

HOW CHURCHES THAT HOLD A TRADITIONAL  
SEXUAL ETHIC CAN CARE FOR LGBTQ PEOPLE

LOVE



ALL

OUR

NEIGHBORS

TONY SCARCELLO

Foreword by Preston Sprinkle



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## THE FELT TENSION



*Truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.*

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

**T**he idea of me writing a book like this felt impossible a decade ago. I spent the first twenty-three years of my life hiding my same-sex attraction from everyone. It was a secret embedded with crippling shame. Somehow, through God's mysterious affinity for redeeming stories, here I am. Not only writing this book but having spent much of the past five years watching God leverage my pain and shame for the healing of others.

A few months ago, I spoke on my story and the Christian sexual ethic at a conference. I shared the bitter pain that came with experiencing same-sex attraction in conservative Christian spaces and how it nearly cost me my life. But I also shared about the beauty and transcendence of God's design for male and female in marriage, known as the traditional sexual ethic. I ended my talk with a plea: Embody a grace that heals the wounds of

shame, and advocate for the truth that God has defined marriage and gender with exquisite intention. We redefine marriage and gender at our own peril, no matter how honest our motives may be.

After the session ended, people lingered to talk, ask questions, share encouragement. Then, as things quieted down, a man (another pastor) approached me. He waited until the crowd had thinned, then walked up slowly with a heaviness in his eyes.

“Thanks for your message,” he said, and paused. “It was faithful . . . and I needed to hear it. But can I be honest with you?”

“Of course,” I said.

He took a beat, then said, “I have LGBTQ+ people I care about in my congregation. I’ve sat in their living rooms. I’ve watched them cry. I’ve had to repent of my own homophobia. And I don’t know how to love them well while maintaining a traditional ethic. I feel like the traditional ethic is a betrayal to them.”

He looked away for a second, then back at me, and named a tension many of us feel.

“It feels like no matter what I say, or don’t say, I’m failing someone. So lately, I’ve just gone quiet. And that silence . . . it’s starting to feel like cowardice. But I still don’t know what to do. The traditional ethic feels so unloving sometimes.”

## **THE PROGRESSIVE POSITION IS NOT A MAGIC ELIXIR**

There is a common tension many of us feel in this conversation. It seems to some that in order to be truly loving, we must embrace a progressive vision of sexuality and gender and discard the traditional one. Others discard being loving in order to embrace the



traditional vision. To frame the traditional ethic against authentic love is a false dichotomy. But that hasn't stopped it from gaining steam in recent years.

A while ago I was at the Washburn Café, the best coffee shop in Springfield, Oregon, for those in the know. I sat across from an old friend who identified as progressive. I, along with a stellar team, had recently planted Open Table Church. This friend wanted to know our church's stance on LGBTQ+ issues.

I told him our church believed that Jesus' table was big enough for all of our stories, that we worked hard to love anyone who came through our door, and that we prayed every Sunday that we would receive whoever joined us just as Jesus had received us. I told him that experiencing same-sex attraction myself had made me ultra-aware of how churches can be uniquely precarious places for LGBTQ+ people and that we were actively working to be a place where LGBTQ+ people could thrive. I also told him our church held to the historic, traditional view of sex and marriage.

"So, you're a non-affirming church?" he asked.

I hate that term, *non-affirming*. I don't believe my views on what someone does with their genitals determines whether or not I affirm their entire personhood. The term is indicative of our cultural moment, though. We are so defined by our sexual interests that to not affirm what someone does with their sexuality is to not affirm their personhood. The truth that we are more than who we want to sleep with gets lost in the discourse. Intentionally or not, the discourse reduces our humanity to sexual desire. And it seems that many of us are all too willing to let our humanity be reduced to what we desire.



Now, to be clear, I do not advocate a Buddhist-style renunciation of desire. When properly ordered and understood, desire is key to human flourishing. In his book *The Gift of Thorns*, A. J. Swoboda makes a strong case that human beings have the capacity for desire not because of original sin but because their Creator experiences desire. Swoboda writes:

Given how central repentance, holiness, and self-denial are to Christian spirituality, one could uncritically presume that Christianity and desire are inherently hostile. But does this hold up? To Scripture? Or to the way of Jesus? . . . These ideas are as half-baked today as they ever were. Not only this, but they're detached from reality and dangerous to the human soul. We were made to desire. To be desireless is inhumane.<sup>1</sup>

Desire is not in and of itself bad. Desire in its purest form is a gift. However, until our deepest desire is for God himself, we must never forget that we are much more than what we desire.

