

2022

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A Biblical-Theological Framework for Human Sexuality: Applications to Private Sexuality

— Trent A. Rogers and John K. Tarwater —

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Abstract: What are good sexual acts? It is not that surprising when cultural voices, without reference to God, argue for the inherent goodness of all “unharmful” sexual desires and acts. Regrettably, ethical pragmatism has influenced some Christian sexual ethics, and this influence is particularly evident with the issue of masturbation. What God defines as good sexual acts are those that fulfill his unitive and procreative purposes for sex within marriage. Given God’s unitive and procreative purposes for sex within the context of marriage, we argue that masturbation is a categorically impermissible act because it fulfills neither of these purposes, and we counter Christian arguments for its permissibility. God calls Christians to deal with sexual desires, including good sexual desires, through either marital sexual expression or Spirit-enabled self-control.

With prevailing cultural narratives defining pleasure as the ultimate good, sexual activity as essential to identity, and the self as the locus of authority, it is no surprise that we encounter individuals in our local church ministries and Christian university campus who are confused about what are good sexual desires and acts. In marital and premarital counseling contexts, questions about sexuality and the permissibility of various sexual acts recur. Perhaps the issue that causes the greatest confusion for both singles and marrieds centers on the permissibility or impermissibility of masturbation, by which we mean a personal sexual act for the purpose of self-pleasure, or what is sometimes referred to as self-stimulation. While this article focuses on the topic of masturbation, our intent is broader because the biblical ethics of masturbation provides a window into biblical sexual ethics in general. This biblical-ethical framework begins with the Triune God who, in his goodness, creates the

good physical world. Humans, by God's good, created design, are sexual beings who are commissioned to use their sexuality for the glory of God. But humans are not merely sexual beings, and their identity is not centered on their sexual expression. Moreover, their sexual desires this side of Genesis 3 are not inherently rightly-ordered. So the new-creation Christian joyfully lives in the freedom of Christ, led by the Spirit, pursuing the goodness of God's design. This freedom and being led by the Spirit entails passionate pursuit of God's good physical gifts and joy-preserving restraint from deviations from his created goodness.

Christians experience constant pressure from prevailing cultural narratives arguing that all sexual expression, so long as it does not harm another, is inherently good and that sexual expression is the foundation of one's personhood.¹ Christians, thinking through the ethics of sexual acts such as masturbation, are sometimes confused when cultural narratives collide with biblical ethics. In fact, there is a good deal of ambiguity and misinformation coming from sources claiming to offer a Christian ethic. For example, James Dobson of Focus on the Family states, "Christian people have different opinions about how God views this act. Unfortunately, I can't speak directly for God on this subject, since His Holy Word, the Bible, is silent on this point."² In another instance, he exclaims, "This is an area where we have to be careful about laying down hard and fast rules—or making definitive statements about the mind of God (though Scripture does clearly address behaviors that are often related to this activity). There's little to be gained by labeling the act of masturbation itself a sin. In fact, we think that misses the point."³ Similarly, Wayne Grudem argues that belief in the sufficiency of Scripture coupled with Scripture's silence on the issue should lead us to conclude that masturbation is not always wrong, even though he does offer cautions and prohibitions on associated behaviors.⁴ Implicit in Dobson's and Grudem's

¹ For a compelling explanation of how Western culture, particularly in the United States, has adopted these sexual ethics, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

² James Dobson, *Preparing for Adolescence: How to Survive the Coming Years of Change* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2006), 69; cf. "Questions and Concerns About Masturbation," *Focus on the Family*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/empathy-and-advice-for-chronic-masturbator>; Stan Jones and Brenna Jones, *Facing the Facts: The Truth about Sex and You* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007), 111–13.

³ "Questions and Concerns About Masturbation," *Focus on the Family*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/empathy-and-advice-for-chronic-masturbator/>.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 726–28. Grudem does provide space for Jason DeRouchie to offer a counterargument (725–26; see also Jason DeRouchie, "If Your Right Hand Causes You to Sin: Ten Biblical Reflections on Masturbation," *Desiring God*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/if-your-right-hand-causes-you-to-sin>). Louis McBurney and Melissa McBurney (*Real Questions, Real Answers About Sex: The Complete Guide to Intimacy as God Intended It* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 273) raise the question about the acceptability of masturbation. Their response indicates a certain hermeneutic of Scripture: "There is no scriptural command against masturbation, although there are cautions against its associated behaviors.... To our way of thinking, the Bible is silent on the rightness or wrongness of individual masturbation." For associated behaviors of which one should be cautious, they list lustful fantasies, tendency toward compulsive activity, and the avoidance of marital sex. Later in their argumentation, they seem to leave this to a matter of Christian conscience, "Some would say that a man who is deprived of sex would have a nocturnal emission anyway to relieve the pelvic discomfort of seminal buildup. That's one way of looking at it. You must decide what God requires of you." Similarly, Alex W. Kwee and David C. Hoover ("Theologically-Informed Education about Masturbation: A Male Sexual Health Perspective," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* [2008]: 261) argue, "The Bible does not directly address masturbation, leaving Christians to articulate a

arguments is the claim that since the Bible does not explicitly prohibit an act, it is permissible, but one should be cautious in practice. Rarely does an author make a positive case for the Bible's endorsement of masturbation; rather, the argument for permissibility is made on the basis of the Bible's silence, often coupled with data about contemporary practice.⁵

