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

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Introduction

Glen Whitehouse (2004) draws on the works of H. Richard Niebuhr (1963) that dealt with issues pertaining to the “Responsible Self.” His conclusive notion is that a consistent or unified identity through time becomes the crucial precondition for ethical and responsible behavior. Fully living out such responsible behavior means that the individual grows into respecting and enhancing the life of integrity (consistency in claimed identity with actions) in all personal and relational interactions and behaviors in the sight of God. Is “Responsible Selfhood” not the creational mandate for every

human being? Was “Responsible Selfhood” not the undermining target of the Adversary from the beginning of time?

Sexual addiction in young men is one such indication of a “Responsible Self” having been undermined through the dissection and division of an individual’s integrity and thus his God-like identity. Sexual addiction is in essence an inordinate desire for “what is not rightfully” within the prescribed identity for human, moral, and spiritual behavior. From the beginning of time, man has had the struggle of competing “selves.” The Genesis (Gen. 2–3) account bears testimony to the struggle and clearly shows what happens when the “Responsible Self” succumbs to the pressure of inordinate desires. It is clear that human beings are created with built-in tensions between the physical and the spiritual (Cohen, 1995). And so, like our primordial ancestor Adam, human beings struggle to live with the tension between our God-like potential and our created human natures. A huge part of the human being’s struggle with sin can be analyzed to also be an integral struggle with “identity.”

A. Struggle with Identity

Since the fall of humankind, man has had the quest for the full integration of self. The search for “human wholeness” is really a search for the integration of the physical with the spiritual selves. Daniel Helminiak (1996) posits that “Spirituality is supposed to relate to the deepest meaning of humanity.” There are several diverse contemporary approaches to spirituality that acknowledge that spirituality is in essence a quest for personal integration in the face of forces of fragmentation and depersonalization. The identity struggle, therefore, is a much greater struggle than merely a struggle to restore one’s personal self. It is fundamentally a struggle for the restoration of the “whole self”—that is, the personal self (man with his body, emotions, psyche, and mind) restored to the spiritual self (man with body, soul, and spirit fully connected to his Maker). Sandra Schneiders (1986) informs that “spirituality refers to the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms, not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives” (p. 266).

The struggle with sexual addiction is a struggle for completeness. It is a desire to have increasingly more of some type of physical fulfillment, which fundamentally could not be totally achieved in the

physical realm. When subjected to sexual addiction, the “Responsible Self” is therefore fragmented and becomes depersonalized to the degree that the individual’s identity remains in a state of struggle. A biblical reminder of such a struggle is evident in Romans 7:15:

For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

The identity struggle, in the main, is the struggle and quest for spirituality—the ultimate search for God and the restoration of the creation-mandated “image” (Gen. 1:26–27). Stanley Grenz (2002) reminds us of Augustine’s “Confessions” in which he said: “Thou hast made us for thyself. Therefore, our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee, O God” (p. 96).

Charles Taylor (1989) in a seminal work, *The Sources of the Self—The Making of Modern Identity*, stresses that if we wish to explore the topic of identity then we must essentially examine the topic of selfhood and morality. His emphatic notion is that selfhood and morality are so inextricably linked: to do otherwise would result in skewed outcomes. Others have argued similarly that moral understanding and moral behaviors are embedded in the structures of a person’s perception of “self” (Grenz, 2002). With Christianity, therefore, known as a religion that shapes an individual’s thinking (mind), and hence behavior (moral actions), it would behoove us to consider the impact of Christian identity on the ever-perplexing phenomenon known as “sexual addiction.”

Numerous scholars have wrestled with the question of identity and have asked whether identity is not perhaps shaped by more than just the “individual self.” The quest is for a deeper and more systemic understanding of all the forces that go into the formulation of an individual’s identity. Some have postulated that one’s identity is not merely, and only, formed by the dependency on one’s personal experiences and memory, but that it must of necessity have deep roots in the realm of one’s social construction and shaping. William L. Wardekker and Siebren Miedema (2001) have presented lucid thoughts on this aspect of identity formation that is worth noting:

On this view, identity is the way we explain, in the form of a life story (autobiography), the choices we make in our commitments, and their consistency, to others and to ourselves. The advantage of this model over others is that it does not posit the individuals the sole creator of its own self-concept.

