

No More Secrets

Clay Crosse's battle with pornography almost ruined his marriage and career. But he found total restoration after honest confession.

CLAY CROSSE LIVED THE GOOD LIFE. He made big money as a Christian recording artist and climbed the charts with his signature song, "I Surrender All." He had a beautiful family, a nice house, money to spend and a reputation as a stand-up guy. Plus, he had tens of thousands of adoring fans. He also had a dark secret—he struggled with porn.

He talks candidly about this struggle in his book, co-authored with his wife, Renee, *I Surrender All: Rebuilding a Marriage Broken by Pornography* (Navpress).

Crosse was first exposed to pornography in the fourth grade. By the time he was in high school, he had a few magazines hidden in his room.

Even after he and Renee started dating and made public commitments to sexual purity, he still didn't see the danger of pornography.

Crosse, now 38, recalls in *I Surrender All*: "I always equated purity with not having sex, and since I'd not had sex, I thought I was doing OK. But deep down I felt as if I must be the only 20-year-old virgin in the entire world, and I resented it."

In 1990 Clay and Renee were married. By all appearances their life was great. They were best friends and both worked hard to make Clay's dream of becoming a recording artist a reality. But Clay wanted more.

He adds, "Even though I had a beautiful wife who loved me and

never withheld herself from me, I grew dissatisfied. Sex within the parameters of marriage as designed by God wasn't enough anymore. I started wishing for something more."

Six years into their marriage Clay started watching pornographic videos a friend had given him. Whenever Renee and the kids ran errands, Clay would watch the tapes. Sometimes he felt bad for doing it, but he became a pro at justifying his actions. Even in those moments when he knew it was wrong, he found some way to make it sound right.

As Clay's fantasy life grew larger, his sexual desires grew darker. Though he never had an affair outside his marriage-except for in his mind. "Even though I wasn't actually doing it [physically]-Christ tells us that it's the same," he tells New Man. He admits, "If God had not intervened, I eventually would have started acting out these fantasies and destroyed my relationship with my wife."

CLAY CONTINUED TO WATCH THE TAPES for two years. Then one day, God got his attention. A sinus infection began to alter his singing voice. After a few weeks the sinus infection left, but Crosse still couldn't sing the way he used to. He became sick with fear worrying he would no longer be able to perform or provide for his family.

On a return flight from a performance in Seattle where his voice failed, Crosse "started to think clearly for the first time in a long time," he writes. "I'd been living a lie. I'd made a career out of singing songs about God, but I didn't live what I sang. Far from it. I lived for Clay. And more and more over the past two years, I'd lived for the rush I found in watching pornographic videos and the quick sexual release that followed."

Crosse sought help from doctors and voice coaches, but no one could determine what had happened to his voice. One voice coach caught Crosse off guard when he asked if he was a man of God. Crosse fumbled through an answer but the Holy Spirit, he

says, had convicted him.

At home, Crosse repented, rededicated his life to Christ and asked for the fortitude to resist temptation. He also confessed his misdeeds to Renee. Though the confession hurt his wife, it served as a turning point that saved Crosse from ruin and ultimately saved his marriage.

RENEE CROSSE GREW UP having all the dreams girls do about marriage. She imagined being married to a godly man who cherished her and was faithful on all fronts. After marrying Clay she worked hard to provide a good home, and an intimate and fulfilling sex life for Clay. It never crossed her mind that her prince charming-the man she had saved herself for-would betray her.

"As a married Christian, God has given a man a wife and she is supposed to be the one he gazes upon," she says. "She's the only one who is supposed to capture his imagination, heart and love."

In the months following Clay's confession, Renee almost became obsessed wondering what he thought of her. Was he thinking of her or someone else? What did porn do for him that she couldn't? But the question that gnawed at her more than any other was: Was this my fault? Trying to answer that question, she says, made her "very insecure."