There are few books written explicitly on the topic of masturbation from a Christian perspective, so Steve Gerali's *The Struggle* deserves special mention.⁶ It also provides a window into the types of arguments made for the permissibility of masturbation. Gerali's argument can be summarized with following statements. The Bible does not explicitly address the issue of masturbation. Therefore, this is not an issue of absolute moral imperative with a definite right or wrong in every situation—it's a "gray issue." Thus, masturbation is an issue of Christian freedom and wisdom to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

After reading this book you may come to a similar personal conclusion—that masturbation is a wisdom issue and that can be engaged in under certain guidelines of Christian liberty.... Others will come to the conclusion that masturbation is a wisdom issue in which, while all things are lawful, not all things are wise (see 1 Corinthians 6:12), making it a personal sin issue.... It is my prayer that all will come into a new freedom, having the ability to formulate a biblically and culturally informed personal view.⁷

Unfortunately, the view that emerges is more culturally than biblically informed. We take a number of issues with his exegesis of particular texts. For example, he cites 1 Corinthians 6:12 as a foundation for Christian liberty in "gray issues." But the phrase "everything is permissible for me" is widely recognized to be a slogan by Paul's opponents, which Paul cites in order to refute.⁸ Most English translations, including the NIV that he cites, even place quotation marks around the phrase to indicate that it is a quotation of a Corinthian slogan.⁹ When Paul cites this Corinthian slogan, he does so to

moral stance from various scriptures that in our view cannot support a deontological prohibition of masturbation."

⁵ James R. Johnson ("Toward a Biblical Approach to Masturbation," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 10 [1982]: 143–44) attempts to make the case for the Bible's endorsement of masturbation on the basis of purity laws in Leviticus 15:16–18, "We are forced to admit that the Bible does specifically include masturbation within its pages, but only in a morally neutral context. The only God-ordained consequence of masturbation in the Old Testament was ceremonial uncleanness. And although the requirements of this law no longer govern behavior in the New Testament era, the law itself is still profitable for our instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16–17). This Leviticus passage implies that God tolerates masturbation when it does not conflict with the moral and ethical principles He has elsewhere revealed."

⁶ Steve Gerali, *The Struggle* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003). While we intend to refute the exegetical and ethical argumentation in *The Struggle*, the book does have some helpful content. For example, much of Gerali's refutation of historical pseudo-scientific arguments about the dangers of masturbation is helpful (pp. 33–55).

⁷ Gerali, *The Struggle*, 30.

⁸ For a summary of Paul's quotation and refutation of the Corinthians' slogans, see Denny Burk, "Discerning Corinthian Slogans through Paul's Use of Diatribe in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20," *BBR* 18 (2008): 99–121; Andrew David Naselli, "Is Every Sin outside the Body except Immoral Sex? Weighing Whether 1 Corinthians 6:18b Is Paul's Statement or a Corinthian Slogan," *JBL* 136 (2017): 969–87.

⁹ There, of course, are not quotation marks in the original Greek text. Translators are generally reluctant to indicate an interpretive decision with English punctuation. Their comfortability with adding the quotation marks indicates the firmness of their interpretation that this must be a quotation. Gerali seems to ignore this scholarly consensus that Paul quotes and refutes his opponents in 1 Cor 6. Ironically, he cites 1 Cor 10:13, which describes

prohibit activities, such as sex with a prostitute (1 Cor 6:15–16) that are categorically sinful. To assume the Corinthian slogan as one’s own ethical reasoning is to endorse the very ethical framework that Paul is refuting. Moreover, Gerali assumes that if something is not explicitly forbidden in the Bible then it is morally ambiguous. The ethical reasoning put forward in this book is culturally and pragmatically determined and subsequently undergirded by inadequate exegesis.

We argue that this issue of masturbation is part of a larger teaching about human sexuality and self-control, about which the Bible has much to say. Merely asking if an act is explicitly prohibited is a way to avoid asking deeper teleological questions that have explicit answers in Scripture. We should not expect Scripture to prohibit every possible deviant sexual act—that category is nearly infinite and ever-expanding. A better question is: “Does this sexual act fulfill God’s good purposes for sex?”¹⁰ With all the writing about this topic, authors’ positions can be divided into three main camps: (1) masturbation is a good expression of human sexuality, (2) masturbation in specific situations can be a good expression of human sexuality, and (3) masturbation is never a God-honoring expression of human sexuality. An urgent need remains for biblical and pastoral clarity on the issue of the permissibility or impermissibility of masturbation. Our approach is three-fold: to outline a biblical framework for sex, to make an argument for the categorical impermissibility of masturbation, and to counter popular arguments for the permissibility of masturbation. We will conclude with some pastoral reflections and exhortations.

1. Biblical-Ethical Framework for Sex

In contrast to those who tend to discuss the topic of sexuality from an understanding of humanity grounded in psychology or naturalism, our approach to the topic arises primarily from the text of Scripture and the field of theology with the goal of applying the teaching within the church. We locate the topic of self-stimulation broadly within two major Christian doctrines: the doctrines of God and humanity.

All moral discussions find their genesis in a God who is by nature good. Scripture not only affirms the essential goodness of God (1 Chr 16:34; 2 Chr 5:13; Ps 118:1; 145:9), but it also teaches that God consequently is the standard by which all goodness (moral or otherwise) is measured (Mark 10:18). Because God is the standard by which moral goodness is measured, humanity does not have the freedom to determine what is morally right or wrong apart from God. As Christian ethicist John Frame writes, “Ethics is theology, viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts, and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not.”¹¹ God defines what is good—what receives his approval and blessing.

