

GAY CHRISTIANS?

The Grave Danger Coming Out Poses to Christian Churches

by BRIAN PATRICK MITCHELL



Coming out therefore poses a special danger to Christianity, but not in the way many might think. The greater danger is not from gays openly living the gay lifestyle while still claiming to be Christians. Most such gays will migrate to churches accepting of the gay lifestyle and thus leave other churches undisturbed. The greater danger is from Christians who profess to be both “gay” and chaste—Christians who openly identify themselves as “gay” on account of their attraction to members of their own sex, yet who accept their church’s condemnation of homosexual relations as sinful.

In her new book *Gay and Catholic* (Ave Maria Press, 2014) and in an article in *The American Conservative* entitled “Coming Out Christian: How faithful homosexuals are transforming our churches,” self-styled “gay Christian” Eve Tushnet touts the benefits of coming out for both gays and churches. In the article, she writes that coming out is a matter of

CONFLICT MAKES people uncomfortable, so in mixed company, people watch what they say. Instead of speaking their minds on controversial issues, they trim their opinions to fit those around them—sometimes out of charity, sometimes out of prudence, but often out of cowardice.

Gays count on cowardice when they “come out.” They know that announcing themselves as gay will silence most objections to gayness. The person who comes out dares others to disagree with him on the matter, challenging them to either accept him as gay or make him their enemy. Not surprisingly, the closer one is to someone who comes out, the harder it is to maintain one’s disapproval of homosexuality. Pew Research reports that people who know a lot of gays are twice as likely to support gay marriage as people who know none. Even for many professed Christians, family blood is ultimately thicker than the water of Holy Baptism. Witness Senator Rob Portman’s recent conversion to the cause of gay marriage at the urging of his gay son.

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honesty and integrity—no more “pronoun games,” no more hedging and sudden silence when the conversation turns to romance or visions of one’s future. The coming-out narrative transforms a source of shame and stigma into a freely accepted, simple truth, which no longer excludes one from the ordinary social world. Coming out allows deeper bonds to be formed: not only romantic relationships but deeper friendships, more honest familial ties, and more pointed and relevant relationships with spiritual guides such as confessors and pastors.

Make no mistake: “coming out” does not mean confiding one’s struggle against same-sex attraction in a close friend or pastor; it means openly declaring one’s orientation to effect a fundamental change in one’s church. The “gay Christians” Tushnet quotes say that coming out makes churches more welcoming

and Christ-like; it shifts the focus of pastoral concern away from “the ex-gay narrative” toward assisting gays in simply living with their desires without indulging them; gays can even witness to straights by demonstrating that celibacy is not only possible but required of all single Christians; so instead of the “prosperity gospel” and a “sentimental, Disney view of marriage,” more Christians will learn the lonely, painful way of the Cross.

There is, of course, some truth to this, but there is also a great danger, for openly “gay” Christians present churches with extremely difficult problems of both faith and discipline—problems that have lately tended to undermine the faithfulness of whole communions.

WHAT IS A “GAY CHRISTIAN”?

The first problem is the term “gay Christian,” which can mean either kind of gay—the professed Christian who lives gay or the professed gay who lives Christian. This ambiguity complicates the discourse, causing considerable uncertainty about how each self-styled “gay Christian” sees himself or herself and about what his or her public plea for acceptance might entail for other Christians. Since those who call themselves “gay Christians” differ greatly in what they mean and want, traditional Christians are justified in objecting to the term on the grounds that it is likely to cause misunderstanding and lead people to presume that it approves more than it should.



The ambiguity of “gay Christian” also hints at a more serious problem, one that challenges fundamental Christian beliefs about sin and human nature. Despite their different lifestyles, both kinds of self-styled “gay Christians” see gayness as so much a part of who they are that they have no choice but to admit it and embrace it. One embraces it by indulgence, the other by abstinence, but both believe they can be nothing but “gay,” and this belief separates them from those Christians who suffer same-sex attraction yet do not identify as “gay” and strive instead to live heterosexually as much as possible in the hope of escaping the attraction. The “gay Christian” harbors no such hope, as Tushnet’s diminishment of the “ex-gay narrative” shows. He therefore resigns himself to living with his homosexuality, inviting others to accept it as his personal norm. “I’m gay,” he says, “so stop expecting me to marry.”

