

"The book that millions of Christian parents wish they had."

SEAN PALMER, author and speaker

Shame-Free Sex Talks



GUIDING KIDS TO LIVE OUT THEIR FAITH, LOVE THEIR
BODIES, AND UNDERSTAND THE GOODNESS OF SEX



Kelly Edmiston

I never thought I would give an endorsement for a book on sexuality. I've been looking for such a unicorn for some time. I've had many sent to me with no luck. But this is it. Here's all the endorsement you'll need: My family will be using this book with our own teenage children. That's how much I believe in it and how useful I found it. Helpful. Healthy. Resourceful.

Marty Solomon, author of *Asking Better Questions of the Bible* and creator of *The BEMA Podcast*

Today, children's views of sex are relentlessly shaped by social media and an entertainment industry that strips intimacy of its sanctity. In a world where no ground is holy, Christian parents must be the primary voice in their children's lives. Dr. Edmiston's faith-centered approach provides parents with the practical, honest tools needed to reclaim this conversation and ground it in God's beautiful design. It is an essential resource for every family, and one I wish had been available when my husband and I were raising our own children.

Dr. MaryKate Morse, author and speaker

As the father of two adult daughters and the son of conservative Southern churches, I quickly learned that my upbringing did not adequately prepare me for conversations with my daughters about their identities, bodies, sex, and sexuality, especially in relation to their spirituality. As a parent, I found myself relying on unhelpful conservative guides that were more focused on winning culture wars than on understanding God's teachings. In contrast, progressive views often reduced human bodies to mere functions and pleasures.

I've known Dr. Kelly Edmiston for over twenty years. She has been instrumental in guiding my wife, our daughters, and me

through these beautifully complex conversations. Now she can guide you, too. *Shame-Free Sex Talks* is the book that millions of Christian parents wish they had—one that conveys the glories of God's design without resorting to the shame often used by others.

Sean Palmer, author of *Speaking by the Numbers*, nationally recognized speaker, speaking coach, and trainer

At last, the book about sexuality that Christian parents need has arrived. *Shame-Free Sex Talks* is biblically sound, medically accurate, culturally aware, morally discerning, pastorally wise, and relentlessly honest, realistic, and practical. This is a book that can be put directly in the hands of parents right now—and should be! Highly recommend.

Rev. Dr. David P. Gushee, distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University

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GUIDING KIDS TO LIVE OUT THEIR FAITH, LOVE THEIR
BODIES, AND UNDERSTAND THE GOODNESS OF SEX



Kelly Edmiston



Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

Shame-Free Sex Talks: Guiding Kids to Live Out Their Faith, Love Their Bodies, and Understand the Goodness of Sex

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ISBN 979-8-89802-054-5

Printed in the United States of America

32	31	30	29	28	27	26
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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INTRODUCTION

FOR THE OVERWHELMED PARENT

I was sitting across the table from Mary one spring afternoon, sharing tacos and iced tea, when she glanced around and said in a low voice, “He asked me about oral sex.” She was describing the conversation she’d had the day before with her fifteen-year-old son.

Mary is a lovely and vibrant young mother of three children, and she and her family are members of the church that I pastor. Mary served as a missionary overseas for ten years before her children were born, and now she works as a nurse in a local hospital. She and her husband are church leaders and deeply committed Christians. And she was looking at me with a panicked expression.

“Okay,” I said. “What about oral sex?”

She went on. “He told me that he and his girlfriend were talking about it, and he wondered if it was okay if they do it, since they have been dating for three years now.”

“What did you tell him?” I asked.

“I froze,” she said. “I didn’t know what to say. They seem way too young.”

She trailed off for a moment. Then she continued, “So I started rambling about the importance of healthy exploration, safety, and consent. I got embarrassed and tongue-tied and ended up just

ending the conversation and walking out of the room. I don't think I gave him an answer at all."

I said, "Well, what *do* you think about them having oral sex?"

Mary responded, "I don't want him to."