God delivering Christians from a categorically impermissible activity of idolatry (10:14), as justification for masturbation because it could be God’s way of deliverance from sin. For a fuller refutation of this exegesis, see Trent A. Rogers, *God and the Idols: Representations of God in 1 Corinthians 8–10*, WUNT 2/427 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

As an example of the supposed moral relativity of the act, Gerali states, “After all, it’s possible that God hasn’t given us all the answers... deliberately [ellipsis original]. It’s also quite possible that God allows some sin to be relative from person to person.... The relativity of sin regarding wisdom issues doesn’t make *all* sin relative. It doesn’t give anyone the freedom or right to ignore moral absolutes. Yet God doesn’t give us a black-and-white answer to every question we have about an activity’s moral quality. In some cases, he creates a ‘gray zone’ that requires us to seek him and his wisdom each day” (*The Struggle*, 140).

¹⁰ See Denny Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 33.

¹¹ John M Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2008), 10.

In addition to God's essential goodness, Scripture affirms the fundamental wisdom of "the only wise God" (Rom 16:27; Job 9:4; 12:13). God is the source of all wisdom (Prov 2:6; 9:10; Jas 1:5). More importantly, Paul writes that his wisdom has been active from the beginning, where God planned what was ultimately good for humanity: "for our glory" (1 Cor 2:6–7). Because God is good and wise, what he does and plans is good, and consequently, never needs modifying.¹²

Goodness and wisdom are essential aspects of God's nature; he cannot act without it being good and wise. God displays his goodness and wisdom in all that he does, such as his act of creation. Scripture affirms the presence of God's wisdom—his planning for our good and his glory—in the act of creating all things (Prov 3:19; 8:22–31) and appraises this wise creative work as good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, and 25). While everything that God made is good, he says that humanity, the crown of creation, is "very good" (Gen 1:31).

The doctrine of humanity, therefore, begins with this truth: God planned and created humanity in his wisdom and goodness. Moreover, he created human beings in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27). Being created in God's image suggests that God made a creature similar to himself. Men and women share the likeness of their Creator. The author of Genesis does not delineate all the ways that humanity shares in God's likeness, but at the least this refers to God creating humanity as moral creatures for interpersonal relationships.

Historically, theologians have referred to God as *personal* to express this capacity for social relationships.¹³ As creatures made in God's image and likeness, we too were created for relations. For these relationships to receive God's approval—to be morally good—individuals must relate to one another in the ways that God planned and purposed.¹⁴

Thus, God's attributes of goodness and wisdom apply not only to God's creation of humanity; they also associate with how God planned for individuals to relate. Because humans are by nature sexual beings—individuals created as male and female—the way that they relate to one another must necessarily include sexuality. That is, it must also deal with how men and women relate to one another.¹⁵ German theologian and ethicist, Helmut Thielicke, locates sexuality in two dimensions: how it relates to being and how it relates to function. For Thielicke, sexuality is part of the essential nature of being human, one's being. "By man in his *being* we mean man as he is related to God, man insofar as he is the bearer of responsibility and an infinite value and insofar as he thus has the dignity of being an 'end in

¹² For a discussion of God's wisdom, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 94–99; Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 193–95.

¹³ See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 269–70.

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of how the trinitarian concept of Person sheds light on the Christian understanding of human personhood, see Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

¹⁵ In contemporary culture, the traditional understanding of the terms gender and sex has begun to shift. Historically, the terms gender and sex were often used interchangeably. If one were a male biologically, then one's gender was understood to be male. But this traditional understanding of gender and biological sex is no longer ubiquitous. In this article, we assume that there are only two options for gender: male and female. For a discussion of issues related to gender, sex, and sexuality, see Mark D. Liederbach and Evan Lenow, *Ethics as Worship: The Pursuit of Moral Discipleship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2021), ch. 17; and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

himself' (Kant), that is, never to be used as a means to an end."¹⁶ In addition, sexuality also includes one's function, which refers to "man as he actively steps out of himself, accomplishes and effects something, becomes, so to speak, 'productive'—whether it has to do with things or persons."¹⁷ Distinct from being, function locates sexuality in not only who one is, but also in how one acts and relates to others.

What we contend, therefore, is that God's creation of humans as sexual beings includes not only who they are as men and women who bear the image of God, but also to how these image bearers relate to one another as men and women. For humans to relate to one another in a manner that receives God's approval, they must relate as he planned in his wisdom. Scripture delineates two categories for relationships: relationships between persons who are not married to one another and relationships between persons who are married to one another. In his work *True Sexual Morality*, for instance, Christian ethicist Daniel Heimbach highlights these two distinct channels. Moreover, he rightly notes that both channels allow for chaste relations. For individuals not in a marriage relationship, Heimbach notes, "chastity means abstaining from sex altogether."¹⁸ For persons who are married to one another, in contrast, chastity means sexual faithfulness to one's partner. At its most basic level, therefore, the marriage relationship sets the boundaries for moral, sexual activity—it is the relationship in which sex operates as God designed it.

If God purposes that individuals in the marriage relationship relate to one another in sexual relations, then sex is God's idea. Moreover, it must, by nature, be good. Because it is designed to be practiced within covenant marriage, it must also by nature be relational.

