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Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity (Book Review)

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dragging in there every Sunday. I just want to find out if the whole thing's true. Just *true*. . . Either it is or it isn't, and that's the one question you avoid like death" (qtd. 123). Brown shows us that when we peer into these characters, we find ourselves gazing right back from inside them, beset with the old questions that come out in new ways.

Buechner's style is new, of course. He has a way of not just gilding the old stuff but remolding the questions into blinding paradoxes. Brown mentions his striking stylistic moves for particular novels. The cadence in *Godric*, for instance, lilts along in iambic pentameter with solid Saxon

words, whereas *Brendan*, another novel about a saint, relies less on diction and more on syntax and adjective placement. Buechner's language is quite often earthy, ready and able to point out the impish surprises of life.

Brown's journey through Buechner's life and writings will captivate and inspire a deep respect for the man and his words. Buechner peeks through the mystery of grace and offers us all comfort as we fall back on the old cry, "Lord, I believe! Help me with my unbelief." In the end, that is all we have, and that is all we need.

Winner, Lauren F. *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005. 175 pp. ISBN 9781587431975. Reviewed by Roger Henderson, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Dordt College.

A non-patronizing, non-moralizing book about chastity: is that possible? Although not caring much for this book's title, *Real Sex*, I find the point of the book compelling: chastity is a practical and (the) attainable norm. Much of what goes on today in our sexually over-stimulated society is insincere, mistaken, or just plain fake (i.e., unreal "sex") and hence the title *Real Sex*. Honoring chastity will help lead to the *real* thing. The silhouette of the book is the author's own experience, a movement from an unchaste youth and college life to a Christian conversion and phased awakening(s) to chastity, its meaning and necessity. The case is made for a continent life-style within the framework of Christian community, discipline, and discipleship. Chastity is argued for, provocatively explained, and its difficulties (and objections to it) illustrated. The real topic of the book is chastity, not "sex."

In terms of language and style, the book is well crafted. It speaks a very contemporary idiom, using a diverse and sometimes trendy diction. It is thought out and well-organized in scope and treatment of its topic. The author's goal is both to instruct and to give practical suggestions on how to achieve a chaste way of life. It is evidently written by a well-read, serious-minded person with an excellent feel for contemporary American language and cultural trends. Lauren Winner is a writer and journalist and author of *Girl Meets God* (her conversion story), which received various prizes. Her grasp of the issues surrounding chastity is extensive and suggests a Christian approach with an uncommonly broad and deep Biblical perspective. Perhaps the most surprising feature of this book is that although its advice is at odds with current Western attitudes and practices concerning sexuality, its form of expression is in tune with these attitudes and practices. In fact, I found the book's language and style so much in tune with urban trendy speech that I kept wondering if it would eventually lapse into something other than Christianity and other than chastity as usually defined. It never did.

The book's author makes few if any compromises with our contemporary secular consensus in struggling for a

Biblical approach to all of reality. She clearly goes against the grain of our contemporary sexual trend without becoming wild-eyed, obnoxious, or dismissive of the claims and problems of other-minded people. For example, she gives voice to contrary approaches and then attempts to answer them, having struggled with chastity and with the shallow advice she found in numerous inauthentic "Christian" books on the subject. The book tells many short stories to make its points and draws on insight gleaned from each of the major Christian traditions. Winner gives a balance of explanation and advice written in a personal style without catering to the appetite developed in most of us for voyeuristic tell-all writing on "sex." Winner is theologically engaging and responsible in her handling of Scripture. She makes profuse use of quotations and stories drawn from a diversity of authors, counselors, theologians, preachers, popular commentators, and scholars. While making clear that contemporary practices are wrong and destructive, she never falls into mere condemnation.

The book is worthwhile for young and old alike but a bit graphic or explicit for very young or sheltered teenagers. It is well-rounded in its treatment of the issues; for example, it contains good sections on men's clothing and women's fashion, money and budgeting, monastic and ascetic practices, fasting, virginity, discipline, and ancient spiritual disciplines. It also contains worthwhile discussions on marriage, being unmarried, sexual experience, the potentially positive and often factually negative role of the Church in working with or ordering sexuality, and setting parameters for pre-marital "sexual" contact.

