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**The Use of the Concept of the New Identity in Christ
when Counseling Sexual Addiction**

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Introduction

Sexual addiction, dubbed the secret sin, is pandemic. We need look no further than our televisions or the World Wide Web to confirm that. The media’s bombardment of such easily accessible, sexually-explicit materials and the inundation of our culture with the sexually-motivated content found even in entertainment programs rated for so-called “family viewing” have caused a desensitizing of sorts. This has led to cultural acceptance of a large portion of this provocative content as normal and provided a pathway of entrapment, which has led to the rapidly increasing numbers of those who have become involved in sexual addiction.

Today there is a pornography epidemic in the church, according to Mike Genung of Blazing Grace, who has stated that statistics show that at least 50% of Christian men, including those in leadership

positions, and 20% of women, are struggling with porn/sexual sin.¹ Acknowledging that sexual addiction is a problem among professing Christians, the question of concern is how the believer can find freedom from this compulsive behavior. This article will examine this issue and prayerfully provide answers that utilize Biblical teachings on grace for those counseling the sexually addicted.

The counselor develops a treatment plan as a prerequisite to treatment. Before one can create an effective therapeutic treatment plan, however, one must first understand the dynamics of the issue facing the counselee. Therefore, I will begin by presenting an overview of what sexual addiction is and how the addict is affected by it before presenting a Biblical foundational therapeutic approach for the treatment of sexual addiction.

A. What is Sexual Addiction?

Sexual addiction has been called the secret sin, not only because of the clandestine nature of the acts but also because it is probably the least talked about and least understood of all addictions. Some in the church are opposed to the use of the word addiction for those who participate in this kind of sexual behavior, because they feel that labeling this behavior as an addiction absolves the person of their responsibility for their actions. While this is certainly a legitimate position to take, I will not address that topic in this article. In an effort to bring a deeper level of understanding to sexual addiction, I will, however, include information on what is said to be a neurological connection with sexually compulsive behavior.

Addictions are a compulsive, enslaving dependence on something that results in detrimental patterns of thinking and behavior. Those who have fallen prey to sexual addiction engage in continual and escalating sexual behaviors despite the evident negative consequences of their actions to self and others.

Patrick Carnes, psychologist, researcher, and author of *Out of the Shadows*, the first Christian book on sexual addiction, played an instrumental role in the initial establishment of the etiology, assessment and treatment of sexual addiction. Citing the prevalence and increase in sexual addiction in our culture over the past 25 years,

¹ Mike Genung, *What is Sexual Addiction*, www.blazinggrace.org

Carnes directly links this to the dramatic increase of sexually-explicit materials that are reflected in print, television, movies, and song lyrics. However, he cites the Internet as the primary gateway for exposure to such materials, referring to it as the “crack cocaine” of sexual addiction, because it has sucked into this compulsive enslaving behavior those who might have otherwise escaped it.²

Historically, sexual sin has been the downfall not only of powerful nations but also many in powerful positions holding respectable titles. Samson, known more from the fame of the Samson and Delilah story, was ordained of God to be Israel’s judge and deliverer from the Philistines in that day. The Bible records Samson’s first words as “I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah, now get her for me as my wife” (Judges 14:2). One only has to read about Kings David and Solomon and many other notables and events in Scripture and history to recognize that sexual sin has left much destruction in its wake since the beginning of time.

Again, sexual addiction is a struggle borne by many in the evangelical community today. Pastors, church officers and diligent and dedicated lay persons have been caught up in this compulsive behavior. While estimates vary, there is a wide consensus that no fewer than 50%, and possibly 66%, of evangelical Christian men have struggled with pornography, at least at some time. It is particularly noteworthy that several recent studies have suggested that Christian women also struggle with pornography, somewhere between 25-33%.³ It is estimated that for every 10 men in church, five are struggling with pornography.⁴ According to pastors, sexual addiction, at 57%, is one of the eight top sexual issues damaging to their congregations. Nearly 48% of families have said that pornography is a problem in their homes.⁵ In answer as to why pornography and sexual addiction are problems in the church, some hold the belief that people raised in religious homes are more likely to become involved with, and progress to, addiction because they have been led to repress or deny their sexual feelings. While considered harmless by some,

² *Christian Counseling Today*, Volume 16, No. 1

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *The Call to Biblical Manhood*, Man in the Mirror , 6 July, 2004

⁵ Focus on the Family Poll, 1 October, 2003

pornography, often the first step leading to sexual addiction, represents an avenue by which those believed to be sexually repressed find an outlet for meeting their sexual needs, albeit in an unhealthy way.