"Why not?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know why. I don't want him to feel bad about his desires. I don't want him to have the same shame-based relationship with sex that I did growing up. I don't think he should experiment with oral sex at fifteen—but honestly, how long can I expect the kid to wait? I had just hoped it would be longer than this."

Mary dropped her head to the table in despair, nearly splattering hot sauce all over the place.

In my experience as a pastor for over twenty years—and as a parent myself—Mary's story is not unique. Most Christian parents feel this way: They know sex is complicated, and they have some level of conviction or idea that their faith should inform how they talk to their kids about it. They think it's important for their kids to wait until marriage. But they also know—and may have experienced themselves—that conversations about the Bible and abstinence can easily swerve into shame-based territory, with long-term implications for both a person's faith and their sexuality. And so they find themselves in despair, rambling on and on, giving their children more questions than answers in the face of complex issues around sexuality.

Disembodied

These days we have a dysfunctional relationship with our sexuality in a myriad of ways. In our culture, bodies are objectified through the rampant pornography industry. Popular movies and TV shows glorify infidelity. As I wrote this, I saw an advertisement

for a film involving a woman in her sixties who has an erotic affair with a man thirty years younger than her—and this is “sold” to us as a healthy exploration of these characters finding their true selves. Our preteens and teens come home talking about “furries” and all sorts of other sexual terms that they (and we) don’t fully understand. We see sex everywhere, from concerts to breath mint commercials, because sex sells. Always has and always will. The problem we face today is that sexual licentiousness is sold to us and our children as freedom when in fact it manipulates us into becoming more disconnected from our own bodies.

Simultaneously, this disconnection is also showing up in how many young people are distancing themselves from their bodies and other people’s bodies through isolation. Smartphones, social media, and video games take up more time for our kids than face-to-face human connections. Sex sells, and real relationships cost.

And what some Christian parents may find surprising (or not, if you experienced this for yourself) is that being disconnected from our bodies is oftentimes something we learn in church. Dysfunctional sexuality is at the root of many of our own first exposures to sex education. Too many Christians have distorted, disembodied relationships with sex thanks to being raised in something commonly referred to as “purity culture.”

Purity culture began in the early 1990s, when fear of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases ran high. But fear rarely leads to measured responses. When we’re afraid, we can—even without fully realizing what we’re doing—begin reacting instinctively but not wisely, trying to shore up protective walls by getting others to share our fear. We draw battle lines; we use absolute, black-and-white language; we speak and think in extremes to make sure no one gets close to what we’re afraid of.

Shame becomes a powerful weapon in our war to control what we fear. That’s why a generation of young Christians was taught

to think of sexuality in the most severe spiritual terms: that sexual expression and sexual desires outside of marriage—far more than any other sin—made you unholy before a holy God. Purity rings and virginity pledges became symbols of holiness. Young men were told that their sexual urges were animalistic, needing to be suppressed and tamed if they were going to be holy. Virginity was for girls to guard, and if a young woman became “lost,” she would be not only unholy but also ruined. The church and church leaders implied—and often said outright—that sex makes you dirty, so you should save it for the person you love the most. Some purity culture adherents even vowed not to kiss anyone except their spouse (and even then not until their wedding day).

At the end of the day, purity culture failed in its goals. Shame rarely leads to lasting change. Spiritual scare tactics didn’t delay when young people engaged in sexual activity. Even if someone did abstain from sex until marriage, Christians often found themselves disappointed or even traumatized after the wedding. The wounds of shame didn’t disappear.

But What Now?

If you were raised with shame-based conversations about sex, you likely have this book in your hands because you’re looking for an alternative for your kids. Because while most Christian parents know what they *don’t* want to teach their kids about sex, they don’t know what they *do* want to teach their kids about sex.

Parents who insist on abstinence until marriage often struggle to explain their reasoning in a way that genuinely connects with their kids, much less equips young people to cultivate the conviction for themselves. Some of us may pull from a variety of places in the Bible, like the story of the garden of Eden or a few words from Paul about sexual immorality and marriage (e.g., 1 Corinthians

7:2; Hebrews 13:4), only to realize that a teenager doesn't find a couple of proof texts particularly convincing. Some parents teach abstinence the way parents of young children talk about Santa Claus—with a “We want you to believe, but we know you don't” *wink wink*. Many Christian parents have resigned themselves to believing that abstinence until marriage is a myth that their children will eventually outgrow. Most parents opt for one or a few isolated conversations about sex where they cover body parts, the mechanics, and “God's plan for marriage.” Then they hold their breath and pray that their kids do not ask them any questions.

