

SEX IN CRISIS

THE NEW SEXUAL REVOLUTION
and the Future of American Politics

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Chapter 2

SOULGASM

WHEN IT COMES TO SEX, observers have routinely gotten the Religious Right wrong. The general consensus has been that right-wing evangelical Christians are anti-sex. They are an uptight and unforgiving bunch who would rather make war than love.

This assessment of evangelical Christianity is thoroughly misleading. Yes, right-wing evangelicals have been bluntly hostile to homosexuality and abortion rights. And religious conservatives have also been tremendously restrictive about adolescent and premarital sex, even as they have regularly admitted the prevalence of both. But the Religious Right is also hugely sex-affirmative with respect to marital sex. Since at least the mid-1970s, evangelical Christians have been pushing the good word that evangelicals have more fun—that godly sex is the most fabulous sex—and that evangelicals respect women. The still pervasive popular notion that evangelical Christians do not like sex, or do not revel in the joys of breathtaking orgasms (within marriage), is nonsense.

Open any Christian sex advice book published within the last several years and you will read comments like this: "Some people have the mistaken notion that God is anti-sex . . . in fact, he's outspokenly pro-sex! He invented it. What an incredible thought! Passionate sex was God's idea."¹ And there is this: "Orgasm is an integral part of God's design for sex."² And in one of the earliest, most admired, and most often recommended evangelical sex advice texts, Clifford and Joyce Penner's *The Gift of Sex* (1981), the emphasis is on "the Bible's loud prosexual message."³ The Religious Right promises that if its rules are followed, magnificent sex can be yours forever.

Writing about sex has been hugely successful for the evangelical movement. Evangelical author Timothy LaHaye, best known for the "Left Behind" series, his science fiction about Armageddon, was ahead of the curve when in 1976 he published, together with his wife Beverly (now head of the right-wing lobby Concerned Women for America), *The Act of Marriage*. In it, the LaHayes describe sex as "*life's most exciting experience*." For a man, "the titanic emotional and physical explosion that culminates the act of marriage for the husband is easily the most exciting experience he ever enjoys, at least on a repeatable basis." The LaHayes did not hesitate to describe the way a wife's vaginal area becomes "very moist" and her labia "swell to two or three times their normal thickness" under the impact of "gentle stroking" by the husband's fingers. The LaHayes declared that, as long as everything was done correctly, "modern research indicates that a woman's orgasmic experience is every bit as titanic as a man's."⁴ They expressed an uncomplicated confidence that evangelical marital sex is the happiest sex, and they assumed that evangelical men naturally cherish their wives.

By the turn of the new century, however, this latter assumption was almost universally understood as outdated. Evangelical

cal sex advice responded with a wholly original analysis of how to promote the joys of marital sex, while recognizing its inevitable discontents as well. The tipping point came in 2000 with the publication of *Every Man's Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time* by Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker. Arterburn and Stoeker's strategic asides about "a jaw-dropping beauty in a thong bikini" or a woman with "long legs in heels, and full breasts crowning a silky-thin, miniskirt sundress" are integral to their new, and surprisingly aggressive, assault *against* masturbation and fantasy.⁵ Arterburn and Stoeker recognize that they could denounce masturbation at the same time they give their male reader something to masturbate about. In this way, the evangelical sex industry can occasionally linger on descriptions of erotic fantasies—the wilder the better—but it douses those fantasies with the ominous warning that they lead directly to sexual dysfunction and marital unhappiness.

Since 2000, the best-selling evangelical writings on sex have been as titillating as the soft-core stuff any adolescent boy used to keep stashed under his mattress (and now keeps bookmarked on his laptop). Evangelical sex advice lures and tempts and arouses—all in the name of Christ. It has done so in order to argue that not only nonmarital sex but also masturbation and fantasy stunt emotional growth, destroy souls, and devastate marriages. This has been its overt message, but to get that message out there as forcefully as possible, evangelical sex experts now engage in their own variation of Christian pornography.

Here is an example from Arterburn and Stoeker's *Every Man's Battle*:

Alex remembers the time he was watching TV with his sister-in-law. The rest of the family was at the mall. "She was lying flat

on her stomach on the floor in front of me, wearing tight shorts, and she'd fallen asleep watching TV. I was on the chair, and I happened to look down and see her upper thigh and a trace of her underwear. I tried to ignore it, but my heart started racing a little, and my eyes kept looking at the back of her upper thigh. It got so exciting that I began to stare and really lust. I had to release it somehow. I masturbated while she slept, right out in the open."