Some hold the view that the church, across a broad spectrum of theologies and doctrines, has failed to provide its members with proper teaching and guidance about healthy human sexuality and that Christians have been left to search for their own answers, thus making them more vulnerable to the dangers of sexual experimentation.⁶

B. The Effects of Sexual Addiction on the Soul

Today's culture, with its in-your-face posture, asserts loudly and unashamedly that pornography, promiscuity and adultery are harmless and fun. Some professionals agree that lust is healthy and should not be inhibited, but the sex addict knows differently as he struggles with the devastating effects of his compulsive enslaving behavior. The Greek word for enslaving is *douloo*, which means to bring under bondage. The one addicted to unhealthy sexual behavior is, indeed, in bondage, trapped and held captive because lust has become his master. He has become conditioned to use sex as a coping mechanism. Certain situations and life circumstances that cause undue pressure become triggers that will lead him to act out sexually in search of comfort and an escape from his pain. In the end he finds that, rather than achieving comfort or escape, he is left with the resulting feelings of shame, emptiness, and isolation in his misery.

Sexual addiction is a spiritual, emotional and psychological poison; it hollows out a man's soul and turns him into a ragged, desperate fool, destroying men, women and children, marriages and families.⁷ It is spiritual and emotional poison because those who are trapped in its clutches are attempting to fill an inborn need for God with a physical act. We are all born with a hunger for God; we crave His love and acceptance and have a need to feel we have significance. These are needs that only God can fill to the level and quality that satisfies our need, because only He can meet the needs of the human heart. The one who struggles with sexual addiction doesn't believe the

⁶ *Christian Counseling Today*, Volume 16, No. 1

⁷ Mike Genung, *What Is Sexual Addiction*, www.blazinggrace.org

living God accepts him, so he desperately and secretly seeks to meet his need for acceptance, significance and love by sexually acting out.

C. The Cycle of Addiction

The addict is consumed by and caught up in a cycle of addiction. He is usually not aware of this cycle; therefore, it remains undetected and unexamined until counseling begins. The cycle of addiction begins or ends with acting out. Avoidance of all feeling is the root of every addiction. Addicts numb themselves by acting out; that is, rather than feeling their feelings, they act them out so they still remain unconscious. This leads to some sort of relief, but guilt follows, unless this pattern has happened so often that they have the beginnings of a seared conscience and don't feel bad anymore. This guilt leads to fake repentance, a "worldly sorry," as St. Paul puts it (2 Corinthians 7:10). They may cry, may feel remorse, but they are sure they can still fix it themselves. This leads to shame, which is different from guilt. Guilt says that I have done something bad, whereas,

shame says I am a bad person. Shame is what really keeps the cycle going.⁸ Shame can lead to depression, which causes anxiety, producing a trigger that keeps the cycle going.

D. The Neurological Nature of Addiction

Sexual addiction is a process of repetitive sexual behavior. According to Dr. Jeffrey Satinover, repetitive sexual behavior alters the brain itself.⁹ When practiced through the years, this behavior creates chemical releases in the brain upon which the addict becomes dependent. When a person experiences significant stimulation with highly sexualized images, the hormone epinephrine (or adrenaline) is secreted into the bloodstream by the adrenal gland. Epinephrine stamps emotional memories into the brain. These memories continue to resurface as flashbacks, regardless of the struggler's desire to forget. In addition, powerful, pleasure-producing and highly addictive

⁸ Erik Bohlen, *The Cycle of Sex Addiction*, www.sexualrecovery.net

⁹ Dr. Jeffrey Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Baker, 1966) p.134.

chemicals are released during the sex act, the same chemicals released during cocaine use.¹⁰

Most people who are sexually addicted to pornography had their first encounter with sexually explicit materials at the age of 11 or 12 years of age. Many sex addicts were sexually, physically, or emotionally abused as children, never getting their intrinsic human needs for love and significance met. They bring that emotional and spiritual wounding into their teen and adult lives, hoping that every new relationship or sexual encounter will solve their problem. Many who engage in compulsive sexual behavior did so prior to becoming a Christian in hopes they would gain control over their behavior. Undoubtedly many have, but for the most part, far more have not and, because of the strong addictive nature of this compulsion, they will need to employ an effective plan of recovery.