Many “gay Christians” are inclined to believe their homosexuality is genetically or otherwise biologically based. Some describe it as “ontological”—inherent in their being as God has made them and therefore nothing to be ashamed of, so long as they do not act on it. They “come out” so as to be themselves. In the language of the postmodern, tribalistic, identity-driven Left, “coming out” makes them more “authentic.” The “gay Christian” Matt Jones, whom Tushnet quotes, writes on his blog:

A central part of my decision to be honest about my sexuality is the desire to foster authenticity. To be closeted usually requires a constant and exhausting self-awareness, a meticulous and intense image-management that can only be maintained through various forms of manipulation, half-truths, and, at times, outright deception.

The impatience expressed here with having to live according to heterosexual norms is remarkably similar to the impatience felt by nineteenth-century European Jews struggling to live by gentile norms after centuries of isolation. The Jewish experience inspired Sigmund Freud’s theory of the trifurcated psyche consisting of the natural, instinctual *id* (who we are deep down); the moral, aspirational *superego* (who we strive to be), and the resulting, mediating *ego* (who we end up being). It has also contributed to the revolt of the postmodern *id* against the constraints of Christian civilization, seen in the Sexual Revolution and in the multicultural/diversity movement. In both, the claim is made that people cannot be expected to live according to Western, Christian, European, American, middle-class, bourgeois, or heterosexual norms, because that’s just not who they are “authentically.”

Therein lies the problem, for the sexual attraction of men for men and of women for women cannot be said

istockphoto. Adam and Eve with Cain and Abel (detail)
by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

by Christians to be in any sense normal or “authentic” without corrupting Christianity’s understanding of human nature. Traditional Christianity has always taken a fundamentally positive view of human nature, believing that God did not make man to sin; that sin is therefore not natural to him but something he introduced on his own; and that, although the first sin made sinning easier by alienating man from God, human nature, even in the fallen world, is still not naturally sinful. The proof of this is the Incarnation, in which the Son’s assumption of human nature demonstrates that nothing naturally human is unworthy of God and that when reunited with God, man, too, can live sinlessly and even divinely, like Christ. Healing is therefore always possible through Christ to those who believe.

LOGOS & TROPÓS

Orthodox Christians sometimes explain the relationship between human nature and human sin in terms of *logos* and *tropos*. Our *logos* is a matter of nature—what we are made and meant by God to become as human beings; our *tropos* is a matter of manner—our way or mode of being, including not just conscious acts but also thoughts, feelings, desires, and the conditions they create. Sexual distinction is a matter of both *logos* and *tropos*, involving both natural differences between the sexes and different ways of behaving consistent with those natural differences. Following Jesus Christ is a matter of *tropos* and the mode of being most consistent with our *logos*, for we are all created to follow Christ. Sin is also a matter of *tropos* but a mode of being always inconsistent with our *logos*, behavior contrary to our nature and endangering our very being.

Sin is therefore not ontological—not *what* we are, but a *way* we are. For this reason, Christians have always insisted that we are not our sins, that we therefore need not sin, and that though we often do sin and therefore deserve to be called sinners, being a Christian means not being a sinner, for a Christian is an imitator of the sinless Christ, a repentant sinner who has “put off the old man with his deeds and put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him who created him” (Col. 3:9–10, cf. Eph. 4:22–23).

The label “Christian” thus identifies neither our nature nor our condition but the ideal toward which we strive. We are born human beings, but we are not born Christians; we only *become* Christians by imitating Christ. Christians have therefore never made a practice of identifying themselves or other Christians by their particular sins. They have never publicly professed themselves to be, for example, “Christian gluttons” on account of their attraction to food. They have always regarded the identities

imposed on us by our sins as characteristic of the old man thrown off when the new man is put on. “And such *were* some of you,” says the Apostle Paul, “but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11).

