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## Spiritual Adultery

In my work as a counselor-of-clergy, one of the most baffling questions is: why do so many clergy and people-helpers commit adultery?

I'm writing a major paper on this issue, which will be posted in due course: together with another article on 'Sex and Singles'...

Where do we start? Here's one place: the need of every human being for intimacy (Genesis 2:18), which people-helpers/clergy are involved in every working day. God has created us with a deep need to be loved when we are 'known'. Spiritual and emotional wholeness happens when the dynamic of confession/forgiveness occurs. God's unconditional love is incarnated when another human being accepts us when they know the worst about us...

But in our world children and adults are not loved unconditionally. Parents, teachers/authority figures and peers 'loved' us to the degree that we are 'good' or clever or conform or satisfy other criteria for acceptance. And because most men were not properly initiated into manhood by their fathers (mothers can't do that: ask for my article on that) and most women were not nurtured adequately by their fathers (I have something on that too), we have in our 'bent world' an increasing number of adults living with a mild-to-severe love-deficit.

If I marry a wife to find a nurturing mother, or a husband to find a nurturing father, all sorts of codependent behaviours develop. I'm supposed to marry a mate, not someone whose main function is to carry the baggage of unmet emotional needs I've brought from my childhood.

Now people-helpers/clergy are very vulnerable at this point. A client/parishioner may project their unmet 'love-deficit' needs into the counseling relationship. 'No one has ever understood me like you do' is a common come-on. The counselor is burnt out, tired, emotionally drained, frustrated in their marriage or whatever, and gets hooked. They share with the client feelings which don't belong in this context and find comfort and refreshment in this relationship. One thing leads to another, and as John Sandford says in his quite brilliant book 'Why Some Christians Commit Adultery' (Tulsa, OK: Victory House, 1989), 'the first and greatest cause of sexual adultery, among well-meaning Christians, is spiritual adultery [which happens when] married persons share with someone else what ought to have been shared first or only with their own spouses' (p.7).

The classical wisdom here:

1. Spiritual adultery is always (at first) unintentional.
2. When persisted in, it leads inevitably to full physical adultery.
3. So: don't become isolated, particularly from your spouse; be careful when you keenly anticipate an appointment with someone or invent even 'innocent' excuses to spend inappropriate amounts of private time with that person; listen to the warnings of others; confess to a spiritual director or supervisor; join a small group where you can be accountable; be willing not to see the person in question in private - ever again; and ask for someone with spiritual discernment to pray for a 'separation' or 'loosing' of spirits - particularly if it led to sexual adultery (see 1 Cor. 6:15-20). Finally: deal with the roots of your own dysfunction.

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