

HEAVY BURDENS

SEVEN WAYS **LGBTQ**
CHRISTIANS
EXPERIENCE

HARM IN THE
CHURCH

BRIDGET EILEEN RIVERA

HEAVY BURDENS

SEVEN WAYS LGBTQ CHRISTIANS
EXPERIENCE HARM IN THE CHURCH

BRIDGET EILEEN RIVERA



BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Bridget Eileen Rivera, *Heavy Burdens*
Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2021
Used by permission.

Contents

Introduction 11

BURDEN 1 Sex . . . err . . . Celibacy Is Great!

1. The Protestant Sexual Revolution 21
2. The New Sexual Order 29

BURDEN 2 Sinners ~~Saved by Grace~~

3. Perverted Identity 43
4. Freud's Lasting Influence 55

BURDEN 3 Folk Devils

5. Political Christianity 67
6. Hellfire and Judgment 78

BURDEN 4 The Bible Is "Clear"

7. Culture and Context 87
8. Double Standards 100

BURDEN 5 "Real" Men, "Good" Ladies

9. Effeminacy 113
10. Emasculation 123

Contents

BURDEN 6 Made in the Image of ~~God~~ Sex

- 11. Gender Essentialism 135
- 12. More Than Just Monkeys? 144

BURDEN 7 Jesus ~~Saves~~ Damns

- 13. Vessels of Wrath 161
- 14. Grace for Me but Not for Thee 171

A Better Way

- 15. Recentering the Gospel 183
- 16. Setting Down the Burdens 191
- 17. Weights of Glory 203

Acknowledgments 213

Notes 215

Author Bio 233

Introduction

For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

—Matthew 23:3–4

I squirmed in my seat, avoiding eye contact with the women in my small group. They offered encouragement to a woman sitting next to me. She spoke in halting sentences, wiping away tears with a tissue they offered.

“It’s just awful,” she said. “You can’t even imagine.”

But I could.

She was talking about her son. Her gay son. And nobody knew that he was gay but me and her. She didn’t even know that I knew. She didn’t know that I knew he had a boyfriend. That he had just come out to her a day ago. She didn’t know that I knew about it all.

She didn’t know that I am gay too. None of them did.

“Pete just needs prayer,” she said. “We learned some things about him yesterday. I can’t go into details, but he’s falling away.”

I fingered the pages of my Bible nervously and found myself saying, “Your son loves Jesus. . . . He really does. God will watch out for him.”

“This is just so terrible, Bridget,” she said, eyes bleary and red. “I can’t say what it is, but it’s just so bad that I’d rather have learned he was dead.”

I’d rather have learned he was dead.

Her words lingered in the air as I looked away. One of the ladies gave her hand a little squeeze, and the mother went on about her family’s despair. A woman volunteered to pray for her. And then we moved on.



What is so bad about homosexuality that a Christian would rather a loved one be *dead* than gay? I’ve asked myself that question more times than I could count. Though her sentiment is shocking, the woman from my small group isn’t an outlier. Her words reflect the secret and often unconscious thoughts of many Christians. Worse, her words reflect the silent voice of death whispering in the minds of countless LGBTQ people—people made in the image of God who often tragically believe they’d be better off dead than alive as they are.

The question is why?

Discrimination never starts with a death wish. It begins slowly. Imperceptibly. Lurking in a raised eyebrow and in the unspoken assumptions we make about normalcy. It flourishes in the hopes and dreams we nurture for ourselves and for our loved ones and in the prejudices we cultivate for those we despise. Until one day a parent wakes up and finds themselves shedding more tears over their child being gay than being dead.

Until one day a child wakes up and actually *wants* to be dead.



Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28–30)

One of the greatest invitations of the gospel is an invitation to rest. Jesus not only brings life to his children. He brings a *good* life. Not a life without troubles, for sure, but one with troubles that are nevertheless *easy*. As he declared in the passage above, he brings a life with burdens that are *light*.

Objections abound to such a notion, even from Christians. What about taking up your cross to follow Jesus? Counting the cost? Dying to yourself and mortifying the flesh? Isn't the call to follow Jesus a call to share in his suffering?

And the answer is yes! But in our haste to emphasize the cost of following Jesus, we must not forget the blessing. According to Scripture, the burdens of Christ bring *peace* to our souls, not misery. "Take my yoke upon you," Jesus said, "and you will find *rest* for your souls."

Anyone who has ever done something good for the sake of doing something good knows what I'm talking about. There's a difference between giving your only slice of cake to your brother because you want to do something nice and your brother stealing that piece of cake. You "suffer" the loss of cake in both situations. But the first scenario makes you happy to see your brother enjoying your cake. The second just makes you angry.

Suffering for the sake of Christ is much the same. Christ calls each of us into a type of suffering that brings joy even in the midst of loss, a paradoxical burden that makes our journey easier, not harder. A mysteriously better way to enjoy our cake by giving it up. A way to live our life by losing it.