But if God created our bodies and our sexuality, shouldn't God's vision for us—and how we share that vision with our kids—be a lot more life-giving than all that?

What if our conversations with our kids weren't just litanies of dos and don'ts? What if instead we were able to guide them into an understanding of sexuality as a means by which we know God? To help them see that our bodies are vehicles to get to God, not barriers between us and God?

This book is for Christian parents and caregivers. This book is for every parent who doesn't know what to say to their kid about sex and sexuality. This book is my offering to the parent who wants to drop their head in the hot sauce of despair. This book is an alternative for the Christian parent who has left purity culture but still desires to raise their kids with Christian ethics.

As we journey through these pages together, we're going to explore a new path forward in how we talk to our kids about sex. The question I hear most often from Christian parents is *What does the Bible teach about sex?*

There are many resources that have sought to answer that question comprehensively—the theological nuts-and-bolts of sex and sexuality, if you will. While theological convictions matter (for example, I serve as a pastor in a network of churches that

has historically held God's design for sex as within a covenantal marriage relationship between a man and a woman), our goal in this book is not to enter into debates over different perspectives. Instead, we're going to explore a big-picture biblical framework and practical ideas to equip our kids to grow up letting their spiritual lives inform their sexual choices.

In part one, we'll clarify the why behind the Christian ethics we teach our kids and take a closer look at the life-giving foundation the Bible offers. We'll discover a threefold biblical vision for God's intent for our sexuality and the values about our bodies, pleasure, and God's presence with us that emerge from God's Word.

With our vision and values in place, we'll move into the nitty-gritty in part two: the tools we need to help our kids grow in weaving together their sexuality with their spirituality. We want our kids not just to learn about the integration of body and soul but also be shaped by it. The twenty-five practices we'll unpack in this section will equip you with conversation prompts and ideas for open, honest, low-pressure dialogue with your kids no matter your parenting style or your kids' personalities and life stages.

Parents, the best gift we can give our children is for our own bodies and souls to become increasingly integrated so that our sexuality and our spirituality are woven together. As this happens, we can teach our kids this integration so we and they can know the majesty of this God-ordained plan. May we know the sensuousness of our bodies and teach our kids about the sensuousness of their bodies. And may this all lead us, as we lead our kids, to know the love of the Trinity, this ever-increasing love.

PART ONE

A Fresh Vision for Sex and the Christian Life



CHAPTER 1

SPIRITUAL SEXUALITY

The Integrated Soul

“It won’t fit!” I was twenty-five years old, half weeping and half shrieking these words to my mentor over the phone. Three weeks before, I had married the love of my life, a man I was deeply attracted to. I had done everything right. Everything I’d been told to do to have sex the right way, the way God wanted for me. And everything was going wrong.

While I am grateful for a lot about my upbringing, one thing that I have spent my adult life unlearning is the messaging I received about sex. I learned, at home and at church, that sex before marriage was the worst, the highest, and the most cardinal sin that a Christian can commit. No one used these exact words with me, but they didn’t have to. This message—at the height of purity culture in the 1990s—convinced me that if I had sex before marriage I just might go to hell. Or if not hell, I would be

condemned to a life of singleness (which, for a West Texas girl in the 1990s, might as well have been hell).

Premarital sex, I'd been told, would make me dirty and unworthy of love. At church, we had the purity ring talk, and the youth pastor passed around a rose to demonstrate how girls who "give away their virginity" are like wilted roses. We even had a youth pastor drain a toothpaste tube in front of a room full of teenagers and compare it to the loss of virginity, proclaiming to us that you can never get it back.