E. Grace: No Greater Gift

Grace: where would man be but for the manifold and inexhaustible gift of God's divine favor bestowed so richly and abundantly upon him and all of His creation? It is by grace through the agency of faith that mankind is brought into a right relationship with Him. More than any other single word, grace is the expression of the sum total of all that enters into Christianity. The meaning of the word grace, as used in the New Testament, is not unlike its meaning as employed in common speech but for one important exception, namely, in the Bible the word often represents that which is limitless, since it represents realities that are infinite and eternal. It is nothing less than the unlimited love of God expressing itself in measureless grace.¹¹ The nearest Biblical synonym for grace is the word favor; additionally, the prevailing thought expressed in the New Testament by the word grace is the prevailing thought expressed by the word favor in the Old Testament.

That being said, because the word grace is not always used in the same sense in the Old and New Testaments, that can lead to

¹⁰ June Hunt, *How to Defeat Harmful Habits* (Eugene Oregon, Harvest House Publishers, 2011) p.301.

¹¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace, An Exposition of God's Marvelous Gift*, (Grand Rapids, Mich. Kregel Publications, 1995) p.19.

uncertainty, misunderstanding, and even mystification surrounding the workings of grace in the life of the believer without the full

appreciation of its study. Louis Berkhof presents critical insight into the definition and use of the word grace as found in both the Old and New Testaments:

The word grace is not always used in the same sense in Scripture, but has a variety of meanings. In the Old Testament we have the word *chen* (adj. chanun), from the root *chanan*. The noun may denote gracefulness or beauty, Prov. 22:11; 31:30, but most generally means favour or good will. The Old Testament repeatedly speaks of finding favour in the eyes of God or of man. The favour so found carries with it the bestowal of favours or blessings. This means that grace is not an abstract quality, but is an active working principle, manifesting itself in beneficent acts, Gen. 6:8; 19:19; 33:15; Ex. 33:12; 34:19; I Sam. 1:18; 27:5; Esth. 2:7. The fundamental idea is that the blessings graciously bestowed are freely given, and not in consideration of any claim or merit. The New Testament word *charis*, from *chairen*, “to rejoice,” denotes first of all a pleasant external appearance, loveliness, agreeableness, acceptableness, and has some meaning in Luke 4:22; Col. 4:6. A more prominent meaning of the word, however, is favour or good will, Luke 1:30; 2:40, 52; Acts 2:47; 7:46; 24:27; 25:9. It may denote the kindness or beneficence of our Lord, II Cor. 8:9, or the favour manifested or bestowed by God, II Cor. 9:8; I Pet. 5:10. Furthermore, the word is expressive of the emotion awakened in the heart of the recipient of such favor, and thus acquires the meaning of gratitude or thankfulness, Luke 4:22; I Cor. 10:30; 15:57; II Cor. 2:14; 8:16; I Tim. 1:12. In most of the passages, however, in which the word *charis* is used in the New Testament, it signifies the unmerited operation of God in the heart of man affected through the agency of the Holy Spirit. While we sometimes speak of grace as an inherent quality, it is in reality the active communication of divine blessings by the in-working of the Holy Spirit, out of the fullness of Him who is “full of grace and truth,” Rom. 3:34; 5:2, 15; 17:20; 6:1; I Cor. 1:4; II Cor. 6:1; 8:9; Eph. 1:7; 2:5, 8; 3:7; I Pet. 3:7; 5:2.¹²

Surely, the Christian should not be ignorant of, but have a clear understanding of, the significance of the relationship of God’s grace to his life. It is only with this insight that he can have access to the fullness of God’s blessings upon his life. When asked to give the meaning of grace, almost exclusively you will hear people say that it is the “unmerited favor of God” or you will hear it is “God giving us that which we do not deserve.” Of course these statements are true, but when asked how the truths of those statements apply concerning

¹² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1949) pp.426-27

practical application in their daily lives, their answers are not as clear and succinct. Several years ago I heard a sermon preached in which the analogy was made of the Christian who is either unaware of, or who does not make use of, all that God has provided for him by His grace. The story opens with an immigrant of a past century to whom a benefactor gave a ticket providing transportation by ocean voyage to America. During the long journey, the man stayed to himself, only venturing out for short periods of time as needed. The bread he brought with him for food eventually ran out and he began to hunger. He was famished by the end of the voyage, and when he was asked upon disembarking why he never joined with all the other passengers for dining, he said that he could not afford to do so for he had little money. It was then that he learned that his ticket was an all expense paid trip and that his meals were included in the price of his ticket.