"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul," the psalmist declares. "The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart" (Ps. 19:7a, 8a). If one thing is certain about

following Jesus, it's that following him is *good* for us. It revives us in the deserts of this world and makes our hearts "rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). The law of the Lord is "sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10) because it's not only objectively good but *subjectively* good too. It "tastes" good to follow God. His burdens feel light. In a world weighed down by sin, shame, and oppression, Jesus Christ delivers us from the weight of our present darkness.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Jesus pronounces anathema upon the religious leaders of his day, hypocrites who loaded the people of God with heavy burdens: "And [Jesus] said, 'Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. Woe to you!'" (Luke 11:46–47).

Indeed, heavy burdens pervert the very message of the gospel. Imagine walking with Christian in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. You arrive at the cross, and Christian's burden slips from his back. But just as he's about to rejoice, a stranger suddenly appears with an even *greater* burden. He hoists it upon Christian's shoulders, replacing what Christ had taken away, and declares that Christian must journey all the way to the Celestial City like that. How far would Christian get?

The Problem

Countless LGBTQ believers find themselves struggling under the weight of burdens that no Christian should ever bear, burdens given to them not by Christ but by stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. They faithfully persevere in their journey to the Celestial City with a heroic degree of faithfulness, but they do so under the mounting pressure of an atmosphere hostile to their faith. What's worse, many sexual and gender minorities leave the faith altogether, their belief destroyed in the wake of

abhorrent abuses that would test the resolve of the greatest of saints. Few Christians understand the extent of the problem, and even fewer are ready to acknowledge that Christian communities are responsible.

Indeed, discrimination against LGBTQ people exists at virtually every level of church involvement, from how sexual and gender minorities experience evangelism, to how they experience discipleship, community, accountability, ministry opportunities, counseling, mentorship, family, and friendship. More than one queer believer has told me that merely stepping over the threshold of a church causes their entire body to stiffen with fear. Others tell me that they no longer attend church at all because they've been rejected so many times; they can't bear to be rejected again.

It's a tragedy experienced by millions of LGBTQ people who grew up in the church, have attempted to join the church, or have encountered the church in some way during their lifetime. A tragedy measured in the silent tears they shed and ultimately counted in the bodies of the many LGBTQ people who die by suicide every year.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth contemplate suicide three times more often than heterosexual youth and are 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide if they experience family rejection.¹ Forty percent of transgender adults have attempted suicide at least once in their lifetime, and of that number, 92 percent attempted suicide before the age of twenty-five.² Of all teen suicides from 2013 to 2015, nearly 25 percent were LGBTQ.³ Of all homeless youth in the United States, 40 percent are LGBTQ.⁴ In the span of a year, an estimated 1.8 million LGBTQ youth between the ages of thirteen and twenty-four will seriously contemplate suicide.⁵ LGBTQ people are also more likely to be the target of hate crimes than any other minority group in the United States today, surpassing Jewish, Muslim, and Black people.⁶

For most people, religious involvement reduces the risk of suicide. But when gay and lesbian college students engage more heavily in their faith communities, their risk of suicide only goes up.⁷ Gay and lesbian students are 38 percent more likely to contemplate suicide if they are heavily involved in faith communities. Lesbian students, counted separately from gay male students, are 52 percent more likely to contemplate suicide if they are heavily involved in faith communities.⁸ How can that be? How is it that going to church would be a factor in keeping straight people alive but pushing gay people toward death?

The discrimination facing LGBTQ people in the church is no secret. The vast majority of non-Christians in the United States (as much as 91 percent) believe Christians to be homophobic.⁹ Consider these observations from two leading researchers who are Christians themselves: “Outsiders say our hostility toward gays—not just opposition to homosexual politics and behaviors but disdain for gay individuals—has become virtually synonymous with the Christian faith. . . . When you introduce yourself as a Christian to a friend, neighbor, or business associate who is an outsider, you might as well have it tattooed on your arm: antihomosexual, gay-hater, homophobic. I doubt you think of yourself in these terms, but that’s what outsiders think of you.”¹⁰

A Better Church

A queer friend of mine once likened her experience in the church to standing in a field in a thunderstorm. Every drop of rain is a new slight, another put-down, another reminder that you’re the wrong kind of person. Talking about it can feel like trying to talk about the wetness of a single drop of rain. *What’s the big deal?* people say. But it’s not a particular raindrop that causes the problem. The problem is the storm. Some people get pushed by the wind, others get stuck in the mud, and a few get struck by lightning. But *everybody* is scared and cold and wet.

Tragically, many LGBTQ Christians find their church to be the source of the storm when it ought to be the shelter. They first experience marginalization in the context of church, they find Christians to be the most common perpetrators of prejudice against them, and they learn to avoid everything to do with Christianity as a means of sheer survival.

It should not be this way.

In the following pages, I explore how we got here, the impact on LGBTQ people, and what it might look like to chart a better path forward. Unlike most books that tackle LGBTQ issues in Christianity, this book is not going to spend much time debating whether same-sex marriage is biblical. Instead, I will unpack the consequences of LGBTQ discrimination *regardless* of your theological position in the “big debate.”