But I knew my friend was not looking for that soapbox. So I answered his question honestly.

“We affirm what Scripture has taught, that sex is intended for a biological man and a biological woman in the covenantal union of marriage.”

He looked at me like I'd just told him we should go kick some kittens. Then he said, “The only church safe for LGBTQ+ people is an affirming church. Non-affirming churches are deadly to queer people. You can do everything you want to welcome queer people, but unless you're affirming, nothing else you do will matter.”

I thought this was an audacious claim for a heterosexual agnostic to make to a same-sex attracted pastor. I let my heterosexual progressive friend vent his misgivings about how toxic my church would be to his gay friends. I genuinely listened. And honestly? I understood where he was coming from. His concern is shared by many well-meaning progressive voices both inside and outside the church.

A common belief among progressives is that we have to sever ourselves from the historic theological perspective on gender and sexuality to genuinely love and serve LGBTQ+ people. I myself spent many years wrestling with this tension. However, I have become convinced that it's misleading to call the historic theological perspective inherently harmful.

The largest scientific survey ever conducted of LGBTQ+ people and their religious backgrounds debunked the assertion that the progressive perspective is the only safe one. In this survey, it was discovered that 81 percent of LGBTQ+ people grew up in a faith community, and 51 percent left after turning eighteen. And, shockingly, of the 51 percent who left, only 21 percent did so over theological disagreements.<sup>2</sup> They were far more likely to leave because of negative experiences such as homophobia or because they were kicked out, felt unsafe, or weren't being allowed to contribute. Even the 21 percent who left over theological misgivings didn't always leave because they disagreed with the church's theology of sex and marriage.<sup>3</sup>

One gay man said, "I left the church because I couldn't find one person who would listen to my story, really listen." A gay couple said, "We never expected this church to conduct our



marriage ceremony. We just wanted them to love our kids like any other kid.”<sup>4</sup>

The narrative is often framed as “Christians who hold a traditional sexual ethic harm gay people.” But is this universally true? Is it the ethic held or the way we hold it? Many times, this question isn’t given its due diligence. Preston Sprinkle writes, “Sweeping generalizations like ‘Christians’ and ‘gay people’ are very unhelpful—as if every gay person is harmed by every Christian who holds to a traditional marriage ethic. What about the hundreds of thousands of gay people who believe in a historically Christian view on marriage and sexual ethics? They don’t say they are harmed by the theology they believe in, even if they say they’ve been hurt by fellow Christians with the same view.”<sup>5</sup>

This belief, that the historic position on sex and marriage is inherently harmful, is not rooted in verifiable data. It is the product of a culture that believes humanity to be far more fragile than it is. In their searing work *The Coddling of the American Mind*, moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt and lawyer-activist Greg Lukianoff rebuke our culture’s tendency to cocoon young people and guard them from challenge. Human beings are not just not fragile, they point out—they are antifragile. Challenges don’t break us; they empower us. The opposite is also true: “When we protect people from risk and discomfort, we deprive them of the necessary adversities to help them grow.”<sup>6</sup>

My point here is not that we should subject LGBTQ+ people to unnecessary risk and pain. Rather, it’s that being in a room with someone who disagrees with us, even about significant matters, isn’t going to hurt us. A traditional sexual ethic is not unsafe—but the posture we hold it with can be.



There are many barriers between the church and LGBTQ+ people, and adopting a progressive position on sex and marriage will not make them suddenly disappear. What's more, it's not the task of the church to upend two-thousand-year-old historic positions so it can appeal to those who find said positions offensive. It is, however, the task of the church to represent Jesus to the world, be ministers of reconciliation, and bear witness to the goodness, beauty, and love of Jesus.