Scripture speaks of forfeiting the grace that could be ours. Although the context of this truth, found in the Book of Jonah, centers on those who cling to worthless idols (2:8), I believe the application can be made that it is possible for one to forfeit God's grace by not accepting it, irrespective of the reason why. Scripture defines an idol as anything that Christians substitute in the place of God in their lives. I believe that, for the Christian, the

reason so many are living defeated, unfulfilled and dissatisfied lives is that they are not abiding in the fullness of God's grace for daily living. As Philippians 1:6 teaches, we can be confident that He who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Paul is telling the saints at Philippi, and those who will follow, that they can be confident that God, who has begun the good work of salvation by grace in them, is faithful to complete the work of sanctification by grace until the day of Christ Jesus' return. God's grace empowers the Christian to do those things unattainable by him through the weakness of his flesh. This is exemplified in I Corinthians, where Paul says, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them-yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (15:10). Isaiah is an example of an Old Testament saint who lived by grace as he relied upon God to work in the lives of His people. This reliance upon the Lord can be seen in Isaiah's proclaiming God's power for the weak: "He gives power to the weak...those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength" (40:31).

Nowhere in Scripture is a better example given of the picture of the relationship the Lord desires for us to have in Him than in John 15:5: "I am the vine; you are the branches, if a man remains in me and

I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” The Lord divides this passage into two voices, the active and the passive. The active part--“if you remain in me”--is our part and is something that we do. To remain in Him means we make the choice to do so. Remaining in Him is an active, necessary decision of our will; that is, a decision of the will to live godly lives. The second part expresses the passive voice in that we let Him do something; we let Him abide in us. It is essential that He abides in us because He is our empowerment; all of our enablement to produce good fruit rests on His ability, as He says that without Me, you can do nothing. Both activities are essential for the process of His sanctifying work and resulting spiritual growth in the believer.

So, it is by the in-dwelling of the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, that the Christian has the in-working empowerment of Christ. God has called the Christian to a standard of behavior, and it is by His grace that the Christian accomplishes what He has called him to do. It has been asked: “what are souls without His grace? -as dead as the branch in which the sap does not circulate. What is the church without Him? -as parched and barren as the fields without the dew of heaven.”¹³ God’s gift of grace by the in-working of the Holy Spirit in the soul of man is the power source by which He, not man, completes the work started by the initial act of grace that brings salvation.

Conclusion: The Vital Role of Grace in Recovery

When counseling the sexually addicted, the overarching focus of the treatment plan should include at least the following vital areas of concentration. First, the plan needs to include the component of self discovery; second, the person will need to learn about their addiction and talk openly about it and to learn who God is so that they may come to trust Him for His empowerment in the process of working toward freedom from their addiction. When we understand who God is, then we understand who we are. It is helpful to understand that treatment and recovery is a healing journey, one that is a process of changing old addictive and destructive behaviors that took time to build into new and healthy sexual behavior that will take time to rebuild.

¹³ Anonymous

Due to the emotional state of the sex addict -- his shame, guilt, anger, inability to trust others, fear, and the like-it can be difficult for him to accept that God is neither angry with him nor has He given up on him. The Biblical counselor will need to be an example of God's grace to the counselee. One of the counselee's biggest fears is that he will not be accepted, especially if others know him the way he knows himself and know about his compulsive behaviors. In order for him to begin the process of coming to a place where he can trust God, he will need to begin building a trusting relationship of acceptance with the counselor and with others, if in a group setting. Scripture teaches that all a man wants is to be loved, and this requires God's grace, because man is not always lovable, and his actions and behavior are never always godly. The counselee will need to be shown that God's grace is not merited; and, just as important, that His grace is not withheld because of lack of merit.

