

“What Is Sexy?”

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“What is sexy?” is arguably the most frequently asked question (directly or indirectly) in contemporary culture. One need only consider the many and varied businesses, media outlets, celebrities, and industries that rely on the adage “sex sells” to see the ubiquitous nature of the question. Further, when one considers that the cultural upheaval related to questions of sexuality, sexual preferences, gender identity and gay marriage, all rely on how one answers the question “what is sexy?” it is not difficult to see why exploring an answer to this question is so culturally important. This essay explores the biblical foundations for understanding “sexiness” and then develops nine ethical principles related to properly answering the question “what is sexy?” in everyday life.

Introduction: Is “Sexy” in the Eye of the Beholder?

Perhaps the question that is implicitly asked more than any other in our culture is “What is sexy?” I say implicitly because it was not until recently that the lingerie company *Victoria’s Secret* explicitly made the question the central element of their ad campaign.¹ And, of course, that same company answers the question (and then capitalizes on it) with an overly physicalistic definition of “sexy” that parades silicon and Botox enhanced, surgically altered, semi-anorexic women around in the company wares. But aside from this explicit ad campaign, the question lingers behind and drives advertising for everything from toothpaste to shampoo, from cars to cookies.² It is the dominant idea behind the front covers of myriads of tabloids and magazines and recently even a major network television company ran an ad campaign describing NASCAR as the “most sexy” sport.³

Interestingly enough, when one seeks to find a definition for sexiness at the pop culture level it is virtually impossible to discover any discussion of substance. Instead, one finds publications, like *People Magazine*, that annually creates a list of “the 50 most beautiful people” or like *Victoria Secret*, that

¹ For an interesting discussion of the entire industry related to the exploitation of women, see Ariel Levy’s *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). While certainly not written from an evangelical position, Levy’s insights into the exploitation of women by women in the name of the feminist movement are fascinating.

² Nonni Inc. has recently begun to market Nonni’s biscotti cookie on television as “The Sexy Cookie” (Fall, 2008).

³ Fox Broadcasting, Summer 2007.

publishes a list of the people with the most sexy eyes, smile, curves, etc. but none of which actually spell out specific criteria by which such lists are determined.

Indeed, a person need only do a brief study of fashion trends and models to discover that the iconic views of “sexiness” that prevail in culture have changed rather dramatically over time. For example, Marylyn Monroe, who was considered to be a “sex symbol” in the late 50’s and early 60’s, would by today’s modeling standards be considered overweight and in need of an extreme makeover.

Are we reduced then to think that “sexiness” is a fluid term? Like the old saying “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is “sexiness” just a relative concept to be entirely determined by the personal whims of individuals or the fickle winds of public sentiment?

In an age of relativistic thinking and/or postmodern epistemological assumptions that erode universal norms and notions of truth, there are those that argue because a man perceives them as sexy—they are “sexy” to him and we should not judge. But are they actually “sexy”? In other words, is “sexiness” in the eye of the beholder or is there a standard for what is actually sexy to which we ought to conform our ideas?

Overly Physicalistic Notions of “Sexy” That Dominate Culture

What complicates the quest to understand sexiness even more in our present age is the strong influence of Darwinian Evolution together with atheistic assumptions that now dominant in cultural ethos. The denial of the existence of God coupled with the denial of a human soul leaves us with a reductionist view of the human person that is merely physical in nature. It is no surprise, then, that such a context would produce an anemic view of sexuality in which human persons and sexual drives are nothing more than instinctual desires and chemically induced response patterns.

In our day and age these philosophical assumptions do not result in some benign reality that we as Christians must put up with. Rather, they function as a powder keg of ideas needing only a match to explode into a world of sexual craziness and moral vertigo. And of course, the match lighting the powder keg is pornography.

A few statistics demonstrate the staggering pornification of culture taking place now in the U.S. and world-wide. For example in the United States alone, the annual revenue generated by the porn industry in 2006 was a staggering \$13.3 Billion. That is a larger revenue stream than ABC, NBC and CBS combined. Worldwide, the porn industry generates a staggering \$100 Billion revenue, a total greater than Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple and Netflix combined. There are over 4.2 million porn sites and over 68 million daily pornographic search engine requests—*daily*. 42.7 percent of all internet users view porn, 34 percent of all internet users receive unwanted exposure to sexual material, 89 percent of kids in chat rooms are solicited for sex and 1 in 7 of all youth have received sexual solicitation via the internet.

The average age of a child's first exposure to pornography is 11 years old and a heartbreaking total of 90 percent of children 8–16 have viewed pornography intentionally or unintentionally online. Out of all the countries in the world, the U.S. is the top producer of both pornographic websites and pornographic videos. In fact, the United States has produced 89% of the pornographic web pages world-wide.⁴

Obviously this massive intake of pornography feeds off of the prevailing materialistic assumptions about the nature of human beings and the universe they inhabit. But in addition to feeding off it, it also fuels reductionist views of sex, sexuality and sexiness. Not only does it work to reduce one's understanding of sexiness to the mere physical, it also presents human beings (and especially women) as nothing more than objects meant to be consumed, not loved; used, not respected; lusted over not cared for and cherished.

