From my Sabbath School teacher's explanation of the Seventh Commandment, I gathered it was something like divorce. That Ham was punished for seeing his father's nakedness puzzled me, since my dad and I changed clothes in the same locker room when we went swimming. What was supposed to have happened in Sodom was impossible to figure out, but, fortunately for the teacher, I was more interested in how a person could turn into a salt statue.

Every new leap in Bible knowledge opened new questions, and the glossing over of them suggested to us that sex was something we don't talk about, except sotto voce and with giggles in the back of the school bus. And so to some extent, my friends and I assumed that what we knew about sex was original information.

At Sheyenne River Academy, my Bible teacher attempted some low-key Christian sex education with a book called *Dialogue in Romantic Love*.² By today's standards, it would be mild; but Mr. Kahler was probably something of a pioneer. It was the first time I'd ever seen such

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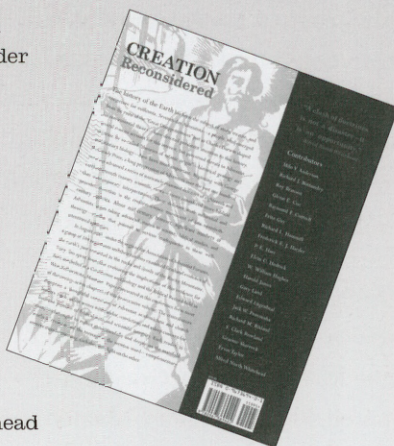
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things in print, and it made a deep impression, although I also found it a little creepy that my old teacher (he was in his thirties) was up in front talking about it.

But the cat was beginning to find its way out of the bag. The 1970s came on, and a lot of stuff was laying right out there for us to see. Things like homosexuality and sexual abuse and rape and harassment. Much of what happens on college campuses has to do with sex, then as now, though it was still a somewhat guiltier place then.

It is mostly in the church that we continue to handle sex gingerly. We speak of it little and cautiously (compared to, say, persecution by Catholics), though it is an unmentioned subtext to nearly every life. We get suspicious of any pastor or teacher who makes sex an especially loud string on his fiddle, and probably not without reason: because, to fit well into Adventist culture, you sort of have to know how we don't address it.

In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie tells of a young unmarried Muslim physician called to examine the daughter of a rich landowner. When he enters her bedroom, he sees her maids holding a sheet with a seven-inch hole cut in the middle. She's a proper girl, the father tells him, and it would be wrong for him to see all of her. She would tell him the complaint, and the maids would move the sheet so he could look at just the offending part. Over the months that he treated her, he found himself trying to put together the pieces of the girl that he had seen in an attempt to picture the whole girl; and was grateful when she finally got a headache so he could see her face.³

That isn't a bad metaphor for what Western culture has done with sex. At any given time, we focus on one problem, or set of problems, but leave the rest covered. For years (for much of my life, and a century earlier), the focus was on marriage: getting people to honor marriage, no matter how bad, and punishing them for leaving it. The goal seemed to be to corral sex into a very small space, in the hope that it could never get up enough momentum to punch its way out and force us to deal with it openly.

How else can you explain churches freezing out the divorced, and ruthlessly expelling those who remarried? But in the church, as well as society at large, we ignored,

or even denied, those more frightening expressions of sex, like incest, pedophilia, homosexuality, and rape.⁴

Only a few groups—Mormons and Roman Catholics—have focused particularly on masturbation. Is it a coincidence that these groups covered the worst secrets of all: child marriage in one case, pederasty in the other?⁵ Roman Catholics have legislated the laity's sex and reproduction most broadly—while hiding one of the worst sexual scandals in Christian history. The perforated sheet generally covers as much as it exposes.

The opening in the sheet takes time to move, but it has. Sex in American culture is regarded quite differently than it was in the 1950s. We now allow inspection of the very things we once avoided talking about. An average American today is indignant over child sexual abuse, has strong,

expressed opinions on homosexual issues, and knows way more about aberrant sexual practices than he or she can ever make practical use of. But the usual moral trespasses, with all the damage they do to families, now seem less critical: most Americans, most of the time, act as though what others do in the privacy of their own homes (or of others' homes, motel rooms, or clubs) is their business. Every movement of the sheet exposes one problem, while putting others out of sight.

Now, all the bile that was once spent on infidelity and divorce is directed toward fringe sexual activity. The upside is to make us watch our children more carefully. But there are downsides, too, to this paranoia of the deviant: witch-hunt enthusiasm for prosecuting an accused preschool teacher, for example; or those charged with sex crimes (rapists to be sure, but also a twenty-one-year-old having sex with a younger girlfriend) marked with a scarlet letter until death. Indignant morality in one area might be transference from insufficient moral reflection in another.