Just because sex may transpire between two persons, however, does not make it moral or fulfill the relational aspect. Moral sex must correspond to how God designed it. When Jesus (e.g., Matt 19:3–9; Mark 10:6–8) and Paul (e.g., 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31) talk about sex and its purpose, they point us back to God's good design in creation. Theologians have attempted to capture Scripture's teaching on the purpose of sex under two main headings: unitive and procreative.¹⁹

The book of Genesis captures this unitive or bonding purpose this way: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). This "one flesh" union requires that the marriage partners "hold fast to" or "cling to" one another, which involves a deep commitment. To be sure, Jesus emphasized this devotion and loyalty when he said, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt 19:6). Far from being a casual encounter, moral sex occurs within the context of deep and lasting commitment. Accordingly, the prophet Malachi

¹⁶ Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, trans. J. Doberstein (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1964), 21.

¹⁷ Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, 21.

¹⁸ Daniel R. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 135.

¹⁹ Dennis P. Hollinger (*The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009], 95) argues for four purposes of human sexuality: consummation of marriage, procreation, love, and pleasure. Hollinger's proposal subdivides the unitive aspect of marriage into the three purposes of consummation, love, and pleasure. This fourfold approach is adopted by Burk, *What is the Meaning of Sex?*, 34–39. In this article, we use only two headings, believing that the other divisions are subsets of these two. For example, we too believe that moral sex is meant to be pleasurable but reason that this pleasure aspect fits within the unitive purpose. Stated differently, God designed sex so that couples enjoy their efforts at bonding and uniting. Moreover, this pleasure is not meant to be non-existent in efforts at procreation as well.

warns marriage partners, “So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless” (Mal 2:16).²⁰ Thus, any form of sexual activity that consciously rejects this relational aspect of sex and treats it casually or mechanically does not receive God’s blessing or approval. Such an approach is immoral.

The author of Genesis also captures the procreative purpose of sex. After the creation of humanity in God’s image, God immediately commanded couples to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). God designed sex so that couples could use it to “multiply and fill the earth” and build families and communities. God approves of this purpose for sex within the marriage relationship. Nevertheless, Scripture also has examples of couples for whom moral sexual activity did not always produce children. Indeed, Abraham and Sarah struggled for years before God provided them with a child (Gen 15–21). The point we are stressing here is that sex is not *merely* a private matter. Again, Heimbach writes, “If sex generates nothing good for others, something must be wrong with how it is practiced.”²¹ It must be open to the possibility of childbearing.²²

Lastly, the author of Genesis hints that God approves the purpose of pleasure in sex when he captures Adam’s response at first seeing Eve: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2:23). Likewise, Paul’s admonition to engage regularly in sexual relations with one’s spouse suggests that sex was meant for more than just procreation (1 Cor 7:3–4). However, God did not plan for this unitive purpose to be something that was merely endured, but rather, it was to be pleasurable. Moreover, the focus of this sexual pleasure is on one’s spouse and not self. Moral sex is other-oriented and focuses on pleasing one’s spouse.

The entire book of Song of Solomon seems to capture this divine perspective on the gift of sex within the marriage relationship. To be sure, it beautifully depicts the pleasures experienced in sexual relations. Solomon, for example, expresses how much he anticipates and enjoys kissing his bride: “Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely” (Song 4:3). He continues, “Your lips drip nectar, my bride: honey and milk are under your tongue” (4:11). He does not limit his praise to her lips and the act of kissing however. He also delights in caressing her breasts (7:7–8; cf., Prov 5:19). Likewise, Solomon’s wife invites her husband to come and enjoy the pleasures of sex with quite explicit language: “Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits” (Song 4:16).

Because this is how God in his good wisdom planned for humans to relate to one another, any other form of sexual expression, whether relational or non-relational, necessarily rejects God’s plan and thus does not receive his blessing or approval. God in his goodness and wisdom, therefore, created sex. He designed sex for meeting the unitive and procreative purposes, as well as designing it in a manner that allows couples to enjoy it while fulfilling these purposes. We conclude that ethical sexual acts occur exclusively within marriage, aimed at unity, typically open to procreativity.²³ By stating that ethical sexual acts are “aimed at unity,” we mean that pleasure is an aspect of unity. The exclusivity of shared

²⁰ The NASB translation states, “So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously” (Mal 2:16). This idea of “taking heed of your life” is a strong warning against unfaithfulness in one’s commitment.

²¹ Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality*, 163.

²² Hollinger (*The Meaning of Sex*, 102) explains, “Though couples engaging in sex need not intend to have children through a given act, they must always be open to the possibility, for sex is by nature procreative. It is part of its essential meaning.”

²³ We do not address certain issues such as homosexual sexual acts because they cannot exist within the context of biblical marriage.

pleasure makes the act unifying. That a spouse reserves this pleasure exclusively for his or her covenant marriage partner as an act of self-giving necessarily unites two in the act. Moreover, ethical sexual acts are “typically open to procreativity.” The married couple might not intend for a certain sexual act to result in the production of children, but they must have a disposition that is open to procreativity if it should result. These purposes recur repeatedly throughout the biblical storyline. Because God designed sex according to his own goodness and wisdom, it is by nature good.

2. Biblical and Theological Arguments for Impermissibility

Having laid the biblical and theological foundation for understanding sex, we now turn to addressing explicitly one form of sexual activity: self-stimulation. Our intent in this section is to provide a compelling biblical pastoral argument that the best rubric for Christian ethical decisions about sex is not merely “Does the Bible forbid it?” but rather “Does the act fulfill the explicit purposes for which God created sex?” When the biblical evidence is considered, we argue that self-stimulation (also called masturbation) is never a God-honoring act.