I don't remember ever having a conversation about the goodness of sex or the purpose of sex. Only that God did not want me to have it, that not having sex was for my good, and that if I ever did have sex before marriage, I would be ruined, forever labeled by all as a slut. No one wanted to be a wilted rose or an empty toothpaste tube!

All this planted a seed of shame in me—a deeply buried belief that my body was bad, an instrument of lust for men. Pleasure was sinful, and sex was a cardinal *no-no*—until, of course, I found a husband, and then all of it would be fine.

The problem is, that's not how it worked for me. And that's not how it works for most people. You can't live your whole life taught to be disgusted by green beans and then one day be expected to turn on a dime and eat them every day.

I waited until marriage to have sex with a man I loved. But then we got married. And I froze sexually. There was so much hype and talk and waiting around the event of intercourse on the first night of our honeymoon, and I was anxious leading up to it. We talked about our expectations, even down to the details, as we had been coached to do. We read books about intercourse. We talked about our first night in premarriage counseling. I talked to my married friends, mentors, and family members about it.

And yet when we tried to actually insert his penis into my vagina, I went cold and froze.

I was married, but sex felt wrong. I felt dirty. I felt scared, vulnerable, and exposed. Surely my innocence was being taken, and God would never look at me the same way. It is strange to say now, but I felt violated. I would freeze, and my husband would freeze in response to me, terrified that he might hurt me. I cried for months, wondering what was wrong with me.

My story is not unique among Christian women raised in purity culture. I have wondered what would have been different had someone told me what I know now: that my body is good and holy, that my sexual desire is God-given and God-approved, and that sexual expressions are avenues available to us for us to know God more. How would my fears have been resolved, how would my wedding night have been different, if I'd known that sexual pleasure was about being a human made in the image of God?

Integrating Spirituality and Sexuality

Most of the time, conversations about sex are separate from discussions about spirituality. We learn about spirituality from the church, and we learn about sex from the media. We wrongly believe that spirituality is about God and sexuality is, well, about sex. Spiritual sexuality is all about learning to write a new, shame-free story for our children so that they can develop a positive relationship with their bodies and sex.

Spiritual sexuality is a Christian sexual ethic free from shame. Ethics, as ethicist and pastor Dr. David Gushee points out, are the critical reflection on morality.¹ Morals are the choices we make. Ethics are the why behind those choices. A Christian moral behavior may be that abstinence until marriage is good. Ethics is the

study of why that is good. Teaching kids spiritual sexuality allows their sexuality and their spirituality to grow up together. The formation of both sexuality and spirituality happens over time. As a two-lane highway merges into one, so spirituality and sexuality are designed by God to be experienced as two areas merging into one. Spiritual sexuality recognizes that spirituality and sexuality are designed to be integrated. The good news is that spiritual sexuality can be taught and formed in our kids as a uniquely Christian sexual ethic.

Let's turn to a more thorough look at what we mean by *spirituality*, *sexuality*, and *spiritual sexuality*.

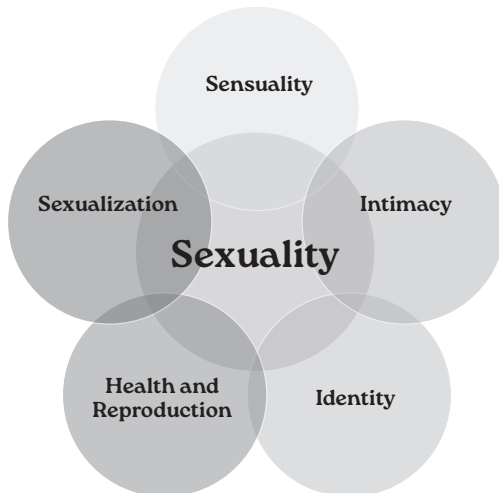
- **Spirituality.** Spirituality is an internal and external reality for every human. Theologian and pastor Eugene Peterson says that what we mean today by spirituality is “God alive and active and present.”²

The truth is that every person has spirituality. Spirituality is not simply church or religious activities. Internally, spirituality is how a person views themselves in relationship to God. Externally, spirituality is how a person behaves as a result of that belief. A person's spirituality, therefore, can be observed in every area of their life.