Heterosexuality is not just the opposite of homosexuality but also the opposite of feminism, for both homosexuality and feminism deny the divinely ordained *logoi* and *tropoi* of the human male and the human female.

It makes no sense, then, for someone to call himself a “gay Christian,” since “gay” and “Christian” are contradictory modes of being. “Gay Christian” makes no more sense than “adulterous Christian.” Such terms rankle Christian ears because no one is being a Christian when he lusts after another man or someone other than his wife.

THE ATTACK ON HETEROSEXUALITY

To relieve homosexuality of its shame, some Christians have taken a different tack. Instead of treating homosexuality as an ontological category, they have borrowed the notion put forward by such unlikely allies as Michel Foucault and Gore Vidal that both homosexuality and heterosexuality are nineteenth-century constructs that fail to reflect the complex reality of human sexuality. “They are recent inventions that are utterly foreign to our faith, inadequate for justifying sexual norms, and antithetical to true philosophical anthropology,” writes Michael W. Hannon in *First Things*.

Decrying what he calls “orientation essentialism” and “heteronormativity,” Hannon has little good and plenty bad to say about heterosexuality. He associates heterosexuality with pride, characterizes it as “nothing but a particular brand of temptation to sin,” and plainly denies that it is the “model norm for the evaluation of sexual deviancy”; instead, he says, our “model norm” as

Christians is Jesus Christ, whom Hannon seems to regard as neither hetero nor homo on account of his being entirely chaste.

Hannon's argument is subtle enough to allow other interpretations. It is also not entirely without foundation in the Christian tradition. There is an essentially anti-sexual strain of thinking in both eastern and western Christianity, expressed elsewhere these days in the argument that homosexuality is not a vice because heterosexuality is not a virtue—both, it is said, are unfortunate results of the Fall that are overcome by Christ, in whom there is “neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28).

For support, advocates turn to the philosophic speculations of a handful of Church Fathers who tend to flatten sexuality into a two-dimensional concern for procreation and concupiscence, consistent with the generally anti-sexual perspective of pagan philosophy. Christians had Scripture and tradition affirming the goodness of marriage, parenthood, and sexual distinction itself (per Gen. 1–2); the philosophers had no such knowledge and held marriage, parenthood, and the female sex in low regard. Their sexuality was therefore mere carnality, which they generally disdained. Gnostic Encratites, dualistic Manichees, mystical Platonists, rational Stoics, and even materialistic Epicureans would all have agreed with the Stoic Diogenes Laertius's saying, “Sexual love is a desire which does not afflict virtuous men.”

This conventional wisdom of the pagan world influenced the speculations of many early Christian monastics. In the third century, a controversy arose between Origenists and anti-Origenists over whether the distinction of sex would persist in the resurrection. The anti-Origenists prevailed, but the impermanence of sexual distinction appeared again centuries later in the thought of St. Maximus the Confessor, who named sex as one of five fundamental “divisions” overcome by Christ. Scholars disagree on what Maximus meant, but some in both the past and the present have taken him quite literally. Before the modern age, Christian anti-sexualism found its plainest expression in the ninth-century Neo-Platonist John Scotus Eriugena, translator of Maximus, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and the Pseudo-Dionysius. In his magnum opus, *Periphyseon* (twice condemned by Rome), Eriugena argued that Christ's transcendence of sex explains why the disciples repeatedly failed to recognize the risen Christ: “For it was not in the bodily sex but simply in man that he rose from the dead.”

Some Christians today are returning to such dubious sayings, seeing that they serve two modern ideological objectives, denying both the distinction of male and female and the difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality. But these denials are impossible to

reconcile with the broader Christian tradition, with its firm and fundamental scriptural basis for the distinction of gender, exalted view of marriage, likening it to Christ and his Church, and many precepts and ordinances urging Christians not to shake off the sex that God has given them (as Maximus seems to say they should) but to imitate God's own distinctly male and female models of incarnate human perfection: Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary.