Every Man's Battle offers a template for an entirely new genre in evangelical sex advice, which starts from the premise that all husbands fantasize about the sexiness of women they see around them, both in real life and in everything from cable TV movies to Sunday newspaper insert lingerie ads. In the face of such perpetual temptation, Arterburn and Stoeker propose this simple solution:

To attain sexual purity as we defined it, we must starve our eyes of the bowls of sexual gratification that comes from outside our marriage. When you starve your eyes and eliminate "junk sex" from your life, you'll deeply crave "real food"—your wife.⁶

Every Man's Battle sold more than four hundred thousand copies within two years, and it has gone on to sell many more in the years since.⁷ It quickly spawned an entire series of "Every Man" books as well as audiotapes, workbooks, and other spin-offs (including *Every Woman's Battle*, *Every Young Woman's Battle*, *Every Woman's Desire*, *Every Young Man's Battle*, *Every Man's Marriage*, *Every Heart Restored*, *Preparing Your Daughter for Every Woman's Battle*, *Preparing Your Son for Every Man's Battle*, and so on), which have together sold close to three million copies. Arterburn also found funding to mail complimentary copies of

his antimasturbation guidebooks to twenty thousand male and female soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸

On the surface, the argument is straightforward. Arterburn takes the view that masturbation is a "quagmire."⁹ He describes it as "an implosion of sexual pleasure that focuses a guy further and further into himself." While "loneliness, insecurity, and broken family relationships are often the stepping-stones to masturbation," he concedes, masturbation "just adds to your loneliness": "It's like slaking your parched thirst with salt water." And while presenting himself as someone able to sympathize with a young man "emptying jar after jar of Vaseline," Arterburn reassures readers that God will provide for nocturnal emissions if they only trust God enough. For those who are anxious about their ability to stay the course, he has two different recommendations. First, "if the idea of never masturbating again produces so much anxiety in you that you're compelled to do it just to prove that it is still an option, then . . . just decide to go one day without masturbating. If that one day is all you ever experience without masturbating, then you're better off to have experienced that one day." Arterburn also advises that a young man find a well-respected older man in his church to be his "accountability partner"—"a person who can encourage you in the heat of battle and ask probing questions like, 'What are you feeling when you're most tempted to masturbate?'"¹⁰ In offering suggestions for breaking the habit, Arterburn turns masturbation into a much more dramatic and meaning-filled practice than it might be otherwise, and he turns the challenge of quitting into a test of both faith and manhood.

While some of the "Every Man" books directed at women are designed to help wives whose husbands crave porn or extramarital encounters, others are directed at wives and single women who have active fantasy lives themselves. Here too there are sexy

scenes interspersed with the shame-inducing assertions that fantasizing about anything or anyone other than one's spouse is a recipe for marital disaster.

One excerpt from an interview with "Kelly" that appears in Shannon Ethridge's *Every Woman's Battle: Discovering God's Plan for Sexual and Emotional Fulfillment*, published in 2003, reads:

As a freshman in college, I began dating Sam, an older man who was far more sexually experienced than I was. I fell head over heels in love with him, and within a few months, we were sleeping together. Within a year, we were living together. That was when I stumbled upon his vast array of videos hidden on the top shelf of his closet. I'm embarrassed to say that at the time, I wasn't offended by his pornography collection, but curious. I began watching the videos with him, just to see what was on them. It wasn't long until I was asking to watch particular ones while we were having sex together. I don't understand why, but the ones that really turned me on were the ones that included a threesome (a guy and two girls) or the ones that had just two women together.

Kelly confessed that even after she broke up with Sam, she masturbated to those videos over and over (Sam had allowed her to keep the videos that had been "her favorites"). She subsequently married a Christian man and threw the videos away, but despite claims that "my husband is a good lover," the memories lingered, and "I think about all those old scenes when I'm trying to orgasm just because that is what really seems to do it for me." Kelly, the text goes on to suggest, has definitely "crossed the line when it comes to sexual integrity." Indeed, as the book warns at another point, "*don't cave in* to the idea that it's okay to entertain any inappropriate thought so you can reach orgasm

more quickly. Just because it takes most women approximately five to ten times longer to orgasm as it does men doesn't mean we should just throw caution to the wind and get it over with for the sake of time. . . . Retrain your brain." Over and over, readers are assured that marital sex will be truly spectacular only if their fantasies are completely banished. Ethridge tells women: "Remind yourself frequently: 'This is my husband. Pleasuring him sexually is an act of worship to God.'"¹¹

Meanwhile, however, the new evangelical sex advisers openly admit that they are no saints. Evangelical sex advice-writers discuss in loving detail their own and their brethren's sins and peccadilloes. Evangelical abstinence and antimasturbation guru Arterburn, now chairman of New Life Ministries, the largest Christian counseling network in America, and host of the *New Life Live!* daily radio program broadcast on more than 180 stations nationwide, openly acknowledges he got a girlfriend pregnant while still a teenager. He admits he insisted she have an abortion, and she complied. He reveals that he once had an affair with a married woman after a nasty breakup with another woman, that he had a "promiscuous period," and that he used to get off watching porn. After he was married, he grooved on ogling the bouncing breasts of pretty girls as they jogged along the Pacific Coast Highway—until one day he wrecked his Mercedes 450SL near Malibu while doing so. He makes no secret of the fact that he's been married three times, or that he had premarital sex with his first two wives. Only with Misty, his current wife—a curvaceous beauty nearly twenty years his junior—does Arterburn say he adhered to his own principles of no intercourse until matrimony. Then again, Arterburn concedes that he kept his engagement to Misty as brief as possible.¹²

Fred Stoeker typed out the original manuscript for *Every Man's Battle*, although the final product bears the strong

imprint of Arterburn's distinctive style (already evident in prior Arterburn books like the classic *Addicted to "Love"*). However, it would be an error to underestimate how much Stoeker contributed to the text's success. With a degree in sociology from Stanford (with honors) and a prior career as an investment adviser, Stoeker brought his own considerable insights and experience to the table when he and Arterburn sat down to reinvent the evangelical sex advice movement. Just like his compadre in the evangelical sex business, Stoeker has been quite open about the details of his own wild and crazy sexual history.

