

Mentioning the Unmentionables: The Corrosive Threat to Our Families and Our Congregational Life Together

Part One—Naming the Problem Among Us

This is the first part of two articles. I split them due to length, and to better digest the whole. Part One details the problem we face in society and in the congregations across the country. It's not a Lutheran problem, or a Protestant problem or a Roman Catholic problem. It is a problem for all in the Church.

The Unmentionables

There used to be a euphemism in society, prominent in the Victorian Age, called “the unmentionables”. The unmentionables could refer to any number of things (body parts, types of clothing, types of behavior), but the term was handy because it indicated certain topics *without overtly mentioning them*. Satan does his best work by getting people to take what should be hidden and putting it out in the open. That was then. However, now it seems *everything is on the table*. We talk about anything, with no compunction or modesty. There are no more unmentionables in speech or in behavior...what was once forbidden to openly discuss is talked about with toddlers and teens, grandparents and soccer moms. *Depravity on full display*. We've lost this helpful euphemism. But we've also lost so much more.

As a society, we've lost our ability to discern between what is good and evil, between what is God-pleasing and God-condemning, between what is true and beautiful and what is base and ugly. And it is a “we” problem—including those of us in the Church. There is hardly any behavior, life-style, interest, activity or habit that is deemed sinful by many church-going people. This blurring of lines and lack of discernment gets to the nature of sin. What is it to be sinful, engage in sinful behavior, or actually be a sinner...when less and less things are seen as sinful? We confess our sins corporately every Sunday morning, *but what are confessing of and to?* With so many things widely accepted, with so many unmentionables now mentioned, are we able even to call a sin a sin anymore?

With this in mind, I dare to broach an “unmentionable” subject because *it is a corrosive threat to our life together, not only in society but inside the Church*. But in the spirit of keeping some things from being *overtly* mentioned, I'd like to speak about this difficult topic by using the acronym **PIL**. **P** stands for the Greek word *porneia* (por-nai-a) which means “fornication, unchastity, sexual immorality”. It also is a root word for (well, you know). The **I** stands for general Immorality, not only that of a sexual nature, but **an overall rejection of God's will**. The **L** stands for Licentiousness, a state of “anything goes” or a “free to do whatever I want”. It is more than a single topic, but a collection of topics, behaviors manifested in so many ways. **PIL**

then refers to the unmentionables that I seek to address, but also broadens the topic beyond that of only pornography.¹

The Normalization and Saturation of PIL

Satan's plan is to pervert what is good in the creation. Satan cannot create *from nothing*; only God can do that. But what Satan can do is *twist what is created good into something evil*. On the flip side, he also takes what is abominable and makes it seem acceptable, what is abnormal and make it appear normal. Satan uses our sinful nature to do his bidding. For those of you over 50, look back at your lifetime; think about what *used to be* off-limits and observe what *is now* commonly bandied about. What was *verboten* and now *widely accepted*. We know deep down that this is not due to "progress" or "advancement", but *a normalization of what was once regarded as sin*. In fact, our entire culture has been so saturated by **PIL**...including those in the Church, that we have grown silent on many things that we should be openly speaking against.²

One way this has happened is in the adoption of "better sounding" language. Take the example of two people living together outside of marriage. Consider how uncommon it used to be and how common it is today. *We can see the progression of our language paralleling the progression of the practice*. What used to be called "living in sin" has become known as "living together". As a pastor, I use the term "co-habitation", sounding clinical and sterilized, scrubbed clean of any sinful connotations! Maybe I should just say it—you're living in sin! That's just one example—*language can obfuscate the root sin or sinful behavior*, making sin seem "normal".

Language, though, is but the symptom. The underlying cause of the normalization and saturation of **PIL** goes deeper. Let me tell you a story. Before I went to the seminary to become a pastor, I worked for *Barnes and Noble*, ending as a store manager. In the summer of 2012, a phenomenon erupted in the book industry. What was at first a self-published e-book became an international best-seller, bigger than *Harry Potter*. Seemingly everyone wanted this book, but it was unavailable for a time. It had been featured on the *Today Show* as the "hot summer read". We got repeated requests for months. Finally, we were able to get it in stock. I remember standing in the receiving room, flipping through it, thinking, "This is pornography! I don't want to sell this...also, I don't want to deal with my customers who will throw a fit!" However, to my surprise, not one single customer complained about this book. *Not one*. I even had members of my bible class coming in to buy it! "Don't read that," I said. "Oh, Chris! You're a prude!" one lady told me. I was appalled by what I heard. We have slid into Gomorrah and don't even know it. And I was personally profiting from this book. I was convicted by my role in this. I left for the seminary not long after.

¹ I use **PIL** also in part because to talk ONLY about a very important topic like pornography can lead to people not connecting the dots to so many OTHER things. **PIL** is both specific to pornography and connects to the broader and related issues.

² Such as co-habitation, sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, to name just a few.

What does the story tell us? That *what used to be unthinkable to read, watch, discuss, binge-out on has become normal*. Ho-hum. There is no discernment (even by members of the Church) regarding what is pornographic and immoral. *Everything goes*. I remember vividly a grandmother-mother-daughter trio clasping their own copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the middle of the store, jumping up and down in their excitement! So, we must be clear—**PIL** is a **threat to our society and our congregational life together**. It is dangerous because it is SO pervasively commonplace. So normal. And no one wants to talk about it.³

I am sorry to have to do this...but I must make you aware of some statistics regarding the **P** (standing for *porneia*) in **PIL**.⁴

- 47% of families in the U.S. report **P**⁵ as a problem.
- The average of age of first exposure is 11 years old; 94% of children will see **P** before the age of 14.
- 84.4% of teen males (14-18) view **P** regularly; 57% of teen females.

