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SEXUAL SANITY FOR WOMEN IN A WORLD GONE MAD

by Ellen Dykas

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SYNOPSIS

Christians don't have a shining track record in addressing sex. It may have been presented in unhelpful and unbiblical teaching (through poor teaching of the Bible) or ignored altogether. Women in the church have struggled with the "louder silence" in regard to female sexuality. In a world spiraling into a sexual free-for-all, many Christian women are succumbing to the cultural insanity that says sex is all about you; do what you want. On the other hand, others are smothered in shame concerning their sexual struggles, because supposedly only men struggle with sexual desires gone amok. God speaks to all of these issues and He does so without blushing, shaming, or offering clichés. Sexual sanity, which is gained through the wise, unashamed, and bold teaching of the Bible, is God's gift for all. Freedom and the healing grace of Jesus are for all those (including women) who have experienced broken-heartedness and the captivity of sexual addictions. Sexual sanity is a reality women can grow into as we embrace God's design for sexuality rather than the ever-increasing expressions of broken sexuality.

"I guess I'm just like a man, Ellen. I want to have sex all the time." Darcy¹ sat in front of me wrestling to make sense of her sexual struggles, as had many women over my years of serving with Harvest USA. She, like many other women, rarely had heard clergy or professionals addressing women who might be struggling with sexual addictions. She had swum for years in the river of the hook-up culture, having jumped in as a teenager. Now as a forty-something single woman, she was experiencing the captivity of years of sexual experiences that left her unfulfilled. The river's toxic waters had seeped into her soul, and she needed a helping hand to get out. She needed help in shaking off the water and learning how to walk in wholeness and freedom.

"No, Darcy, you're like so many *women* wrestling with your sexuality in the midst of a sexually insane world." Yes, I use the word *insane* to describe a sexual ethic

that is loud, persuasive, and gives itself over to “sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness” (Eph. 4:19).²

Insane describes the foolish and unreasonable ways many women are living out their sexuality, expressing themselves sexually through modes and venues that give credence to scriptural truth such as Ephesians 4:19. Sexual insanity is not a gender discriminatory term: it’s actually a promise of what happens when people, male or female, strive to live sexually outside of God’s design.

TOXIC STREAMS OF SEXUAL BROKENNESS

Like so many women today, Darcy didn’t jump intentionally into that toxic flow of sexual water, even as it was portrayed as a “river of delights.” She was wooed and tempted through her own desires and the seductions of a sexually insane world, and also influenced through the crippling silence of the church. Ultimately she made the sinful choice to jump in and swim in those polluted waters, and then she wasn’t sure how to get out. Worse, she didn’t know anyone who could offer more than a few Bible verses to read or to encourage her just to “try harder” in avoiding temptation. Neither of those paths had worked for Darcy.

The church preaches (and sometimes merely *mentions*) to wait until marriage for sex; that adultery is sin; that homosexuality is, well, you know, that “abomination” (sadly this is often the only way homosexuality is addressed...and with a tone that is distinctly un-Christ-like). One woman recently shared with me, “Ellen, over the past twenty years, I’ve had pastors and Christian counselors affirm what I already knew: what I was doing was sexual sin! But no one has been able to offer practical help to change! I’ve yet to hear how the gospel, the idea of grace, or even the person of Jesus really connects to my shame, guilt, and longtime sexual struggles.”

And what about communicating and teaching about God’s good and beautiful design for sexuality, for men *and women*, for the married and unmarried? Brothers and sisters: we’ve been quiet while other voices have been boisterous and convincing.

We’ve also been slow and shy about sharing the enthusiastic and bold grace of Jesus Christ into the hearts of women like Darcy who are battling sexual temptations and addictions. Many women are struggling in so many sexually broken ways: enslaved to pornography, masturbation, cybersex (and other forms of “tech sex”), promiscuity (through intercourse, oral sex, mutual stimulation), and a variety of emotionally and sexually entangled relationships *with each other*. The current cultural voice regarding homosexual orientation and gay identity has fostered deep confusion for those women who experience persistent same- sex attraction and struggle to make sense of it within a Christian framework. Women are hurting as they seek to deal with their sexuality, and many are also experiencing a heavier weight of shame, as so often the toxic streams of sexually broken behaviors generally are not addressed as a problem women deal with.