Stoeker talks about his former "ruggedly promiscuous lifestyle" and swaggers a bit when he discusses his success with females: "Eventually, I had sex with anyone at any time. After five years in California, I found myself with four 'steady' girlfriends simultaneously. I was sleeping with three of them and was essentially engaged to marry two of them. None knew of the others."¹³

Nor does *Every Woman's Battle* author and Teen Mania Ministries instructor Shannon Ethridge steer clear of discussing her past sexual encounters.¹⁴ Her first sex was at fourteen with a boy of eighteen, and she had sex with quite a few men while a young single woman. She does point out how unhappy she was and how awful it was that she used sex to get men to like her. Nonetheless, Ethridge admits that she racked up rather a long list of men she slept with or pursued during those years before her marriage. Even during the years of her marriage, Ethridge says, she continued to flirt with other men (because of her low self-esteem, she contends). When one of these guys fell in love with her and asked her to leave her husband and run away with him, Ethridge realized that she had gone too far and needed to gain more control over her life—through prayer and worship. When God intervened and told Shannon to move with her husband far

away from Dallas (and temptation) to another town in Texas, she did. Her marriage was saved.¹⁵

Far from being rigid, leading spokespersons for the Religious Right emphasize the movement's recuperative and therapeutic aspects, using their own biographies as evidence. Instead of ejecting the wayward from the fold, the movement welcomes them and even validates them for their prior failings. Evangelical advice-writers clearly revel in telling stories of their prior promiscuities and sinful misdeeds and mistakes. The conversion narratives that have been part of evangelical tradition for centuries have been given a postmodern twist.

Evangelicals incessantly—even obsessively—admit that they are drawn to the very things they say they despise. Fifty percent of evangelical pastors have confessed that they look at Internet porn, while a recent poll conducted among one thousand evangelicals found that "50% of all Christian men and 20% of all Christian women are addicted to pornography"; that "60% of the women who answered the survey confessed having 'significant struggles with lust'; and that "40% admitted to being 'involved in sexual sin' in the past year." The sponsor, ChristiaNet.com, concluded from its findings that "no one is immunized against the vice-grip clutches of sexual addictive behaviors" and that the "people who struggle with the repeated pursuit of sexual gratification include church members, deacons, staff, and yes, even clergy."¹⁶ Along related lines, the opening anecdotes in Marsha Means's *Living with Your Husband's Secret Wars* feature the porn usage and extramarital affairs of pastors, church youth leaders, and ordinary Christians warming the pews on a typical Sunday.¹⁷ Or consider the GodMen conference held in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2006. (GodMen have been called "Promise Keepers with an edge.") One speaker, a former pastor, opened his presentation by mentioning that he picked

up his first prostitute on the way to a Christmas Eve service.¹⁸ The continual self-castigation, among its many functions, also preempts in advance any attempt on the part of critics to engage in the traditional liberal strategy of muckraking exposé of conservative hypocrisy. For there's nothing anymore to expose. The sins have all long since been confessed.

Preemptive (and simultaneously tantalizing) self-criticism of evangelicals is a tactic Arterburn wields with vigor. Arterburn makes a point of documenting how often Christians fail to live up to Christian standards. It is one of the most frequent themes in his texts: "Look at the statistics for the church, friend. Our divorce rates are no different from the world's." And: "We have countless churches filled with countless men encumbered by sexual sin." *Every Man's Battle* is chock-full of tales like these: The youth minister who needs to look at *Playboy* and *Penthouse* "to stimulate him" before he has sex with his wife. The young pastor whose "tears turned to wrenching sobs as he spoke of his bondage to pornography." The adult singles group at church filled with "players"—that is, men and women just looking for sex partners. The youth group full of kids "actually taking drugs, drinking, partying, and having sex." The congregation member who insists he has a "biblical right to sexual fulfillment" so that when his wife doesn't give it to him, he's driven to have an affair. The nationally known pastor who tells an audience of tens of thousands at a Promise Keepers conference about his powerful impulse to masturbate in his car after "a banking transaction with a lovely bank teller."¹⁹

And in yet other books authored by Arterburn, or by Arterburn and Stoeker together, there are scenarios ranging from the banal to the disturbing: a husband who gets off on wearing his wife's lingerie; a father sexually excited by hiding in the dark and peering into a window of his own home to watch a pajama

party hosted by his prepubescent daughter; and a father who joins his son in bed to teach him how to masturbate.²⁰