I myself am a lesbian who follows what’s known as the “traditional” sexual ethic. This means that I’ve chosen celibacy as a vocation instead of marriage, and that I’m invested in discovering pathways within celibacy that are healthy and life-giving. However, if I’ve found one thing to be true when it comes to LGBTQ issues in the church, it’s that many of us get so caught up on gay marriage that we forget there’s more at stake.

Countless LGBTQ people grow up in churches believing that God hates them—the climax to a story that we’ve told ourselves about sex and gender that elevates cisgender heterosexuality as the only valid human experience and that labels all other experiences sinful. We’re going to unpack that story together. More than that, we’re going to shift our focus away from LGBTQ issues as the source of our problems and, instead, look at the church itself. Self-examination is hard, but that’s what this book is about. I’ll be asking us to put a magnifying lens to the church, and together, we’ll consider how *Christians* have contributed to lasting trauma for LGBTQ people, many of whom are siblings in Christ.

Tackling this topic is no easy endeavor. Nearly everything I address in the following pages deserves its own volume. If

I covered everything, I imagine I'd be writing for a lifetime. Instead, my goal is to explore a *few* key issues that impact everything about how LGBTQ people experience the church, extending so far as to shape the very way that LGBTQ Christians think about themselves and culminating in the suicide of thousands—a totalizing system that many find impossible to escape.

For every story you read in the following pages, countless more exist just like it. I invite you to grapple with these stories and to unpack their causes and, moreover, to consider what this means for the church moving forward. The people of God represent the hands and feet of Christ to a broken world, bringing God's healing touch to you and to me and to every person we meet. As the body of Christ, we incarnate the goodness of the gospel. We represent a life-giving Savior who doesn't rest with ninety-nine sheep out of a hundred. He goes out, and he searches, and he rescues, saving the smallest and most insignificant member of his flock. He isn't happy with saving "most" of the flock. He works until every last one of his sheep experiences the love and care and mercy of his fold (Matt. 18:10–14).

The heart of Jesus breaks with every broken heart, and he mourns the mistreatment of every vulnerable soul. A day will come when he will look upon each of us, and he won't ask us about our ninety-nine friends. He'll ask us about the one, and he'll want to know how we treated the one; and on that day, he will declare, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40).

LGBTQ people are the "one." But how exactly have Christians treated them? What is it like to be queer in the church? Why is it like that, and how can we change? If you genuinely want to know, this book is for you.

BURDEN 1

SEX . . .

ERR . . .

CELIBACY

IS GREAT!

1. The Protestant Sexual Revolution

STEPHEN

Growing up in a conservative, evangelical context, Stephen learned that gay sex was an abomination. If he messed up now and again, it might not be the end of the world, as long as he repented. But with eternal damnation ever looming in the background, he could never be sure if he had repented enough.

“My theology was a form of slow suicide,” Stephen recalled. “It didn’t matter how hard I tried, and it didn’t matter how many things I did right, it still tortured me.” He found himself spiraling in and out of anguish and suicidal thoughts, his sexuality consuming his life. “It was like this cut in my mouth that I just couldn’t stop feeling. Even on good days, it was still there eating away at me. I lost a good portion of my life to it.”

Stephen dropped out of high school. Though he eventually returned to complete his education and enrolled in college classes, he failed multiple courses each semester and took eight years to finally graduate. Over time, he developed a network of Christian friends who were okay with him as long as he was celibate. But he didn’t know if he could honestly be celibate for the rest of his life.

Friends suggested he look to Henri Nouwen, a “hero of gay celibacy,” for inspiration. One article in particular described Nouwen as

“choosing to live the wound,” as Stephen put it. “Again and again and again,” Stephen recalled, “he just chose to embrace and live the wound.” Stephen was in his early twenties at the time, and the article filled him with despair.

“I’m looking at the rest of my life, and this is what I’m being told is the best that I can look forward to. It just destroyed me. It just crushed me.” But he couldn’t budge on gay celibacy because “to do so would be to live in mortal error.” It was grin and bear it or go to hell. But he found himself getting to the point where he didn’t know if he could bear it any longer.

“I thought, ‘I might as well just kill myself now. If this is all I have to look forward to in life, I don’t think I can do it.’”



During the early years of the culture wars in twentieth-century America, a kind of righteous fervor gripped the faithful in countless evangelical churches. Christian leaders cast their followers as valiant soldiers in a grandiose battle for the soul of their country, a struggle in which sex, marriage, and the nuclear family took center stage. Sexual liberation threatened the very fabric of society. Fornication, adultery, serial monogamy, divorce, abortion, pregnancy out of wedlock, homosexuality—all of it loomed large in the evangelical imagination. Sexual autonomy threatened the building blocks of Western civilization. Apart from drastic Christian action, society itself would crumble.¹

Among the most prominent theologians of this era was Carl F. H. Henry, who published a scathing indictment of American liberalism titled *Twilight of a Great Civilization*. Writing in the late 1980s, he argued that shifting norms of immorality and “sexual libertinism”² in particular sounded the death knells of not only the United States but ultimately Western culture. Describing a showdown of cosmic proportions, he called for Christians to band together against the forces of secular humanism,

political leftism, and sexual liberation “before hell breaks out.”³ “A half-generation ago the pagans were still largely threatening at the gates of Western culture,” he said. “Now the barbarians are plunging into the oriental and occidental mainstream.”⁴