Jessica Harris, a woman who broke free from sexual addiction, writes poignantly of *wanting* to get caught, to be exposed, so that she could be helped.

We know this wasn't you; women just don't have this problem.

Those words hit hard. More than anything, I wanted to be caught. Here I was, red-handed, with a red folder. If they had checked my email they would have found pictures I had sent to a man at a different college. If she had asked if it was me, I would have said "yes." I would have gladly accepted help. Instead, I was forced to sign my name, vowing that I would not give out my log-in information again because this obviously was not me.

But it was me.

As I have worked with women addicted to pornography and masturbation, I have found this phenomenon painfully common. Young women want help, but how, exactly, do you ask for help from women in church who cringe at the mention of sex?³

I use the phrase *sexually broken* because of a passionate conviction that the Bible is true and authoritative. *Broken* implies that the original design has become disordered in our dysfunctional experience of it due to sin. Scripture speaks clearly of a Designer, the Lord God, who originally created all things as beautiful and good, including female sexuality.

GOD THE LOVING CREATOR IS ALSO SOVEREIGN LORD

Colossians 1:164 says it clearly, "All things have been created through Him [Jesus] and for Him [Jesus]," and all means *all!* He has designed everything about us—personalities, relationships, gender, sexuality, body—to function and be experienced in a certain way. This includes the sexuality of women.

Female *sexuality* refers to the fact that women are sexual beings, capable of sexual expression. We can express ourselves in God-honoring ways, within the wise and protective guardrails of His design, or in sinful ways, which is any expression of sexuality outside of His wise boundaries.

As Creator, God alone has the right to design how His creation is meant to function. God's design for sexuality is a way for Him to be glorified by us and through us. First Corinthians 10:31 says, "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Because we exist completely for Him and through Him, *our bodies and sexual lives are also meant to give God glory*. Furthermore, as I wrote in my recently published book on this subject,

God's glory is also eternally tied to our good. This is important to understand in the context of His design for human sexuality, which God created to be expressed in specific ways. It is not a free-for-all, and yet his wise guardrails are misinterpreted by some as coming from a withholding, prudish, and joy-killing God. This simply is not true. God is good, loving, kind, and cares for us as Father. As our Father who knows our temptations and is merciful toward us as we battle against sinful desires, the boundaries He has put in place for sexual expression are not only for His glory but our protection and flourishing.⁵

SPECIFICS OF GOD'S DESIGN FOR SEXUALITY

Women, like men, need to know what the specifics are for living out their sexuality according to God's good design.⁶ He is not a Creator who abandons us, leaving us to figure out the details of life on our own. Our loving Lord commands and enables us to live sexually faithful lives with our minds, thought patterns, behaviors, and emotional attachments. "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass" (1 Thess. 5:23–24).

God-Honoring Sexuality for the Married

God's blessed context for *all* sexual expression is marriage. Christian marriage, as defined and designed by God, is a lifelong, committed union between one man and one woman. Jesus and Paul both gave clear affirmation in their teaching that God's design of marriage was not limited to a certain time period but is the enduring pattern we are to follow (Matt. 19:4–6; Eph. 5:22–33). The uniqueness of the one-flesh union experienced by a man and woman through sexual intimacy is a gift given to married couples and also a radically beautiful signpost to the union He shares with His people.

This sounds weird to many people, but it's amazingly true. In Ephesians 5:32 the apostle Paul calls the "signpost" reality of Christian marriage a "mystery" that is a reference to Christ and the church (followers of Jesus). By faith, Christians enter into a spiritual union with God, becoming one with Him.⁷ Christian marriage signifies this union, and sexual intimacy uniquely gives a picture of the oneness that God shares with His people: two distinct and very different beings, joined together as an expression of covenantal love. Savior, Creator, and Redeemer become one with the saved, created, and redeemed.

God in His magnificent wisdom created the male and female anatomy with the capability of uniquely joining together in the context of a committed relationship of love, faithfulness, and devotion. Sexual intimacy is meant to be pleasurable, to foster bonding between a husband and wife, and a means through which new life can come forth.