In short, evangelical sex and marriage experts have concocted their own brand of Christian porn, not least so that we know that they know what they're talking about. That's the implied rationale. The invitations to voyeurism are multiple. Some stories are appalling and meant to repel; others invite direct identification; yet others are clearly boastful. Certainly, the authors' own experience with nonmarital sex and pornography dramatizes the sincerity of their conversion to the righteous path of sacred love within marriage. Yet meanwhile, they—or at least the men—can suggest that the best evangelicals have also been (and presumably still are) studs in bed. At the same time, the surface message of all the autobiographical evangelical writing about sex is precisely the opposite: *Don't try this at home. Don't do what I did.*²¹

ANTIMASTURBATION AND ABSTINENCE guidance is not the only graphically detailed evangelical advice out there. Obsessing over orgasms has also long been an essential ingredient of the evangelical sex advice business. For at least a quarter-century, evangelical sex advice-givers have recognized that every man and woman wants bigger and better orgasms. They know this is as true for their flock as it is for the average forsaken nonbeliever. And so they have turned their attention to techniques for intensifying climax.

God wants His devoted followers to have boundary-dissolving ecstasy each and every time. There is no need to feel unfulfilled and frustrated after sex with a spouse. Evangelicals deserve the very best in sex, and so evangelical experts offer the happy news that holy sex means orgasmic sex. Dozens upon dozens of

evangelical publications rehearse the basic facts of life. *Cosmo* meets the Bible.

Evangelicals Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus provide one of the most popular guides for Christian women and their orgasmic lives: *Intimate Issues* (published, like the “Every Man” series, by WaterBrook Press, an evangelical Christian publishing house based in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and a division of Random House). Coining the term “soulgasm” as the desired result of sex with your husband—incredible orgasms *plus* intense emotional connection with your husband *plus* God’s spiritual presence—Dillow and Pintus describe the experience variously: “Waves of pleasure flow over me; it feels like sliding down a mountain waterfall.” Or: “It’s like having a million tiny pleasure balloons explode inside of me all at once.”²²

Orgasm equity is key to the Dillow and Pintus vision. They are unapologetic in their insistence that Christian women make their own pleasure a priority. They recommend that women “EXERCISE YOUR LOVE MUSCLE. Your PC muscle (pubococcygeal) is your love muscle.” They describe the “SIX SECRETS OF HIGHLY ORGASMIC WIVES,” which include not only “grab your Nikes” (because a well-exercised woman is also a pleasure-primed one) but also “educate yourself” about your own body. Above all, they urge women to “let yourself feel”:

As Christians, we often think that focusing on ourselves is wrong, that we should concentrate on giving, not receiving. But in order to move toward physical orgasm, we must give ourselves permission to dwell on our physical responses and emotional feelings. . . . It is not selfish. . . . There is a fascinating paradox as your selfish inward journey to orgasm and intense

personal excitement become a mutual experience and a marvelous turn-on for your mate.²³

Dillow and Pintus are enormously reassuring in their sensible advice that every woman—like every couple—is unique, and that “there is no ‘right way’ to make love.” So they also stress that while clitoral pleasuring may be the key to orgasm for the majority of women, some women experience their orgasms as centered in the vagina. And they point out that simultaneous orgasm is not a necessary aim; it is perfectly fine for women to come first. Indeed, “some couples find that intercourse is more pleasurable for the women [*sic*] if she has already reached a climax as her genitals are lubricated and engorged.”²⁴

And they go out of their way as well to answer the query “Is intercourse the only ‘proper’ way to have sex?” by asserting that, no, “intercourse is not the *only* ‘proper’ way to have sex,” because “God grants us enormous liberty” and “we are free to enjoy sexual variety.” They recommend to their female readers the following prayer: “*Lord, keep me growing as a godly and sensuous woman. Keep me from worrying about what is normal and let me dwell on what is a successful sexual encounter for me and my husband.*”²⁵ If all goes well, and all lessons are practiced and learned, Dillow and Pintus assure their female readers that this story of “Bethany” might someday be their own story:

It had never occurred to me that I could come more than once. Then I read that this sometimes happened to women as they grew in giving in to their sexuality and in their trust of their husbands. I think reading about it opened the door—and the next time we were making love I experienced wave upon wave of pleasure. As he entered me, I built up to another orgasm. It

wasn't something I tried to make happen, but it was glorious, and my husband felt like "Superman lover."²⁶

Testimonials like these are another crucial component of the evangelical sex industry: true tales from real people who find orgasmic bliss through prayer and devotion—and by flexing their love muscles.

WHEN EVANGELICALS TALK ABOUT SEX, they inhabit a world of religious references that make sense to them. A typical recommendation is: "Try this simple act of foreplay: Pray with her."²⁷ Nor would eyebrows be raised by the answer to the question "*How Do I Shift into Sexual Gear?*: 1. Memorize the first portion of Romans 12:2: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."²⁸

Yet, as the experts suggest over and over again, evangelicals struggle with anxiety about what they are permitted to do with one another. As marriage therapists and clergy counselors Louis and Melissa McBurney put it in their essay, "Christian Sex Rules: A Guide to What's Allowed in the Bedroom," they receive "many, many questions from Christian couples who want to know what is and what is not okay to do sexually."²⁹ Or as Dillow and Pintus note, "Many women we talk with want to be reassured that their sex life is normal."³⁰ Yet "normal" is not always an easy thing to define, even for the true believer. (And certainly doing so has not gotten any easier in the midst of new pressures and challenges wrought by sexual psychopharmacology and Internet pornography.)

