

A Better Story: Re-imagining the Biblical Vision for Sex and Marriage*

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Until recently biblical sexual ethics had for centuries played a central role in the formation of social attitudes to sex, marriage and family. In less than a generation, however, the Christian moral vision - that human beings flourish when sexual interests are boundaried in life-long covenant between a man and a woman – has seen a profound loss of cultural power. Across Western Europe and the US, those who hold to traditional Christian sexual ethics not only find themselves on the wrong side of popular opinion, but allegedly on the ‘wrong side of history’ too.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for Christians with conservative views on sexual ethics to navigate the relationship between private and public spheres of faith. It is not my purpose however to address pressing issues of rights legislation, reasonable accommodation and freedom of religion here. Instead, I want to take a step back to address the impact of the sexual revolution on evangelicalism itself. The reality is that traditional biblical ethics have not only lost cultural power in wider society, but are now seriously weakened within evangelical communities too.

The sociologist Peter Berger argued¹ that unless ‘cognitive minorities’ (those who hold views dissonant with wider society) take active steps to sustain their internal plausibility structures (the ideas and hidden social interactions that support their particular way of life), they are destined to implode. This, I believe, is what is happening in many areas of modern evangelicalism.

Evangelical leaders seem poorly equipped to deal with the complex ethical, biological and social questions inherent in conversations about marriage and human sexuality. Despite their tradition of ‘Christian mind’, with some notable exceptions, they have displayed little serious academic engagement with these areas. Most important of all, fear of the new public shame culture seems to have silenced many and, in some parts of the Church, the shepherds have elected to referee, rather than to lead, their sheep.

This does not bode well for the future. Without a vision the people perish. So in this brief article I want to ask what needs to be done *by* evangelicals, *for* evangelicals. What must be done to stem if not reverse this tide? Can we better understand the times we live in and work out together what we must do?

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Understanding the times

A revolution of ideas

Like all revolutions the sexual revolution is rooted in ideas. 'If you want to change the world,' Martin Luther King said, 'pick up a pen and write'. The ideas that have so effectively torpedoed traditional Christian morality are remarkable, however, in not only offering new and radical perspectives on what it means to be human, but in laying claim to the moral high ground as well. This observation is important because the sexual revolution is often portrayed as a descent into moral anarchy when what is actually being offered is a new moral vision about the nature of human flourishing. Indeed, the corollary is that it is the old traditional Christian moralities that cause harm, not only hindering human flourishing but promoting beliefs antithetical to it.

There are several strands of thought here. First, in the sphere of radical feminist thought, the Christian moral vision is seen as diminishing women. Tied to a traditional patriarchy in which the man brought home the bacon and she cooked it, Christian morality is held to have spawned a culture that neglected the education of girls, shamed single mothers and closeted lesbians. In contrast, the sexual revolution offers freedom from the shackles of patriarchy and a radical new vision of re-invented femininity.

Ancient Gnosticism, which according to theologian Tom Wright² has surged to become a 'controlling myth of our time', is another philosophical strand at work behind the scenes. In the Gnostic worldview the external worlds of society and religion, and the outer world of one's own body, are essentially irrelevant. Indeed, they are deceptive and misleading. Beneath layers of cultural and religious accretion there lies buried your real, inner, private 'self'. So dig deep, liberate the authentic you from the bondage of tradition and become the you that *you* want to be.

Queer theory, another ideology that drives forward the sexual revolution, is a modern variant form of Gnosticism. Drawing on the work of philosopher Michael Foucault and thinkers such as Judith Butler³, queer theorists construe gender categories as mere social constructions, cultural inventions perpetuated to serve the power plays of the religious and cultural elites that stand behind them. In this understanding there are no compelling biological realities behind these categories, far less any natural, organically embedded norms in which we are supposed to walk. They are the outer layers that need to be cast-off in the search for authenticity.

It is ideas such as these – radical feminism, Gnosticism, and Queer theory – that form the plausibility structures of a new moral order and underpin its vision of human flourishing. We need to get to grips with them. Christian apologetics needs to be about more than cosmology and fine-tuning arguments for the existence of God. In the area of human sexuality we are failing because we are not thinking.

A moral cause

As I noted earlier, the storm troopers of the sexual revolution not only believe they have an intellectual case, but a *moral cause* as well. The work of social psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt⁴ may assist us here.

Haidt suggests that, faced with moral problems, human beings have evolved to think intuitively along a limited number of cognitive systems or channels. One such 'gut level' system is concerned with care/harm, asking 'is anybody getting hurt here?' The other systems are: concern for fairness; a desire to protect the weak; respect for received wisdom and tradition ('what have we always believed about this?'); loyalty to those close to us; and an instinctive desire to hold to what is sacred for the good of the community ('we meddle with this at our cost').

Haidt has shown that when asked to make moral judgments, human beings differ, often in predictable ways, in the relative weight they give to these different gut level responses. Those on the political liberal left, for example, consistently score highly on moral concerns connected with individual care/harm and equality/fairness. Social conservatives, on the other hand, score highly in respect for tradition and sense of community sacredness ('it is no use meeting the needs of the a sub-set of the bees if in doing so we destroy the whole hive').