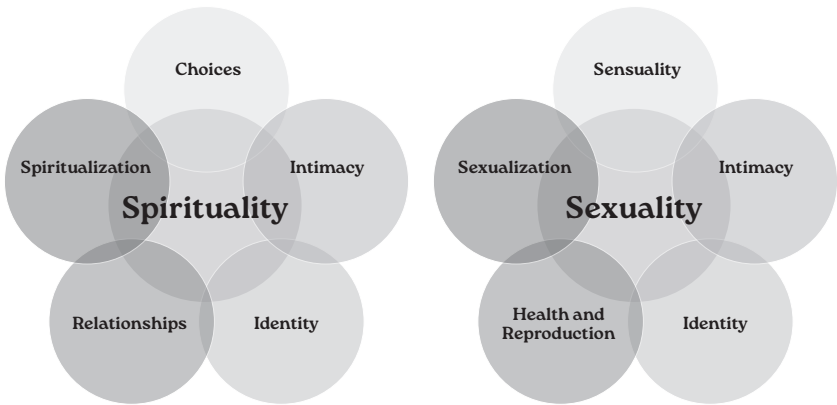
For the follower of Jesus, spirituality is how a person lives the Christian life. Peterson writes that true Christian spirituality is the “development of awareness and discernments that are as alert and responsive in the workplace as in the sanctuary, as active while changing diapers in a nursery as while meditating in a grove of aspens, as necessary when reading a newspaper editorial as when exegeting a sentence written in Hebrew.”³



- **Sexuality.** Sexuality is both an internal and an external reality for every human. *Sexuality* is an encompassing term for sensuality, intimacy, sexual identity, sexual health, and sexualization/sexual activity. Sexuality is how a person experiences their own body and what they do with their body sexually.



- **Spiritual sexuality.** Spiritual sexuality is a Christian sexual ethic, free from shame, that is about understanding the body's place in spirituality. The integration of spirituality and sexuality is a framework that includes how we see ourselves, other people, and the world. Development of spiritual sexuality begins at birth and continues throughout a lifetime.



When spirituality and sexuality are integrated, we see two important shifts in how our kids understand sex.

1. *Our spirituality informs how we make decisions about sexuality.* This is what is missing in the conversation with young people today. Over three years of research, conducting hundreds of interviews with Christian teenagers, I learned that most Christian teenagers do not consider God or spirituality a factor in how they make decisions about sex. Those who believe spirituality should be a factor in how they make decisions about sex could not articulate why.
2. *Sexuality informs spirituality.* When spirituality informs sexuality, my body and my sexual desires become resources

for knowing God more. For example, when I experience sexual pleasure with my husband, that pleasure leads me to experience God's love to a greater extent. When our kids experience sexual desire at any stage, we can teach them that this desire is from God and meant to lead them to God. What would it look like if a preteen boy had a sexual desire and, instead of hiding that desire and subsequently moving into a shame posture, he brought that desire to God, either through prayer or by talking to a safe adult in his community? What if he learned to take a posture of gratitude instead of shame because he had been taught that sexual desire is a gift from God that makes him human, not unholy? It is possible to teach kids that their desires don't make them unholy or bad. Their desires are intended to lead them to God. God's plan for our kids is for them to experience the highest form of sexual pleasure within the safety of a covenant.

When sexuality and spirituality work together, humans flourish. When we raise our kids with an integration of sexuality and spirituality, then they grow up to see God in all areas of their lives. This will lead them to have a bigger, more expansive view of God and more satisfying sex lives as adults.