As a result of this “barbarian” invasion, Christians had no choice but to fight back. Henry enlisted imagery from Sodom and Gomorrah to summarize his battle cry, calling on Christians of every stripe to “wake up” before the sun sets: “When that great meltdown comes, where will you be? Trapped in Sodom? In the bleak twilight of a decadent culture, where will you be? Overtaken, like Lot, looking back at the citadels of sin? ‘Wake up!’ says Paul; ‘wake up!’ American culture is sinking toward sunset.”⁵

By linking our dystopian future of “sexual libertinism” to the forces of radical leftism, secular humanism, and the “gay agenda,” evangelical leaders created a moral panic in the Christian imagination. *We* faithful Christians stood as the vanguards of biblical morality against *them*, the leftist agents and sexual deviants who will destroy the nuclear family and civilization as we know it. “We’re living in the outpouring of the wrath of God in the category of His abandoning a culture,” John MacArthur said in 2012, “and we’re living in the sequence that is here: a sexual revolution, a homosexual revolution, a reprobate mind that unleashes everything, including murder on a massive scale and hate toward God.”⁶

But a deep irony lies at the bottom of this panic. Despite decades of rhetoric blaming the “secular left” for the explosion of sexual liberation in the twentieth century, the basic ideology behind sexual autonomy didn’t originate in leftist propaganda. It didn’t begin with the gay agenda or even the sexual revolution of the 1960s. It began with a movement far deeper in the history of Western civilization—a sexual revolution with far greater consequences than anything accomplished in the 1960s. One that continues to shape how we think about sexuality and,

ultimately, what we believe to be true about the most fundamental aspects of human identity.

It was the Protestant Reformation. And it changed everything.

A History of the Revolution

Martin Luther exploded onto the scene of Western Christianity with a radical new idea that would alter the course of history: *Sex is a necessary good*. Sex is “not a matter of choice or decision but a natural and necessary thing,” Martin Luther said. “It is just as necessary as the fact that I am a man, and more necessary than sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, and emptying the bowels and bladder.” He argued for an understanding of not just human sexuality but sex itself as “innate” to human existence.⁷

Luther’s message stood in contrast to the prevailing beliefs about human sexuality at the time. Catholic doctrine about sex and marriage had dominated the religious landscape for over a millennium, teaching that holiness required a renunciation of sexual desire, even in the context of marriage. Chastity, particularly celibate virginity, was the ideal. Marriage was a lesser calling for those too weak to abstain. Anyone who carried a position of spiritual authority was expected to be celibate, and church governance regulated all aspects of married life in an effort to limit sexual expression to procreative purposes alone.

Medieval historian James Brundage describes the situation in his book *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*. Even marital intercourse was “always impure, and always sinful”⁸ unless accomplished without the faintest hint of sexual desire, a requirement difficult to fathom. Sex came to be seen in Christian teaching as the vehicle through which original sin passed from parent to child—a fundamental expression of human depravity, necessary only for procreation. Chastity

in marriage became nearly impossible, as any hint of sexual desire betrayed sinful motivations.

The resulting ascetic atmosphere cast human sexuality itself as the root of all evil, the cause of original sin, and the reason why every last man, woman, and child was tainted by iniquity. Penitential writers developed such a complex web of limitations on marital sexual activity that it became difficult to discern just *when* sex was permissible, if ever. Pious couples who attempted to observe the prohibitions, says Brundage, “would have found the process of deciding whether or not they could in good conscience have intercourse at any given moment a complex, perhaps even frightening, process.”⁹

Not surprisingly, mandated celibacy was a natural requirement for the priesthood. Celibacy was the *only* surefire way to pursue true and lasting holiness. By the time of the Reformation, this approach to human sexuality had become so institutionalized within Christian teaching that few could imagine the Bible teaching otherwise.

Until Luther.

Undergirding Luther’s rejection of clerical celibacy was a rejection of the idea that human sexuality was inherently sinful. It was tainted by sin, Luther argued, just as all aspects of humanity are, but sexuality was a good thing created by God nevertheless. In one sermon, Luther humorously observed that even eating and drinking are tainted by sin, but eating and drinking are no more inherently evil than anything else innate to the human condition, including when people “purge themselves and pick and blow their noses.”¹⁰ He continued, “Why do you only look at the impurity that exists in marriage? If you want to talk about the kind of purity and chastity that the angels have, you will find it nowhere, neither in marriage nor out of it in the unmarried condition. Purity does not exist; even children are not pure.”¹¹

Having rejected the medieval Catholic belief that human sexuality is inherently evil, Luther argued that celibacy is a “special

gift” that few possess.¹² “It is a devilish tyranny to require it.”¹³ “This is a matter of nature and not of choice.”¹⁴ Celibacy was not just unreasonable but an affront to human nature. “No one is bound to obey such a command, and the pope is responsible for all the sins that are committed against it.”¹⁵

