



Review of Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker with Mike Yorkey, *Every Man's Battle: Every Man's Guide to Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time* (Waterbrook Press, 2000) and *Every Young Man's Battle: Strategies for Victory in the Real World of Sexual Temptation* (Waterbrook Press, 2002).

Mark J. Justad

The *Every Man's Battle* books are clearly not for every man. Rather, they are a pair of self-help guides for the Bible-centric, conservative, heterosexual Christian male waging a war for sexual purity. This war, as the authors call it, is necessary for two reasons. First, the bible tells us to avoid sexual immorality and to seek sexual purity. Second, boys and men are particularly prone to sexual immorality because they possess both a rebellious nature and a strong and relentless sex drive. A topic-driven list of scriptural quotations is used to affirm the former while extensive anecdotes from Stoeker's and Arterburn's personal experiences are used to prove the latter. In addition, the authors make a great deal of the claim that men possess the ability to receive sexual gratification through their eyes. Men, they claim, naturally dwell in the eye of a perfect storm of sexual immorality, possessing an obsessive sex drive fueled with near universal access to sexual temptation in the form and fact of the female body. These men must go to battle because they always want sex and can seemingly find it whenever and wherever they are.

The student of gender with any awareness of critical masculinity studies will find the *Every Man* depiction of male sexuality rather familiar and sadly one-dimensional. It is also terribly depressing to this reader. The authors have no sense that men *qua* men possess a wide range of personal characteristics and tendencies—sexual and otherwise. Same sex attraction is beyond the pale, of course, and can be fixed through prayer and professional help. The books also evidence no awareness of recent scholarship that help us to see the androcentric nature of inherited religious traditions and practices. The lack of critical and systemic thinking in these books is not entirely unexpected given that they carry a Focus on the Family stamp of approval. No, it is naïve to expect these authors to help us with new or critical insights into the nature of patriarchal masculinities or the male nature of a religion largely shaped by eidetic thought and practice. Still, it would be interesting to know how Stoeker, an honors graduate from Stanford University, might analyze the relationship between the visual/sexual fixation on women's asses he describes and analogous visual/religious fixations in his religious tradition.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these books is the candor of its main confessor, Fred Stoeker. Stoeker, in a manner loosely reminiscent of St. Augustine's written struggle with the sins of the flesh, argues that his own "addiction" to sex inhibits his ability to worship. I encounter Stoeker's described excesses as immature choices consistent with cultural expectations but made outside of intentional circles

of individual accountability. The authors, however, tell us that anything that leans at all away from sexual purity (read: a heterosexual marriage in which the wife is the sole source of sexual attraction and gratification) is sinful. Sexuality and sexual behavior is so central to the religious imaginations at work in these books that it must be controlled entirely. We must say “no” to masturbation so that we can say “yes” to intimacy with God. Sadly, even the man who notices tight blouses in the choir—presumably worn by women—cannot give himself wholly to God.

It might be tempting, then, to think that the heart of these texts are the various strategies they offer to me and my brothers for avoiding sexual temptation. (My favorite is the practice of “bouncing” one’s eyes away from visual temptation—most often depicted as a female jogger.) But I think it an incomplete reading to see these as primarily “how to” books for the conservative Christian male. It is also tempting to simply write these books off as another example of a Christian form of a sexuality-denying and dualistic anthropology, which of course they are. Rather, the eros that guides these books—an attraction to achieve a state of complete devotion—is best understood as that of two heterosexual men attempting to come to terms with their desire to submit to a male god who possesses no particular sexual orientation. The authors’ response to this desire is traditional, rather unimaginative, and simply does not address the dilemma they have described. Shifting all (narrowly defined) male heterosexuality to the marriage bed is uninspired and driven by the need to reaffirm “family values.” (It frankly places wildly unreasonable amounts of pressure on women and the marital relationship, but that’s a story for another time.) And it leaves unexplored and unanswered just why these men are so convinced that controlling their sexual desire and gratification is a necessary precondition for meeting their god in authentic worship. Sadly, they are so convinced of the depravity of what they understand as “male” sexuality that they cannot find either a language of worship or an understanding of God that includes them as male. What does this say about their ability to love themselves? And what kind of message does it send to the young men they wish to counsel?

Finding maturity as a self-acknowledged sexual being can be a difficult path for many of us. And it would be a mistake to take the concerns that these authors seek to address too lightly. As a father of two sons, I am terribly aware of how toxic much of our public discussions of sex and sexuality can be. This seems to be especially true for boys who continue to be bombarded with narrow notions of male sexuality restricted to notions of “drive” and “conquest.” It is my hope that the religious imagination might help us to identify expanded notions of male sexuality that are incorporated into our spiritual practices. A desire to be completely open to one’s god, to be made willingly vulnerable, to submit to that which is greater than our whole, must now be understood as completely consistent with male heterosexual desire. In fact, the desire for genuine worship at the heart of the *Every Man* books is a potential seed for the flowering of just such a pairing of eros and worship. No doubt the authors would disagree with this assessment.

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