
True Sexual Morality: An Interview with Daniel Heimbach

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Ten years ago Daniel Heimbach, senior professor of Christian Ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, published the book *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis*.¹ In it Heimbach provides erudite research and faithful exposition to help Christians understand the culture in which we live and how God's unchanging word calls us to embrace true sexual morality.

Ten years later, Heimbach's prophetic warnings have come to fruition. True sexual morality is trampled in every corner of our society—including the evangelical church—and the need for Christians to be equipped on matters of sex and sexuality has never been greater. Therefore, it seems appropriate to revisit this book through an interview with its author.

1. David Schrock (DS): For those readers who do not know you, tell us a little bit about yourself and how a nice MK like yourself wound up devoting so much of your academic life to the promiscuous subject of sexual ethics?

Daniel Heimbach (DH): I am an MK (missionary kid) who was born under the Communists in China and raised in the jungles of North Thailand. I did not settle in the United States until the late 1960s at the height of the Sexual Revolution when everyone was rebelling against Judeo-Christian values in the name of free sex. That answers your question well enough, but let me offer two reasons that make sexual ethics so compelling for me.

The first is because I feel a terrible sense of urgency. Our culture and large sections of the institutional church are being flooded with sexual chaos threatening either to completely redefine the faith, or to leave it irreconcilably divided. And sexual moral rebellion is rising in the culture to the point of threatening social survival. The second is because I have a very strong sense of calling from God to address the church and our culture on this issue. Like Jeremiah, God wants me to speak and, if I do not, then so much the worse for my relation to Him.

2. DS: For those who have not read your book but should, please explain in a few words, what your book is about?

DH: The title, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis*, says it all. In that book I take a bold stand affirming there is indeed one true view of sexual morality for all people, which is the one set by our Creator for all time and cultures in the Bible. My book not only explains what God's true standards are, but also examines various ways his view of good sex is being challenged in our culture today.

3. DS: On the first page of your book, you sound the alarm that America's sexual revolution is "the most serious spiritual-moral crisis to arise in the history of Christianity and Western culture." Ten years later, I do not know anyone who would disagree. Is there anything

that you would add or qualify to the magnitude our cultural crisis?

DH: Nothing challenges Christian witness in our culture today more than deeply subversive sexual rebellion. Some institutional Christians now blame the Bible for threatening the faith rather than resist sexual trends in the culture, and our nation is deconstructing institutions without which no society can survive merely to accommodate the private feelings of a few individuals. Sexual ethics is the greatest religious and moral battleground of our day, and if we do not engage with vigor and fidelity, we will lose our right to be heard on anything else.

4. DS: Citing Philip Yancey, you state that the reason why you wrote *True Sexual Morality* was to address the need for Christians to present a persuasive approach to biblical sexuality. Are we doing a better job now addressing the subject than when you wrote your book?

DH: Perhaps a few more evangelicals now are speaking with a little more biblically grounded insight on the culture than before, and here I include Denny Burk, Russell Moore, and Wayne Grudem. But we are not keeping up with the pace of moral degradation in our culture. Other evangelicals have written books on sexual ethics since my book came out but, while repeating what Christians have always affirmed, no one else has engaged the actual questions driving cultural rebellion the way I did in *True Sexual Morality*. While things are getting rapidly worse all around, most evangelicals are side-lined by division. Older evangelicals seem mainly to be ignoring the problem, and younger evangelicals seem mainly to be attracted by accommodationists like David Gushee and Jim Wallis. Sadly both are failing the greatest challenge of our day—older evangelicals because they are ignoring the culture and younger evangelicals because they are accommodating the culture. Hardly anyone in the church comprehends the level of rebellion taking place. Francis Schaeffer once observed that, while evangelicals have the right answers,

most do not know the questions being asked in the culture. I fear that Schaeffer's criticism remains as true for us now as when he made it back almost 40 years ago.