There is no consensus among the faithful as to what constitutes good clean sexual fun. To be told that I Corinthians 7:1–5 reveals that "the Bible clearly promotes the value of regular sex-

ual release" is considered pertinent, if perhaps ambivalently received, information.³¹ Being told that the Song of Solomon celebrates oral pleasuring for men and women can be a huge relief for some. A few Christian advice-writers reject the idea that the Song of Solomon offers guidelines for sexual practice, yet many argue otherwise. The LaHayes in their 1976 classic were among the first to suggest that the Song of Solomon, especially verses 2:6 and 8:3, might be translated into tips for genital pleasuring.³² And Joseph Dillow (Linda's husband) dedicated an entire book to the naughtiness of *Solomon on Sex* in 1982.³³

In his book, Dillow offers a close reading of Song of Solomon 4:5: "Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies," and then riffs on Solomon's interest in "his wife's breasts": "They are very curvaceous like the lily. Their beauty creates within his heart a desire to reach out and fondle them as one would a gazelle feeding by a brook. The notion of frolicksomeness suggests sexual playfulness." And "the female genitals are referred to in 5:1 as a 'garden' and in 4:13 as 'shoots.' In both passages, myrrh and frankincense are described as characteristic scents of her 'garden.'"³⁴

Other evangelicals have made similar enthusiastic claims that the Song of Solomon is a detailed account of the sexual foreplay and "total body involvement" enjoyed between King Solomon and his beloved, and that the Song of Solomon describes "passionate lovemaking" and "sexual climax—higher and higher," "ecstasy," "orgasm," and "sexual oneness."³⁵ It all gets pretty steamy in the retelling. As one writer summarized the accumulated wisdom in 2000, "The Song of Solomon . . . is one of the best textbooks for sexual instruction ever printed."³⁶

Another writer assures his male readers: "If you're a husband who wants to be a consummate lover to your wife, learn from Solomon. Once you start understanding the idioms of Solomon's

day, you'll see that he knew exactly how to bring his wife to peaks of sexual ecstasy. Do what he did, and your wife will respond as passionately as his." Never mind that a few pages earlier, the same author concedes that "rich and powerful men like King David and King Solomon had not only a multitude of wives but concubines, as well, to sate their need for status and sexual gratification."³⁷

Not that Song of Solomon is the final word on sexual dos and don'ts. There are a host of thorny issues that continue to challenge evangelical sex writers as they confront what should be deemed proper or improper behavior in bed. For instance, there is the not-inconsequential matter of oral sex. In this regard, Tim Alan Gardner's *Sacred Sex: A Spiritual Celebration of Oneness in Marriage* stands firmly with the naysayers. Gardner informs the faithful that

If you receive your sexual information primarily from the magazine rack at the grocery checkout lane, you'll believe things like "every man loves getting oral sex and every woman loves giving it." In reality, however, studies show that this is not true. A majority of women do not like giving or receiving oral sex, and most men don't find it the most enjoyable way to engage sexually. The reason everybody is talking about it is simply because everyone is talking about it.³⁸

Evangelicals cannot agree about the righteousness of oral sex. Marriage and sex advice author Karin Brown acknowledges that there is considerable unease among Christians over the activity of oral sex, and she admits that often either the man or the woman does not particularly enjoy it or feels forced into it by their partner. She notes that "so many marriages seem to be plagued with disagreement regarding it."³⁹ Yet Brown says she favors the activity, although she is careful to advise that it be used solely for foreplay and not as a substitute for intercourse.

There are also sex toys to puzzle over. Take vibrators. This time Karin Brown heads up the opposition: "I personally see no need for them when we have hands, lips and other great body parts to successfully heighten our intimate sexual encounters."⁴⁰ But Dillow and Pintus demur. They ask that the faithful apply the following test: "To find out if the use of a vibrator is right or wrong, let's apply the three questions. Is the use of a vibrator prohibited by Scripture? Is a vibrator beneficial to lovemaking? Does the use of a vibrator involve anyone else?" Since scripture does not offer commentary on vibrators—rendering it acceptable from a scriptural perspective—Dillow and Pintus move rapidly to questions two and three. On this basis they conclude: "So if a vibrator enhances a couple's lovemaking and is used exclusively for the couple's private enjoyment, then it is permitted."⁴¹

This is the commonsensical view adopted by a number of evangelical writers. Examine scripture and if there is nothing to prohibit a specific activity there, then it ought to be permitted. On this score, evangelicals Melissa McBurney and Louis McBurney emerge as virtual sex libertarians. The McBurneys have concluded, with regard to "oral sex, rear-entry vaginal penetration . . . and mutual masturbation," that since "we find no scriptural injunction against any of these," they are all just fine.⁴²

Evangelical authors have given thumbs-up to all sorts of activities one might not immediately assume to be appropriate evangelical behavior. Sexy lingerie? This has been interpreted as a definite plus, again with reference to the Song of Solomon.⁴³ Anal sex? Hard to imagine? On the contrary, while some evangelicals deem anal sex unhealthy, there is the loving couple Reverend Charles Shedd and his wife, Martha, who have testified that their own sexual experiments have included anal sex, and they have publicly pronounced it enjoyable indeed.⁴⁴ So too do the Reverends Paul and Lori Byerly of the online site