And yet when we hear a statement like this—"Marriage, defined by Scripture, applies only to opposite-sexed biological males and females in lifelong covenantal union"—it's easy to feel discouraged by how exclusive it is. The problem is that the conversation is framed in such a way that it robs the traditional sexual ethic (and a healthy theology of the body, for that matter) of its beauty and context. This is why it feels unloving. Before we go any further, we must recover the beauty of God's created order from underneath the rubble of violent fundamentalism and ignorant progressivism.

## **TRADITIONAL ETHIC**

This is not a comprehensive review of the traditional ethic, as there are several rich theological works exploring this topic.<sup>7</sup> What I'd like to do here instead is unpack what we mean by "traditional ethic" and why there is beauty to be found in it. A corrective is necessary, since the loudest voices defining the traditional ethic have come either from hardhearted, anxious, outraged fundamentalists or from wounded, reactive, revisionist progressives.

Neither group has charitably or accurately captured the beauty and context of the traditional ethic. Despite how harsh



fundamentalists might make it sound, God's created order tells the most beautiful, hopeful, loving story in history. And despite what defensive progressivism might say, God does have a well-defined, thoroughly understandable ethic.

When people discuss sexual ethics, particularly concerning same-sex relationships, the conversation often centers on what the Bible prohibits. This is the wrong place to start. Before we ask whether the Bible forbids same-sex marriage or gender transition, we must ask deeper, more foundational questions: What does Scripture say marriage is? What does Scripture teach about our bodies? For followers of Jesus, boundaries are not about restriction but about revelation: God revealing his design for creation, covenant, and, ultimately, human flourishing.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses issues of sexuality, celibacy, and marriage in the early church. It's important to note what Paul assumes: that sexual intimacy belongs within the covenant of marriage. That assumption is not arbitrary; it reflects a deeply rooted theology of creation, one that sees human sexuality as a gift to be stewarded according to God's intentions.

To understand what God's intentions are, we have to go back to the beginning, in Genesis, where the Bible tells the story of how everything began. Suspend for a moment questions about science and evolution, and you will see God is up to something magnificent here. The creation story in Genesis 1 has a poetic rhythm to it. It also has a central idea that is pivotal for understanding what God is up to: God creates the world by creating unity in diversity.

Read the creation account and you'll find God purposefully pairing things that, on paper, seem so opposite they could not



possibly fit together. But that is the beauty of God's design: unity in diversity. God's power, and his prioritization of unity, means things that don't seem to go together are formed into creation, not chaos.

Imagine creation as a vast, intricate tapestry being woven by a master weaver (God). Each thread has its own color, texture, and place. Some threads are very different, almost opposites, but the weaver pulls them together side by side, weaving contrasts that create a beautiful, unified, and diverse picture.

With this central idea of unity in diversity in mind, we can see a trajectory in the story that is not merely informational; it's not accidental; it is building to something. Creation begins by taking complementary opposites and uniting them:

- ***Light and dark (Genesis 1:3-5).*** Two things that do not naturally coexist but, when united in God's transcendent design, give creation the circadian rhythms necessary to flourish.
- ***Sky and earth (Genesis 1:6-8).*** Above and below. So far apart from one another that we still don't know how far the skies are above the earth. However, when they're brought together, creation is placed within time and space, ripped from the conceptual and rooted in reality.
- ***Land and sea (Genesis 1:9-10).*** The thunderous waves of the ocean could not be more elementally different from the dry dirt of the desert, yet when married in creation they form the boundaries that make life possible. Shorelines become places of transition, provision, and beauty—harbors for life to emerge, ecosystems to thrive, and stories to begin.

- ***Sun and moon (Genesis 1:14-19)***. One blazes with fire and floods the world with light; the other is quiet, reflective, pulling tides in the night. Different though they are, they work in tandem, marking days, seasons, and the passage of time. They speak of order, balance, and a world ruled by faithful light, even in darkness.
- ***Birds and fish (Genesis 1:20-23)***. One soars through skies with feathered wings; the other darts through the depths with scales and fins. Their realms are disparate (air and water, flying and swimming), yet they fill the spaces above and below, proclaiming that even the most unlike belong in the same creation song.

Then we get to the climax of creation:

- ***Male and female (Genesis 1:27)***. This is the pairing to define all pairings. Just like the other contrasts in this chapter, man and woman are not the same. It is the differences between man and woman, not the sameness, that reveal God's priority for unity in diversity.