We experience similar, and entirely predictable, sub-divisions when we debate sexual ethics. Those adopting a conservative stance tend to emphasise the sanctity of marriage and the authority of the bible. Those on the liberal side focus on the suffering of the individual and the need for compassion, fairness and freedom from oppression. And so we talk past one another, and descend further into animus.

To break out of this dynamic, in which one side emphasises one set of values over and against those of the other, evangelical leaders who want to make a more effective case should communicate in terms of the whole spectrum of moral concerns. They must accept that they are often perceived as hard, excluding, and lacking compassion. They need to acknowledge and repent of judgmental attitudes that have made it hard for some to find a home in their families and their fellowships. If they want to gain a hearing, they need to show that their moral concerns are motivated by the same compassion and desire for human flourishing as those on the liberal side.

But then with courage and conviction they must also make the case that compassion for the individual cannot be allowed to trump the wider social goods that hinge upon the defence of sacred values (such as Christian marriage). In other words, they need to find winsome language for their convictions that it is no use meeting the needs of a subset of the bees if in doing so we destroy the whole hive. That is not compassion it is emotionally driven folly and it is ultimately destructive of human flourishing.

Narrative power

Finally, we need to understand that the sexual revolution has narrative power. According to the philosopher Charles Taylor, facts woven together in the form of narrative have additional persuasive power. So in order to counter narratives effectively it is not enough simply to offer rival evidence and data – *you need to tell a different story*⁵.

The sexual revolution is not held in the popular imagination as a list of facts - it is held as a story. It is a story about the freeing of the human spirit from the stifling shame of Christian tradition. It contains sub-plots with heroes who had the courage to swim against the tide of hatred and prejudice, and villains who tried to bring them down. These stories are narrated, over and over, through sitcoms and romcoms, in documentaries and drama. In response we have often deployed complicated arguments, or listed the 'deviances' and the diseases. This simply doesn't work. We have to tell a different story. A better story that appeals to imagination as well as intellect.

So what must we do?

A better critique

First, we need a better critique, one that starts by addressing the sexual revolution on its terms, rather than our own. We should be ready to humble ourselves. Where it challenged Christian shame culture, judgmentalism and hypocrisy, we need to take it on the chin and show that we are genuinely ready to learn and change. Only then will we gain a hearing when we ask whether the sexual revolution delivered the freedom, equality and flourishing that *it promised*?

For example, what happened to the promise of sexual liberation? In his book 'Sex by Numbers'⁶ the statistician David Spiegelhalter presents compelling evidence that over the past 30 years sex as a recreational activity has actually been in steady *decline*. The sexual revolution promised more sex, but actually delivered less.

More seriously, what has been the impact on children? The sexual revolution promised fairness and equality but in reality the collapse of marriage has helped to heap structural injustices and inequalities on the most vulnerable of all - our children.

Marriage – having a mum and a dad bound together by promises of life-long fidelity – is good for children. Of course some individual marriages are very bad for a child; and some non-traditional family arrangements (such as adoptive same-sex parents) can be very good for a child. But in the round the evidence suggests that the welfare of children is best served by a culture of strong marriages.

As the sexual revolution got underway divorce rates rocketed in the 1960's and 1970's and it is still the case that 42% of marriages will end in divorce. By the age of 16, only one half of children are now found living with both their mother and father. Individual studies need to

be interpreted carefully of course, but the evidence is overwhelming - divorce is generally very bad news for children⁷.

With the rise of cohabitation the news gets worse still. A smaller percentage of people married in 2008 than in any year since records began - cohabitation is the new norm⁸. According to data from the Marriage foundation⁹, only one quarter of couples that first marry and then have children split apart. In contrast, independent of mothers' age and education, over one half of those who give birth and then marry split up, and over 2/3 of those never marrying eventually split up.

The difficulty for the children of these torn relationships is that most will live in lone parent households, usually without a stable father figure. Men who are not married to the mother of their children are much less likely to invest financially, practically, and emotionally in those children's lives¹⁰. And we simply cannot escape the significant associations between fatherlessness, poverty and low education¹¹.

The simple genius of marriage is that it binds men to their responsibilities for the children they help to bring into the world. Single mothers do a wonderful job, of course they do. And many children will be better off with a single mother than a feckless, abusive father. But we cannot remain silent about the ideal that overall, in the round, kids do best with both a mother and a father in the home. There, I've said it.

Of course these data raise all kinds of methodological questions – not least the question of causation. Does marriage produce virtues of faithfulness and commitment, or is it simply the case that people who possess these virtues are more likely to get married? We will never completely disentangle these questions but it is becoming increasingly clear that 'both-and' explanations are needed. It needn't be one or the other.

There are things that government must do in terms of child support, education, and reducing income inequalities. And there are things we must all do to promote a strong marriage culture, especially one that cements expectations that boys and young men develop the virtues of commitment and faithfulness that will help bind them to their responsibilities.

We could continue to interrogate the fall-out of the revolution across several other areas, not least the scandal and tragedy of the pornogaphication and sexualisation of childhood. But we must conclude by returning to the central question of whether, in the face of these failings, evangelicals have anything better to offer of their own?