“The Marriage Bed,” which is officially antiporn, feel comfortable recommending both oral and anal sex, as well as a wife masturbating while her husband gets to watch. For the Byerlys, in marriage you can do just about anything. Typical upbeat advice includes enthusiastic endorsement of the “come-hither” move, in which the husband uses his fingers to stimulate his wife’s G-spot—“We think the G-spot should be seen as one more way God gave us to share in the pleasure of sex”—as well as the seemingly neutral observation that just because the Bible says homosexual sex (as well as, they note, homosexual kissing) is wrong does not in any way prove that anal sex is wrong. They also note that spanking can be “arousing” and that bondage can be “very arousing.”⁴⁵

Recently, evangelicals have also begun increasingly to recommend that couples engage in occasional quickies. As Tim Alan Gardner states in *Sacred Sex*:

I like to think of healthy marital sexual encounters in three categories. . . . The first grouping is Fast-Food Sex. This primarily includes “quickies” and those spur-of-the-moment rendezvous that take place without a lot of planning. Frequently, only the husband will have an orgasm (though not always). Fast food is fine, on occasion, but too much of it will leave one or both of you lacking passion and feeling taken for granted just as too many triple cheeseburgers will leave you—well, let’s just say, not healthy.⁴⁶

Gardner’s two other recipes for a healthy marriage are Informal Dining and Five-Star Dining.

Gardner is far from alone. Dillow and Pintus also endorse the quickie, by which “we are talking about the act of sex taking

around three to five minutes.” The quickie, these women assure their presumably female readers, is absolutely “okay with God.”⁴⁷

HOW DO WE EXPLAIN the evangelical advocacy of the quickie? First, there is the worry that with women’s growing equality in the world and growing concern with enhancing women’s orgasm equity, men don’t seem to feel terribly special anymore. Second, there is the much-discussed phenomenon that the supersaturation of the visual landscape with sexualized images—from Internet porn in the home to racy fashions on the street—has been accompanied by a perceived plummet in heterosexual desire. Viewed in this double context, the evangelicals’ obsession with male ego-boosting and the novel attacks against masturbation and fantasy make more sense. And this is also the context in which the quickie—fine for the man, less so (usually) for the woman—should be understood.

The extent to which evangelicals embrace their version of the sexual revolution and the feminist movement is striking. As Shannon Ethridge writes: “I’m thrilled that the women’s liberation movement brought us freedom to vote, get an education, and find satisfaction in careers.”⁴⁸ And Stephen Arterburn clearly understands the necessity of husbands serving their wives, especially the many who work outside the home, by cooking, cleaning, doing the dishes, sharing child care responsibilities, and so forth.⁴⁹ These are the legacies of women’s liberation that the evangelical movement supports 100 percent.

Yet evangelical writers on sex unapologetically contradict themselves. On the one hand, they admonish men that they never have a “biblical right” to demand sexual submission from their wives. They assure wives that they need never engage in

any sexual practice they find degrading or unpleasant. In fact, they urgently remind wives that to accept the biblical injunction to wifely “submission” does not mean mindlessly doing whatever their husbands tell them to do.

On the other hand, the authors of the “Every Man” series, for instance, also recommend that wives be sexually available to their husbands at all times. Women should meet their men’s needs with tenderness and compassion—and, if need be, with those quickies. Even Shannon Ethridge encourages wives to keep their legs shaved and their vaginas douched at all times.⁵⁰ Just in case.

Despite their seeming support for women’s equality at home and in the workplace, moreover, evangelical authors spend a great deal of time repeating what they call “a foundational truth: God created men and women to be different.”⁵¹

That women don’t want sex as often as men is a regular feature in the archives of Christian sex literature. Dr. Neil T. Anderson, founder and president of Freedom in Christ Ministries, tells us that when he conducted a “For Women Only” seminar in the early 1990s, “to my surprise most of the written questions dealt with sex in marriage. If I could synthesize their questions into one, it would be, ‘Do I have to do whatever my husband wants me to do in bed?’”⁵² Tim LaHaye is even more blunt: “The sex drive in a man is almost volcanic in its latent ability to erupt at the slightest provocation.”⁵³ James Dobson, president of Focus on the Family, has said: “Many women stand in amazement at how regularly their husbands desire sexual intercourse.”⁵⁴ More recently, Paul Coughlin, in *No More Christian Nice Guy*, finds it rather irritating that evangelical wives were found—statistically—to be the most sexually satisfied wives in the nation. (He’s invoking those early 1990s National Health and Social Life Survey research findings conducted by the Uni-