Ultimately, God values unity in diversity because that is the only way for us to be in relationship with him. Unity in diversity is how our space comes into contact with his space. God is very different from us. He is infinitely wise; we are only occasionally wise. He is always just, good, and true. We have a tendency toward oppression, corruption, and deceit. He is all-powerful, ruling even over nature. We are in control of little, even if we fool ourselves into believing otherwise.

God loving us into existence, we who are so very different from him, exposes his high priority for unity within difference.



We tend to love those who are most like us, make space for people with similar interests, and invite like-minded people to our tables. Our relational networks are more segregated than we often want to admit, The United States, being torn apart by political polarization, bears witness to this. But this is not so with God. He built values of unity in diversity into the very fabric of creation. The union of man and woman is his ongoing testimony of this truth.

### **GOD'S TAPESTRY**

The dark thread next to the light thread isn't a mistake; it makes the light shine brighter.

The blue thread of the sky beside the brown thread of the earth gives shape and dimension.

The thread of the sun and the thread of the moon, the threads of birds and fish—all different, all necessary to complete the design.

And then the master weaver comes to the center of the tapestry: male and female.

These two threads are not the same color or texture. They stand out as distinct and different. Placed together, their difference forms the pattern's heart. Their difference makes the tapestry complete and vibrant. This is no accident. The weaver deliberately created a design where unity comes through diversity, not uniformity. The whole tapestry depends on the interplay of contrasts to reveal the fuller picture of God's glory.

In Genesis 2, this idea gets even clearer. The Bible says, "A man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (v. 24). This "one flesh" union isn't just about physical intimacy; it's about two people becoming united



in a deep, meaningful way that goes beyond emotion or biology. We call this unity marriage.

This union between man and woman is more than a relationship. It's a sacred sign pointing to something greater than itself. Just like the pairing of heaven and earth, marriage shows God's plan to bring unity in diversity.

When a man and a woman come together in marriage, they reflect God's heart for unity, not uniformity. Their relationship becomes a living picture of the union God wants to have with his creation. Marriage, then, isn't a human idea. It's God's idea. And in the Bible, this purposeful relationship always shows a man and a woman coming together in a way that tells the truth about who God is and what he's doing in the world.

N. T. Wright captures this beautifully when he writes, "The man and woman coming together are a symbol of something profoundly true of creation as a whole. Male and female together is itself a signpost pointing to that great complementarity of God's whole creation, of heaven and earth belonging together."<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the Bible does not present marriage as a cure for loneliness, a convenient social arrangement, or even simply a lifelong commitment between two people. It's not about fitting a mold, stepping into adulthood, or the desire for romance. It's not even a divine expectation. The Bible presents marriage as a symbol God embedded in creation to reflect his purposes.

## UPPING THE ANTE

Paul takes this a step further in Ephesians 5, where he draws a breathtaking parallel between human marriage and the relationship between Christ and the church. Husbands are called to



love their wives as Christ loved the church, sacrificially, redemptively, and with a life-giving love. Wives are called to respond to that love with trust and devotion, modeling the church's response to her Lord.

Don't miss this. Marriage is a union intended to proclaim a story, namely, the story of Christ's relentless faithfulness, harrowing pursuit, and self-sacrificial love for us. Marriage is not only a romantic act; it is a missional one. It proclaims fidelity, love, and grace to a world dying from lack of these things. The biblical paradigm for marriage, according to Paul, "refers to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32 ESV).

In the biblical imagination, marriage is not an end in itself. It is a sign pointing to something greater. It is the gospel made visible in flesh and blood. By this logic, marriage has a missional function. It proclaims to the world the staggering love and unending faithfulness of God toward us. In a world where fidelity is scarce and self-sacrifice might seem foolish, marriage understood on Scripture's terms is a glimpse of new creation.

This symbolism continues all the way to the final pages of Scripture. In Revelation, the consummation of history is portrayed not simply as a victory or judgment but as a wedding: "The wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7). The ultimate union is not between two people but between Christ and his redeemed people, a covenant fulfilled in glory. The Bible starts with a marriage in a garden and ends with a marriage in a garden-city (Revelation 21:2-3).