5. DS: What area are Christians most deficient in considering? Where are our blind spots?

DH: The true church always has criticized how the world views sexual ethics, and vice versa. That alone is nothing new. What changes all the time, however, is the focus of criticism taking place. Basic features of biblical sexual morality—such as saving sex for marriage, expressing sex privately, honoring sexual fidelity in public, and disciplining adult appetites for the sake of family stability—were for ages respected in the West whether people were Christian or not. Now all that has evaporated in one generation and most Christians do not yet realize how much has shifted. Does this mean we should go on defense? Not at all! Rather we should be going on offense. Light is never so bright as when penetrating darkness.

6. DS: After ten years, what does your book contribute to the conversation that others still lack? Or are there other books that help continue the conversation?

DH: My book on sexual ethics is very different than any other book on the subject written either before or since. And, for that reason, it stands alone remaining as powerfully relevant now as in 2004. All theological writing falls into either of two categories. It either *compiles*, meaning it attempts only to repeat and review what others have said. Or it *constructs*, meaning it attempts to develop understanding in a way never done before. Theology interprets God's truth and so all was constructed at some time, usually when Christians were forced to examine more closely what the Bible really says about some previously unaddressed question. For example, the word *Trinity* does not appear in the Bible. But theologians discovered God's Trinitarian nature was indeed biblical when some began questioning the deity of Christ. I was forced to do something

like that when writing this book. Never before has the surrounding culture ever challenged the basic nature of sexual ethics the way it is doing today. This challenge forced me to dig more deeply into what God says about sexual ethics than theologians had done before. Now Christians must be cautious with *constructive* theology. We must focus on what the Bible truly reveals and must never forget that when it comes to theology mere newness is no asset by itself. I did not go to and rely on a different source of moral truth outside the Bible, but instead I dug deep into aspects of God's written Word that were always there but had never before been questioned as they are today.

7. DS: Before treating the biblical teaching on sexual morality in your book, you spend a number of chapters exposing something called "sexual paganism." Can you summarize what that term means and how paganism is a primary cause of our country's immorality?

DH: Sexual paganism is where people define the value and nature of God by sex rather than define the value and nature sex by the Living God. It is where people judge the meaning and value of spiritual life by their own sexual feelings rather than judge the meaning and value of sexual feelings by spiritual life of God. In other words, sexual paganism is the diabolical opposite of God's moral order in the area of sex. It takes the truth that sex is spiritual and affects the Power running the cosmos—and turns it upside down and inside out. It calls spiritual life "spiritual death" and calls spiritual death "spiritual life." It calls salvation "sin" and calls sin "salvation." And it sexualizes the incarnation by which God took on flesh to save sinners by reinterpreting sexual arousal as incarnating the presence of Deity. Sexual paganism, which characterized the ancient worlds of Canaan, Egypt, and Babylon, is roaring back into 21st century American culture and has become the anvil on which God's moral order is being deconstructed.

8. DS: Onto the biblical teaching on sexuality, what is most essential for Christians to under-

stand about human sexuality?

DH: The Bible is filled with references to sexual identity, sexual behavior, and sexual relationships and some might think the most important references addressing sexual ethics in the Bible are the prohibitions it contains. But as important as these prohibitions are, I believe the two most important passages in the Bible on sex and sexuality are first where it tells us that "God created man in his own image, . . . male and female he created them" (Gn 1:26–27), and second where God commands us to "be holy, for I am holy (Lv 11:45).

9. DS: If you were preaching a series on biblical sexuality, how would you do it? What biblical passages would you turn to and why? What do Christians most fundamentally need to know about true sexual morality?

DH: It is terribly important for Christians to understand how positively God views the gift of sex, while also understanding that God views good sex differently than fallen men and women. There are negatives in the biblical view of sex of course, but what God prohibits is not arbitrary. Each prohibition protects something very positive and desirable. In other words God views sex so positively he opposes anything messing it up.