RIGHT GOVERNANCE OF SEXUALITY

Until the twentieth century, all Christian societies cultivated the sexuality of their citizens in four ways: (1) The sexes were actively differentiated by obvious and obligatory differences in dress and demeanor; (2) the sexes were segregated to protect individuals from sexual temptation, to avoid unnatural competition and strife between the sexes, and, importantly, *to reinforce individual identity as either male or female*; (3) the sexes were ordered in a way consistent with both human nature and divine economy, according to which the man is the head and the woman is the body (1 Cor. 11:3, cf. Eph. 5); and (4) violations of these norms—blurring the distinction between male and female through cross-dressing, effeminacy in men or mannishness in women, usurping male headship, or carnal relations with others of the same sex—were condemned as unnatural and severely sanctioned. Heterosexuality—respect for the divinely ordained distinction between male and female—was the rule.

Christianity's insistence on heterosexuality and condemnation of homosexuality as unnatural in all forms was a major change in the sexual ethics of the ancient world, as Kyle Harper shows in *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Harvard, 2013). Christians can therefore agree with Michael Hannon that homosexuality is not a natural category of human being, but they cannot agree with him that heterosexuality is not our “model norm,” for God himself has made man male and female and also blessed their sexual union.

Human beings are therefore obliged to live heterosexually—as either a man or a woman—distinguishing themselves as either a man or a woman in dress and demeanor and assuming the responsibilities incumbent upon their sex. Some men and women are also blessed with the opportunity and responsibility to express their heterosexuality through conjugal relations, but whether married or unmarried, all men and women are obliged to express their heterosexuality celibately much if not most of the time, just as our Lord did all of the time without ever ceasing to be a man, and as our Lady did all of the time without ceasing to be a woman.

Thus, in Christian understanding, there is a human nature and a human way; and within both the nature and the way, there are two further natures and ways, one male and one female; and within each of these, there are still two more ways, two modes of heterosexuality—celibacy and marriage—and all of these natures and ways are blessed by God. Heterosexuality is therefore not just the opposite of homosexuality but also the opposite of feminism, for both homosexuality and feminism deny the divinely ordained *logoi* and *tropoi* of the human male and the human female.

MERCIFUL INTOLERANCE

With this understanding, the early Christian Church took an approach to dealing with the age-old problem of homosexuality very different from the approach now advocated by “gay Christians.” On one hand, the Church publicly condemned homosexuality in the strongest possible terms, denying that there could ever be such a thing as a homosexual Christian. On the other hand, it offered all Christians the opportunity to confess their sins privately; to receive confidential counsel, encouragement, and forgiveness; and to be reconciled after penance with Christ and his Church.

This biblical and traditional approach to sexuality edifies everyone, especially those afflicted by homosexual passion. Strong public sanctions against sodomy confirm the norm of heterosexuality, reinforcing the distinction between male and female and eliminating any uncertainty as to the proper sexual use of the human body. Intolerance of homosexuality actually strengthens those afflicted by homosexual passion in their struggle against temptation by impressing upon their consciences the enormity of the evil, giving them even more reason to “put off the old man with his deeds.” It teaches them self-control by minimizing opportunities for temptation and making indulgence unthinkable.

It also encourages them to live heterosexually as much as possible. For the young person just beginning to experience same-sex attraction, this means struggling against the attraction, adopting the manners and courses of life appropriate to his sex, directing his romantic attentions toward persons of the opposite sex, and often even eventually marrying, begetting or bearing children, and otherwise living in every way as a normal (yes, normal) man or woman.

In their struggle to live heterosexually, early Christians were not alone. They had spiritual fathers and confessors in whom they could confide and to whom they were accountable. These father-confessors were responsible for administering and also protecting the healing power of the Holy Eucharist by ensuring that those who

partook of it did so worthily—“For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor. 11:27). Exclusion from communion was the ultimate punishment for Christians. Serious sins like sodomy excluded

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the sinner from Communion for many years, during which he was forced to confront the consequences of his sin through the experience of separation from the Body of Christ. Excommunication was thus a severe mercy, presenting the sinner with a plain, palpable choice of good or evil—the Savior or the sin.