In contrast to those who evaluate the morality of masturbation within the context of psychological and human development,²⁴ we approach the question within the framework of how God in his wisdom designed it. We consider, for example, the following questions: How does masturbation fit within the covenantal nature of marriage? How does masturbation fulfill the purposes for which God created sex? And, how does masturbation relate to God’s command to be holy as he is holy?²⁵

2.1. How Does Masturbation Fit within the Covenantal Nature of Marriage?

God created sex as a means for individuals within the marriage relationship to relate to one another. Masturbation, in contrast, is a sexual act that is overtly non-relational. Moreover, where sex within the marriage relationship is altruistic and other-focused, masturbation by nature focuses only on self. Scripture repeatedly warns against a heart that is selfish. Paul commands believers to “do nothing from selfish ambition” (Phil 2:3), while James warns that the presence of selfishness in one’s heart leads to “disorder and every vile practice” (Jas 3:16). With such a negative view of acting from selfish motives presented in Scripture, it is impossible to imagine how masturbation does not fall short of God’s design for marriage. Because masturbation focuses a sexual desire on someone other than one’s spouse, one might rightly argue that it is a form of adultery—giving to another what alone should be given to one’s spouse. For these reasons, masturbation cannot fit within God’s design for covenantal marriage.

²⁴ See Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 138–42; and Richard F. Hettinger, *Growing Up with Sex* (Edinburgh: R&R Clark, 1970), 33–43.

²⁵ Heimbach (*True Sexual Morality*, 223) advances a similar argument for the impermissibility of masturbation: “God made sex to be *relational*, but solitary, self-stimulated sex is never relational. God made sex to be something *exclusive*, but while solitary self-stimulated sex is exclusive physically, it is not exclusive to another person and it encourages thoughts to wander in ways that are not exclusive at all. God made sex to be *profound*, but solitary self-stimulation is shallow. God made sex to be *fruitful*, but solitary self-stimulation treats sex like a commodity rather than capacity for production. God made sex to be *selflessly* God-centered, but solitary self-stimulation is self-centered and self-satisfying. God made sex to be *multidimensional*, but solitary self-stimulation separates physical sex from everything else. Perhaps most seriously, God made sex to be a joining of *complementary* sexual differences, but solitary, self-stimulated sex never involves corresponding sexual union” (original emphasis).

2.2. How Does Masturbation Fulfill the Purposes for Which God Created Sex?

In addition, masturbation does not fulfil the three main purposes of sex. For example, masturbation obviously is not procreative. The inclination to legitimize masturbation is part of a larger cultural denial of the purpose of sex. Todd Wilson comments, “Our culture has separated the act of sex from the purpose of sex. We have severed the connection between sex and its power to unite lives and create life, so that now, virtually everywhere we look, sex is separated from its uniting and procreating purposes.”²⁶ Furthermore, masturbation is not unitive because it privatizes sexual activity that is designed to be shared. Matthew Anderson notes the inability of masturbation to fulfill God’s good design: “Human sexuality is inherently social, and masturbation is not. In that sense, it represents a failure to fulfill the nature of Christian sexuality as God designed it.”²⁷ Finally, while it is true that self-stimulation may bring intense pleasure, it does not achieve moral sexual pleasure as God designed it when it is practiced in isolation from one’s spouse.

2.3. How Does Masturbation Relate to God’s Command to Be Holy as He Is Holy?

Lastly, masturbation falls short of God’s call for believers to “be holy, for [God is] holy” (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:16). God calls believers to be certain kinds of people—individuals formed according to the image of Jesus Christ. As we become new creations in Christ through the work of the Spirit, we correspondingly re-order our disordered loves.²⁸ Before our loves are completely reordered, however, we find that at times our flesh is driving our conduct. Paul captures this idea in his letter to the church at Philippi when he describes the “enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly” (Phil 3:18–19). Apart from Christ and the power of the gospel, persons are controlled by physical desires. In contrast, there is a repeated call for Christians to be characterized by self-control, regardless of one’s marital status: single, marrieds, or widows.

Paul similarly exhorts his readers to be imitators of God (Eph 5:1). Those who attempt to make “Christian” arguments for the permissibility of masturbation do so on the grounds that it is possible to separate masturbation from activities that are clearly prohibited, such as lust and pornography. We argue that even if the activities are divisible, masturbation is still categorically impermissible because it still runs contrary to the moral purity of God’s holy nature. It is impossible to imitate God’s self-giving nature while focusing solely on oneself. We further acknowledge that in the vast majority of cases masturbation involves lustful thoughts. Moreover, masturbation creates ungodly sexual tendencies and expectations in which a person assumes that sexual fulfillment should be on demand to meet one’s own immediate needs. Consequently, masturbation also falls short of the character and holiness to which

²⁶ Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality: Rediscovering the Christian Vision of Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 97–98. Ironically, Stan and Brenna Jones (*Facing the Facts*, 112) argue ultimately that masturbation may be permissible even though they acknowledge its incompleteness: “Maybe one reason so many people have confused feelings about masturbation is that it falls short of what God intended our bodies and sexual feelings to be used for, because it is something a person does alone rather than with a spouse. It can be selfish rather than loving. So even though masturbation may sometimes feel physically good, it will never feel complete.”

²⁷ Matthew Lee Anderson, *Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter to Our Faith* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011), 135.