Not surprisingly, as the Reformation spread throughout Europe, sex-positive discourse began to proliferate. For the first time in centuries, not only could clergymen get married; they could also talk about sex! Prominent clergymen, such as William Gouge, told married Christians to yield “that due benevolence [sex] one to another which is warranted and sanctified by God’s Word.”¹⁶ Sexual intercourse, he said, was a “domesticall dutie” that God had ordained for the good of his people. Many likened intercourse to a spiritual experience.¹⁷ Others urged their congregants to actually *enjoy* sex.¹⁸

Marriage had always been seen as a picture of Christ and the church, but Protestants began to locate within sex itself a means of receiving God’s grace. Theologian Richard Sibbes, in a sermon called “Bowels Opened,” used overtly sexual language to describe Jesus in shockingly erotic terms, beckoning his congregants to “open, open still” that Christ might “come into us.”¹⁹

Even theologians who resisted the Reformation began to shift their beliefs about sex. Erasmus, for example, who had attempted an air of neutrality toward the Reformation, nevertheless agreed with the reformers that sex is “fair and holy.” Why would God give us “these pricks and provocations”? he reasoned, referring to sexual desire. God makes nothing in vain, he continued, so why make us sexual if not to have sex? “Virginity is a divine thing,” Erasmus concluded. “But wedlock is a human thing.”²⁰

Bending the Rules and Redefining Marriage

The consequences of reframing sex as a necessary good meant that marriage could no longer be understood as it had been for

centuries. Martin Luther and John Calvin argued medieval Catholicism elevated marriage as a sacrament in service to its lust for power. Because the Catholic Church reserved the right to regulate everything about the sacraments, marriage had become an extension of religious authoritarianism, leading to greater sexual sin, not less.²¹ “It may truly be affirmed,” Calvin argued, “that, when they made matrimony into a sacrament, they only sought a den of all abominations.”²² “Not only is marriage regarded as a sacrament without the least warrant of Scripture,” Luther said in *Babylonian Captivity* (written in 1520), “but the very ordinances that extol it as a sacrament have turned it into a farce.”²³ Undergirded by Luther’s conception of the two kingdoms, reformers located marriage within the domain of earthly affairs, redefining it as a “worldly” institution that existed in the kingdom of earth as opposed to the kingdom of heaven.²⁴ It was a covenant before God (as Calvin articulated) but certainly not a sacrament.

Luther went so far as to advise leaders to follow local customs governing marriage: “Every land has its own customs, according to the common saying. In keeping with this, because weddings and marriages are the business of the world, it is not proper for us clergymen or servants of the church to arrange or govern them. On the contrary, let each city and land follow its own usage and custom, however they go.”²⁵ In later writings, Luther maintained a strict separation between the temporal and spiritual realms, arguing that “marriage is an external, worldly matter, like clothing and food, house and property, subject to temporal authority, as the many imperial laws enacted on the subject prove.”²⁶

But isn’t marriage an ordinance of God? the naysayers countered. Well, sure it is, said the reformers. But so is agriculture; should we make agriculture a sacrament?²⁷ *But marriage represents Christ and the church, the very kingdom of heaven!* Sure it does, said the Protestants. But so does a mustard seed; should we make mustard-seed planting a sacrament too?²⁸ “Upon this

principle, everything will be a sacrament,” Calvin remarked, tongue-in-cheek.²⁹

To be clear, reformers were *not* trying to overthrow marriage as a thing of moral consequence. They believed that marriage carried a great deal of ethical and theological weight; Calvin taught that marriage represented a solemn, lifelong covenant before God. Even though Protestants fought for local determination in regulating marriage, no one would have tried to argue that marriage was merely a social construct. Instead, they opposed the authoritarian system in Roman Catholicism that prevented everyday people from getting married—despite the approval of friends, family, and neighbors. Even more, they argued that mandated celibacy led to rampant sexual immorality.

These were the issues at the forefront of people’s minds that reformers were trying to fix. Divorce was still a grave sin, and procreation was still understood to be the purpose of sexual intercourse. Though Luther rejected the idea that intercourse itself was the vehicle through which original sin passed from parent to child, he still recognized that all things, including human sexuality, were infected by original sin.³⁰ Notably, he even believed that adulterers should be put to death, though he thought the government should do it, not the church.³¹

Nevertheless, in deconstructing the Catholic Church’s control over the institution of marriage, Protestants gifted the Western world with a new way of thinking about human sexuality. With the exception that priests could now marry, not much looked different on the outside, especially to a present-day observer. However, tectonic shifts had nevertheless taken place in the assumptions underneath people’s behavior. These shifts would now form the basis of a new sexual order.

2. The New Sexual Order

CHANG

Chang's youth group talked about sex all the time. But not how most people would imagine. Teens out in the world talked about sex because they couldn't keep their hands off each other. But Christian teens talked about sex because God made sex, and it was *good*. At least, that's how Chang's church explained it. All they had to do was wait to get married, and God would bless them with a wonderful sex life.