Perhaps one of the clearest indicators of the moral insanity that results from combining a materialist world view and the pornification of culture is seen in the confused way Feminist thinkers weigh in on the problem of pornography. Indeed, pro-feminist thinkers tend to find themselves in a complete conundrum when dealing with the porn industry for on the one hand some abhor the objectification of women, while others are willing to laud the women posing for pornography as "bold" and "courageous" and "self-empowering" women unafraid of their sexuality.⁵

Of course praising such women is all nice and easy in the ivory tower, but when one considers the mixed messages this sends to our little girls and young women (not to mention the men) such ideas can be seen for the hypocritical and tragic lies they are. The reality is that the porn industry is connected to a vast and almost unimaginable human suffering and oppression. For every playboy bunny that parades her body as a form of "self-empowering" there are hundreds and perhaps thousands of little girls forced into human trafficking and prostitution somewhere in the world.⁶ The same lust

⁴ Internet Pornography Statistics, <http://internet-filter-review.topten-reviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html> (accessed 3/8/12).

⁵ For an interesting article delineating the contours of this "dilemma" among feminists, see "Feminism and Pornography: Building Sensitive Research and Analytic Approaches" a paper presented by Natalie Purcell of the Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Cruz on May 8, 2009 at Sexual Ontogeny: A Lifelong Work in Progress, The Western Regional Conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. This article was published in the *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, Volume 12, May 11, 2009. <http://www.ejhs.org/Volume12/Feminism%20and%20Porn.htm> (accessed 3/8/12).

⁶ Estimates vary greatly as to the exact number of women and girls forced into sexually exploitive situations. The FBI estimates 700,000 women and children are trafficked each year. For an interesting discussion on human trafficking and the related statistics see <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/slaves/etc/stats.html>.

fuels both engines! Both come from the headlong pursuit to experience something viewed as “sexy.”

But porn is not merely problematic in that it reflects a materialistic world view or fuels the objectification human persons as sex objects to be consumed. It also serves to literally reshape the neurological structures of the brain that perceive sexual input and shape sexual behavior.

One of the more interesting and wretched problems we run into with regard to the effects of the pornification of culture that directly relates to the question “what is sexy?” is the actual affect that viewing of pornography has on the biological and physiological structure of the human brain. Recently, William M. Struthers, a bio-psychologist and Associate Professor of Psychology at Wheaton College, demonstrated how pornography hijacks the male brain functioning and reorders the hard wiring of a man’s thinking process as he gazes on pornographic images.

In his book, *Wired for Intimacy*, Struthers shows that in addition to moral, legal, and spiritual matters, pornography is also a *physical* matter, “rooted in the biological intricacies of our sexual design.”⁷ He demonstrates in the book how men in particular are neurologically “hardwired” to see and understand sexuality in a particular way. He then goes on to show that “Men seem to be wired in such a way that pornography hijacks the proper functioning of their brains and has a long-lasting effect on their thoughts and lives.”⁸ He concludes that through prolonged and consistent exposure to pornography men “have unknowingly created a neurological circuit that imprisons their ability to see women rightly as created in God’s image. Repeated exposure to pornography creates a one-way neurological superhighway where a man’s mental life is over-sexualized and narrowed. It is hemmed in on either side by high containment walls making escape nearly impossible.”⁹

In other words, a man literally reshapes his mind so that he no longer sees women as a God-created gift, but in the image of sexual fantasies created by the porn sites he visits.

So, we see the view of sexiness championed by *Victoria’s Secret*, and accelerated by the pornification of culture, is actually a reductionism of the human person to an overly physicalistic portrayal of human personhood and animalistic sexual expression. It is a perspective that emphasizes the physical nature of human sexuality to the exclusion of every other aspect of personhood.

Christian Gnosticism and Hypocrisy

So “what is sexy?” Testing to see whether my graduate seminary students might have some insight into this question, I tasked them to write papers giving a biblical answer to the question. Fascinatingly, the vast majority of the

⁷ William M. Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 15.

⁸ *Ibid*, 11.

⁹ *Ibid*, 85.

papers I received betrayed Gnostic understandings of human anthropology that predictably emphasized internal/spiritual qualities and almost completely neglected all substantive discussions of external/bodily elements. No doubt many felt such thinking is what they were “supposed to write” for a seminary class, when in fact many of these same students admitted in private conversation that they really defined sexiness mostly in physical terms.

Unfortunately, because evangelicals are interested in sex but give little attention to biblical, theological and philosophical dimensions shaping our views on sexuality, it should be no surprise our answers are convoluted and even tend toward hypocrisy. That is, while many of us have a spiritually syrupy Gnosticized definition on our lips, we actually function using the physically reductionist answer given by *Victoria's Secret*.

It is my fundamental contention that it is not by choosing between these extremes that a Christian will most honorably and faithfully be able to answer the question “what is sexy?” Rather, while Scripture does not spell out all the details of sexuality, a biblical view of sex and sexuality helps us understand that sexual allure is not ultimately something relative to individual perception but rather incorporates both spiritual and physical aspects of human nature.

The remainder of this paper will do three things. First, it will lay out elements of a biblical ethic of worship from which to engage the question of sexiness. Next, it will identify nine biblical and theological principles that ought to shape our view of sexiness in light of an ethic of worship.¹⁰ Finally, it will apply these principles to answer the question “what is sexy?” providing a foundation for redeeming sex and sexuality.

Biblical Foundations of “Sexiness”

First, a comment about the word “sexy.” Grammatically, it is an adjectival form of word “sex.” That is, it is a descriptive term meant to point out something that epitomizes a gender sex or sexual expression. Thus, when we ask the question “what is sexy?” what we are in essences asking is “what qualities or characteristics epitomizes a gender?” and/or “what expressions or forms of sexual expression best inhabit the highest order of that gendered sex or sexual expression by these gendered sexes?” Here the discussion will touch on the former but focus more heavily on the latter. And as a result, it will have correlative implications for how each of us can evaluate culturally pop-

¹⁰ As I understand it, the discipline of ethics is the Spirit-filled use of the intellect, will and affections to discover truth given by God’s grace in both general and special revelation and then the application of that knowledge wisely to particular situations and issues in hopes of conforming our actions, character, community and ultimately our culture to the image of Christ as an act of worship. Thus, because as evangelicals we recognize that the highest source of authority is Scripture, it is proper to begin with an analysis of God’s word to develop an ethic of worship that is theologically grounded as well as philosophically coherent and consistent.

ular categories of “sexiness.” In addition, it should also point us in the direction of discovering biblical categories by which to cultivate right thinking and practice related to what we find alluring and enticing with regard to sexual identity and practice.