Freud is accused of overstating the case when he said everything is about sex, but I don't think he overstated it by much. Because it hadn't happened to me, I assumed that child sexual abuse was a rare thing. When I became a pastor in a secret-telling era, I was shocked at the number of



people, some well past retirement, who quietly confessed to having been raped or abused in childhood. Although it doesn't happen to everyone, it isn't rare. As a middle-aged pastor, I listen more, and hear more, and now know that there is a world of sexual secrets around us, even in a happy, conservative congregation. Religion doesn't seem to help much in suppressing sex, but it does provide means to conceal illicit sex, and sometimes even justify it. (The adulterous couple who always had a session of earnest prayer after their Motel 6 tryst comes to mind.)

It comes down to this: sex is both ordinary and dangerous. It makes babies, but also inflames sick minds. It is rooted in the deepest part of our souls, but may have tethers into the most unstable, pathological parts of us. It is pursued in rather ordinary ways in most relationships, but it can also be expressed in threatening, hurtful ways.

The model we were taught is of a young person who never thinks about sex, only about happy homes and

children, until he or she is married; discreetly does what is necessary to create babies; and forgets about it again afterwards. It is a Victorian ideal that didn't even work during Victorian times. It has never worked very well—just read the Bible. Young people experience sexual feelings before they even know what they are. Almost all men and many women have had some level of sexual



experience when alone.

Those who remain faithful through marriage (and in spite of how popular culture makes it sound, there are many) still have sexual attractions to others. There are those who, from the security of marriage, in the shadow of the church, find themselves drawn (for reasons we don't fully understand) to the terrible and frightening attraction of sex with children, or accompanied by violence. These aren't culturally acceptable in the church and rarely outside of it, but piety is a good camouflage and sometimes an astonishingly successful one.

I have a friend who was raped repeatedly by her church school teacher at about the age of thirteen. Enough suspicion had been raised that the pastor and elders called her in. (Surprisingly—or perhaps not—they didn't question the teacher.) When my friend came before them, she read the future in their faces: they were disposed to disbelieve her, or at least hoped they could find some way not to deal with it. So not to prolong the agony, she (showing the most sense of them all) denied anything had happened, and it was dropped. He moved on to another church school, she to a period of depression and promiscuity.

Deceit, it seems to me, is at the core of sexual sin. But the Christian church has been quite as deceitful as its members. The lie has been that if you set a high fence between marriage sex and everything else, it will always hold. The lie is that we can control sexual behavior with threats. The lie is that once the barrier is breached, it can never again be repaired. The lie is that sexual sins are the worst of all sins, and unusually difficult for God to forgive, if he can forgive them at all.⁶ The lie may be that it simply doesn't happen here. Some believe these things sincerely, and others know better but keep up the fiction because they're afraid of what they might let loose if they don't—as though our denial is holding back the tide of sexual attraction.

Our children haven't bought all this without question. Many (even Christian) young people believe that sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or even with several, doesn't necessarily destroy your life. The virginity myth that was widely accepted (if carelessly practiced) for thousands of years has lost adherents. I do not ask young unmarried couples attending church if they are sleeping together; whether or not, my goal is to get them married, not embarrass them and make them unwelcome. From a traditional point of view this may be regrettable, but it is also realistic.

It's hard to fault the traditional model on the grounds of either moral principle or common sense: sex is deeply, spiritually, wired into the soul, and it creates new human beings (or at least it can); and for both reasons it serves us best in the context of a stable relationship.⁷ In a perfect world, that would be self-evident to everyone. But this is far from a perfect world. It is deeply damaged, with deeply damaged inhabitants. And in this context, the criticism that can be advanced against our (the Christian church's) attitude toward sex is not that the ideal is bad, but that there's not much of a fallback position to the inevitable failures. It begins with a refusal to admit that sexual sins are relatively easy to commit, and are surprisingly common, even among Christians.

We hate to acknowledge that, of course, because sex excites the church's deepest shame. For all the simple earthiness about sex in the Bible, the church still does its best to dodge it. We church people sometimes complain that sex is no longer a secret; it is everywhere in Western culture. But that doesn't mean anyone address-

es it constructively.⁸ Because we don't speak of it, we are likely to either overreact, or underreact, when its non-traditional forms present to us.

What I find most regrettable as a pastor is that the unreflective attitudes that form the traditional position fulfill their own expectations. There is no doubt that an extramarital affair is a hurtful thing. To churches inclined to proactivity, the case seems easy to prosecute: indict the first partner to make physical contact with an outsider. The church may then censure or disfellowship.

Informally, friends take sides. That a couple *may* divorce because of infidelity (according to some interpretations of Matthew 19) may even imply that they *ought* to. So marriages that could be saved, or where damage could at least be minimized, are not because we are more interested in enforcement than healing.