Popular opinion would have one believe that porn doesn't really hurt anyone. But experts see otherwise. "It feels like a personal offense," says Brenda Spina, assistant director and family therapist at the Center for Family Healing Mental Health Clinic in Menasha, Wisconsin. "The woman feels as if she isn't good enough."

Rick Schatz, president of the National Coalition for the Protection of Children & Families, has spent years studying the effect porn has on men, families and culture. He says porn skews people's thinking.

"Porn demeans women, marriage, commitment, fidelity and children," he says. "It produces a distorted view of sexual relationships within the covenantal marriage relationship that God intended for one man and one woman. The use of porn totally divorces intimacy and commitment from the sexual relationship so that sex becomes nothing more than an act of self-fulfillment rather than a mutually satisfying and beautiful part of a committed relationship between one man and one woman."

The definition of addiction varies from one therapist to the next. Is a man who looks at porn only occasionally an addict, or is he simply "dabbling"? Regardless, the effects of porn are far-reaching. Crosse warns that porn desensitized him and left him wanting to be intimate with other women than his spouse. Schatz concurs: "The guy who says I'll just dabble here and there [in porn] is kidding himself. Any amount of porn is too much for a Christian. Porn ultimately destroys people's lives. It's destructive, and eventually leads to addiction."

IT'S ESTIMATED THAT THE PORN INDUSTRY in the United States grosses more each year than Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association and the National Football League combined.

To say that we live in a "pornographic culture" is no stretch. Victoria's Secret catalogs-which some experts consider soft-core porn-are sent to hundreds of thousands of homes each year; sports broadcasts are filled with titillating commercials; even video games contain sexually charged themes.

"We've lost our ability to blush," Renee Crosse says. "You can't walk through an airport without being bombarded by 'soft porn.'"

Clay and Renee say all the secular media began adding up to serious trouble for Clay. Renee's favorite magazines

consistently had scantily dressed women on the covers; additionally, the mainstream movies that Clay watched “didn’t leave a lot to the imagination,” he says.

“For many years we were so influenced by the world,” Renee admits. “As Christians we weren’t making wise entertainment choices.”

Clay adds, “We’re not legalists, but at home we walk in wisdom and always ask if our entertainment lines up with what we believe.”

It’s a tough battle and one that is fought on earth as much as it is in the spiritual realm. Soon after Clay confessed, Renee began praying and reading Scripture over him as he slept. She prayed that Clay would be prudent, wise and willing to flee from evil.

“Those were hard prayers to pray,” she says. “And it was even harder to pray together about such things, but we know we have to.” She also holds Clay accountable. “I know that if I love my husband I’ll ask the uncomfortable question and demand honesty.”

Clay wishes he had been taken to task for his sins much earlier. “There has to be order in our lives,” he says. “I regret there weren’t people in my life who held me accountable because in Jesus’ eyes, I committed adultery.”

After the confession in 1998, Clay and Renee began reading the Bible and praying every day. They also became more involved at their church. Even his concerts changed. “I knew I had to do more than put on a good show,” he says. “I wanted people to leave thinking God is great, and He’s done a great work in that man’s life.”

Clay has also employed other tactics to stay pure. When he sees a beautiful woman and begins to feel tempted, he averts his eyes and says a prayer for the woman or quietly recites a Bible verse. “You have to be prepared,” he says. “Commit your

eyes to the Lord and He'll help you deal with it."

Renee says she has realized and accepted that temptation and lust are battles they are going to have to fight every day for the rest of their lives. "We can't ever relax on this issue," she says. "It's like a scar-it never goes away."

CLAY AND RENEE WERE ON THE ROAD a few weeks ago. They checked into a hotel and went to their room. Like most people they immediately gravitated toward the window and pulled back the drapes. As they took in the view, Renee looked down at the pool below them. Stretched out on the pool's deck in a string bikini was a beautiful woman.

Clay and Renee decided to make the moment a spiritual one. They shut the drapes, held each other's hands and prayed for the woman and for every businessman who was staying at the hotel.

"We need to be praying for the men in our lives all the time," Renee says. "It is a battle for our homes and our hearts."

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