

Sexting: A Dangerous New Temptation... ... And an Opportunity for Ministry

by Ted Kober, President of Ambassadors of Reconciliation
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In recent weeks, a mother pleaded with parents and teens on NBC's *Today* show to openly discuss sexting and its potential consequences. Her 18-year-old daughter committed suicide because the nude picture she had previously sent to an ex-boyfriend was shared with others and she couldn't deal with the teasing and shame.¹

Sexting is part of the exploding epidemic of people falling prey to sexual temptation through new technology. Sexual sin of all types presents real dangers to individuals, marriages, families, as well as churches, schools and even businesses. At the same time, however, these situations provide ministry opportunities to the leaders in our churches and schools.

Trend Escalating among Teens and Young Adults

“Sexting” is the growing phenomenon of people using cell phones and computers to share sexually explicit photos and videos of themselves with others. It is especially popular among teens and young adults. An October 2008 survey commissioned by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and *CosmoGirl.com* cited these results (in the study, teens are age 13-19; young adults are age 20-26)²:

- 20% of teens and 33% of young adults have sent/posted nude or semi-nude pictures/videos of themselves.
- 39% of teens and 59% of young adults are sending or posting sexually suggestive messages.
- 44% of young adult women and 50% of young adult men say it is common for sexually suggestive text messages to get shared with people other than the intended recipient.
- And yet, incredibly 75% of teens and 71% of young adults say sending sexually suggestive content “can have serious negative consequences.”

Sexting is a form of pornography. Sending or posting nude photos of minors is child pornography and therefore a crime. High school students have been arrested recently for sexting.³ Some are outraged that teenagers are being prosecuted for sex crimes because they believe that sexting is simply an adolescent prank that doesn't warrant such harsh treatment. Some even advocate that sexting is normal flirtatious behavior and no big deal. In spite of how the world views such behavior, the Bible identifies looking at another lustfully, sexual immorality, and dirty talk as sinful and idolatrous (Matthew 6:28; Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 4:29).

Sexting Involves Lutherans

Christians are not immune from the effects of these sins. Lutheran education institutions from elementary schools to universities are wrestling with these issues. At Ambassadors of Reconciliation, we are aware of numerous examples, including:

- An eighth-grade girl sent nude pictures of her breast to a sixth-grade boy at a midwestern, rural Lutheran school; he showed it to two other boys.
- A Lutheran high school senior exchanged nude photos with his younger girlfriend.
- A Lutheran student teacher posted nude pictures of her breasts on her personal web page, and it was discovered by the 7th graders in the Lutheran school where she was student teaching.
- From his Lutheran university dorm room, a male student broadcast to college friends a live video of having sex with his girlfriend.
- A Lutheran middle school teacher was arrested in a sting operation because he had been “talking dirty” over the Internet and arranged to meet a 13-year-old girl for sex.
- A professional church worker was dismissed when members became aware that he had

1 See article at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29546030/>.

2 http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech_Summary.pdf.

3 For example, see http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1391233/sexting_results_in_six_high_school.html?cat=15.

posted nude pictures of himself on a homosexual web site, searching for hookups. The church exploded in conflict.

Each of these situations gave rise to significant conflict and hurt. The world is screaming for help (listen to the mother crying over her daughter's suicide). But the church remains mostly silent, pretending that sexual temptation in a high tech society is not affecting us.

How Should Christian Educators Respond?

The church possesses divine answers for issues such as sexual temptation. For Christ came into the world to die for sinners. His wounds paid for our guilt and he took upon himself our shame on the cross. He rose from the dead, victorious over sin, death and the devil. Confession and forgiveness bring healing and restore relationships, including our relationship to God (Romans 5:1-11).

However, the people of our churches and schools need to learn how to apply the Law/Gospel message to today's current struggles, including sexual sins.

Sexting is just one form of sexual temptation available to us through modern technology. Others include viewing Internet pornography, engaging in cybersex (relating to someone on-line using sexual messages, photos or video), listening to racy music on iPods, watching sexually explicit videos or TV, tuning in to pornographic satellite radio stations, and more.

In spite of what the church has to offer through repentance, confession, forgiveness, and power to resist temptation, Christian leaders (including educators) often avoid the subject. In contrast, such topics are frequently discussed in the news, by medical and counseling organizations, among divorce lawyers, and even in businesses. Comedians joke about Internet pornography on late night television, and sit coms make light of it during prime time. All of us are being affected by sexual temptation in our high tech society, and the world around us is talking about it.

And yet, godly people who sit in quiet denial have a message of hope for addressing sexual temptation in today's culture.

Because the issue is so sensitive, many are uncomfortable talking about it. People feel it is too shameful to mention. Others claim that their children shouldn't be

exposed to such discussions – they must be protected. Meanwhile, their children have likely viewed Internet pornography. One study indicates that 90% of children age 11-16 have viewed Internet porn, unintentionally at first.⁴ Moreover, some church and school leaders are reluctant to talk about such issues because they themselves are involved.

Internet pornography is rampant in our society. It tears apart marriages and introduces children to sexual sin at very young ages. It is easily accessible in multiple locations. It is not a temptation that only non-believers struggle with. It is common throughout our society and affects even Christian families and professional church workers. Consider this:

- A *Leadership Journal* survey dated March 2005, in an article entitled "Christians and Sex," states that 57% of pastors say that addiction to pornography is the most sexually damaging issue in their congregations.⁵
- A *Christianity Today* leadership survey (December 2001) reported that 51% of pastors indicate that Internet pornography is a possible temptation and 37% reported that it was a current struggle. Four out of ten pastors have visited a porn site.⁶

Our present technology presents many forms of sexual temptation in addition to Internet porn and sexting. Christian educators cannot afford to ignore its affects on our children, our teachers, our parents, our schools—in fact, our entire society. But we need not fear our world's temptations more than God. Instead, this should be seen as an opportunity to apply God's Word of Law and Gospel to a dying world.

Rather than ignore the dangers around us, we need to proactively discuss the realities of living in a sinful world under the cross. Christians should be warned about the dangers and empowered through the means of grace for spiritual battle. For those who struggle with sexual sin, we offer comfort and hope through the Gospel. Sexting and other forms of technological sexual temptation pose serious threats, but Jesus came to heal us in our brokenness and send us to minister to

4 Gaines, Sara. "Why sex still leads the net." Guardian Unlimited, February 28, 2002.

5 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/yc/2005/janfeb/13.88.html>

6 <http://www.lightedcandle.org/pornstats/stats.asp>

all who suffer from the consequences of sin.

A new Bible study and accompanying DVD, *Responding to Sexual Temptation in a High Tech Society*, equips God's people for addressing this current topic. Ambassadors of Reconciliation developed and tested this new material over three years in response to the growing crisis. Learn more about this study, including reviewing the introductory lesson and watching a video trailer at www.hisaor.org. (Click on Training, then the "Introductory Lesson" and "Trailer" under *Responding to Sexual Temptation in a High Tech Society*.)

As you encounter sin in any form, remember how God addresses us: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). May God's message of forgiveness comfort you personally and compel you to share this good news with others.

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