10. DS: One of the many ongoing strengths of your book is its strong cultural analysis. Your fourfold taxonomy in chapters 12–15 gives the reader a well-researched survey of sexuality in the West. For those who haven't read your book, can you briefly summarize the four different counterfeit views of sexuality (e.g., romantic sexual morality, playboy sexuality, therapeutic sexuality, and pagan sexuality)?

DH: Western culture has seen the rise of four different counterfeit views—the romantic, playboy, therapeutic, and pagan views—on sexual morality, all of which are competing with the influence biblical sexual morality has had in our culture. In examining these counterfeits, one discovers two interesting things. First we can notice how there is a progression to how seriously each challenges true sexual

morality. The romantic view challenges it least, the playboy view challenges it more, the therapeutic view challenges it even more seriously, and the pagan view challenges it most seriously of all. Second, we can observe how these four counterfeit views have risen in Western history to usurp the influence of biblical standards in that exact same order. All four counterfeits challenge true sexual morality by raising a relative good to the level of absolute good and then using it to redefine sexual ethics. The romantic view absolutizes the relative value of affectionate feelings, the playboy view absolutizes the relative value of physical pleasure, the therapeutic view absolutizes the relative value of psychological fulfillment, and the pagan view absolutizes the relative value of spirituality as a self-defined experience.

11. DS: If you were writing this book in 2014, would you include a fifth counterfeit view of sexuality? If so, what would it be and why?

DH: My short answer is, No. But to explain I will give two reasons. First is because the four-fold taxonomy I use does not impose something foreign on reality in order to explain it but rather describes reality for what it is. And what I describe is not a chain of variations that might grow, but rather exhausts all the variations that can arise. The second reason no more counterfeits can arise is because, having reached the diabolical reverse of God's moral order, there is no way to get worse.

12. DS: In your book, you list sixteen biblical prohibitions that guard moral sex. One of those is "no homosexual sex." You devote three pages to the subject, but given the prominence that homosexuality has taken in our culture and among some Christians, might you have said more on that subject?

DH: Those who follow the world over the Word of God start with viewing sex as an individually experienced sensual event and therefore assume sexual ethics must come from what individuals feel or desire. In other words they view sexual ethics to be a matter of satisfying desires of the flesh rather than keep-

ing them within boundaries set a Divine Creator. I did not say much in particular about the drive in our culture to normalize homosexual desires and behavior because I was addressing something larger and more profound. Everything in my book undermines the homosexual movement, but I do it at a deeper level to give readers insight into not only what is happening but why. The book would have lost focus and power had I delved into particulars for the various sorts of sexual sin people get into after embracing false paradigms. I did not go into detail on how people reject God's prohibition of homosexual sex for the same reason I did not go into detail on how people reject God's prohibitions of adultery, lust or divorce, all of which are stressing our culture as much as homosexuality. There is a place for that but not in a book engaging ideological reasons driving moral rebellion in all areas of sexual behavior. But on that, it might interest you to know that I have just completed an entire book refuting same-sex marriage and am now working on another book that will have a chapter on homosexuality.

13. DS: In your book you write on page 129: "Christians who embrace the idea [of inborn sexual orientation] can no longer hold homosexuals responsible for having same-sex desires; they can no longer insist that must change; and they can no longer say that same-sex behavior is unnatural for everyone. Once the idea of inborn orientation takes hold, Christians start thinking the Bible is out-of-date and cannot be trusted on sex. Instead, they believe the culture is more trustworthy because it understands sex better than scripture does—better even than God himself. Biblical standards condemning homosexual behavior no longer make sense, and Christians sympathetic to inborn orientation end up having to choose between abandoning biblical sexual morality or holding to those standards even though they seem arbitrary and cruel." Can you articulate why the idea of an inborn sexual orientation is so deleterious to a

biblical worldview of sex? What is the greatest concern for Bible-believing Christians who argue for the notion of inborn same-sex attraction?