versity of Chicago team. Never mind that it was only 32 percent of conservative evangelical wives who always had orgasms during sex with their husbands versus a mere 27 percent among mainline Protestant and Catholic American women; no matter which number is considered, the findings were not exactly a ringing endorsement of the state of American heterosexuality. Yet the difference is still cause for right-wing pride.⁵⁵) But Coughlin is focused on something else. He thinks the untold story is that it’s evangelical *wives* who are not so satisfied. Coughlin complains vociferously about wives who give their husbands—who struggled so hard to preserve their own sexual purity in the midst of a sex-obsessed culture—nothing but the sexual equivalent of “frozen dinners” rather than the “fabulous banquets” they need and deserve. Coughlin says that “sex isn’t the only reason some guys get married (at least it shouldn’t be), but it’s a biggie.” And he regales readers with sad laments of husbands who suffer from being with wives who offer up “I’m-tired-so-hurry-up sex” or “did-I-detect-life? sex”—or even “new-car sex” or “bigger-home sex”—when “*what we really want and need is There’s-No-One-Like-You sex.*”⁵⁶ Coughlin may sound whiny, but he has an audience.⁵⁷

Again emphasizing the idea that women don’t want sex as much as men, after reviewing the results of their survey of 1,400 individuals about the “top five love needs,” evangelical syndicated radio talk-show hosts Dr. Gary and Barbara Rosberg—authors, individually and together, of at least a dozen books, including *Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage* and *Forty Unforgettable Dates with Your Mate*—make related observations. In their advice book on how best to *Divorce-Proof Your Marriage*, the Rosbergs relate that while for both spouses “unconditional love and acceptance” rank as number one, among husbands “sexual intimacy” is number two but does not even make it onto the wives’

top-five list. The Rosbergs elaborate: "Much of a man's masculinity is rooted in his sexuality, a part of his maleness he cannot erase. As most couples discover, men spell intimacy S-E-X." The same cannot be said for the wife: "Wives spell intimacy T-A-L-K. For many women, conversation is the primary way they process thoughts, feelings, ideas, and problems."⁵⁸

The books in the "Every Man" series argue repeatedly that guys use emotions to get sex, while women use sex to get emotions. But the series takes this generic sentiment—so frequently asserted in mainstream culture as well—and amplifies it in wholly new ways. Arterburn's contention is that, put in the most rudimentary terms, if a husband can't do it to his wife every couple of days at least, he *will* stray—at least in his mind, if not with his body.

So what is the self-respecting evangelical wife supposed to do? This is where the quickie comes into play. It is also where some of the more disturbing aspects of evangelical advice come into the picture. For a woman has to be taught to cooperate. She must never ever compare her husband unfavorably to another man. The sin of comparison is as bad as the sin of sexual impurity.⁵⁹ She should wear sexy lingerie, if he wants her to do so.⁶⁰ But she must also give her husband sex whenever and wherever he wants it. For only in this way will her man be reassured. And a reassured husband is a satisfied husband and a satisfied husband is the key to marital bliss.

A central premise of *Every Man's Battle* is that men must learn to "bounce" their eyes. That is, they should practice and learn to look away immediately when confronted with a sexy image in the same way one would immediately yank a hand back from a hot stove. In this way, a guy can learn to "starve" his brain of all improper fantasies, memories, and images—anything and everything that is sexually stimulating that does not involve his

wife. Stoeker and Arterburn recognize that Satan tempts men who will try this—and that the closer a man is to victory, the more Satan will develop ruses and rationalizations. But they express confidence that their step-by-step plan will work. They recommend going "cold turkey." Targeting masturbation alone won't work. The key is to target the eyes and mind. And then, in fact, there will be a huge—as they unabashedly say—"sexual payoff": "With your whole sexual being now focused upon your wife, sex with her will be so transformed that your satisfaction will explode off any known scale."⁶¹

With reference to the husband who decides finally to give up the visual stimulations that fuel his sexual fantasies, Arterburn and Stoeker directly advise wives: "Once he tells you he's going cold turkey, be like a merciful vial of methadone for him. Increase your availability to him sexually, though this may be difficult for you since your husband might have told you some things that repulse you."⁶²

Wives are directly told to have sex with their husbands more often, no matter what it feels like for them. (All in the name of *his* sexual purity.) Having introduced their scientific conclusion that all men need to have their sperm released at least once in any seventy-two-hour cycle, Arterburn and Stoeker approvingly quote the testimony of "Ellen":

In relation to your own husband, understanding the seventy-two-hour cycle can help you keep him satisfied. Ellen said: "His purity is extremely important to me, so I try to meet his needs so that he goes out each day with his cup full. During the earlier years, with much energy going into childcare and with my monthly cycle, it was a lot more difficult for me to do that. There weren't too many 'ideal times' when everything was just right. But that's life, and I did it anyway."

Voice-over intervenes:

“So there’s a place for the quickie. While a long-term diet of drive-by sex is unhealthy, it certainly has a place in defusing the power of the seventy-two-hour temptation cycle. Sometimes you just don’t have the time or energy for the full package, but if you care about his purity, you can find just enough energy to get him by.”⁶³

Evangelical women might be unhappy with their men—or with having sex with their men—but Arterburn and Stoeker argue that it is all for a good and godly cause. Take the case of “Andrea,” again quoted by Arterburn and Stoeker: “Even if I’m tired or don’t feel good, I can appreciate his sexual needs, so I do my part to satisfy him. I have to admit, though, I’ve had times that I felt resentful.”⁶⁴ Nonetheless, trooper that she is, Andrea soldiers on.⁶⁵

AFTER A WHILE, IN SHORT, it begins to sound like the real deep-down taboo—which Arterburn and Stoeker can never openly acknowledge even though it is *the* core basis for their entire enterprise as well as their success—is that many husbands have actually lost desire for their wives. Despite evangelicals’ constant announcements about revved-up men, it is simply not true that women want sex less than their husbands.