Hopefully this short discussion about the basic meaning of the term “sexy” already indicates the absurdity of advertising agencies describing cookies and car races as sexy. Obviously these things do not have genders and do not directly depict something about sex. But the ubiquitous nature of advertising related to sexual things points out our culture’s fascination with the topic. Thus, if we are to discover what epitomizes sex and sexual expression we must consult the one who created sex and sexuality to discover what things or expressions would properly represent at the highest level the sexual form represented by the gender’s God created as well as the expression of those gender’s in actions and/or behaviors.

In his lectures on Christology Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly argued that theology must give priority to the question of *Who* over *how*, and that the best and most proper way to understand *how* must be determined in light of *Who*.¹¹ The first step, therefore, in answering the question “what is Sexy?” from a distinctly Christian point of view must begin where all good theology and ethics begin—with an inquiry about God and his purposes for the world.

From the very first words of the Bible—“In the beginning God”—the reader is oriented to the fact that not only is God the ground of all existence, but that what follows is a grand narrative that displays the wonders of the Creator. Properly understood, the first two chapters of the Bible place God, the Creator, as the focus of the story. This simple reality, then, ought to shape our understanding of the Bible in a manner that transforms our reading of it from an anthropocentric perspective where human experiences and needs are central to one in which humans (indeed, all things) are meant to exist for the purposes and glory of God.

The creation account that follows in the remainder of Genesis 1, then, is meant to offer a panoramic view of creation that displays in general terms how God pieced into existence each vital component of what was to be a faultless world. And as the narrative in chapter one moves toward its summit, one discovers that it is the creation of man and woman that emerges as the crowning jewel of the masterpiece of God’s glory.

Then God said, “Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.” . . . And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it” . . . and God saw all he had made and it was very good. (Gen 1:26–30)¹²

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology* (London: Collins, 1971), 37–39.

¹² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

What we learn from these verses is that God set human beings apart from the rest of creation in at least two significant ways. First, He gave them a special nature distinct from all other parts of the creation as *image bearers*. Second, God gave to Adam and Eve a distinct blessing and task. They were to be *fruitful and multiply* in order to fill creation, and they were to *subdue* the creation *and rule* it as benevolent stewards. The clear implication from the passage is that it would be in the fulfilling of God's agenda for them that they would experience the promised blessing and presumably its accompanying joys.

In Genesis 2 the scene moves from a panoramic view of all creation to a close up of the creation of Adam and Eve. In zooming in on the final element of creation God not only allows the reader to get a more particular look at the finer details of how humans were created but also to see more clearly the reason and purpose for which He created them. Genesis 2:15 and 18 are most helpful for this purpose and read as follows:

Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."

First, regarding Gen 2:15, Old Testament scholar John Sailhamer highlights an important linguistic and contextual nuance about the verse that is often lost in translation from ancient Hebrew to modern English. Many English translations, he argues, overlook the "specific purpose for God's putting man in the Garden. In most [English versions] man is 'put' in the Garden 'to work it and take care of it.'¹³ Sailhamer objects, however, and argues that from the perspective of the language and context of the entire creation narrative it is clear that Adam was not put in the Garden merely to be a farmer. Rather, as Sailhamer comments, "Man is put in the Garden to worship God and to obey him. Man's life in the Garden was to be characterized by worship and obedience" as he cultivated and kept it.¹⁴

In the safety of the perfect environment God created for humanity, the Creator not only created Adam to reflect His image in the world, God also gave to Adam an overriding purpose and life orientation: to worship the Creator and fully express proper worship through obedience to His commands and purposes as he took care of the world in which he lived.

¹³ Sailhamer, John H. "Genesis" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* vol. 2, *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser and Bruce K. Waltke (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1990), 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Genesis 2:18 indicates that Adam was *alone* in the Garden and God declared that this condition was “not good.” So in His wisdom and grace God decided to create a “helper suitable” for Adam.¹⁵

Why is this important? Because it highlights the reality that God wanted Adam to have a partner uniquely created and gifted to compliment Adam’s own nature and assist him in God’s purpose. As his “helper” she is both uniquely similar to Adam in comparison to all other beings in creation and yet particularly different: she is female, he is male. And as such, she can partner with Adam and join with him in pursuing the existence for which he was created in a manner that no other being in creation could do.

Piecing these ideas together, we know from Gen 1:26–28 that a central element of God’s purposes in creating Eve was to help Adam “be fruitful and multiply.” It would certainly be difficult for him to fulfill this task alone! Thus, his “aloneness” was “not good.” He needed a companion—a “suitable helper”—with whom he could accomplish God’s desires. Sailhamer’s comments about this passage are once again helpful. He writes, “in what sense was the women created to be a ‘helper?’” It is in “light of the importance of the blessing (‘Be fruitful and increase’) in the creation of the man and woman in 1:28, it appears most likely that the ‘help’ envisioned is tied to the bearing of children.”¹⁶ Clearly, then, God remedied Adam’s aloneness not simply (or even primarily) because he was “lonely” but because remaining “alone” would make it impossible to complete the task of filling and subduing the earth.¹⁷

Second, consider the following line of reasoning:

If God created Adam and Eve and placed them in a Garden of perfect safety and peace in order to worship and obey, and

if that worshipful obedience transcended the realm of duty and was instead the highest form of fulfillment and thus joy, and

if God created Eve as Adam’s perfectly complementary helper so that together they could fulfill His agenda to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it,

¹⁵ For further discussion, see Ray C. Ortland Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 95–112 (esp. 99–105).