As I read, however, I kept wondering what Winner would say is wrong with un-chastity or promiscuous sexual relations—especially since she had experienced them herself. Was she secretly just preaching dogmas which she really did not understand and of which she had no experiential sense of what made the actions in question wrong? It appears from her story that she became convicted that pre-marital sex is wrong during a time of confession of sin when challenged about what she had

done. She gives less attention to the question than to other topics discussed in the book.

Another minor shortcoming of the book is that Winner sometimes talks as if her own body were something other than herself, as if it had desires and cravings that were not quite *her* cravings or *her* desires. Although there is a long tradition of doing so, speaking this way is misleading because it suggests mere occupancy of our own flesh and blood. Isn't it clear that it is *our* eyes, *our* life history, *our* feelings that are at play in sexual desire? Isn't it our

lack of care and love, or more pointedly our love for the wrong things, that turns temptation into acts of sin? By not having trained our taste buds, nose, and eyes (when we had the opportunity), we easily attach ourselves to things less lovable than God, fellowship of the saints, and good works. It is we, our person, that is having the craving, not merely our "body."

All in all, though, it is a good book that is worth reading and worth giving as a gift.

Van Til, Kent A. *Less Than Two Dollars a Day: A Christian View of World Poverty and the Free Market*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007. 161 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8028-1767-9. Reviewed by Abby M. Jansen, Instructor of Social Work at Dordt College.

In *Less than Two Dollars a Day*, author Kent A. Van Til argues that the Christian faith requires that all people have access to basic sustenance. In an extensive review of economic and political theory as well as biblical and contemporary theologies, Van Til lays out the need for distributive justice and, ultimately, an alternative system of distribution.

Van Til is currently a visiting assistant professor of religion at Hope College. This book, which is a product of his doctoral work at Marquette University, combines his interests in economics, political theory, and theology. Van Til spent time working in Central America and uses those experiences and his family friend, Ester, to highlight the stark inequalities of the current system:

The simplest explanation for the privileges I have received and the hardships that Ester has endured is that I was born in the United States of America and Ester was born in Panama: as a result of this accidental difference, I received many of the benefits of my society, and she received many of the burdens of her own (2).

An estimated forty percent of the world's people live on less than two dollars a day. Not surprisingly, these people do not have the capital to participate in the market. The poor do not have access to basic goods and services, never mind the rewards and benefits of the market economy. In the initial understanding of the free-market system, as described by Adam Smith in the late eighteenth century, there was the assumption that "within a properly functioning market economy, the entire population would necessarily receive basic sustenance" (18). Clearly, the historical and current realities indicate that either the market is not functioning properly, according to Smith's intention, or the assumption itself is faulty. One thing should be made clear: Van Til does not propose an entirely different system of distribution; he lauds certain components of the free-market capitalist system, especially its efficiency in the distribution of goods. However, the main flaw of free-market capitalism, he asserts, is that there is no moral

component to the system: "the market is not designed to value claims based on human need" (52).

Free market capitalism as it stands currently, then, runs contrary to the biblical mandate to care for the poor, the widowed, and the orphans. Using examples from both the Old and New Testaments, including the Year of Jubilee, distribution of land within the Promised Land, the importance of work, and shalom, it is clear that God established and promotes systems of distribution that, in some way, provide basic sustenance for all members of the community. In addition, "At the heart of Scripture's teaching on wealth, property, and poverty is the belief that the world and all things within it belong to God, and whatever portion of it we receive is a gift of God" (67).

All wealth and property belong to God, and his Word indicates that he favors systems of distribution that provide basic sustenance for all. From these two basic principles emerge a variety of contemporary theologies that attempt to navigate a world in which goods are not distributed equally. In fact, as Van Til points out repeatedly, the free market system allows for inequality and does not include a mechanism that addresses human need. A review of Catholic and Protestant theologies provides a helpful backdrop for the subsequent conversation. Van Til lays the groundwork for an alternative system of distributive justice that seeks to go beyond the current flawed system to validate both the biblical and moral claim of the right to basic sustenance for all.

On what basis should such a system be devised? Van Til synthesizes work by Abraham Kuyper, the Calvinist theologian and Dutch statesman from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Michael Walzer, a contemporary Jewish political theorist, to develop a theory of justice for just such a system. Van Til draws heavily on Kuyper's Reformed Christian perspective of "sphere sovereignty" and of people as image-bearers with a creational mandate to develop and care for creation and created order. From Walzer, Van Til seeks to simplify the concept of "spheres" to three basic relationship types: instrumental, solidaristic, and citizenship. Although Van