Individual stories are created through the use of story schemata, genres, motives, metaphors, examples, and other elements that are found in culture. (It is exactly the use of such cultural elements that makes an individual's story comprehensible to others and to the self.). Moreover, other people play a role in the construction process: as audience, as people to relate the story to, as co-constructors.

The Wardekker and Miedema (2001) view seems to hinge on the crucial impact that social relationships have on the shaping of “self,” and how those influences engender and enhance understanding of one's identity. This second aspect becomes crucial in formulating an approach to counseling young men trapped by sexual addiction, because it does follow the biblical notion of the importance of the individual's mature development of a Christ-like identity, not only as an individual “self,” but crucially as “self in community” within the body of Christ. In essence, a person's Christian identity as a believer should serve as the compass to give direction to all other parts of the self (cognitions, affective domain, and behaviors). And, since all humans are made in the “image of God,” it follows that any fragmentation of that image (and identity) through alienation from God needs restoration through God's primary image bearer, Jesus Christ. Romans 8:29 (NASB) states: “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” But more than that, the Father has clearly designed for the Son to be His image:

And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also the head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel. (Col. 1:15–23, NASB).

The ordering of a believer's identity is, therefore, not without a divine blueprint and the definitive promises of obtaining fullness,

reconciliation, holiness, and blamelessness (freedom of guilt and reproach). The full realization of the intention for humans is to be found in the clothing or re-clothing of the fragmented human self and identity with the *Imago Dei* (Glanzer & Ream, 2005). Before we embark on the explication of the influence of the *Imago Dei* on moral behavior, it would be to our advantage to have a cursory understanding of sexual addiction and its seeming indomitable power over young men.

B. Nature of the Sexual Addiction Struggle

As I am writing this journal article, the news media is having a feast over the Penn State University coach's alleged paraphilic sexual indiscretions. He had been arrested on alleged charges of about fifty counts of sexual assault with 10 minor boys over a period of 15 years. If all of this is true and verified, where would this have started? Most professionals who work in the field of sexual addiction counseling believe that it grows from seeds planted in childhood. During adolescence, the indicators of this penchant may be accepted as normal sexual development. However, from young adulthood, the disorder may grow progressively worse if it goes undetected and untreated (Laaser, 2004). For young men (and the same is also true of adult men) then, being trapped in the sexual addiction cycle has some etiology established during the early developmental years of life.

Leanne Payne (1991) highlights a quote from a Roman Catholic philosopher-theologian, Roman Guardini who wrote:

The act of self-acceptance is the root of all things. I must agree to be the person who I am. Agree to have the qualifications which I have. Agree to live within the limitations set for me.... The clarity and the courageousness of this acceptance is the foundation of all existence (p. 31).

The foundation for a young man's identity and sexual security and fulfillment is rooted in a healthy measure of "self-acceptance and self-love." This was the kernel of Jesus' response to a Pharisaic lawyer in Matthew 22:37 (NASB):

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.

Structuring Jesus' response from the personal to the divine would sound something like this: "Loving and accepting yourself correctly

first will lead to loving and accepting your neighbor correctly next, and then most importantly loving and accepting God correctly.” John says:

for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also (1 John 4:20–21, NASB).

There is, therefore, something to be said for the love of “self and neighbor” which will reflect on a person’s love for God. There is a clear linkage, according to Jesus and John with respect to loving self, neighbor, and God. And that linkage, according to Jesus, has much to do with the core status of an individual’s love and acceptance of self. The way the neighbor (which could be an image of the opposite sex or even same sex for that matter) will be treated or viewed depends on the deep psychological schemata of an individual’s *own view of self and personal acceptance*.

The literature is replete with categorical elements that comprise the dynamics and characteristics of sexual addiction. According to Laaser and Gregoire (2003), the dimensions of healthy sexuality—in order of priority—are spiritual, personal, behavioral, relational, and physical. The core element is the “spiritual,” that gives direction and value to all the connecting elements. An exploration, therefore, of the person’s spiritual life (how his life is connected and committed to things divine or God-directed) and commitment must be dealt with first. The “seeking the kingdom first” principle (Matt. 6:33) and practice is what will give direction to all the “other needs” that an individual may have. Furthermore, the assessment of the person’s willingness to “surrender” his life and passions to the authority of Jesus Christ then becomes paramount to embarking on the fulfillment of perhaps a spiritual and emotional thirst that may exist within. The paradoxical “dying to self to find life” is no less true with respect to a person’s physical, emotional, and psychological illicit passions and desires.