To cultivate spiritual sexuality is to acknowledge the reality that we are "ensouled bodies and embodied souls," to borrow ethicist Paul Ramsey's phrase.⁴ In the Bible, the word *soul* is used to describe the whole of who we are. The soul is not an ethereal, ghostlike essence inside us; it is the container for the body, mind, and heart. As Hebrew scholar Jeff A. Benner notes, "The soul is the whole of the person, the unity of the body, organs and breath. It is not some immaterial spiritual entity, it is you, all of you, your whole being or self."⁵

Consider how we read the Bible differently when we have this understanding of the soul. You may be familiar with the Shema, the central prayer of God's chosen people:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your *soul* and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9, NIV, EMPHASIS ADDED

Now consider Benner's translation of this passage, which highlights the breadth of the definition of *soul*:

Israel, pay careful attention and respond: Yahweh works in unity with himself: and you shall act upon your love to YHWH with your thoughts and mind, with your entire body and with everything that you possess.⁶

When asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus quotes the Shema: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mark 12:28, 30-31, RSV). Benner explains what it means to love God with your heart, soul, and mind: "The [Hebrew] phrase 'heart, mind and soul,' as it is translated in the RSV, is generally interpreted to mean that we are to love YHWH with "three" things [separate parts of our being], but the reality is

that this phrase is a form of poetry that is using three synonyms to show that our love for YHWH is to be all encompassing, beginning with our thoughts, then our bodies, then everything we possess.”⁷

As Benner is pointing out, loving God with our integrated selves is the greatest commandment. You cannot do something with your mind that you don’t do with your soul. You can’t do something with your body that you don’t do with your soul. Your body, mind, and heart were created to work together. Teaching kids to see this truth is what spiritual sexuality is all about.

Symptoms of the Divorce Between Body and Soul

Spiritual sexuality stands in stark contrast to distorted worldviews around us that have tragically divorced the body from the soul. We talked a bit about these disembodied ways of being in the introduction, but there are three primary symptoms of this divorce between body and soul that we must understand before we can help our children—and ourselves—bring the pieces back together.

Symptom 1: Sex as a Physical Act Only

The belief that it doesn’t matter what we do with our bodies is a secular idea, perhaps best captured by seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes, who wrote, “I think, therefore I am.”⁸ James K. A. Smith coined the term “brains-on-a-stick”⁹ to summarize this theory of humanity from Descartes and other Enlightenment philosophers: that the soul is the sum of what is in the mind. But any philosophy that relies on just one part of the soul to the detriment of the others is an incomplete one.

You may recognize some of how we see this philosophy at work today on two seemingly opposite ends of a sex spectrum. On one extreme, we find the hookup culture that continues to thrive among young people, especially on high school and university

campuses. A hookup is a sexual encounter with a noncommitted partner. Hookup statistics are startling: “50% of young adults aged 18–29 have participated in casual sex at some point.” Furthermore, “over 70% of individuals report feeling some level of guilt after casual sex.”¹⁰

Author Naomi Wolf describes a common discussion she has with students in her university classes about sex:

“Why have sex right away?” a boy with tousled hair and Bambi eyes was explaining. “Things are always a little tense and uncomfortable when you just start seeing someone,” he said. “I prefer to have sex right away just to get it over with. You know it’s going to happen anyway, and it gets rid of the tension.”

“Isn’t the tension kind of fun?” I asked. “Doesn’t that also get rid of the mystery?”

“Mystery?” He looked at me blankly. And then, without hesitating, he replied: “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Sex has no mystery.”¹¹

Sex as uncomfortable and something to “get . . . over with”? What a far cry from God’s good plan for us to experience the highest form of human mystery, intimacy, and pleasure.

As a pastor for over twenty years, I have had hundreds of conversations with young people who try to convince me (and themselves) that their decision to have sex (or not) is a choice they are making with their bodies only. They behave promiscuously on Friday and Saturday nights, engaging in sexual activity with a variety of people, and then they lift their hands in worship on Sunday with no regard for confession or repentance. They tell me sex is just a physical act, wrongly believing that whom they have sex with has nothing to do with their spiritual lives.

Hookup culture is one form of disconnection from our bodies. Ironically, the “sex recession” we find ourselves in is another.