²⁸ For an excellent discussion on the relationship of what we love and ethics, see Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church 3* (NPNF¹ 4:42). An important contemporary treatment is found in David K. Naugle, *Reordered Loves, Reordered Lives* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 37–45.

God calls everyone to walk. For these reasons—it cannot meet any of God’s purposes for sex or for marriage and it runs contrary to God’s moral character—we conclude that masturbation can never be a God-honoring behavior.

3. *Countering Christian Arguments for Permissibility*

Having put forward a biblical-theological sexual ethic and having made a case for the impermissibility of masturbation, we will briefly address some of the common arguments made for permissibility by those claiming a Christian worldview. These will be only brief comments on the outworking of the more robust biblical sexual ethic described above. We also do not intend the minimal references to be proof-texting; rather, the biblical references are representative of a larger stream of biblical thought, and space constraints demand brevity. The reader will note that there is a pattern in these arguments for the permissibility of masturbation: they begin by noting the Bible’s silence and then proceed quickly to pragmatic considerations.

3.1. **Healthy Sexual Expression**

Some argue that God created us with sexual capacities and sexual needs, and a legitimate means of fulfilling these desires is through personal self-stimulation. Balswick and Balswick, for example, state, “Masturbation can allow one to explore the pleasures of the body without guilt or shame.”²⁹ And further, they state, “Since God has created humans as sexual beings, masturbation provides a way for individuals to experience their sexuality and meet their sexual needs.”³⁰ Their assumption is threefold: (1) masturbation is a legitimate Christian practice because sexuality is merely individual, (2) sexual desires are needs, and (3) sexual acts are merely physical. As we have outlined above, the biblical picture of human sexuality runs counter to each of these assumptions. We have already made the case that masturbation is a categorically impermissible action. We also take issue with the supposition that sexual desires are needs that must be fulfilled. Not all desires are needs. Many sexual desires, even good marital sexual desires, are not fulfilled in the Christian life. Moreover, sex is not merely physical, so the simplistic solution of masturbation meeting a basic sexual desire is categorically incorrect because sexual acts, by design, are never merely physical (e.g., 1 Cor 6:12–20). Rather, sex is a gift from God to a married couple as an emblematic act of their one-flesh union (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5; Mark 10:8; Eph 5:31).

3.2. **Preparatory for Marital Intimacy**

Some argue that masturbation is helpful preparation for future sexual expression. Frequently authors argue that self-stimulation is a normal part of the maturation of adolescents getting to know their bodies.³¹ For example, James Dobson states,

It is my *opinion* that masturbation is not much of an issue with God. It is a normal part of adolescence which involves no one else. It does not cause disease, it does not produce babies, and Jesus did not mention it in the Bible. I’m not telling you to masturbate, and

²⁹ Judith K. Balswick and Jack O. Balswick, *Authentic Human Sexuality: An Integrated Christian Approach*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 289.

³⁰ Balswick and Balswick, *Authentic Human Sexuality*, 290.

³¹ Balswick and Balswick, *Authentic Human Sexuality*, 290; Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex*, 139–40.

I hope you won't feel the need for it. But if you do, it is my opinion that you should not struggle with guilt over it.³²

That this form of sexual expression “involves no one else” is the problem. Sexual expression, by God's good and wise design, must include someone else, namely one's spouse. Some even argue that masturbation focused on another person, such as one's future spouse, could be a healthy practice: “Fantasies about future possibilities are usually benign, and masturbating with one's spouse or future spouse in mind can be a way of creating a more personal context for an otherwise solitary act.”³³ Additionally, it can be argued that masturbation can be a clinical exercise within marriage to prepare or train a couple to achieve mutual orgasm.³⁴ The assumption is that a person requires a certain level of self-experience in order to be prepared to engage meaningfully with his or her spouse in a sexual context. Of course, another option is that a husband and wife mutually explore their bodies within the context of marriage. This moves the sexual learning experience within the context of the relational covenant of marriage and keeps the marriage bed pure/undefiled by making it the exclusive locus of sexual expression (Heb 13:4). Masturbation as a preparatory practice has the façade of making masturbation inter-personal, but the reality is that there is still only one person in the room. Moreover, this practice potentially creates unrealistic fantasies and expectations that will be unmet by a future or current spouse. Fantasy and personal sexual stimulation on demand will always be more “efficient” than godly mutual self-giving. Masturbation as a preparatory practice has the façade of training people to interact rightly with their spouses, but, in reality, it tends to train them toward their own touch instead of another's.

3.3. Permissible Release within Marriage

Even within marriage, every sexual desire is not satisfied because a married couple's schedules and desires rarely align perfectly. Some argue that masturbation is a solution to different sex drives among

³² Dobson, *Preparing for Adolescence*, 69 (emphasis his). Stan and Brenna Jones (*Facing the Facts*, 113) give similar counsel to adolescents, “Masturbation is usually not such a big issue that people should be overwhelmed with worry about it. Masturbation can become sinful if a person fills his or her imagination with immoral thoughts. But occasional masturbation that focuses on the pleasure of your body and not on lustful images may not be much of an issue with God. There may be more harm done by people punishing themselves with guilt than by the masturbation itself. We do not think God wants that.”