In the realm of the personal and behavioral, exploration must involve checking if there are any wounds in the areas of sexual abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, and loneliness and issues of isolation (Laaser & Gregoire, 2003). Issues of a loss of control over life or circumstances may also contribute largely to a person wishing to feel a sense of control over “something” (which in this case is

sexual activities). The person may have the illusory sense that he is exercising control during such times, but it is merely the feeding into the same cycle of “being controlled” by the addiction (Garcia & Thibaut, 2010). Therefore, the greater the secret feeling of being in control, the deeper the dominance of the private and addictive behaviors with the individual.

In the realm of the relational, assessment must involve checking for difficulties at a person-to-person level (Levine, 2010). The relational disconnect(s) usually have their origins in the parent-child attachment/abandonment issues. Unavailable and sexually punitive spouses may trigger the historical, childhood abandonment issues which will then in turn compel the addict to retreat into his comfortable, secret place (Marcus, 2010). This re-experiencing of abandonment further enhances the addict’s drive to avoid growth in the actual person-to-person intimacies. The addictive, sexual behavior with unknown people or objects, therefore, becomes an outlet for intimacies without the threats of the person-to-person abandonment. How then will we use the knowledge about the nature of the sexual addiction struggle at the intersection with the young addict’s new identity in Christ?

C. Use of the Concept of New Identity in Christ to Help the Sexual Addict

Young men who are caught in the trap of sexual addiction roam around in a private world of shame and guilt. Outwardly they may manifest confidence, self-control, and psychological normalcy, but inwardly there is a raging war with foes that want to undermine their newfound identity and standing in Jesus Christ. We, therefore, want to recalibrate their personal views of their spiritual environments which, for sure, have been demolished by the Evil One to keep them in the cycle of sexual addiction. Their personal and spiritual identities have been undermined and are in need of serious restoration. A healthy, spiritual systemic approach to dealing with their sexual addiction will affect much more than just the cessation of the addictive behaviors. It will restore spiritual confidence and reestablish the person’s walk in his designated and pre-ordained *Imago Dei* identity.

1. Restoring the Environment of Sonship: I am loved

The believer who is caught up in the cycle of sexual addiction perennially lives with untold guilt and shame. It is the nature of guilt and shame to drive a person towards isolation and a sense of feeling “unworthy” (White & Kimball, 2009). The words of the lost son in Luke 15:21 ring true to the life of the person who is experiencing the cycle of guilt, shame, and unworthiness: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” The lost son’s father recognized that restoration had to start with an immediate reminder that this lost son was still “this son of mine” (Luke 15:24). At the heart of the celebration was not only the fact that the son returned, but a reaffirmation of his place and position in the family.

Sexual addicts feel psychologically, emotionally, and even sometimes physically isolated from those who are “in the family.” They need the genuine embrace of the Father and His reassurance that they are still “His sons.” Here it behooves the counselor or minister to represent the heavenly Father’s actionable embrace with the accompanying words: “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet” (Luke 15:22). The reconfirmation of sonship is the foundational platform for the start of the sexual addict’s rehabilitation work. Those caught in the cycle of sexual addiction need to be reminded that the heavenly Father desires their existence and position to be that of “sons” and not that of “slaves to addiction.” The fresh realization of “sonship” with all its divine privileges and power will instill a sense of hope, confidence, and gratitude. The reminder and reconfirmation of “sonship” will also begin to eliminate feelings of guilt and shame, and will initiate the process of restoration of the personal and spiritual identities.

2. Restoring the Environment of Community: I am not alone

In multiple case studies of Christians who are caught in the cycle of sexual addiction, the major issue for them is “how they would be seen as individuals ... if their problem was revealed within the church” (White & Kimball, 356). The stigmatization, labeling, and the fear of enhanced isolation are sure realities for the sexual addict. Some have suggested the sharing of stories, publications, and books with the addict to let him know that “he is not alone in his struggle” (Bridges 2003). Several churches have programs that cater for the

support of people who are caught in the cycle of some type of addiction. The sexual addict should be connected with such programs in addition to personal counseling and accountability partnership.