¹⁶ Sailhamer, 46.

¹⁷ This is not to say that the companionship of Eve and the vital role of marital union was not a crucial factor in the motive of God to create man and woman together. Surely Gen 2:24 indicates that oneness is vitally important to marriage and that human companionship is central to the creation of male and female.

then one has to wonder what the world would have been like if Adam and Eve never gave in to Satan's temptations in Genesis 3 and plunged the world into sin.

To put it in question form: "What would have happened if they had remained pure, obeyed God, and fulfilled the task to be fruitful and multiply and to rule the world and subdue it? What kind of people would have filled creation? What would Adam and Eve's sexual and fruitful oneness have accomplished?"

The answer is a world filled with God-honoring, sinless worshippers united under one purpose: to subdue and rule the world for the glory of God! From the point of creation on, human beings were created not only to worship, but to be about the mission of spreading of that worship to the ends of the earth.

It is not a difficult step from this point to see that based on the very nature of the created order, the purpose of *all* human life is to bring glory to God. As Romans 11:36 puts it, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." And it is in fulfilling that purpose that we will find ultimate value and fulfillment in *all* venues of life (including sex). Every element of creation, simply because it *is* His creation, is meant to reflect back to God the glory He is due. As Jonathan Edwards rightly affirms in his classic work *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, the glory of God is the chief end of *everything*.¹⁸ This is why the apostle Paul instructs both the Colossian church and the Corinthian believers that whatever they do, whether in word or deed or in eating or drinking (or having sex), all is to be done to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17). Therefore, we can state that the primary purpose of marriage and our sexuality is directly linked to the missional purpose of extending the glory of God to the entirety of creation. Marriage and sex are ultimately about worshipping God and bringing Him glory.

Nine Biblical Principles Shaping "Sexiness"

Having grounded the purposes for which God created the whole cosmos (including marriage and sexuality) in a comprehensive ethic of worship we are a step closer to answering the question "what is sexy?" The next step is to explore the Scriptures to address more particularly how sex, sexuality and sexual expression fit in this ethic of worship so as to bring maximum glory to God. In order to discover this we must return to Gen 1:26–28 as well as engage Gen 2:7 and Gen 2:24–25.

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World in The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), See sections 2.3.142; 2.4.221; 5.10.238–9; 7.264–285.

1. The Difference between Male and Female Is Sexy

As for the nature of human sexuality, note that Gen 1:26–27 indicates that God created human beings in His image and then more specifically in verse 27 it is stated that maleness and femaleness are both designed to bear God's image.

Then God said, "Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness". . . And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

The text indicates that the *imago Dei* is foundational to humanness and that each human being—by God's design—was created to bear the image of God according to an assigned gender. Maleness and femaleness is written into our very nature.¹⁹ This does not suggest that the *imago Dei* is defined by maleness and femaleness, rather, that one can only bear the *imago Dei* as either a male or a female and that being male or female expresses the *imago Dei*.²⁰

Thus, because human sexual identity is a gift from God closely linked to the *imago Dei*, we can unabashedly state that sexual identity is an inherent quality of humanness and not a social construct. A man is male not only because his body has male parts and his society then constructs a pattern for how he is to behave. Rather, he is male and has male parts and ought to behave a certain way because God made him a man and desired for him to reflect His image as a male and then gave instructions about how to function as a male. The same is true for women. God created them female with female parts and made them so that they ought to behave as women in accordance with the instructions He gave regarding womanhood. Our sexual identity, then, finds its ultimate grounding in God's creation order and is an inherent part of our make up as image bearers. It is not a construction of societal norms or ideas.

Now if this interpretation of Gen 1:26–27 is a fair representation, then the first principle of sexiness is that God created only two genders: male and female. While some modern behaviorists and social constructionists would want to suggest that empirical data from human sexual behavior or abnormal genital formation might indicate anywhere from 4 to 7 genders exist, we know this to be a misapplication of fact and value categories.²¹ The mere fact

¹⁹ Gilbert Meilaender "The First Institutions," *Pro Ecclesia* 6, no. 4 (1997): 444–55.

²⁰ For a fuller discussion of this point, see Jack W. Cottrell, *Gender Roles and the Bible: Creation, the Fall, and Redemption: A Critique of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994), 70–76. Maleness and femaleness do not constitute the image of God—but male humans and female humans express the image of God by God's design. Thus, ontologically they are equal in value, but ontologically, they are also distinct in nature.

²¹ For example see Anne Fausto-Sterling "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough" *The Sciences* (March/April 1993): 20–24. See also M. Kay Martin

that many people do act homosexually, or bisexually and further claim an inherent orientation based on experience, does not make it right or moral. Rather, God built each human with a particular sexual nature: male or female. The irregularities that may come in various desires or even the deformed body parts (such as that of a hermaphrodite) are the devastating effects of the Fall that come to life in our desires, our bodies and even our social structures and ideas.

2. The Complementarity of Maleness and Femaleness Is Sexy

Second, and closely related, God made male and female to correspond to one another. Thus, as the full context of the Genesis 1, Genesis 2 and the entire Bible indicate, the clear default position is that sexuality is designed by God to be heterosexual in nature. Therefore, it is proper to find members of the opposing gender as “sexy” but one ought not be aroused sexually by persons of one’s own gender. Neither should one be aroused by the viewing of two other people of the same gender engaged in sexual behavior as much pornographic material and an increasing number of television shows and movies portray. Simply put, homosexuality and homosexual behaviors are *never* sexy. Indeed, if they appear to be to us then we can conclude that our perception of sexiness is deformed and needs to be redeemed by the renewing of our mind through the washing of the word and the help of the community of saints known as the local church.

