

Missionary Singles Issues: Masturbation

Probably no other sexual topic produces more disagreement among Christians at the present time than masturbation, the deliberate physical sexual stimulation of oneself. A century ago most Christians, and nearly everyone else in Western culture, would have agreed that it was wrong and that people, including single missionaries, should not masturbate.

Ancient rock paintings and other kinds of art as well as early literature from many cultures depict both men and women masturbating. Even the gods in some cultures were depicted as masturbating. Apparently few of these cultures considered it wrong. To find out why this change occurred in Western culture, one needs to consider what brought about this change. Christianity was involved.

What did the Bible say?

The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible appeared in the early 17th century and became widely used. The English words chosen to translate some of the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts became influential in writing about masturbation.

- Genesis 38: 9-10 (KJV). Onanism: “And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother’s wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother. And the thing which he did displeased the Lord: wherefore He slew him also.” Early readers of the KJV believed that Onan had masturbated, so they sometimes called it “Onanism” and condemned it as sinful because God had

killed Onan for doing it.

- Micah 2:1 (KJV): “Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds! When the morning is light, they practice it, because it is in the power of their hand.” People who masturbated with their hands in bed in the morning probably projected what they were doing into the particular wording of the KJV. Therefore, masturbation was evil.
- 1 Corinthians 6:9 (KJV): “...abusers of themselves with mankind,” are listed along with adulterers, thieves, and many others as people who will not “inherit the kingdom of God.” Masturbation (self-abuse) would keep people out of the kingdom.

What did people say then?

During the 18th century masturbation was condemned by people in many walks of life throughout Western culture.

- 1716, Dutch theologian, Dr. Balthazar Bekker wrote a pamphlet, “Onania, or the heinous sin of self-pollution, and all its frightful consequences in both sexes.” The pamphlet was published in more than 60 editions in several languages.
- 1760, Swiss physician, Samuel-Auguste Tissot published “L’Onanisme,” a medical treatise saying that the loss of semen through masturbation would cause loss of strength, memory, reason, and vision. It would also cause gout, rheumatism and headaches—along with dozens of other diseases.
- 1797, German philosopher, Immanuel Kant published *Metaphysics of Morals* in which he maintained that “such an unnatural use of one’s sexual attributes ...

is a violation of one’s duty to himself.” Its immorality is because “a man gives up his personality” when he masturbates.

- 19th century: dozens of examples available.
- 1888-1917, Dr John Kellogg was an American physician (to Henry Ford and Thomas Edison), inventor (corn flakes), and educator (American Medical Missionary College). He published multiple editions of *Plain Facts for Old and Young*, devoting 97 pages to the “Secret Vice (Solitary Vice or Self Abuse).”
- 1914, Robert Baden-Powell, Britain, founder of Boy Scouts added a passage in *Scouting for Boys* warning them of the dangers of masturbation. This was gradually changed to saying that to “be prepared,” scouts had to avoid wasting vital fluids to conserve their virility, and this warning was not removed until 1945.

Clearly, masturbation was condemned for many reasons. It was considered not only to be immoral, but also to be harmful to people physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and in many other ways.

What does the Bible say?

Only during the last half of the 20th century were the three KJV passages understood more correctly. Some of the changes were made earlier, but all the needed changes did not occur until then. The popular New International Version (NIV) made them all when it appeared in 1978.

- Genesis 38: 9-10 (NIV) is changed little, but today people agree that Onan practiced coitus interruptus (a form of birth control), withdrawing before

ejaculation, rather than masturbation. What angered God was that Onan failed to carry out the Levirate marriage law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

- Micah 2:1(NIV): “Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning’s light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it.” This verse refers to evil in general being planned at night and carried out during the day.
- 1 Corinthians 6:9 (KJV): “homosexual offenders” are listed along with adulterers, thieves, and many others as those who will not “inherit the kingdom of God.” Nothing is said about people abusing themselves.

The fact is that the Bible says nothing about masturbation. Even most people who believe that masturbation is sinful agree that the Bible says nothing specific about it. They typically attempt to interpret general verses about evil as applying to masturbation specifically.

What do people say now?

By the middle of the twentieth century physicians and psychologists believed that masturbation caused neither physical nor mental illness. Rather than seeing it as harmful, people began encouraging masturbation. They said that it felt good, was legal, was always available, was not hazardous to health, and released tension to help avoid premarital sex.

Since the Bible does not mention masturbation, and since modern medicine has not found it harmful to health, modern Christians have come to many different conclusions about masturbation. In fact, by

1975 they had taken two extreme positions as well as ones in between.

- 1968, “Masturbation—Gift of God.” This is a chapter title in *The Stork is Dead* by Charlie Shedd. He noted that perhaps past generations were just blind to the truth, that masturbation may simply be the “wise provision of a very wise Creator” who “gave it to us because he knew we’d need it.” He advised teens to thank God for it and to use it as a blessing.
- 1971, Masturbation—sometimes sinful, sometimes not. In *Sexual Understanding Before Marriage*, Herbert Miles has chapter sections on “When is masturbation sinful?” and “When is masturbation not sinful?” He concludes that though masturbation may be sinful in some cases, when practiced on a limited, temporary basis for the purpose of self-control, guided by Christian principles, and with no evil results, it is acceptable.
- 1973, “Masturbation Is Sin.” This is a chapter section title in *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* by Jay Adams. Agreeing that the Bible has no direct references to masturbation, Adams maintains that it is sinful for four reasons: (1) In 1 Corinthians 6:12 Paul notes that he would not be brought under the power of anything. Some people are unable to control their masturbation; therefore, it is sin. (2) In Matthew 5:27-28 Jesus says that sexual fantasy is adultery. Many people fantasize during masturbation; therefore, it is sin. (3) The Bible does not present masturbation as a sexual option; therefore it is sin. (4) Adams says that masturbation is a perversion of the sexual act; therefore, it is sin.

Obviously Christians do not agree about the rightness or wrongness of

masturbation. As is often the case when the Bible does not say anything specifically about a topic, Christians reach many different conclusions about it.

Conclusions

Although masturbation has been practiced in many cultures for thousands of years, the Bible does not even mention it. Although for a couple centuries many Christians reading the KJV interpreted three passages as being about masturbation, now most people agree that the Bible says nothing. What are single missionaries to do?

- Related things tend to happen when people masturbate, so Jay Adams’ first two points need to be taken very seriously. If single missionaries are not able to control masturbation, it is a problem (1 Corinthians 6:12). If they are engaging in lustful fantasy (Matthew 5:27-28) during masturbation, it is sin.
- Masturbation is usually not physically harmful to an individual. It does not cause all of the debilitating illnesses attributed to it during the last two centuries. However, single missionaries need to be aware that some forms of it may lead to physical damage or sexual dysfunction. See details on WebMD at <http://men.webmd.com/features/masturbation-5-things-you-didnt-know>
- We must be careful about loading guilt on people about masturbation. Condemning them for something not mentioned in Scripture should not be done.
- If masturbation is done in public or interferes with social contact or daily life, we need to help the person overcome this practice.

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