Sexual activity within marriage, experienced as God has designed it, reveals Him as the giver of good gifts for the delight of His children. God has given this gift as a way for husbands and wives to express the heart of Christ (who came not to be served, but to serve; Mark 10:45) to each other. Sex is meant to be intensely relational and is thus limited to the marriage relationship as an expression of committed love, a man and woman forsaking all others to be devoted to one: *a spouse*. In this sense, I like to say that instead of trying to self-categorize ourselves into heterosexual, gay/homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, perhaps a more helpful descriptor is the call of God to be *spousal-sexual*: focusing our emotional, sexual, and mental desires on a spouse. (Implications for singles are to follow.)

"Within marriage sex is more satisfying than anything the world offers as a sexually attractive substitute. Like a fire inside a fireplace, it provides light and warmth,

but outside the right context sex can destroy, like an un-extinguished cigarette can burn down a huge forest.”⁸

All this is not to say that when any sexual activity is experienced outside of God’s design that it won’t provide physical pleasure and perhaps some degree of emotional or mental comfort. However, I have yet to meet a woman trying to follow Christ who has drunk deeply of sexual “freedom” through engaging in pornography, masturbation, using “friends with benefits,” or being fused emotionally and sexually with another woman who would say these experiences grew her in Christlikeness and liberated her to love others as Christ loves us (2 Cor. 5:14–15; Phil. 1:9–11). Living outside of God’s loving and protective guardrails does not bring a peace of mind and heart that lasts. It can’t. Our Creator is for our flourishing in every way, and so are His boundaries.

God-Honoring Sexuality for the Unmarried Woman

As much as people have tried to “make it work,” sex will never be able to live up to two false expectations: that sex is *life*, or that sex is *merely a physical act*. Sex is a deeply spiritual activity, as it unites two people’s beings in a way that is profound and powerful. This is one of the reasons why God lovingly commands for it to be contained within a lifelong, committed relationship. It’s too precious to be shared broadly, casually, or selfishly. The fact is, as you read the Bible, you will never find God approving or delighting in any type of sexual expression that is outside of His design: with someone you love but are not married to, creating sexual fantasies in your thoughts, sex with self, same-gender sex, hook-ups with strangers, pleasuring yourself with objects or sexual activity with animals. (Nor do you find God calling it praiseworthy when sex between a married couple is selfish, demeaning, or manipulative.)

Unmarried women demand, “Well, what about us then? We don’t have a sanctioned-outlet to express our sexuality! Why is the Cosmic Killjoy so prudish when it comes to sex?” If you’ve felt or said this, you may have believed the lie that sex = life and that without it you’ll shrivel up and be incomplete as a woman. You may have also believed the lie that Jesus doesn’t actually sit on the throne of grace to receive you while offering mercy, help, and comfort as you battle against sexual temptation (Heb. 4:16). He is there for us *and here for us* through our spiritual union with Him by faith.

God’s command for those of us who are single is that we learn to steward our sexuality (and emotional and mental attractions) by choosing to abstain from sexual expression, both with our minds and our bodies. Negatively, that means choosing not to engage in sexually arousing behaviors or feeding sexually arousing thoughts and images through books, entertainment, or conversations. Positively, it means that by not choosing those behaviors that ultimately become enslaving, we are increasingly free to love others selflessly and with greater self-giving impact. Along with those who are married, we too are called to obey Hebrews 13:4: “Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” As singles we don’t have a marriage bed and so we hold marriage in honor

and, if in the future God does give us a marriage bed, we nevertheless live faithfully now as women of sexual integrity until we are married. (A married woman, too, is called to live with this same integrity by not allowing *any* influences to intrude on her emotional, mental, and sexual faithfulness to her husband).

Godly, unmarried sexuality is a battle, but it is not impossible! It's a powerful way to live out faithfulness and devotion to Jesus, as the unmarried state allows for a unique attending on Christ (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 7:32–35). Through saying no to physical and emotional desires, we learn to love people rather than using them for sexual and emotional purposes. And you know what? I think it's one of the most wonderful ways to prepare for godly, *married* sexuality. I've talked with hundreds of married women over the years, and I have yet to meet one who said, "Wow, I wish I would've had more sex with myself, men, and/or women before I got married!" A sobering component of my ministry to married women is helping them in their battle against the creeping nature of past sexual experiences on their marital sexual relationship. For them, masturbation was easier than trusting their husband and learning to work at knowing each other sexually. Memories of sex with others or the stick-to-the-brain power of pornographic images don't wash away easily. Many women have shared with me that emotional and sexual entanglements experienced with female friends had such an intoxicating influence on them that growing into oneness with their husbands has been painfully difficult.