3. Understanding the Value of Each Gender (Male and Female) Is Sexy

Third, because males and females are both image bearers, men and women also carry an equal dignity or inherent value before the Lord. The fact that they will display the *imago Dei* differently does not negate this fundamental equality of value. Likewise, because God gives them both the task to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, we ought to understand that while the part they will play in the grand design will be different, the value of each part is equally important to God. It is sexy, then, when a person understands their inherent value, is comfortable in his or her gender related tasking or role, and is confident in the importance of living within these differences before God—in the manner God describes—as an act of worship.

4. God Designed the Physical Part of Our Selves to Be Sexy

In addition to these three principles, Gen 2:7 gives added insight into the constitution of men and women as sexual. The text says,

and Barbara Voorhies, “Supernumerary Sexes” in *Female of the Species* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 84–107.

. . . then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. (ESV)

This text reveals that human anthropology involves both a material/physical element and an immaterial/spiritual or soul element. Not only are we bodies, but we are bodies made alive by the “breath of God.” What sets humans apart from other living creatures is not that we have physical life, but that our life is “God breathed” in a way that give us a unique “soul” that bears the image of God.²²

In regard to our discussion of sex, sexuality and sexual behavior, what Gen 2:7 helps us to understand is the fact that when God created human beings and gave us life, he made us what Paul Ramsey described as “ensouled bodies” or “embodied souls.” That is, the immaterial and the material elements are integrally and necessarily linked.²³

²² The Hebrew word נְשָׁמָה (*nyshamah*, “breath”) is used for God and for the life imparted to humans, not animals (see T. C. Mitchell, “The Old Testament Usage of *Nyshamah*,” *VT* 11 [1961]: 177–87). Its usage in the Bible conveys more than a breathing living organism (נְשָׁמָה חַיָּה, *nefesh khayyah*). Whatever is given this breath of life becomes animated with the life from God, has spiritual understanding (Job 32:8), and has a functioning conscience (Prov 20:27). Human life is described here as consisting of a body (made from soil from the ground) and breath (given by God). Both animals and humans are called “a living being” (נְשָׁמָה חַיָּה) but humankind became that in a different and more significant way. The Hebrew term נְפֶשׁ (*nefesh*, “being”) is often translated “soul,” but the word usually refers to the whole person. The phrase נְפֶשׁ חַיָּה (*nefesh khayyah*, “living being”) is used of both animals and human beings (see 1:20, 24, 30; 2:19).

²³ This passage, then, highlights a clear point of contrast with Platonic thought regarding the interaction between the body and soul. In Greek anthropological understanding, Plato likened the soul to a bird and the body to a cage. As he understood it, not only was the soul the more important element, but it existed independently of the body. His anthropology was a full blown dualism. Thus, as a bird is trapped in a cage, so also is the human soul trapped in the body. This perspective, obviously, renders the body to a status of significantly less value than the soul. In Greek philosophy, then, there was a tendency either to neglect the body and concentrate on soul-ish matters (asceticism), or over-indulge the body because only the soul mattered (hedonism). Christian theology, however, understands that while there is a duality that exists with body and soul, Scripture indicates an understanding that is clear and distinct from that present within Platonic thought. While each of us has both a body and soul, these elements are not meant to function independently. There is an integration of body and soul, material and immaterial. And it is this integration of the body and soul that God describes in the Genesis text as “very good.” Clearly the implication from this point is that not only are spiritual matters important to God, so also are bodily matters. God is pleased to give us both body and soul. For further discussion see Paul Ramsey, *Patient as Person* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), xiii. For a fuller discussion on this topic, see Allen Verhey, *Reading the Bible in*

From this we can identify a fourth principle of sexiness, which is that if God made bodies with a sexual nature, and if God declared these sexual bodies to be “good,” then God must intend for there to be a bodily element to sexiness. By God’s declaration the body is good, and it is right for us to appreciate it as good. To some degree we can say that *Victoria’s Secret*, while inadequate and often perverted, is not completely wrong.

Thus, when we (in appropriate ways) appreciate the physical qualities of the other gender and (in appropriate contexts) enjoy the physical pleasure that God built to accompany the proper expressions of our sexuality, we can rejoice in the goodness of our Maker’s design. The question, then, is not *if* we can appreciate the body and bodily pleasures as “sexy” but *how* and *when* it is right to do so.

5. God Designed the Spiritual Part of Our Selves to Be Sexy

A fifth element of sexiness we must see is that there is a non-physical component to “sexiness” that it is also good and right to appreciate. That is, contrary to what *Victoria’s Secret* ads indicate, issues of spirituality and holiness, character and virtue, personality and disposition are also very important elements in determining “what is sexy.” As Paul expresses it in 1 Tim 4:8: “while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” Thus, because godliness is of such great value, then we ought to find the expression of godliness in and through gender appropriate behavior to be very “sexy” indeed.

6. God Designed Marriage to Be Sexy

In addition to these elements, the Gen 2:24–25 narrative of God’s creation of Eve and the establishment of the marital union indicates several more characteristics of God honoring sexual expression and human sexuality. The text reads:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

As the passage indicates, a man is to leave his father and mother and join with his “wife.” Thus, a sixth important element of human sexuality is that sexual coitus is meant—by its very nature—to take place within a marital context that is permanent. The only context in which God finds physical genital sexual expression to be “sexy” is a lifelong marriage covenant between one man and one woman. Put simply, adultery and adulterous behavior is *never* sexy.

the Strange World of Medicine (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 68–98. This chapter in Verhey’s book has an interesting comparative analysis between the work of Joseph Fletcher and Paul Ramsey on the question of personhood.