Bentley (2005) found that 60% of young men (aged 19–22 years) in a Christian denomination have accessed pornographic sites more than 25 times. That is not unusual across denominations nowadays, which clearly is a red flag warning to the church that we need to be in the “ready mode” to deal appropriately with this surging dilemma within our church communities.

We have done well to alert people to the Christian websites that could block access to pornographic sites, but we have not done well in educating our church communities in addressing the dilemma “in church.” The reality is that cybersex addiction is spiraling out of control among our young adults with little to no concrete, spiritual help being offered within our church communities. This writer is of the conviction that the church community (as a collective) and not merely a side program (e.g., Celebrate Recovery) must be the fountain of healing, embrace, and support to the young men in our midst who are enslaved to sexual addiction.

To fully restore the sexual addict’s personal and spiritual identity, he has to feel and experience the sense of attachment to his spiritual community. And that sense of attachment is not merely experiencing corporate worship with the affiliation group, but it must be the integral daily connection that the sexual addict must have after his spiritual dilemma has been revealed to the church community. It would be prudent for the counselor or minister to provide avenues for such connection(s) for the sexual addict. The connections (a small group or couple of individuals) could then serve as mentors and accountability partners to the sexual addict. The mentors could also be used to guide the sexual addict through a period of exercising several spiritual disciplines like praying, bible study, fasting, meditation, confession, and the like.

3. Restoring the Environment of Assurance: I am saved

The believer who has succumbed to sexual addiction must be reminded that his ultimate destiny is not determined by the addiction. There will be times when the sexual addict’s struggles will be so overwhelming that he will “feel” totally unsure about his salvation. The reminder of assurance can bolster the person’s faith in the

purpose of salvation—ongoing redemption, reconciliation, and healing. The sexual addict must be given a fresh reminder of John 10:27–29:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I gave them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

The voice of Jesus is definitely *the* voice of assurance when it comes to sheep who listens to His voice. Hurting and struggling sheep are never bashed and made to feel unworthy during their struggles. They are continually called to “keep following and listening to His voice.” They are tenderly shepherded to find rest and healing.

The voice of the counselor or minister must resemble and echo the voice of the Good Shepherd during the addict's struggle. The sexual addict must walk out of every session of counseling with a sense of reassurance and hope that he is still saved and in God's fold. The counselor's voice must be a directive one, but it must simultaneously be a voice of total healing, empathy, genuineness, acceptance, and reassurance (Steffen, 1998). Wounded people have an extraordinary sixth sense for discerning judgementalism. Beware of the judgementalism that will crush any hopes of the sexual addict gaining any traction on the pathway of assurance.

4. Restoring the Environment of Grace: I am favored

Human strength and will are not enough to carry the sexual addict through the valley of recovery. What is needed is a fresh realization of the power of God's grace in the midst of the struggle. The reminder of grace will restore the person's vision of hope, and grace will reignite the realization that divine salvation or any type of spiritual healing has never been based on pure human effort alone. The environment of grace—the pouring forth of God's undeserved favor—is the healing balm that every sexual addict needs for the removal of disordered layers of guilt, shame, and sense of unworthiness (Arends, 2010).

It is the environment of grace that will provide the believing sexual addict with the confidence of his secure position in Jesus Christ and his place in the body. Peter admonishes believers to

be on guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 3:17–18, NIV).

The counseling process must, therefore, provide opportunities for the sexual addict to *grow in the grace of Christ*. Such an environment is not one of totalitarian control and legalism, but it is clearly an environment of understanding, nurturing, and compassionate guidance into the will of God.

5. Restoring the Environment of Forgiveness: I am free

No sin (except for blasphemy) can keep the sexual addict separated from God while the blood of Jesus Christ is available. The reminder of forgiveness and its depth and height will restore the person's trust in God and Christ's work on Calvary. Most, if not all human beings despise and loathe any type of enforced bondage. The struggle, therefore, under a self-imposed bondage for most human beings is physically, psychologically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually gigantic. Sometimes the worst part of the sexual addict's struggles is that of accepting and believing that he has been forgiven (Wagner, 2009). While the struggle exists, which will be the case even during the healing process, the person may feel bound, pulled, and even "unforgiven." It is, of course, Satan's ever-prevailing task to keep the sexual addict under the umbrella of "guilt and shame," so that he can fall back into the old pattern of feeling unworthy and condemned.