The Bible promises many things, some that hit the center of our heart with sweetness while others are sobering. One of the sobering promises of God is that a harvest *does* come in from our actions. God's grace brings healing, forgiveness, and compassion; mercy brings strength for each of us as we walk forward in the midst of painful consequences of sexual sin and...sexual insanity. Jesus Christ is the One who brings sanity and wholeness to each woman who seeks His truth, mercy, and love.

THE ABOUNDING EXPRESSIONS OF SEXUAL INSANITY

Having described God's plan for how our sexuality is to be cared for, in its expression and nonexpression, I want to explain why certain specific expressions of female sexuality are *broken*. The areas I've chosen to address below are included because, with the exception of homosexuality, you won't find any of them listed in the concordance of a Bible. However, when we understand the Bible's broad teaching concerning sex and sexuality, the broken expressions of it become more clearly seen for what they are: sexual behaviors outside of God's design.

- *Viewing pornography and reading written porn (sensual stories and erotica fiction).* These sexual activities fill our thoughts with images that clearly violate what God has intended. Pornography serves selfish desires and fuels lustful thoughts. These desires and thoughts will powerfully intrude on oneness with a husband (present or future).

- *Masturbation/sex with self.* Solo sex does not fit God’s design because it is divorced from the beauty of marital sex being relational and a way to serve another selflessly. It is radically focused on self and misses the signpost reality in every way for holy sex.
- *Tech sex.* Sexting (sending sexual text messages/photos) and cyber-sex (talking or typing sexually with someone) are broken expressions on two levels. If you are single and engaging in this sexualized relating with someone, you’re going against Hebrews 13:4, and also removing sexual activity from its relational, covenantal context. Within the marriage relationship, the communication of desire and longing is God-blessed. These expressions are, however, always to reflect the loving and selfless relationship between Christ and His Bride, the church.
- *Sexualized friendships and homosexual relationships.* Many Christian women develop idolatrous emotional entanglements with one another, often in the context of ministry-based relationships. I’ve had many “duos” of women who became a type of best friend for each other in a deeply intense and fast-forming relationship. The emotional affection then escalated over time and became physical and sexual. Sadly, it was sinful not just because it violated God’s design for appropriate sexual expression, but it also gravely distorted what Christian friendship between sisters in Christ ought to be.

SEXUAL SANITY GROWS ON US AS WE GROW IN CHRIST

Sexual sanity means living wisely, responsibly, and with a radical commitment to love Christ and love others. This kind of lifestyle is more than challenging—it’s impossible without His healing and forgiving presence in our lives and people to journey with us.¹⁰ Jesus loves women, and He consistently showed tender mercy to sexually sinful women. He still does today even as the world still calls His design for life and sexuality foolishness. I’m willing to be a fool for Christ, choosing to be guided by His definitions of wisdom and sanity. I hope others will too!

Ellen Dykas serves as women’s ministry coordinator for Harvest USA, a national ministry that exists to help men, women, and families affected by sexual struggles and sin and to equip churches to minister to sexually broken people (www.harvestusa.org). She provides individual and small group discipleship for women affected by these issues and also serves as a conference and retreat speaker to equip others.

NOTES

- 1 Name changed for sake of confidentiality.
- 2 All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Version.
- 3 Jessica Harris, *Porn Is a Co-ed Sin*, July 9, 2009. Online at <http://www.covenanteyes.com/2009/07/20/porn-is-a-co>

ed-sin-a-message-to-women/, emphasis in original.

- 4 Other Bible passages to consider are Genesis 1–2; Psalm 24:1–2; Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 8:5–6.
- 5 Ellen Dykas, ed., *Sexual Sanity for Women: Healing from Relational and Sexual Brokenness* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2013), 168.
- 6 Key Scriptures to consider: Genesis 1–2; Song of Solomon; Matthew 19:4–6; 1 Corinthians 6:15–20, 7:25; Ephesians 5:22–33; Colossians 1:16; 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8; Hebrews 13:4.
- 7 See John 14:23 and 15:1–11.
- 8 Dan Wilson, Ph.D., “God Gives the Best Sex: A Positive Theology of Sex,” online at http://www.harvestusa.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=158:god-gives-the-best-sex&catid=28:singles&Itemid=93.
- 9 See David White’s article, “Homosexuality and Change: Is It Possible?” Online at: http://www.harvestusa.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=24&Itemid=90.
- 10 Harvest USA offers biblical resources for men and women seeking to grow in godly sexuality including small group curricula, *Sexual Sanity for Women* and *Sexual Sanity for Men*.