Chang heard sermon after sermon about waiting for marriage, learned how to “stay vertical” when spending time with a guy, and internalized important principles, like never being alone with the opposite sex. But sex itself wasn't bad. Rather, sex was so good that you had to make sure you didn't ruin it. Her church hosted a “Silver Ring Thing” event, where Chang's friends lined up to pay twenty dollars each for a silver ring that signified their commitment to purity. The best kind of sex would come to those who waited for it.

Chang never fully internalized the “sex is great” rhetoric of her white evangelical church, even though it surrounded her. Something about it seemed off. Why did they have to talk about sex so much in the first place? “I was like, Can't we talk about something else? Like God?” she recalled.

And then she discovered that she was bisexual. Nothing in her Christian sex education had prepared her for that discovery. In college, she talked frequently with mentors and wrestled with Scripture. But the

more she wrestled, the more questions she had. The more she wondered whether same-sex marriage could be biblical.

That scared Chang. That kind of thinking was dangerous. It could easily get her kicked out of her campus ministry. Her Christian social circle encompassed her entire life. She couldn't lose that.

She prayed that God would confirm that same-sex relationships were wrong. But a miracle never came. She dated a girl for a few weeks hoping that God would expose how terrible it was. Nothing serious, just a few dates. But God never did.

Until then, Chang had been afraid to tell the campus ministry leader, who had been mentoring her, that she might be questioning her beliefs about same-sex marriage. It seemed like a line she couldn't cross, but she realized she needed to talk. She finally called him at the end of the semester, and they met for coffee.

"I thought you were smarter than this," he said. "You should know better."

He told her to step down from the leadership team, preventing her from leading Bible studies or even volunteering with the soundboard crew. "It was like the idea that questioning this one thing that we had all agreed on threatened everything."

She had straight friends volunteering in the ministry with more lenient views about sex and marriage than she did. Why didn't they get kicked out of volunteer work? What was so dangerous about the questions she had? Why couldn't she ask and look for answers like anybody else?



The consequences of removing marriage from the sacraments are so vast that it's doubtful the reformers grasped the full ramifications. But they certainly understood the immediate benefits. "Restore freedom to everybody," Luther proclaimed. "Leave every man the free choice to marry or not to marry."¹ Let the saint and the zealot be celibate if they choose, but "why should another's holiness disturb my liberty? . . . Let him not rob me of my liberty!"²

Marriage thus became a human right, one that religious authority had no business controlling and which could not be denied without restricting basic liberties.

Undergirding this transformation was a shift in Christians' assumptions about sex. Previously, facts about human biology—specifically sex and sexual desire—had been seen as largely inconsequential to Christian ideas about marriage. Marriage itself had governed the Christian approach to sex, and desire, in turn, had little to do with defining the boundaries of morality.

The reformers upended this schema.

"Why should people marry," Luther mused, "unless they have desire and love for another?"³ Sex is "a matter of nature and not of choice." Denying people the right to marry, he reasoned, compels them to sin. "You may be sure," he wrote in *The Estate of Marriage*, "that they will not remain pure but inevitably besmirk themselves with secret sins or fornication. For they are incapable of resisting the word and ordinance of God within them."⁴

At one point, Luther suggested that if a woman were married to an "impotent" man and "burned with desire" on account of his impotence, he would counsel her to "contract a marriage to another and flee to a distant unknown place."⁵ When Catholics responded with outrage, he explained that he wouldn't actually counsel her to flee. He would merely encourage her to discuss the matter with her husband and, after gaining his consent, get married to another man in secret.⁶

Luther was speaking hypothetically, but his musings reveal how far things had shifted. Historian Steven Ozment summarizes the consequences: "The Protestant reformers tolerated . . . for the first time in the West on Christian grounds, genuine divorce and remarriage. Although they viewed marriage as a spiritual bond transcending all other human relationships, marriage was not a church sacrament that created a once-and-for-all

state; a marriage could definitely end this side of eternity and a new one begin for separated spouses.”⁷ Forcing unhappy couples to stay married no longer made sense. More than that, in a world where sexual frustration leads to sin, requiring divorcees to be celibate looked no better than requiring priests to be celibate.

Although most of the early reformers explicitly connected sex to procreation, discussion of procreation became less and less central as Protestant reformers increasingly adopted a narrative about marriage that prioritized sexual and romantic fulfillment. Well-known clergymen and theologians talked more and more about marriage in terms of “fellowship,” “companionship,” “love,” “joy,” “copartnership,” “conjugal affection,” “mutual delight,” and “heaven on earth.”⁸ This language shifted the focus away from procreation and toward a conception of love that buoyed the development of romance in the eighteenth century.⁹

Naturally, if sexual pleasure is a good thing in itself, it’s not too far a jump to conclude that sexual intercourse is permissible outside of procreation. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contraception evolved into an acceptable point of disagreement among Christians until it eventually became majority practice. By the early to mid-twentieth century, Protestant denominations were lobbying *en masse* to legalize contraception.¹⁰ Today, 93 percent of Protestants and 89 percent of Catholics believe that contraception is either morally acceptable or morally neutral.¹¹

Taken altogether, Reformation ideas altered the logic by which sex and marriage were understood, allowing Christians to explore possibilities that would have been unthinkable a century before. Things didn’t change overnight. Divorce was still discouraged, procreation still very *encouraged*, and anything related to same-sex intercourse still considered an abomination. Nevertheless, the reformers introduced new assumptions

to the Christian imagination—sex and sexuality as integral to human identity; celibacy as unnatural; marriage as a human right; pursuit of marriage for romantic love. All these ideas remain embedded within the legacy of Protestant teaching. It wasn't the 1960s that bequeathed such ideas to Western society. And it wasn't gay people either. It was the Reformation and the Christians who helmed it.