For those who so deeply desired the Body and Blood of Christ that they truly repented of their sins through fully humble confessions, the choice of the Savior could be suddenly and wondrously healing—like having one’s brain instantly rewired to erase habitual thought patterns inconsistent with life in Christ. This was not something to expect, but it did and does sometimes happen.

The result of the Church’s merciful intolerance was a society largely free, if not of homosexuality, of homosexual suspicion. Boys and girls could be raised to be men and women, understanding and accepting the requirements of their sex and trusting all others to live accordingly. They could associate freely with members of their own sex without sexual tension developing between them, and they could even form intimate friendships with their own sex without fear of them turning sexual. Men could walk arm in arm and women could exchange kisses without so much as a thought of homosexuality. Persons of the same sex could share houses or apartments without anyone thinking them gay. Friends could allow friends the benefit of any doubt, overlooking the possibility of homosexuality without condoning or excusing it.

Men and women struggling privately against homosexual passions could therefore take part in society without prejudice; they could live up to their ordinations

as men or women even while single; they could even know the joy of raising a family, experience the pleasure of heterosexual intimacy, and be slowly relieved and sometimes even quickly healed of their affliction—but only as long as homosexuality was condemned publicly, homosexual passions were kept not secret but private, and homosexual acts were not tolerated.

THE CHALLENGE OF COMING OUT

Today's "gay Christians" defy this biblical and traditional Christian order when they "come out" and publicly profess their homosexuality, as if the old man were who they really are, as if change were not possible, as if Christ could not heal, as if they could not still marry and have children, and as if others were wrong to expect them to conform to heterosexual norms distinguishing the sexes in so many ways. By coming out, the "gay Christian" testifies to the world that all of these claims are true, when they are all in fact false: Change is possible, Christ can heal, the old man is not who we must be, and people attracted to members of the same sex can and often do marry someone of the opposite sex, raise children, and lead heterosexual lives in every overt way.

The testimony against these truths by publicly identified "gay Christians" is most damaging to the young. Many children go through a phase of infatuation with someone of the same sex, but very few such children get stuck in the phase by indulging the infatuation and

consummating it carnally. Most recognize the infatuation as unnatural and immoral, so they consciously resist it by denial, avoidance, and redirection. It is in this process of resistance and redirection that the heterosexuality of many children is confirmed and secured, but the will of such children to resist is undermined by public acceptance of homosexuality as an immutable aspect of one's identity.

And public acceptance of the immutability of their sexual identity is just what many "gay Christians" seek from other Christians. They have given up on the "ex-gay narrative" and are often not just skeptical but dismissive and even contemptuous of change efforts. To children struggling against same-sex attraction, the public example of "gay Christians" says: "You might be one of us. You might have been born our way. Don't think you can change."

The will of adults to live heterosexually, despite their homosexual passions, is also undermined by the alternative lifestyle proffered by "gay Christians," who tout their chaste-gay narrative as both easier and more honest, more natural in the sense of being more appropriate to their person, and even more beneficial to other Christians. The truth is that even adults who have fully embraced an unchaste gay lifestyle can and do sometimes change enough to live happy heterosexual lives, but the hope of such healing gets short shrift in the chaste-gay narrative. So as more Christians "come out," fewer Christians will attempt change therapy or otherwise endeavor to live

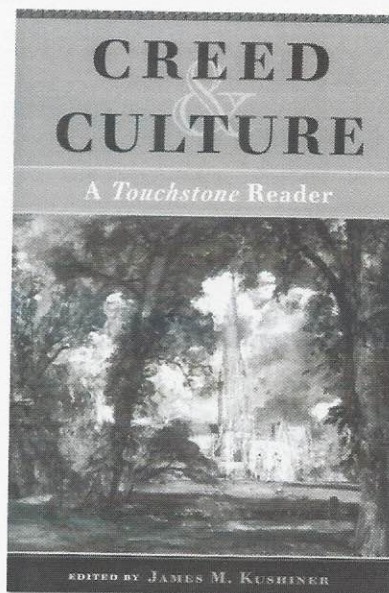
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heterosexually, and more misguided Christians will lose hope and forsake their families to be “true” to themselves, even if it means cursing their children with the knowledge that Daddy or Mommy is gay.