7. God Designed Monogamy to Be Sexy

Seventh, not only is the context of that which is sexy regarding sexual behavior supposed to be marital, God designed sexuality to be monogamous. Not only does Deut 17:17 indicate that it was wrong for the kings to “multiply wives,” but throughout both the Old and New Testaments we see a number of prohibitions on adultery, fornication, prostitution, divorce and remarriage after a divorce. Not only this, but the tradition of the Christian church consistently affirmed this perspective for all people throughout its history.²⁴ Therefore, it is sexy for a man to remain married to one woman all of his life and likewise for a woman to stay married to the same man as long as they both shall live. Further, and by direct implication, the only proper viewing of nakedness in a sexual context is within this marital covenant.

8. God Designed Childbearing and Raising to Be Sexy

Eighth, sexual intercourse or “becoming one flesh” is an element of sexuality designed by God and given as a gift to a man and his wife. Thus, sexual intercourse with one’s spouse is supposed to be “sexy.” Directly related to this, of course, is the fact that sexual intercourse is designed to lead to both procreation and a marital bond and companionship in the God given task to fill the earth and subdue it. This oneness is sexy not only because it unites bodies physically and begets children; it also brings a “oneness” or unity between two image bearers that is meant to depict something about the relationship of Christ’s love for his bride the Church. All of these elements and consequences of oneness (pregnancy and rich marital companionship), then, are likewise proper expressions of human sexuality and thus by definition “sexy.”²⁵

9. God Designed Nakedness to Be Sexy

Finally, a ninth implication from the Genesis 2 account is that unashamed nakedness is appropriate to find attractive. In regard to being unashamed the text indicates both a comfort and friendship with God and with each other. In the context of marriage these two friendship would be the foundation for a willingness to bare the entire self to one another. Because of this, then, physical nakedness is also a beautiful and designed element of a biblical view of sexiness. It is an unfortunate reality that the fallen human heart often looks outside of the marital context to find shameful things to entice us when by God’s gracious ordering, He designed to offer us joy and freedom in our sexual pleasures and expression without shame. From a biblical point of view,

²⁴ David P. Gushee, *Getting Marriage Right* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 40–41.

²⁵ John Piper, “Sex and the Supremacy of Christ: Part One” in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Grand Rapids: Crossway, 2005), 26. See also Gilbert Meilaender’s “Homosexuality in the Christian Perspective” in *Things That Count* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1999), 59–76.

the naked lives and bodies of a husband and wife together is “sexy” in the eyes of God.

“What Is Sexy?” A Biblical Summation

This brings us, finally, to a place where we are able to make a more particular application of the general principles and guidelines offered by asking very specific versions of the question “what is sexy?” Because our culture’s default understanding of the word “sexy” is heavily geared toward outward appearances, I believe it is wise to first attempt to answer the question in terms of sexiness as it relates to physical appearance before summarizing the non-physical elements.

The Physical Elements of Sexiness

It is important to note the Bible *does* indicate that there are things that are beautiful. For example, it describes several women as beautiful (Sarah [Gen 12:11, 14]; Rebecca [Gen 24:16]; and Esther [Esther 1:11]) and men as handsome (Joseph [Gen 39:6], Saul [1 Sam 9:2], David [1 Sam 17:42], Absalom [2 Sam 14:25], Adonijah [1 Kgs 1:6]). It *does not* lay out, however, the particulars in regard to physical form and beauty of either a woman or a man. Even in the Song of Songs where the writer goes to great lengths to describe how he perceives his lover’s beauty there is nowhere to be found a universal or clear standard of what physical beauty should be for all of us. This reality leaves room for individual tastes regarding particular attributes that reflect the larger category of beauty without deifying any one aspect. In a world that was created by God as inherently diverse in physical form and in which, because of the Fall, our physical forms are decaying through time and with age, we ought to be glad we are given freedom and grace in this manner.

But this is not to say that beauty or sexiness is merely in the eye of the beholder or that it is a social construct. Rather, because the Scriptures do not lay out for us the particular dimensions, shapes and forms of physical beauty, we are then given freedom within the larger constructs already provided to enjoy particular elements of beauty related to personal taste.

The one unfortunate caveat we must make to this freedom in taste is the fact that when we feed our lusts and tastes with ideas that are contrary to the biblical principles described in the previous section, our tastes can indeed become warped and twisted. Beauty is not determined by the eye of the beholder, but the *perception of beauty* is. And that perception can be wrong. Therefore, in a *Playboy* infested, *Victoria’s Secret* enticed, pro-homosexual pornified context, we must be diligent to constantly guard our hearts and minds, take every thought captive, cast down ideas contrary to those of God, and renew our ideas of sex and sexual expression to conform to that which glorifies Christ.

If this is true, then, perhaps what is sexy in terms of physical appearance is more definable by stewardship and function than particular elements of

shape, color or form. That is, we are told in Genesis 1 and 2 that part of Adam and Eve's worshipful obedience was to cultivate and keep the Garden as an act of worship. Perhaps we can find in this command the principle of stewardship towards all of creation—including our bodies. Indeed, as we have seen in 1 Timothy 4 physical conditioning is of value and we learn in 1 Cor 6:19 that the body functions as a "temple" of the Holy Spirit. What appears to be the mandate about our physical bodies is that a sexy body is one that is in good physical condition relative to the body type that we have been given and the age that we are.