A better story

Those holding to the biblical moral vision for sex and marriage need to tell a better story. Our culture has a good sense of what we are against, but what are we for? In the biblical worldview, what is sex is for? What is marriage for? What are families for?

There can be no ‘going backery’, no return to some bucolic moral paradise of the 50’s that never existed. The challenges of the sexual revolution call for a radical re-imagination of the biblical narrative about sex, marriage and flourishing. But what might this look like? I can only sketch the bare bones here, but our narrative needs to be framed with renewed conviction that the gospel really is good news; that it conveys truth about human flourishing; that it offers life for the world.

First, our vision is that *we have not been left alone in the darkness of self-construction*. If the Universe is essentially meaningless, devoid of order or any natural way of things, then indeed we must self-construct as best we can. And the sexual revolution has furnished us with a smorgasbord of sexual identities to enrich our choice. You can take your pick and when you grow tired, simply choose another. But when this freedom turns into a terrifying hall of mirrors, a treadmill of endless re-invention, then the good news is that God has not left us alone. In Scripture he not only reveals who he is, he shows us who we are as well: *he speaks our identity to us*.

And so, in the Christian narrative, the nurturing of personal identity is cradled in the knowledge that we have been created, male and female, in the image and likeness of God himself. As we venture on our unique journeys into the world of relationships and community, we do so knowing that God has set boundaries around the expression of our sexual interests, good boundaries necessary for our wellbeing and for the nurture of children. We can harness data from the social sciences to buttress our case here.

Second, we must be prepared to say that because we live in a broken, fallen world *the Christian call to discipleship is never easy but it is always good*. Our dislocation from God has taken its toll in our physical, intellectual and emotional natures; in disordered appetites and desires; and for some in the deeply painful dissonance of gender confusion. But the good news is that we are equally welcome in the big-tent hospitality of the Grace of God.

God’s grace always accepts us as we are but never leaves us as we are. That is why the radical demands of Christian discipleship are always good. The journey may be long, slow and painful, but the Gospel casts the vision that one day we will truly come home. And those who persevere to the end will not be only saved, but in holy flesh they will see the face of God himself.

This narrative needs to be populated with heroes as well— those who have the courage to swim against the tide of the zeitgeist; those inspired by the gospel to discover for themselves the blessings of obedience and submission. Brave young people with the guts to stand up to consumerist sex and stand out against today’s identity politics.

And finally, we must be ready to fire people’s imagination. The bible tells us that these holy ways of living are vivid allegories of the Gospel that stands behind them. They are signposts, images, and gateways to the Gospel. In the book of Ephesians, for example, the Apostle Paul tells us¹² that in the faithful coming together of male and female as ‘one flesh’, married couples are made signposts to the mystery of God’s life-giving, covenantal love for us in

Christ. In other words, God has etched the story of His love for His people into the shape of their most intimate physical relationships.

When we live out these faithful, covenanted ways of life we tell the story of God's love in our own flesh - over and over again. And those who heroically embrace chastity so long as they remain single also bear witness to the greater reality that God's passionate love is always covenantal. And so we not only tell the story of the Gospel with our words, but in our relationships we *put it on display*.

We must never abandon the public square because the goods of the Christian moral vision are for everybody and not just for ourselves. But first it needs to be re-vitalised in our own hearts and lives, in our churches, in the work of pastors and teachers, and youth groups and house groups. And there is much work to be done in challenging the compromises of the past, not least in attitudes to divorce and the scandal of our casual approach to extra-marital sex.

A daunting task? We have been here before. Two thousand years ago the belief that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead inspired Christians to create a culture – the way they treated women, children, the sexually exploited, slaves and the poor – so attractive to Pagans that by the fourth century A.D. an entire empire was on the edge of faith.

Of course there are many questions. And there are good ways and there are bad ways of making our case. We shall need wisdom as well as courage. But for the sake of our children, for the sake of the Gospel, for the life of the world, the biblical moral vision is a story we must now be prepared to tell all over again.

¹ Berger, P (1968) *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. Doubleday and Co.

² Wright, T (2013) *Creation, Power and Truth*. SPCK.

³ Sanlon, P (2010) *Plastic People: How Queer Theory Is Changing Us*. Latimer studies.

⁴ Haidt, J (2013) *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Penguin books

⁵ Smith, James, K.A (2014) *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Eerdmans

⁶ Spiegelhalter, D (2015) *Sex by Numbers*. Wellcome

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http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/UserStorage/pdf/Pdf%20reports/CSJ_Fractured_Families_Report_WEB_13.06.13.pdf

⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2010/feb/11/marriage-rates-uk-data#data>

⁹ Benson, H (2015) *Get Married before you have Children*. Marriage Foundation.

http://www.marriagefoundation.org.uk/Shared/Uploads/Products/15035_MF%20paper%20-%20Get%20married%20before%20children.pdf

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, Social and Demographic Trends: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/06/15/a-tale-of-two-fathers/>

¹¹ <http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/channel-4-dispatches>

¹² Ephesians 5:32