³³ Balswick and Balswick, *Authentic Human Sexuality*, 291. So also Johnson, “Toward a Biblical Approach to Masturbation,” 138: “The sexual drive is achieving its divinely intended purpose when masturbation is merely a side-effect of developing sexual maturity and the person is motivated for marriage.” And later, he states, “But fantasies involving a legitimate marital relationship with a potential or imaginary partner need not involve wrongful coveting. Such fantasies may quite appropriately express the affective-social dimension of the sex drive” (p. 142). Ironically, in his explanation, he admits that there is a danger of these fantasies being misapplied. His counsel is that it merely takes Christian maturity expressed in self-control: “One rightly concludes that sexual fantasies may serve an appropriate function in sexual development and that their content should be deliberately limited to activities and relationships consistent with the will of God, such as when one fantasizes relations with an imaginary marriage partner. This may require self-discipline, but that is a mark of Christian maturity” (p. 142).

³⁴ See for example, Mark A. Yarhouse and Erica S. N. Tan, *Sexuality and Sex Therapy: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 180, 229–33. They indicate being influenced by Geralsi, whose hermeneutic we discussed above.

spouses,³⁵ circumstantial impediments,³⁶ or even the death of one's spouse.³⁷ The assumptions again are that (1) sexual release is a need, and (2) sexual release is merely a physical need. We have already addressed that sexual release is a desire rather than a need. Masturbation as a cure for different sex drives among spouses assumes that sexual release is a merely physical desire and that one's spouse can be replaced with self. Instead of sex being an act of self-giving love, masturbation makes sexual desire to be an act of self-seeking substitution of one's spouse. Again, God intends sexuality to be shared by spouses. Paradoxically, one's own body belongs sexually to one's spouse (1 Cor 7:3–5). The consistent biblical call is not to indulge in every physical desire, but rather to exercise godly self-control by the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23; 1 Thess 4:3–7; 2 Tim 1:7). This type of utilitarian ethic assumes that the only options for someone with a sexual desire are fulfillment within the marriage (i.e., sex with one's spouse), illicit sexual acts (e.g., adultery), or masturbation. But the two God-designed means for dealing with sexual desires are sexual expression with one's spouse and Spirit-enabled self-control.

3.4. Lesser Evil or Enabling Self-Control

Some argue that masturbation is a God-given means to combat extramarital sexual expression, whether that be prior to marriage or adultery during marriage. Gerali, for example, lists several reasons that masturbation is acceptable: “The *first* [his emphasis] is that masturbation may be God's way of offering escape from greater sexual temptation and sin. As a way out, masturbation becomes beneficial.”³⁸ Johnson argues that masturbation is a legitimate way to deal with sexual desires when there is a delay between sexual maturity and marriage, “Accordingly, it would be unreasonable to expect complete sexual self-control in the unmarried with this gift [i.e., the gift of marriage], and masturbation should be

³⁵ McBurney and McBurney (*Real Questions, Real Answers About Sex*, 274) state, “It [i.e., masturbation] relieves sexual tension when a man and his wife have very different sex drives.” So also Balswick and Balswick (*Authentic Human Sexuality*, 291) state, “When married partners have different desires regarding the frequency of intercourse, masturbation can be a helpful and loving way for dealing with different needs.”

³⁶ McBurney and McBurney (*Real Questions, Real Answers About Sex*, 273) state, “When a husband and wife are separated by distance, sickness, disability, or pregnancy, masturbation is an option.” So also Hollinger (*The Meaning of Sex*, 160) comments, “When a couple is apart for a period of time, masturbation can be used if the act is directed toward the other and is clearly an expression of their loving, one-flesh union.” So also Johnson, “Toward a Biblical Approach to Masturbation,” 139.

³⁷ Hollinger (*The Meaning of Sex*, 160) states, “Some individuals may even use it [i.e., masturbation] legitimately for a time after their spouse dies, as part of the loving memory of their loved one. While it is no longer directly in the context of procreation, it is by memory still in the context of the one-flesh, procreative union.”

³⁸ Gerali, *The Struggle*, 132, cf. 126, 169. In an earlier section, he describes the reasoning: “If we're honest we'd have to agree that the sexual thoughts, desires, arousal, and even lust *precede* the need to masturbate. Once orgasm occurs, all that is gone. Masturbation is the end of lust, not the beginning of lust. Masturbation isn't lust nor does it feed lust. It ends lustful episodes. I continued to explain that there are many godly men and women who believe that because masturbation follows the lust and shuts down the process, it becomes the way out that many people pray for. For these people, this deliverance from lust makes masturbation a gift from God” (p. 103). Gerali makes a pragmatic argument that does not account for the biblical argument that masturbation itself is a sin, and thus it would not be a gift from God but rather the deceit of the flesh and Satan. Even from a pragmatic standpoint, his argument is not compelling. He presents lustful desires as being able to be quickly and resolutely dispatched by a mere physical release. But he does not consider that these “lustful episodes” are likely to become reinforced by the practice of self-stimulated orgasm with the result that the person's experience is not that of a singular episode but rather a sinful pattern.

expected in many cases where marriage is delayed and fornication is avoided.”³⁹ Similarly, some argue that even within marriage, masturbation can be a means of keeping oneself faithful to the marriage: “It [i.e., masturbation] is a hedge against unfaithfulness when a man’s wife is unavailable and temptation presents itself.”⁴⁰ This line of reasoning is tantamount to saying “let us do [a lesser] evil that good may come” (Rom 3:8). Masturbation is not a hedge against extramarital sexual expression; masturbation itself is sexual expression outside of the marriage. The God-given means for dealing with sexual desire are marriage and self-control (1 Cor 7:1–5, 36). Rather than engaging in so-called lesser sinful pleasures, Christians are called to make *no* provision for ungodly sexual expression. “Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:13–14).