The pivotal role of the counselor or minister here is to take the sexual addict back to the power and efficacy of the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul's words in Ephesians 1:7–8 (NIV) can be very helpful at this stage of the process:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Emphasis must be laid on the biblical doctrine that the blood of Jesus Christ has perpetual cleansing powers (1 John 1:9) available to believers, irrespective of their struggles. Submission and obedience to the will of God even during difficult struggles are clear signs and indicators of faith and trust in Him Who loves and forgives.

6. Restoring the Environment of Victory: I am Destined to Overcome

In this final, essential, environment for restoration, it will be important for the counselor to remind and emphasize the fundamental premise of the Christian faith—*victory!* Believers have the promise of victory through Jesus Christ. The reminder of victory will *empower* the person to *fight* to overcome, rather than surrender to the subtle and drenching power of the Evil One. Once the sexual addict has confessed his sinful pattern—of being trapped in the vicious cycle of sexual addiction—it is easy to begin the process of wallowing in the pit of victimization (Reed, 2000). This is a very important juncture in the therapeutic process; because although all the above-mentioned environments may be in place, the psychological underpinning of victory is what will take the sexual addict into the “I can do this” mindset. A huge part of this victory reformation for the sexual addict, though, is to be reminded of the basis of his victory. John Coe (2008) has some helpful reminders of what this basis is all about:

The moral temptation is the attempt to deal with our spiritual failure, guilt and shame by means of spiritual efforts, by attempting to perfect one’s self in the power of the self. It is the attempt of the well-intentioned believer to use spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, ministry, service, obedience—being good in general—as a way to *relieve the burden of spiritual failure, lack of love and the guilt and shame that results. It is the temptation to try to relieve a burden that Christ alone can relieve* (pp. 55–56).

Important in this reminder is the notion that the sexual addict needs to know that former acts of moral failure can never be made up for by positive deposits of numerous good deeds. Redemption is only possible through the blood of Jesus Christ and not earned goodness. Coe (2008) posits that

the Christian has the possibility of being the most “moral” in the fullest and best sense of the term. That is, it is possible for the believer to be good and grow in virtue not as a way to deal with failure, guilt and shame in the Christian life but to do so in freedom, on the basis of the cross and in the Spirit (p. 56).

The environment that merges all the restorative elements within this process of counseling the sexual addict is rock solid on the foundation of the achievements of Christ on the cross, and the continuing work of

empowerment and victory that the Spirit will provide to all of God’s children, irrespective of their idiosyncratic struggles.

It is also pivotal to help the sexual addict to develop an “inward rather than an outward” focus on the struggle. Too many counselors and ministers set up their counselees for failure by merely focusing on the behavioral transformations that need to happen. A major part of the believer’s new identity is his revision or renewal of perspective. As the apostle Paul would say:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 6:12, NIV)

Preston (2010) would remind us that “what matters most for how life goes and ought to go is what we are on the inside. This ‘within’ is the arena of spiritual formation and, later, reformation” (p. 217).

Conclusion

Sexual addiction among young men is growing in our world, and the community of faith must be ready to serve the wounded. The restorative environments of

Sonship,
Community,
Assurance,
Grace,
Forgiveness, and
Victory

are essential for the holistic and systemic rehabilitation of the sexual addict. As noted earlier, the sexual addiction cycle is vicious, pernicious, and powerful, and all the spiritual strongholds that God has placed at our human disposal for healing must be brought into full view and use during such a struggle.

At the heart of the sexual addiction struggle is the issue of clarifying the true self. Part of that clarification involves the verification that the self is accepted—by God as His child—*attached* to the family of God and not cut off because of the struggle, and *assured* of a continuing eternal salvation as the sexual addiction battle is fought, a certain recipient of God’s grace and forgiveness—all with the promise of victory over the sexual addiction struggle.

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