

Glynn Harrison outlines a Christian response to the sexual revolution



AFTER THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

key points

- In less than a generation, the Christian moral vision has seen a profound loss of cultural power.
- We need to get to grips with the ideologies that form the plausibility structures of the new moral order.
- The sexual revolution is not held as a list of facts in the popular imagination - it is held as a story. Arguments alone can't beat this, we have to tell a better story.
- The challenges of the sexual revolution call for a radical re-imagining of the biblical narrative about sex, marriage and flourishing.

In his Rendle Short Lecture of 2001 Andrew Fergusson suggested that Prof Rendle Short, whose life spanned the tumultuous years of the first half of the twentieth century, was one of history's 'men of Issachar'. These were the Israelite chieftains who, in offering strategic support to the future King David in his rise to power, 'understood the times and knew what to do.'¹

I am returning to Andrew's theme because we need to face the reality that, in less than a generation, the Christian moral vision - that human beings flourish when sexual interests are boundaried in life-long covenant made between a man and a woman - has seen a profound loss of cultural power. Moreover, those holding to Christian sexual ethics not only find themselves on the wrong side of popular opinion but allegedly on the 'wrong side of history' too. And so, like the men of Issachar, we need to understand the times we live in, and work out together what we must do.

We need to acknowledge and repent of excluding and judgmental attitudes that have made it hard for some to find a home in our families and our fellowships

Understanding the times

A revolution of ideas

The sexual revolution, like all revolutions, is rooted in ideas. 'If you want to change the world,' said Martin Luther King, 'pick up a pen and write'.

The idea that sits at the heart of this revolution is that traditional Christian morality is bad for you: not only does it hinder human flourishing but it is antithetical to it. According to radical feminist thought, for example, the Christian moral vision diminished women. Tied to a traditional patriarchy

in which the man brought home the bacon and she cooked it, Christian morality spawned a culture that neglected the education of girls, shamed single mothers and closeted lesbians.

Ancient Gnosticism is another big idea at work behind the scenes. Indeed, according to theologian Tom Wright, it is the great 'controlling myth' of our time.² In the Gnostic worldview, the 'outer world' of society and religion, and indeed the outer world of one's own body, are irrelevant and deceptive. Buried beneath layers of cultural and religious repression lies buried your real, inner, private 'self'. So dig deep, liberate the authentic you, and become the you that you want to be.

Queer theory, the other big idea driving forward the sexual revolution, may be considered a variant form of Gnosticism. Drawing on the work of the philosopher Michel Foucault and thinkers such as Judith Butler,³ queer theorists construe gender categories as being mere social constructions, 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 natural, organically embedded norms in which we are expected to walk. These are the outer layers that need to be cast off in the search for authenticity.

These are the ideas – radical feminism, Gnosticism, and Queer theory – that form the plausibility structures of the new moral order and drive forward the revolution's vision of human flourishing. We need to get to grips with it.

A moral cause

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 Haidt may assist us here.⁴

Haidt suggests that when faced with a moral problem, we tend to think intuitively along a limited number of cognitive systems or channels. One such 'gut level' reaction is 'don't cause harm'. Others include our instinctive sense of fairness; the desire to protect the weak; deeply held respect for received wisdom and tradition ('what we have always believed about this'); and a strong sense holding 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 in the relative 'weight' they give to these different gut level responses. Those who are politically on the liberal left, for example, consistently score highly on care/harm and equality/fairness for the individual. Social conservatives, on the other hand, score highly in respect for tradition and their strong sense of community sacredness.

We experience these kinds of 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 animosity. If we want to be like the men of Issachar we need to understand what is going on here.

Those holding to the traditional moral vision must be prepared to demonstrate that their moral concerns are motivated by the same compassion and desire for human flourishing as those on the liberal side. We need to accept that we are often perceived as hard, excluding, lacking compassion. We need to acknowledge and repent of excluding and judgmental attitudes that have made it hard for some to find a home in our families and our fellowships.

And then, with courage and conviction, we must also insist that compassion for the individual must not trump wider social goods that hinge upon the defence of sacred values (such as Christian marriage). In other words, we need to find winsome language for our 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.

Narrative power

Finally, we need to understand that this revolution has narrative power. According to the philosopher Charles Taylor, facts woven together in the form of narrative have additional persuasive power. 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 as a list of facts in the popular imagination – it is held as a story. It's a story about the freeing of the human spirit from the stifling shame of Christian tradition and those at the margins who had the courage to swim against the tide of hatred and prejudice. These stories are narrated, over and over, through sitcoms and romcoms, in documentaries and dramas. 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.

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. Has it delivered the freedom, the equality and the flourishing that *it promised*?

For example, the sexual revolution promised sexual liberation but 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 been in steady decline. How come the sexual revolution, ironically, is delivering less sex? Maybe it's because idols promise more and more but always deliver less and less.

But more importantly it is time to begin to speak up for children. We could spend a lot of time



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discussing the scandal and tragedy of the revolution's pornographication and sexualisation of childhood. But I need to focus on the collapse of marriage: the sexual revolution promised fairness and equality but has helped to heap structural injustices and inequalities on the most vulnerable of all.

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 welfare of children is best served by a culture of strong marriages.

As the sexual revolution got underway in the 1960s and 1970s divorce rates rocketed, and it is still the case that 42% of marriages will end in divorce. Now, by the age of 16, only one half of children will be found living with both their mother and father. And, although studies have to be interpreted carefully, divorce is generally very bad news for children.⁷

Cohabitation is even worse news for children. A smaller percentage of people got married in 2008 than in any year since records began⁸ – cohabitation is the new norm. And yet, according to data from the Marriage Foundation, independent of mothers' age and education, only one quarter of couples who marry and then have children split up. In contrast, over half of those who give birth and then marry split up, and two thirds of those never marrying split up.⁹

The difficulty for the children of these torn relationships is that most will live in lone parent households. We have witnessed the progressive increase of fatherlessness over the period of the sexual revolution and we cannot escape the significant association at population level between fatherlessness, poverty and low education.¹⁰ 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 lives.¹¹

The simple genius of marriage is that it binds men to their responsibilities for the children they help to bring into the world. Single mums do a wonderful job but we cannot remain silent about the ideal that overall kids do best with both a mother and a father in the home. There, I've said it.

Now 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 have these virtues are more likely to get married? We will never completely disentangle this 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 the goods of marriage, especially the way in which it binds men to their

responsibilities for children, and cements cultural expectations that boys and men develop the necessary virtues of commitment and faithfulness.

A better story

Finally, we need to be able 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 for? What is marriage for? What are families for?

There can be no 'going-backery', no return to some bucolic moral paradise that never existed. The challenges of the sexual revolution call for a radical re-imagining of the biblical narrative about sex, marriage and flourishing. This involves a re-imagining of what it means to be human – to be made in the image of God as male and female. It requires the re-imagining of how his covenant love and creative fruitfulness is etched into the shape of our most intimate relationships. It is the story of how, in honouring their solemn vows, married couples become signposts to the mystery of God's life-giving, covenantal love in Christ; and how those who heroically embrace chastity so long as they remain single also bear witness to this greater reality.

We need to speak this vision, and then live it out in holy lives. Speaking out requires a step change in our intellectual engagement with this issue. 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 this moral vision must be re-imagined in our own hearts and lives, in our churches, in the work of pastors and teachers, and youth groups and house groups.

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 so attractive to Pagans – the way they treated women, children, the sexually exploited, slaves and the poor – that by the fourth century AD 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 vision is a story we must be prepared to tell once again, and then to live.

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