The Ongoing Legacy

The legacy of sexual liberation in modern Christianity exposes a reality at the heart of contemporary debates over sex and marriage: both conservative evangelicals *and* their liberal counterparts in mainline denominations owe their existence to a movement deeply committed to redefining Christian sexual morality. Sex, marriage, and human sexuality have always been contested ideas in Protestant denominations, and Protestants have long accommodated sticky ethical dilemmas when it comes to these topics, leading to a broad acceptance of divorce, remarriage, and contraception despite the historic understanding of Scripture.

The end result is a system that would have been alien to most people at the start of the Reformation but that is largely taken for granted by many Christians today. What Christians today might call “biblical teaching on marriage and sexuality”—whereby two people of the opposite sex pursue sexual fulfillment in the context of a romantic marriage relationship—is actually quite modern.

Even more, many Christians now take for granted that lifelong celibacy is impossible. Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, teaches that it is “unreasonable for [people] to refrain from sex”¹² and that choosing singleness when you experience sexual desire is a “neglect of Christian responsibility.”¹³ Prominent theologian John MacArthur likewise

teaches that “there’s a place for voluntary celibacy. It’s a blessing if you have the gift, as Paul put it. But to deny someone normal family life, to deny someone normal relationships, is a cruel, cruel thing.” He further argues that forcing people to be celibate leads to “sexual perversion.”¹⁴ The implication is that people *need* sex to live a healthy life.

Such logic inevitably places sexual fulfillment (as opposed to procreation) at the center of the marriage relationship. Consider the following excerpt from Ray Ortlund’s *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, where he speaks to the problem of lust: “Wisdom is *not* saying, ‘You feel desire? And there’s temptation out there? Then what you need is an iron will. So there’s your future—endless frustration bottled up inside.’ Self-control is an important part of maturity. But wisdom believes that God’s remedy for a man’s thirst for sex is sex—an overflowing sexual joy with his wife: ‘your own cistern,’ ‘your own well.’ A man’s wife is his own personal, divinely approved wellspring of endless sexual satisfaction.”¹⁵

The notion that “God’s remedy for sex is sex” reflects a reimagining of sexual desire wherein sex is the only way to “satisfy” our sexuality. Classically, Christians understood sexuality as a thing to be stewarded. “Satisfaction” was not the point so much as faithfulness, whether in celibacy or marriage. Ortlund’s focus on “joyously bubbling sexual happiness between husband and wife” as being the “remedy” for desire effectively situates sex at the center of not only marriage but human fulfillment. The implication is that a man is doomed, apart from marriage, to “endless frustration bottled up inside.”¹⁶

It’s no coincidence that Christian sex manuals have exploded in the past century, from Tim and Beverly LaHaye’s *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love*, which contains illustrations and sexual techniques, to Mark and Grace Driscoll’s *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship, and Life Together*, where married Christians learn about their biblical freedom

to engage in masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, menstrual sex, and cybersex. Far from being a departure from “stuffy” Christian teaching, such writing typifies the purient ethic of Protestantism. Scholar Amy DeRogatis summarizes it well: “The main message of evangelical sex manuals is that frequent and mutually satisfying sexual encounters are crucial for a strong marriage. Sex is sanctioned by God, should be practiced in marriage, and is one of the wonders of creation. In most cases, the writers downplay reproduction and focus on mutual sexual pleasure as the fulfillment of God’s plan for humanity. . . . Evangelical sex manuals allow the faithful to participate in an American culture that they often describe as ‘over-sexualized’ while still affirming biblical principles.”¹⁷

A striking example of this phenomenon is purity culture, an evangelical subculture intended to combat sexual immorality that largely depends on beliefs mirroring those of sexual progressivism—just as long as you wait for God to give you a heterosexual marriage. Conferences in the ’90s and 2000s, like the Silver Ring Thing, sold T-shirts reading, “How to Have the Best Sex Ever,”¹⁸ and featured attractive twenty-somethings on stage leading teens to chant, “Sex is great! Sex is great!” before concluding, “and it is great, in the context of marriage.”¹⁹ Jim Burns’s *Purity Code* includes detailed descriptions of male and female anatomy and promises adolescent readers that following the “purity code” will bring them “freedom and set [their] future up for joy.”²⁰ Dannah Gresh uses a similar line of reasoning in *And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity*. She describes a couple who remained virgins until their wedding day and says, “*I am pretty sure that Jenny and Bryan have glorious sex, and I believe it is because God has blessed their marriage covenant. I truly believe that when we keep that covenant by saving ourselves to love someone with all the intensity of our heart and body, He is able to bless us immeasurably beyond what we could have imagined within our sex lives.*”²¹