DH: I say that for two reasons. The first reason is because if sexual passions are trustworthy and should be indulged instead of disciplined, then the whole structure of biblical morality is wrong, not just in one or two places but throughout. Releasing sexual passions from moral restraint deconstructs God's moral order completely. The second reason is because the claim now is being used contrary to reliable evidence in order to justify the massively destructive idea that gender difference makes no difference. If gender difference makes no difference biologically or psychologically, then it makes no difference morally either. The idea cannot be accepted to any degree at all without rejecting God's moral ordering from top to bottom. If this is right, then God is wrong and evil; and if God is right and good, then this particular idea is wrong and evil. There is no middle ground.

14. DS: In your book, you make a strong case that followers of Christ must choose either God's view of sexuality or their own. In fact, you close the book with a sermonic appeal to choose life over sexual sin (358–59). Speaking to pastors, what counsel do you have for heralds of God's word when addressing the topic of sexuality?

DH: You cannot say God is generally right, except when it comes to sex. That cannot be done because there is no neutral ground between the two opposing sides. When it comes to sexual morality, people must either choose restraining sex with God or indulging sex without Him. God either is totally right about sex, or he is totally wrong about sex and everything else as well. Normalizing perverted sexual desire is the most strategic and most powerful weapon in Satan's arsenal.

15. DS: In the last ten years, what cultural trends and trajectories have surprised you? Did you foresee the threat to religious liberty?

DH: Much concerns me very deeply but nothing surprises me. I did anticipate the threat to religious liberty riding in on the wings of sexual moral deconstruction. If you do not believe me, then read Part III in my book. Paul inspired by the Holy Spirit, in the first chapter of Romans, was not simply referring to one of many possible illustrations when he used justifying sexual sin to explain how men and women come to revile God's true morality and to praise the reverse. Sexual sin can be forgiven. But no one can redefine sexual morality without also redefining God and his moral order. Other sins can be rationalized without redefining the moral structure of God's universe. But sex touches the spiritual core of humanity in such a unique way that no one can reject God's ordering of sexual ethics without revolutionizing the whole moral order.

16. DS: In your final chapter you refer to the sociological research of J. D. Unwin. Can you share what his research 'proved,' and why his work is so underappreciated—what Yancey calls "the lost sex study."

DH: The J.D. Unwin study is truly fascinating. It is the only truly comprehensive study ever to be conducted on how sexual ethics relates to the rise and fall of civilizations. The interesting part is that Unwin expected to find that restricting sex to man-woman marriage weakens social cohesion and that loosening sexual restrictions encourages social stability if it does not go too far. But he found the opposite of what he expected. He found that in every case without exception when societies limit sex to man-woman marriage they grow stronger, and when they loosen sexual restrictions they grow weaker and eventually collapse. No one has done further work on this since that time. No one has refuted the overwhelming evidence Unwin uncovered. And no one now talks about it either, which I suppose is because it flies in the face of present cultural desires. But Unwin's study reveals that, on the basis of social science alone, American culture

is losing sexual discipline at a pace no civilization can or ever has survived.

17. DS: Finally, as true sexual morality continues to be rejected and made illegal by our culture, what word of counsel do you have for Christians in general and pastors in particular.

DH: First I would say that Christians in general and pastors in particular should understand and communicate the truth that God's view of sex is amazingly positive. And that, while God forbids various sexual activities, he is not arbitrary or cruel and only is protecting what is best and most desirable. Second I think there is a connection between where Unwin's study suggests we are heading and what the Bible prophesies will occur before Jesus comes back. If so, all Christians need to remember God has not put the church in charge of winning the culture war over sexual ethics but only calls us to be a faithful witness until he returns. I wrote my book, *True Sexual Morality*, to equip Christians to be faithful; God is the One in charge of winning.

ENDNOTES

¹Daniel R. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).