This is not simply a “them” versus “us” problem.

- 76% of young Christian adults (18-24) actively search for **P**.
- 68% of church-going men and over 50% of *pastors* watch **P** on a weekly basis.⁶

And it’s not just a “singles” problem.

- 55% of married men and 25% of married women watch **P** at least once a month.
- 56% of divorces involve one party having an “obsessive interest” in **P**.

These stats are but a drop in the bucket. Just pause on this—how does a child of 11 see **P**? *Because P is everywhere and can be accessed at any time*. More on this below. The **P** industry is powerful. It generates more revenue per year than the NBA, NFL and MLB *combined*. It is a **trillion** dollar global industry, relying on drug addiction and the sex trafficking trade of girls and children. But also relying on the normalization of **PIL**. I could go on and on. Maybe I’ve gotten your attention. Or maybe you’re starting to tune out, thinking “it’s not me” or “not my child” or “not my husband” or “not my pastor”. We tune out in part due to a lack of awareness, or perhaps to suppress our own guilt and shame, but we tune out because of **JUST HOW SATURATED AND NORMALIZED PIL HAS BECOME**. *It’s always easier to sit in silence*. We are comfortable with silence. But **PIL** is prevalent in nearly every streaming series, every movie, pop song, sporting event, and video game.⁷ So, we have become numbed to it, both hiding our

³ Remember that **PIL** is *porneia* (sexual perversion including pornography), general immorality (which allows for a whole range of behavior not God-pleasing) and licentiousness (which is living in freedom from any constraint).

⁴ These statistics are an amalgamation of several agencies including the Barna Group, Covenant Eyes, the ADA, and many others taken in the last three years. Things are probably worse now.

⁵ Here *porneia* stands in for what is obviously pornography—the *viewing of sexual activity of any sort*.

⁶ Maybe this explains why the church is silent on this issue!

⁷ Another not-so-helpful exercise is to debate “what it is”. We know what it is! Stop with the language games.

obsession in the shadows and indulging in secret habits, but also more and more comfortable and emboldened **due to the silence of the Church**. I'll get to that in a moment. One more thing. The latest trend in education is to see **P** as something that *should be* learned in classrooms and taught in order to use it "wisely" and with "discernment".⁸

The Technology Conversation

So, even though sin, immorality and every manner of debauchery has been around since Adam and Eve left the garden, the overall acceptance of **PIL** in our culture has exploded in recent years. What's the cause? Multi-faceted. Since World War II, our country has seen tremendous technological advances and prosperity. This has led to some very bad innovations. With the FDA's approval of the birth control pill in 1960, and subsequent legalization of it across the country, *for the first time the act of intimacy and sex was effectively severed from pregnancy*. This "freed" things up (the Licentiousness in **PIL**) without the "threat" of the "consequences" of a child. The so-called "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and beyond *groomed* more and more on the notion of "casual sex" and multiple partners. These ideas and practices have seeped into our culture like dirty ground water into a leaky foundation. The culture increasingly embraced **PIL** in many different forms. The generation born after 1945 rejected the morality of their parents (the increase of **Immorality**), with other generations following their lead and example. Cinema imitated life, and life imitated art. Inhibitions lessened and people became bolder. Finally, with the advent of cable TV and the personal computer, people could more readily access **PIL** in the privacy of their homes. But it was with the advent of the "smart phone" that gave anyone, anywhere, at any time access to **PIL** on demand, 24-7.⁹ Quick, easy and cheap.

We used to have conversations about the role of technology in our lives. When the personal home computer became commonplace, parents were instructed to keep them out of bedrooms, keep them in a public area of the home and limit children's access. Sound advice. But over the last two decades, we have abandoned these practices with the smart phone. Even worse, in the name of "safety" and "entertainment", seemingly every child is given a smart phone. Now, every teen has access to whatever they want with little to no oversight. I wonder what they'll look at?!

One trope commonly claimed is, "Technology is a neutral tool—neither good nor bad". Folks, technology, while inanimate, *is not neutral*. Technology is **designed to achieve a goal, to elicit responses, to shape and mold behavior**. While it may be a "tool", it certainly can do damage! For instance, the "like" button used in social media platforms was invented in order to manipulate an intended response and more frequent usage! Not neutral! So, phones in the hands of children and teens, in the hands of EVERYBODY gives all people unfettered access to **PIL** and shapes people to use **P** more and more. The effect of **P** and its prevalence has taken a tremendous toll on the way people relate to each other, (especially) with the opposite sex.

⁸ In one notable example, educator Justine Ang Fonte, a New York school teacher was heralded in the *New York Times* for her sexual education curriculum that was "sex-positive" and called her lessons "pornography literacy".

⁹ This includes any mobile screen technology connected to the internet.

People’s views of sexuality have been warped and twisted. Expectations in dating are centered in the perverse “unreal” of what is viewed. As a result, fewer people are getting married, fewer people are raising families...even dating at all.¹⁰ Domestic abuse and gross, Licentious behavior is skyrocketing. What starts as curiosity becomes something that people cannot stop. Titillation→Habituation→Addiction. Easy as ABC. Or **PIL**.¹¹

Stay tuned for Part Two, due out at the first of August. The next half is the suggested solution—Scriptural response as well as practical suggestions we all can take and put into practice.

¹⁰ This even doesn’t get into the prevalence of “hook up” apps designed for quick and almost anonymous encounters.

¹¹ Once again, **PIL** is porneia, immorality, licentiousness.