4. Pastoral Reflections

In God’s goodness, he designed the goodness of marriage and the goodness of sex within marriage. Both of these realities are good, God-glorifying gifts to humanity. God intends for marital sex to draw a husband and wife together in mutual love and self-giving, thereby reinforcing their exclusive affections for one another. In the first marriage, Adam recognizes in Eve someone in whom he can delight and fulfill his commission, and he is to “hold fast” to her with care and devotion (Gen 2:24; cf., Matt 19:5; Mark 10:7; Eph 5:31). In this marriage relationship, they enjoy the mutual sexual satisfaction of giving themselves to “one another” (1 Cor 7:5). From that mutual love, God intends the generation of new life. As with all of God’s good gifts, evil is eager to corrupt, distort, and defile God’s design. Thus, it takes careful biblical thinking and Spirit-empowered self-control to enjoy and uphold God’s good design. The church collectively supports the purity of marriage (Heb 13:4), and a primary way that the church guards marriage and sex is by teaching about it rightly (1 Tim 4:1–10). Additionally, churches exercise corrective discipline to train their members toward God’s way (1 Cor 5:1–13).

But the Christian virtue of self-control, being led by the Spirit, is directly at odds with prevailing cultural narratives. Culture prizes license to do what one wants without constraints, particularly any biblical constraint. The Bible, however, prescribes restraints that promote our flourishing because those restraints are in line with how God designed us to flourish. So biblical morality is aligning our actions with their intended and God-oriented design for our good. On the one hand, we want to say that sexual expression is less than culture makes it—sexual expression is not our identity or essential humanity. And on the other hand, we want to say that sexual expression is more than what our culture makes it—sexual acts are not merely biochemical hormonal release; rather, sex is divinely designed to glorify God himself. A prevailing cultural lie is that one’s identity is his/her sexual expression; thus, the inability or prohibition to act sexually makes someone less than human, robbing them of personhood. But, in

³⁹ Johnson, “Toward a Biblical Approach to Masturbation,” 140. Kwee and Hoover seem to imply a similar justification of masturbation in the case of a dating couple: “Do all instances of masturbation reflect such grave moral failures? The intentions behind masturbation are varied and, arguably, not always of a lustful nature. A contrast of scenarios commonly encountered in the counseling office may help to illustrate this. In the first scenario, a young man and his girlfriend make out during a date but, out of respect for their shared Christian value system, they abstain from intercourse. The young man is nevertheless sexually aroused and on returning home, he masturbates to alleviate his pent-up sexual tension” (“Theologically-Informed Education about Masturbation,” 262).

⁴⁰ McBurney and McBurney, *Real Questions, Real Answers About Sex*, 274.

reality, everyone experiences unfulfilled sexual desires. The non-fulfillment of sexual desire, even good sexual desire, does not reduce a person's humanity, virility, masculinity, or femininity. On the contrary, the non-fulfillment of good desires can orient us properly to the consummation of all things for which we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20).

While we await our adoptions as sons and the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:18–25), we are indwelt and led by the Spirit of God as sons of God (Rom 8:9–15). Being indwelt by the Spirit transforms our minds, so that "those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (Rom 8:5). Christians walk by the Spirit and "do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal 5:16). The desires of the flesh produce the works of the flesh: "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality..." (Gal 5:19). In contrast to the desires and works of the flesh, the Spirit produces a radically unique way of living: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:22–24). And this Spirit-led way of life contrasts the flesh-led way of life particularly in the way that Christians act on sexual desires: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God" (1 Thess 4:3–5). Walking by the Spirit in our sexual desires and expressions means that we enact God's good design.⁴¹ We recognize that this side of heaven, many desires, even good desires, remain unfulfilled. We affirm that sex is designed to be social (in the smallest social unit of husband and wife), not secretive and secluded. We affirm that sex is designed to be selfless self-giving rather than self-serving. As singles and as marrieds, we keep the marriage bed pure by reserving the emblematic marriage act for the mutual self-giving of spouses.

In the midst of swirling cultural narratives urging the inherent goodness of every sexual impulse, it might be hard to believe that God's way is best. It might be hard to believe that living out our faith in God through the blood of Christ and the empowering of the Spirit is really the most joy-filled course of life. But God is wise. His way is best. And his plan is for our good. Marrieds rejoice in the goodness and God-glorification of marital sex, and treasure Christ as all-satisfying in the midst of unfulfilled desires. Unmarrieds rejoice in the goodness and God-glorification of seeing Christ as all-satisfying in every desire. John Piper memorably summarizes the satisfying joy in the Christian life, "The fight for joy is the fight to see and believe Christ as more to be desired than the promises of sin. This faith and sight come by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."⁴² Using our bodies rightly begins by thinking rightly about God and humanity (2 Cor 10:5–6). With the hope of the near return of Christ, let us walk by the Spirit not in the flesh: "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom 13:14).

⁴¹ "Purity" is another word that can describe this Spirit-led walk in regard to our sexual desires. While the word is often criticized along with aspects of "purity culture," rightly understood "purity" communicates an orientation of the heart rather than the mere absence of prohibited activity. Garrett Kell (*Pure in Heart: Sexual Sin and the Promises of God* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021], 26) helpfully defines purity: "Purity is an orientation of the faith-filled heart that flees the pleasures of sin and pursues the pleasures of God by the power of the Holy Spirit."

⁴² John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 105.

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