It is essential that he knows and accepts that there is no place we can go that God's grace cannot reach, and there is no depth to which we can sink from which God cannot pull us out. His grace is greater than all of our sin, no matter how small or big we might view what we have done. Whether we are just starting to wander off course or if we are already sinking and drowning in our sin, we can receive grace.¹⁴

The counselor will need to help the counselee to come not only to the right knowledge of who God is but also to the truth concerning how God feels about him. The counselee will need to surrender to God to begin recovery from his addiction. The distinction should be made to the counselee that with addiction, the addict does not quit, he surrenders. Quitting involves self, ego, and a sense of control. Quitting makes it seem as if the addict really can stop by the power of his will.¹⁵ Surrendering means to give oneself up, as into the power of another; to submit or yield. It is at this point that the counselee can begin to see change in his life. Luke teaches us that the things that are impossible with man are possible with God (12:27). When the addict can earnestly accept and trust that man cannot, but that God can, he

¹⁴ Samuel Wakefield, *Grace That Is Greater Than All Our Sins*, Christian Database 2007, Wordsearch Corp.

¹⁵ Erik Bohlen, *The Cycle Of Sex Addiction*, www.sexualrecovery.net

can free himself from the cycle of human performance and effort that has helped to keep him in bondage to his addiction.

In his addiction the addict feels powerless already, so admitting he is powerless may, understandably, be one of the last things he wants to do, because when we admit powerlessness, we also admit defeat. But the process of true recovery from addictive behavior includes making this admission. The counselee will be helped when he understands that his addiction is his master. He is likely laboring under the false assumption that he does have control, even in the face of the number of times he's quit only to find himself having done what he said he would never do again. The process of surrender, then, is an issue of transferring ownership from one master to another. Sexual addiction is a harsh taskmaster in that it causes damage and ruin. It promises that it will deliver comfort and relief and fulfillment, but in the end, it brings devastation and conviction that causes guilt, shame, and self-hatred. The addict's surrender to God will also bring conviction, but it will be conviction done in love to lead him to repentance, empowerment, and freedom.

In the course of the counselee recognizing and admitting his powerlessness and then beginning the transformation process of complete surrender to God, the counselor should help the counselee to understand that his part is to be willing to surrender, but that it is God, by His grace, who accomplishes and maintains his surrender. The counselee will experience empowerment when he understands that, although God commands his surrender, he need not be fearful or overwhelmed because God will not command from him what He will not bestow.

When the counselee in earnest submits his will to God, God, by His grace, is able to empower change from within. As Paul teaches in Philippians 2:13: "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." While it is essential that the counselee understands that God will empower him in his process to freedom from his addiction, it is equally important that he understands and accepts that he has a role and responsibility in his process of recovery. Unless he understands the difference between God's empowerment and his responsibility, he will likely experience defeat, falling back into his compulsive behavior. Because of God's

provision of grace for forgiveness of sin upon repentance, he need not remain defeated in his sin.

The counselee's most basic responsibility is to learn about himself and his addiction -- more specifically, about the core issues underlining his addiction -- and to learn and recognize his ritualized behavior that precedes the acting out. The addict is often unaware of the first steps toward their acting out and find himself saying something like, "it happened again." Addicts will describe their addiction as though they had little to do with it, it just happened to them. Recovery is helping them break out of this "trance" and see the many steps that led them to the place of acting out.¹⁶ Furthermore, the counselee will need to understand and take responsibility for his choices and actions and to be honest and open with himself and others.

Prayer is talking to God. The person in recovery from compulsive sexual behavior benefits greatly by being in constant communication with God. When he understands that God's appeal to him is one of love, he will begin to meet with Him more regularly. In his First Epistle, the Apostle John states: "this is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have what we asked of him" (5:14, 15). The counselee will be more inclined to spend time with God in prayer as his beliefs about God and himself begin to align with the truth of Scripture. He will have an increased confident level of trust setting him on the path, through God's mercy and grace, to freedom from a life of compulsive sexual behavior and to complete healing for his body, soul and spirit.

Dear Lord, I humbly admit my own insufficiency to produce the life You want me to live. Nevertheless, I confidently confess Your grace as my sufficient resource for abundant fruitfulness. Lord, I want to know You better, that humility and faith might be growing realities in my life, Amen.¹⁷

¹⁶ Erik Bohlen, *The Cycle Of Sex Addiction*, www.sexualrecovery.net

¹⁷ Bob Hoekstra, *Blue Letter Bible Daily Devotional*, Day By Day By Grace, September 20, 2012



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