SIDEBAR

Jesus, His Followers, and Fifty Shades of Grey: Whose Voice Are We Listening To?

You may be a Christian, like me, who desires to build bridges between sound Christian faith and the post-Christian culture in which we live, but does not always succeed at it. You may also struggle, as I do, with faithfully applying and graciously speaking the truth of the Bible into the cultural discussion of what is good and evil. The prophet Isaiah dealt with this as he was sent to speak of God’s love and truth to a confused people (Isa. 5:20–21). Thousands of years later, this remains the same: the competing and debating voices for determining what is true are all fueled by personal conviction.

I’ve recently jumped into the firestorm of debate among believers regarding the best-selling trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and it has been a sobering wake-up call for me. When it comes to convictions regarding sex and sexuality, Christians are disagreeing with each other, and, in the process, sending mixed messages to the unbelieving world.

The *Shades* series is classified as erotic fiction. According to one online dictionary, this genre of literature is defined as having “no literary or artistic value other than to stimulate sexual desire.”¹ The type of eroticism featured in *Shades* is known as BDSM, or bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism. Sex experienced through BDSM utilizes pain, humiliation, hitting, slapping, whipping (and worse, but I hope you get the point), as consenting individuals take one of two main roles: the submissive (having the pain inflicted) and the master (who dominates through violence). This *Shades* trilogy has sold millions of copies around the world and many of those to Christian women.

As I’ve read articles describing how many Christian women not only are reading but passionately defending and promoting erotica, I’ve been stunned and saddened.

One woman, responding with disdain to a blog post² that urged Christians to not read these books, shared how she and her husband (a pastor) enjoy BDSM in their sexual relationship. She argued that because they were married and both consented to BDSM sex that they were obeying the spirit of Hebrews 13:4: not defiling the marriage bed. Now, I use that same passage to teach about godly sexuality and the goodness of God's design for sexual expression. What's going on here? I believe what we are seeing among Christians is an indiscriminate acceptance of the pornification of sex. Pornography has become so mainstream, even among Christians, that we are imitating and endorsing sexual practices that do not display the beauty of sex that God intended for us. Reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and seeing nothing wrong in doing so, moves us further in that direction.

I'll share two reasons for why this is happening, based on talking with Christians from all over the world. First, the church has been woefully silent³ and ill equipped to teach and mentor people concerning God's good, beautiful, and amazing design for sexuality. Sex is *His* idea, and as Creator and Lord He really does care about the how-why-when-and-what of our sexual expression. He gave it as a gift for our pleasure, our growth as Christians, and ultimately for His glory to be displayed in marriage. Sex that is God-glorifying (by what we do and by what we do not do) is intended to reflect Christ's relationship with His people (Eph. 5:31–32). When we divorce sex from its God-given spiritual meaning, we open the door to worldly perspectives that can and will shape our personal preferences and desires and make those supreme rather than God's. Sex between a husband and wife is meant to be pleasurable, bonding, and potentially life-producing. It can be both passionate and tender. Jesus relates to His people in all of those ways. But violence—whips and handcuffs, slapping, shoving, humiliation? These in no way reflect Christ's love for His people.

The second reason ungodly sexuality has been embraced by many Christians is that we've not understood a basic point of our faith: *we don't belong to ourselves*. We sing and pray, "Lord," but we've not understood that as loved children of God, we are also His servants. Second Corinthians 5:14–15 says that we no longer live (including sexually) for ourselves but for Christ. This means that we never have the right to do what we want with our sexual desires, thoughts, or behaviors. We are called, as beloved children of God, to honor our Father through aligning our lives and sexuality with His design and listening to His voice alone. — *Ellen Dykas*

NOTES

1. <http://www.definitions.net/definition/erotica>.
2. Dannah Gresh, "Why I'm Not Reading Fifty Shades of Grey," <http://purefreedom.org/im-not-reading-fifty-shades-of-grey/>.
3. John Freeman, Harvest USA, "Sex and the Silence of the Church," http://www.harvestusa.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=469%3Asex-and-the-silence-of-thechurch&catid=27%3Achurches&Itemid=92.