Research shows that sexual activity among young people is decreasing because the amount of time young people spend with others is significantly decreasing. Young people are spending less time together and more time alone and on screens: “Between 2010 and 2019, the average time young adults spent with friends in a given week fell by nearly 50%, from 12.8 hours to just 6.5 hours.”¹²

In his book *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt calls this period “the Great Rewiring.”¹³ Adolescents going through puberty during this period were raised on smartphones. Childhood became increasingly digital. So many two-year-olds have an iPad today! This digital childhood has led kids to experience greater anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. Our young adults may be having less sex, but they are also more depressed, more overweight, more socially isolated, and more addicted to pornography than ever before. While we may want to celebrate that kids are having less sex, we cannot celebrate the reason why. This is hardly something to celebrate.

Victims of “the Great Rewiring” stay isolated because of the social connection they think they’re finding through technology. As the technological tether stunts social development, it simultaneously stunts sexual development. Some kids never learn how to call the person they like on the phone because they will just slide into their DMs or stalk their TikTok account. They are missing out on necessary social/sexual developmental lessons learned from interacting with romantic interests more directly and conversationally. Kids who stay isolated due to technology never experience the pain of being rejected at the school dance because they stayed home playing video games instead of being with their peers. That might sound like a relief to those of us who have experienced the pain of rejection—but the reality is that kids who don’t go through

these developmental experiences don't learn how to develop resilience, how to emotionally engage with a romantic interest, how to date, how to have intelligent conversations with others, and how to recover from a broken heart.

For Christian parents, hookup culture and the sex recession are equally concerning realities, symptoms of the same sickness. If sex is simply “an itch to be scratched,” then we are bringing only a third of our body-mind-and-heart selves to sex. We can do it with a stranger or by ourselves in our rooms in front of a computer screen.

But sex is an embodied experience, one where we are meant to bring our whole bodies (not just our genitals), hearts, minds, and very souls to another human to grow in intimacy and knowledge of both ourselves and them. Furthermore, sexual development is not just about the act of sex. Sexual development is about all the things that go into developing a covenant relationship that may lead to sex. Sex is not something we need to just “get over . . . with” but something we were designed to cherish. Sex is not just a physical act. God created sex to be a gateway to a glorious and spiritual union between God and humans and between humans.

Symptom 2: Pornography

The second way we see our world divorce the soul from the body is through the production and consumption of pornography. Pornography is a multibillion-dollar industry full of “professionally produced or consumer-generated pictures or videos intended to sexually arouse the consumer.”¹⁴ Addiction to pornography has grown exponentially in the church in a post-purity culture age. The message of purity culture to Christian men was *Make sure you don't have sex, because you will be unholy and maybe go to hell*. As a result—and aided by the prevalence of personal devices like smartphones and laptops—many men (and an increasing number of women) turned to pornography. A recent study by the Barna

Group revealed that over half of professing Christians interviewed watch pornography.¹⁵ According to findings, 84 percent of individuals dealing with pornography addiction handle this issue in isolation, with few seeking outside help or counseling.¹⁶

Young people were never taught how to bring their pornography use into the light and get the help and healing that they needed. They were told that their sexual desire was sinful, which led them into sin; this sin led them to hiding and shame, and that resulted in a generation of people addicted to pornography.

It is beyond the scope of this book to unpack all the devastating realities of pornography. But as parents seeking to raise kids with spiritual sexuality, we must be aware of pornography's evil prevalence and be in frequent conversation with our school-age children about its ubiquity and the harm. According to a 2023 research study, 10 percent of young adults had seen pornography before age nine, 27 percent had seen it by age eleven, and 50 percent by age thirteen.¹⁷ Deepfake porn, nudes sent by peers, excessive screen time, and the lack of parental controls make the reality of pornography a real and present danger in the lives of our children.¹⁸

Pornography objectifies bodies and sells sex as a product to be consumed, which has devastating consequences for human relationships. Research has found that pornography exposure in childhood and adolescence is linked to risky sexual behaviors in young adults,¹⁹ and “using pornography correlates with decreased sex-life satisfaction, increased desire for rough or violent sex, and increased chances of divorce.”²⁰

Author Jonathan Grant writes, “Pornography . . . has made sex central to personal identity while ironically emptying it of its deeper meaning. Such contradictory pressures pose a significant threat to modern spiritual, emotional, and psychological identity, undermining the resilience of relationships. These mixed messages have also made it more difficult for Christians to bind themselves

to the practice of chastity, that is, living faithfully in both singleness and marriage.”²¹

Pornography is a problem within the context of spiritual sexuality because pornography empties sex of its spiritual significance. Explicit images of naked bodies reinforce the lie that sex is just a physical act and is just about getting a physical release. This could not be further from the truth. Sex is a physical act designed to give us physical pleasure with the end goal of leading us into greater union with our partner and with God.