The message is clear: follow God's rules, and he'll bless you with an incredible sex life through marriage. "If we gladly obey all that God has said about sex, within the promises of a covenant before God," said Marshall Segal, writing for *Desiring God* in 2019, "he gives sex a depth the world has never known."²² Sex, write the LaHayes, is the "most thrilling, exciting, and fulfilling experience in the world."²³ Writing for *Focus on the Family*, Rob Jackson says that "our earthly expressions of sexuality in marriage are the closest approximation to the unity, joy, and pleasurable fulfillment we will experience in heaven."²⁴

The result is a worldview, evolved over the past five hundred years, that promises heterosexual Christians everything they could possibly desire out of sex, as long as it takes place within the context of heterosexual marriage. Marriage can be defined apart from the sacraments. It can be defined apart from procreation. It can even be defined apart from a lifelong, one-flesh union, as even remarriage is okay.

But it *can't* be defined apart from the sexual needs and desires of everyday Christians who happen to be straight.

Sexual Liberation with a Christian Twist

This leads to an uncomfortable truth: Protestant Christianity is a Christianity that is deeply in love with sex. Although many conservative evangelicals commonly view sexual liberation as contradicting their beliefs, the sexual revolution of the twentieth century, far from being a rebellion against Christianity, was in fact a very natural evolution of the basic premises developed by Christians five hundred years prior.

The biggest difference, of course, is the belief that sex is reserved for marriage between a man and a woman. But because Protestant Christianity shares the same narrative about human sexuality as liberalism, Protestant beliefs about sex and

marriage ultimately reflect the same worldview. Consider the following arguments side by side:

[Sex] is just as necessary as the fact that I am a man, and more necessary than sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, and emptying the bowels and bladder. It is a nature and disposition just as innate as the organs involved in it. (Martin Luther)²⁵

If it have been rightly everywhere pronounced as a proverb, that God nor nature have made no thing frustrate nor in vain, why (I pray you) hath God given us these members? Why these pricks and provocations? . . . Moreover, in other beasts, I pray you from whence cometh those pricks and provocations? Of nature, or of sin? Wonder it is if not of nature. . . . Surely we make that by our imagination to be foul, which of the self nature is fair and holy. (Erasmus)²⁶

It's better to marry than to—what?—than to burn. It's better to marry than burn with passion. And certainly 1 Corinthians 7 makes it very clear that singleness is not preferable to marriage. To make celibacy mandatory is utterly unbiblical. (John MacArthur)²⁷

I am suggesting that when people wait until their mid-to-late 20s to marry, it is unreasonable to expect them to refrain from sex. (Al Mohler)²⁸

Christians throughout history have affirmed that lifelong celibacy is a spiritual gift and calling, not a path that should be forced upon someone. Yes, permanently forgoing marriage is a worthy choice for Christians who are gifted with celibacy. But it must be a choice. (Matthew Vines)²⁹

All of these authors are Christians, and all of them make similar arguments about celibacy. But only one of them would be considered unchristian or unbiblical. Matthew Vines, coincidentally,

is gay. The Christian tradition that tells people that celibacy is “cruel,”³⁰ that the answer to their sexual frustration is having sex,³¹ and that sex through marriage is the “most fulfilling experience in the world”³² also tells gay people to marry a person they don’t find attractive or else be celibate forever. The result is a system that excludes people from understanding their sexuality in any meaningful way unless they experience attraction to the opposite sex and only the opposite sex.

Chang, whose story I shared earlier, spent her teenage years attending conferences where they chanted “Sex is great!” and youth groups where the leaders bragged about their hot wives and great sex lives. At her college, her campus ministry permitted a host of perspectives and convictions about marriage, and she noted that most of the ministry’s straight participants had more lenient ideas about sex than she did. None of them faced reprisal for their perspectives. It was only Chang who was punished, and it was only after she started questioning her beliefs about same-sex marriage.

Stephen’s story, which I shared at the beginning of chapter 1, also echoes the double standard. As a gay man, he felt forced into celibacy, and Christians told him to look to historical celibate figures (such as Henri Nouwen) for inspiration. However, Christians also talked about such people as being miserable. And Stephen *was* miserable.

It’s not lost on gay people that few straight Christians learn that suffering is the point of sexual ethics. In fact, they learn the opposite: “If we gladly obey all that God has said about sex, within the promises of a covenant before God, he gives sex a depth the world has never known.”³³ But Stephen learned that Christian obedience was a “wound” that he must live “again and again.”

Both Chang’s and Stephen’s experiences highlight the ways in which many evangelical Christians promote a narrative about human sexuality that contradicts the expectations placed on

queer people. The message that LGBTQ people internalize is that God promises wonderful things in exchange for Christian obedience—but only if you’re straight.

BURDEN I SUMMARY

We thus conclude the first burden that LGBTQ people bear in the church. Many straight Christians tell gay people to be celibate forever even as their own tradition has evolved to eliminate any similar requirement for themselves. Lifelong celibacy is possible, they say. But most don’t believe it. Most only say so when talking to gay people.