Further, because we are instructed to use our bodies sexually to bring about both procreation and a unitive bond between a husband and wife, the body parts and body conditions related to fatherhood and motherhood are also "sexy" as they embody the core element of why God created them and in the context God have us for them. Likewise, because God invented pleasure, those parts of the body in the opposite sex that are pleasure zones in sexual expression are likewise created by God and are appropriately appreciated as "sexy."

This would mean that regardless of whether a person is tall or short, whether they have black skin or lighter skin, whether they are blond or brunette, whether they are big chested or small chested, muscular or thin framed, none of those sizes, shades, or shapes are inherently essential to being "sexy." Rather, whatever version of these body parts one has, when they are displayed appropriately in light of one's gender and life context, they can all be sexy for another person of the opposite gender. Beyond this, what is sexy in terms of physical form in sizes and shapes and colors does not seem to be of great concern in the Biblical text.

But what about those images and ideals portrayed by *Victoria's Secret*? Is it okay to wear lingerie or find it attractive? Much of the answer depends on the context in which they are displayed and adorned and for what purposes they are displayed and adorned. As we discovered above, "what is sexy?" is that God designed human sexuality to have a male and female correspondence that is inherently marital and monogamous in nature. Thus, what is absolutely right about *Victoria's Secret* is that men are, and ought to be, attracted to women. What is flawed is the public and sexually charged public display outside of the context of marriage. Not only does this type of advertising produce a phantom image that shapes the perspective of a man regarding sexiness, it also entices sexual lust in men. For women, these types of advertisements project a phantom image of particular body type that not only has the potential to distort a woman's view of herself when she compares herself to these particular body types, they also subtly communicate the dangerously idea to women that they ought to use their bodies as commodities of exchange for the attention of men.

In sum, regarding physical appearance, it appears that God allows for a wide variety of tastes and "turn-ons." But the things we perceive as "hot" and "inviting" all must be placed under the rubric of how we were created,

what all of us were created for, and the proper context in which we are meant to express and explore “sexiness.” Tantalization, flirtatiousness, and visual arousal are all created for the marital context and may-by the grace of God-be appropriately pursued with great vigor there.

This does not mean that a man or woman (whether single or married) cannot find a person of the opposite gender that is not his or her wife attractive. But, that each person must work hard to understand sexuality from a larger perspective than personal wants and mere physicality. Each of us must guard our eyes and hearts from roaming toward that which is not meant for us to possess or indulge. The unfortunate reality is that in this ever increasing world of immorality such contexts are harder and harder to avoid.

This also means that both men and women ought to be carefully aware of how they dress so as to protect their sexuality for the context of the bedroom. In a manner that is increasingly true for both genders, Christians ought to seek to protect others who are naturally built to appreciate the opposite gender from needless temptation. Indeed, contrary to the messages of today’s world, modesty is very beautiful and can be very appropriately enticing without provoking lust. Indeed, when it comes to the public portrayal of our sexuality in regard to dress, what we ought to find most sexy are those who guard the physical elements of their sexuality for the proper context through modesty and propriety.²⁶

The Spiritual Element of Sexiness

It is appropriate to reiterate the earlier point that human are sexual beings both in body and soul. And given the teaching of 1 Tim 4:8, it is very possible that because of the fallen nature of the world in which we live, the point of greater emphasis ought to shift in favor of discovering and appreciating the non-physical elements of sexiness in others. That is to say, we do not neglect or downplay the physical element—in fact we enjoy it greatly, but because it is dependent upon an element that will decay and break down in time (the body) it is vital to recognize that it is only a part of a greater whole. And so we ask the question now, “What ought we find sexy in terms of non-physical elements of a person?”

Certainly we can begin by affirming that, regardless of one’s gender, basic characteristics of the moral and spiritual self that align with and reflect godly attributes should be attractive. In this sense, even non-believers ought to recognize goodness, kindness, justice, love and other such qualities as attractive.

But our question is not just what is attractive about non-physical qualities in a person, but what qualities in a person are particularly sexy? Because we live in a fallen world, a major problem is that as a result of the Fall much of

²⁶ The best discussion of this point that I am aware of can be found in Daniel Heimbach’s *True Sexual Morality* (Grand Rapids: Crossway, 2007). Heimbach has an excellent discussion of the idea of allurements that is very helpful (see pages 243–50).

our perspective and portrayal of particularly male or female character qualities are terribly bent and defiled both from the structural sin that shapes our society and the personal sin choices we make that shape our character. Thus for this reason, the most basic and fundamental quality that a man or a woman should find “sexy” about a person of the complementing gender is if he or she has been rightly aligned with the One who created him or her as a sexual being. That is, if a man has become a Christian, he now has begun to be properly realigned with the way God created him as a man. Likewise, if a woman has become a Christian, she now has begun to be properly realigned with the way God created her as a woman. Thus, the most fundamental element of sexiness is whether or not one loves Jesus and then strives to live under His lordship.

An obvious implication of this is that while a non-believer may exhibit other qualities both physically and non-physically that are aligned with natural law or general revelation, fundamentally they are disordered to the Creator and the ultimate purposes for which God created men and women. In essence, they do not even have the capacity to become sexy as God ultimately defines maleness or femaleness. Thus, even dating such a person (and certainly marrying one) is the pursuit of foolishness and a journey down a dead end road. If the question of sexiness is primarily a question of bringing maximum glory to the King of the Universe in and through both our physical and spiritual elements of sexuality, then the pursuit of someone who is not a believer is quiet simply “not sexy.”