The man and the woman are different, because God and people are different, because heaven and earth are different. But when



man and woman come together in marriage, they embody the unity in diversity used by God to compose creation. This unity is a sign to a deteriorating world that God and humanity will live in perfect harmony. It points to a promise that one day heaven and earth will come together in transcendent matrimony. It is a sermon married couples preach with their lives: Despite how different we are from God, he will go to the farthest lengths to rescue, redeem, and be unified with us.

Christopher West writes, “In creation, God’s mystery of love became a visible reality through the union of the first man and the first woman. In redemption, that same mystery of divine love becomes a visible reality in the unbreakable union of Christ and the church.”<sup>9</sup> Marriage tells a story not just about love between two people, but about the love that made the world and will one day remake it. This is why the church’s theology of the body and its understanding of marriage matter so deeply. Our bodies are not just biological; they are theological. They expose a beautiful order behind all of creation.

In this we see that marriage and our bodies have both form and function. The form of marriage is a one-flesh union of biologically different people in lifelong covenantal relationship, and the form of our bodies is the two biologically different categories of people introduced in Scripture.<sup>10</sup> The function of marriage is to testify to the world of God’s relentless faithfulness and unending love for us, even though we are different from him, and to proclaim that one day he will fully unite heaven and earth, our fundamentally different spaces. The function of our bodies is to testify to his embedded value for unity and diversity.



## **A PARABLE IN FLESH AND BLOOD**

When we repurpose human bodies and marriage for our own purposes, we are not simply expanding the definition of marriage and gender; we are rewriting the story they tell. The creation of humanity as male and female is not a biological afterthought. Men and women are not interchangeable but distinct, and their differences are designed to reflect unity in diversity. The body itself speaks of divine truths, especially in its capacity for union, communion, and fruitfulness. Human bodies, and their covenantal union in marriage, are a sermon God preaches through creation.

While many same-sex couples demonstrate beautiful virtues like love, loyalty, courage, and even sacrificial commitment (some of my favorite love songs were written by Christian lesbian singer Brandi Carlile), Scripture does not define marriage based on emotional or moral quality alone. It defines it in terms of form and function: a covenantal, sexual union between male and female, who together embody the unending love of God and mirror the mystery of divine union.

Of course, this high vision of marriage has often been dishonored, even and especially by heterosexual couples. Divorce, infidelity, casual sex, and the commodification of bodies have marred the sacredness of marriage in countless ways. But failure to live out the ideal does not invalidate the ideal itself. On the contrary, it highlights our need to recover it. The church is not called to adjust its standards to accommodate cultural norms; it is called to lift its eyes to a greater story: one that redeems, restores, and redefines love itself.



In a culture obsessed with autonomy and self-fulfillment, the historic Christian vision of marriage and human bodies offers something different: a sign pointing beyond ourselves, a calling to mutual self-giving rooted in the Creator's design and revealing the Redeemer's love. Marriage is not a social contract. It is a sacred covenant, a parable in flesh and blood of a love that will never let us go. And our bodies are not human meat suits that conceal our true authentic selves; our bodies are exquisitely part of the real us.

As you can see, marriage and human bodies are not peripheral, secondary constructs in Scripture. They carry massive significance. As Laurie Krieg wrote in a recent Instagram post, when a book begins and ends with something (as the Bible does, beginning and ending with a wedding), it's telling you, "That's what this is about." The Bible is not about a sexual romance between two humans. It's about a divine romance between God and his people and the harrowing lengths to which he'll go to find those people when they are lost.

There are worthwhile reasons to safeguard the way Scripture reveals and defines gender, marriage, and sex. But there is also a legitimate tension between how the church has held these beliefs and how it has used them to justify treating our LGBTQ+ neighbors with indignity. In the next two chapters, we will look more closely at these indignities and harms. Holding to a traditional ethic while seeking to love well sometimes feels like an unclimbable mountain.

It's not, I promise.



## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What aspects of the traditional sexual ethic are most challenging to you?
2. What about the traditional sexual ethic is most compelling to you?
3. Why do we sometimes feel a tension between the traditional ethic and loving our LGBTQ+ neighbor?



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