But because sexual trespasses are so threatening, they are equally easy to ignore. We find it difficult to confront our church members about them. We may in the process stir up our own fear and guilt. If left alone, those involved may slip away and save us the trouble, and they often do.

Neither response is appropriate for a people whose theological foundation is the healing, restorative grace of God through Jesus Christ. The punitive response supposes that churches are the private club of the sinless—a stupid supposition. Ignoring it achieves no Christian purpose, either, not least because it leaves perpetrators unaccountable and all parties lonely.

Better would be the response like Jesus' to the woman caught in adultery: clear engagement with both the victim and perpetrator, attentive, compassionate, and reassuring of the ubiquity of sin among us and our mutual attempts to grow beyond it. But as long as sexual sins amplify our anxiety beyond almost every other kind of sin, we won't be very redemptive with them. We'll either deny them, or deal harshly with them, but there will be little insight and little healing for what is really a fairly common problem of human life—again, read the Bible.

Should we learn to regard these trespasses with neither panic nor denial, we may discover some advantages. Sexual sins are a major reason that people leave the Adventist church, or are expelled from it. I wonder how many would still be here had we enculturated a redemptive, rather than a punitive,

framework to assist us? We might have thirty million church members rather than half that number.

I suspect benefits would be apparent in dealing with "normal" sexual sins (assuming that an extramarital affair is more normal than, say, rape) as well as criminal and pathological ones. At the very least, it would prevent people from having to go through these experiences alone and give them a place for healing and hope rather than becoming perpetual victims. I've seen those who have been raped or abused (such as my friend mentioned earlier) recover in remarkable ways when placed in a thoughtful and supportive environment, where healing, rather than a ruined life, is assumed.

Like the continuum between anger and murder, the psychological territory between sexual trespass and rape or pedophilia is complex and difficult to map. Yet even rape and pedophilia, which must be dealt with criminally, and whose perpetrators must be removed from society, have to be seen in light of a world broken in just about every particular. That takes an almost Christ-like maturity; but prove to me that God can't forgive, and save, and have living next to you in heaven, someone we wouldn't allow near our children down here!

Much of what I'm talking about might fall together naturally were we to give a proper weight to this sin, against all the others. About sexual sin, C. S. Lewis wrote,

I want to make it clear that the centre of Christian morality is not here. . . . The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronising and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute.

"But of course," he added, "it is better to be neither."⁹ ■

Notes and References

1. My Sabbath School teacher insisted that they weren't really naked, but clothed with light, an idea that finds support in Ellen White's *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3 (Battle Creek, Mich., 1864), 34.

2. Prentiss L. Pemberton, *Dialogue in Romantic Love: Promise and*

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Communication (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Books, 1961). It had the advantage of being a bit more progressive than the Adventist alternatives, *On Becoming a Man*, and *On Becoming a Woman*, in the latter of which Harold Shryock, in at least one edition, recommended female circumcision. "There are teenage girls who, impelled by an unwholesome curiosity or by the example of unscrupulous girl friends, have fallen into the habit of manipulating these sensitive tissues as a means of excitement. This habit is spoken of as masturbation. . . . There is an anatomical factor that sometimes causes irritation about the clitoris and thus encourages a manipulation of the delicate reproductive organs. . . . Oftentimes the remedy for this situation consists of a minor surgical operation spoken of as circumcision. This operation is not hazardous and is much to be preferred to allowing the condition of irritation to continue." Harold Shryock, *On Becoming a Woman: A Book for Teen-Age Girls* (Victoria, Australia: Signs, 1968), 38.

3. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Penguin, 1980).

4. Please understand: I am not equating homosexuality with pedophilia and rape, only that it fell into the same unmentionable category in many minds.

5. It is surprising that Adventists have, for the most part, dodged the issue of masturbation, given an early revelation of our prophet on the topic. See Ellen White, *An Appeal to Mothers* (Battle Creek, Mich., 1864).

6. Many a pastor has heard a church member say that because of a past sexual trespass he or she fears having committed the unpardonable sin.

7. I say traditional, rather than biblical, because the biblical model isn't all that clear. Could you recommend that a young person emulate the family life of most of the Old Testament's major characters? Also, although the New Testament gives more practical guidelines, it still permits polygamy.

8. C. S. Lewis explains it this way: "They tell you sex is a mess because it has been hushed up. But for the last twenty years it has not been hushed up.... I think it is the other way around. I think the human race originally hushed it up because it had become such a mess." C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier, 1960), 91.

9. *Ibid.*, 94.

Loren Seibold is senior pastor of the Worthington, Ohio, Seventh-day Adventist Church.