What about a person who is a Christian? What character qualities ought we to find sexy in them? Certainly the qualities of discipleship such as the fruit of the spirit (Gal 5:22) and the beatitudes (Matt 5:3–12) are foundational to discipleship and therefore ought to be generally attractive, but once again we are not asking the question of general attraction, but of what is “sexy.”

This is where we once again return to our general guidelines discovered above that indicate that not only is maleness and femaleness linked to our image bearing status, but that God created them to be equal in value of both person and role, but distinct in our roles. Thus, to discover what qualities we ought to seek that are most sexy, it would be those that highlight particular character traits of men and women.

Beginning with men we see two very clear passages in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In these passages Paul lists the characteristic for men who are qualified to shepherd the worship patterns of the body of Christ as well as lead out in regard to the mission of God. Because worship is the purpose of the created universe it follows that these character traits that qualify a man to lead in worship would be those qualities that are most “sexy.” Further, regarding male sexiness, we find that Ephesians 5 indicates clearly that a man ought to take the role in his marriage and family life of leadership (headship) in which he serves his wife, seeks to present her to Christ more holy and pure, and bring the family into a context of more profound life oriented worship of God. Too often the modern man is simply afraid to rise up to these

callings from Scripture. The wise woman is the one who waits and seeks this man out. The wise man is the one who fights passivity in an attempt to become the sexy man these passages describe.

For women we see in I Timothy 3, Titus 2 and Proverbs 31 beautiful discussions of what biblical womanhood is and therefore what inner qualities would embody sexiness. Likewise, in Ephesians 5 we see that submission and respect are key elements of the fulfillment of a woman's sexuality. We must be careful here to not suggest that such character traits are equivalent to "doormat status." Nor do we want to place relative cultural forms of these qualities from previous eras or decades on women as scriptural norms. Nonetheless, in a world in which women are being encouraged to play the role of sexual predator, assert their place as relational leader and usurp the role of men (who are far too often wimpy and passive) as leaders in the home and church, the wise woman, the truly sexy woman is the one who seeks the wisdom of Scripture to mold her character and values. Likewise the wise man is not fooled by the counterfeit picture of womanhood championed by the culture, but waits and then strongly pursues in his masculinity the woman who embodies these traits.

One last comment need be added regarding this spiritual element of sexiness. Part of the beauty of God's design is that even in a fallen world in which our bodies break down and decay with time and age becoming less "sexy," the spirit can become more and more sexy as it conforms to the image of Christ. Therefore, it is indeed a biblical truth that for an old man the most sexy woman on earth is the woman he's been married to for 50 years and who has grown in her love for the things of God. And for an old woman, the most sexy guy on the planet is the man she's been married to for 50 years and who walked with Jesus throughout their marriage. Indeed, even when time or circumstances take their toll and a body is reduced to a wheel chair or sickbed, these inner qualities that are more and more conformed to the image of Christ are rightly perceived as incredibly sexy to the one who understands a biblical view of sexiness.

Conclusion

How ought we Christians answer the question of "what is sexy?" and what are we to do with the claims of *Victoria Secret*? In regard to the latter question, the problem is not that we like to see human bodies or that we have particular tastes, but that we take them out of proper contexts, we make them primary in our understanding, and most tragically, we do not evaluate them in light of the overall and dominating purposes for which we and our sex and sexuality were created.

Victoria's Secret is not wrong in claiming that the human body is attractive and sexy. Indeed, in many ways they are exactly right. God did make humans physical and sexual. Further, as Scripture indicates, in the right contexts and from the experience and pleasures of sex and sexuality are meant not only to

bring us great joy, but are also seen as *very good* by God himself. In fact, one could say that when we rightly pursue and express our sexuality it not only brings us great pleasure and joy, it makes the Father joyful as well.

But where the perspective of *Victoria's Secret* is woefully inadequate and tragically deceptive is in the utter shallowness of their depiction of what "sexy" is. Its depiction of sexy is divorced from the fuller biblical context. It is offered without reference to the great task God created humans to fulfill. It separates the physical dimension of sex from a richer and more holistic biblical understanding of embodied selves. Finally, it roots the physical desire and enticement God linked to our sexuality in selfish forms of lustful wants. For these reasons, the *Victoria Secret* version of "sexy" strips a true biblical understanding of its essentials and prostitutes a cheap and anemic imitation in its stead. As such, it promotes a view of "sexy" that appeals to (and creates?) self-oriented lusters who ever consume and never find satisfaction.

The great tragedy is not that *Victoria's Secret* celebrates the human body, but that it does so by taking that which is most subjective and most temporal from the larger, grander picture of sexiness and parades it about as if it were the final goal and highest expression. Thus, it is not the body form that is evil, but the context and exploitive nature of its uncovering as well as the disoriented expression of its use that is the counterfeiting thief. In truth, the secret Victoria is not telling us is that she is taking a good and beautiful element out of the beauty of its context twisting it in a selfish direction and undermining the higher and more satisfying pleasure.

But God offers something of far exceeding excellence for us to discover to our great and lasting joy. For it is God, the one who created sex and sexual expression, it is God who invented pleasure, it is God who gave this great gift to the human race, and it is God who also provides contexts, purposes, and guidelines to enable its fullest expression and meaning. God understands "sexy" better than anyone and it brings Him great joy when we trade in our petty and anemic views of "sexiness" for a much more enticing one.

Thus, if there is a higher and better definition of sexy than the one paraded around in our culture, then even if it is at first hard for us to see or accept, we must trust the Maker of all good things, and seek to alter our perspective in light of His. After all He is the One who declares in Ps 16:11 that in His presence there is fullness of joy and in His right hand there are pleasures forever. If this verse is true, then it must be God's definition of "what is sexy" that is actually the most tantalizing. And what God finds sexy, we ought also to find sexy.