RIGHTFUL DISTANCE

The damage does not end there, however, because in mixed company, people will watch what they say: Christians will self-censor their public and private comments about homosexuality so as not to offend known gays in their midst. That is just as “gay Christians” would have it. That is what they want. They do not want to hear “hurtful” things said about homosexuality. They especially do not want straights to express their revulsion from homosexuality. They don’t want straights to even *feel* revulsion from it. They want exactly the opposite: they want to desensitize straights to homosexuality so that gays and straights can feel comfortable together as if no difference existed between them. Thus the blogger Matt Jones writes:

LGBTQ people are often kept at a distance, which I guess is what makes it so easy for some Christians to fire away with their sniper rifles of “truth-telling.” So long as there is distance, beliefs can remain undisturbed and comfortable.

But I want those Christians to know that I brush legs with them as I slide into the row. I shake their hand or hug them as we pass the peace of Christ. I share the communion cup and broken bread. We are one body.

There is no distance.

In fact, Christians have been told to keep sexual rebels at a distance by no less an authority than the Apostle Paul: “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one, no, not to eat” (1 Cor. 5:11; cf. 1 Cor. 5:1–13; 2 Cor. 6:14–18). The reference here is to Holy Communion, by which Christians are made “one body.” The apostle directs that fornicators be excluded from Communion, not just for the sake of the Church but for their own sake as well—that they may be made to choose between the Savior and their sin. The great fourth-century preacher and patriarch St. John Chrysostom explains:

For it is the part of humanity not to humor the sick in every thing nor to flatter their unseasonable desires. No one so loved him that committed fornication amongst the Corinthians as Paul, who

commandeth to deliver him to Satan; no one so hated him as they that applaud and court him. (Homily 14 on 2 Cor. 7)

But note how Jones characterizes this “tough love” on the part of Christians. Note his expressed desire to disturb and discomfort Christians so as to challenge their beliefs and silence their truth-telling. Note also his expansion of the category of supposed victims of Christian distancing: he faults his fellow Christians for keeping at a distance the whole LGBTQ crowd.

“THINGS WILL GET WEIRD”

We have already seen where this leads. Churches that put no distance between themselves and the world become more and more like the world. Pastors and people unwilling to bear the reproach of the Joneses in their midst are cowed into silence. Sodomy becomes unmentionable. The word itself is forbidden as offensive. The church goes gay-friendly and consequently attracts more gays and fewer families. Accountability slides. The more comfortable gays feel, the bolder they get. The whole LGBTQ crowd finds a home, and those who object are shown the door.

Tushnet as much as promises this will happen in her book. In a final appendix on making churches more welcoming of gays, she first recommends coming out as a “huge way to change the culture.” Then, after a few more recommendations, she asks the question, what if people take a church’s welcome seriously? She ends the book with these words:

If our churches begin to change to welcome gay and same-sex attracted people, the changes won’t stop where the churches might predict they will or want them to. The churches won’t be exactly the same as before, only with more people. The churches themselves will change: new concepts of vocation, new questions, new challenges. Things will get weird. If you welcome someone, be ready for them to change you. That’s part of what love does to a person.

It takes perhaps a generation for a complete moral inversion to take place. You can’t keep what you won’t teach. Older members, taught that heterosexuality is normal and that homosexuality is sinful, will give way in time to younger members, who have never heard homosexuality condemned in church, who instead have been taught by the world to hate the “haters” who condemn it, and who therefore will “think they do God service” when they persecute the faithful for bearing witness against wickedness. ♦