As parents, we want to raise kids who hold sexual acts as sacred. We want our kids to experience their bodies and bodily desires as resources for knowing God.

Symptom 3: Sexual Repression

Christians are particularly vulnerable to the third symptom of this divorce between the body and the soul: sexual repression. Sexual repression occurs when we believe that the body is a barrier between us and God rather than a resource for knowing God. When we believe that we must surpass the body to become truly spiritual and that the “unholy” reality of the body makes us unclean or unworthy, we are actually moving further from what God desires for us.

I work with a lot of Christians who were raised in purity culture, and sexual repression has emerged as a key facet of that belief system, with painful consequences. Consider Carrie’s story.

When I first met with her, Carrie was thirty-two years old, married, and the mother of a two-year-old son. She married her husband, Caleb, when she was twenty-one and he was twenty-three. They were both raised in Christian homes and abstained from sexual intercourse until marriage. And today, after nine years of marriage, Carrie has never had an orgasm that she is aware of.

Carrie tells me that Caleb is a tender and loving partner. He spent years reading sex books and has tried to get Carrie to

communicate about her sexual needs in their marriage. But she is hesitant to talk about her struggle to orgasm with Caleb. She feels shame and embarrassment even when Caleb just tries to bring up a conversation about sex. Growing up, Carrie was taught that sex is for men and that women participate in sex only to please their husbands (and have children, of course), so she never learned the mechanics of sex, learned her own body, or discovered what was pleasurable to her.

For Carrie—as for many young people raised in purity culture—sex was always the forbidden act. In her Christian context, having sex was the very worst thing someone could do. She spent her entire life thinking about having sex and then making sure she didn't have sex. When she got married and sex was expected, she found that years of repression and fear had become so deeply ingrained that she didn't know how to find her way to sexual desire. Now, after nine years of marriage, sex has lost its forbidden allure. She and Caleb are resigned that this is just how things are.

When sex is the forbidden fruit, people learn to disconnect from their bodies to try to stay faithful to their faith commitments. In this dualistic worldview, the further away from the desires of the body you move, the closer to God you move. And the closer to God you move, the more the body must be left behind.

But sexual repression is not chastity. Chastity is being morally directed in decisions about sex instead of impulse directed. Sexual repression is a result of fear and shame. Sexual repression is about shutting down your desires and ignoring them. Chastity is about making morally directed decisions about your sexual desires based on your values.

We want to raise kids who uphold chastity because of the goodness of sex, not the fear of it. We want to raise kids who grow in sexual intimacy and pleasure with their partner from their very

first sexual encounter and throughout their lifetime. To do this, we must show our kids God's good plan for sex. We can teach our kids that God created their bodies and that the sexual desires of their body don't separate them from God but instead serve as a powerful resource for them to know God.

The remedy for the tragic divorce between the body and the soul is a generation of parents willing to change the conversation about sex. And in order to change the conversation, we need more expansive, robust, and truly beautiful theology.

Discussion Questions

1. Map out your sexual autobiography, identifying messages that you learned about sex and your body. Reflect on the people who taught you about sex, the words that were used, the media influence you experienced, and so on. Try to think about both the overt messages (things people said to you directly) and the subtle messages (things you assumed or picked up on).
 - a. What is your earliest memory of learning about sex?
 - b. What messages did you learn about your body?
2. Put in your own words the definitions we've explored for *spirituality* and *sexuality*. How do these definitions differ from the ones you were raised with?
3. What have you taught your kids about spirituality and sexuality?
4. What do you want for your kids as their spirituality and sexuality grow up together?