Further, what the evangelical advisers suggest is that most men lead lives of quiet desperation. Men far too often feel like losers and chumps. Evangelical authors repeatedly hammer home the awfulness of many American marriages, but especially the misery of masculinity. Men find their lives dull and boring. In James Dobson’s words:

The straight life for a working man . . . is pulling your tired frame out of bed, five days a week, fifty weeks out of the year. It is earning a two-week vacation in August, and choosing a trip that will please the kids. . . . The straight life is coping with head colds and engine tune-ups and crab grass and income-tax forms.⁶⁶

In addition, as another evangelical author notes in passing, “many, many Christian couples are bored silly with their sex lives.”⁶⁷

In this insider’s view of evangelicalism, men are revealed as worrying that they will be exposed as posers or impostors, fakes or failures. Men fear that their jovial, buddy-buddy interactions with other men are merely a sham to cover up a mutual defensiveness and rivalry. Men wish they had a more gorgeous and thrilling or less critical and demanding wife, but they are afraid they don’t deserve one.

The core appeal to men of the new evangelical advice-writing is its seductive promise that they can again *feel like real men*. Conservative evangelicalism holds out the promise of a restored masculinity. It offers men the ideals of self-confidence and strength. It flatters guys with extensive talk about their powerful sex drives. It acknowledges how much men need to have their egos stroked and stoked. And it addresses the supposed “raw power” that comes from holding back on sex.

Evangelicals also taunt men to buck up. They define a “sissy” as someone who cannot eliminate every hint of improper sexual innuendo from his life. As Arterburn and Stoeker insist: “We must choose to be *more* than male. We must choose *manhood*.”⁶⁸ They mock men who still seek out porn. A porn-achieved intimacy is intimacy attained without risk. And only losers need that kind of cheap reassurance. They promise the faithful guy

that he is not a loser because only a loser can't control himself, or has sex with any woman who will sleep with him, or masturbates every time an erotic image assails him.

Some advice-writers seek the transformation of Christian couch potatoes into adventurous, untamed men. In his massively best-selling self-help manifesto *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*, John Eldredge of Ransomed Heart Ministries draws on a combination of stories from scripture and new age and men's movement thinking to challenge the stereotypical view that Christian men ought to be dutiful homebodies. Eldredge has a nightmarish vision of modern man as mortgage-burdened and overstressed, paralyzed at the prospect of taking risks in his personal life. Fathers and sons need to escape the world of work and women—not as a means to abandon those responsibilities, but as a means to revitalize their relationship to them.

Eldredge argues that the modern man has been castrated and feminized by the pressures of his middle-class, suburban existence, citing men's movement spokesman Robert Bly's argument in *Iron John* that "some women want a passive man if they want a man at all; the church wants a tamed man—they are called priests; the university wants a domesticated man—they are called tenure-track people; the corporation wants a . . . sanitized, hairless, shallow man." Eldredge's take is that this is *not* what God wants. In his view, the last thirty years in America have resulted in a "gender confusion never experienced at such a wide level in the history of the world." Eldredge is disgusted that "what we hold up as models of Christian maturity" are "Really Nice Guys." He suggests that "this dedication to niceness is the reason there are so many tired and lonely women, so many fatherless children, and so few men around."⁶⁹ Christian men especially have become bored—and boring—beyond belief.

Like everyone else in this business, Eldredge engages the confessional mode, admitting his own past failings and struggles. He talks about his own marital crises and the moments when he felt his formerly pretty wife had grown plump and unattractive; he refers to his nagging insecurities about his masculinity. He also includes stories about other boys and men anxious about the size of their penises, the high-maintenance challenge of their girlfriends or wives, and the wounding and emasculation that resulted from their fathers' inability to validate them. This technique invites identification. The book moves on to inspire guys to be "dangerous" men, unconstrained and more fully themselves. Women, he advises, should not be turning their husbands and sons into eunuchs—after all, what every woman really, truly wants is a *wild man*. And when the Bible is correctly understood as reflecting the wishes of "a passionate God," then men will be able to remake themselves in this God's image.⁷⁰

Evangelical writers appear torn between the points they ultimately wish to make. They admit the prevalence of dull men and emotionally and sexually unfulfilling marriages, but also say that God made men to be passionate and wild, thrilling to their spouses, confident in themselves. They want to assure men that they really have powerful sexual motors and raging "mustang minds," and yet they also want men to know that they can win the battle against improper lust.⁷¹ They document widespread agony but promise ecstasy. They pay lip service to gender equality, yet instruct wives to be available as sexual receptacles no matter how badly their husbands are treating them or how ineptly their husbands perform in bed—because this is the only way husbands can learn to cherish them.

These contradictions, far from undermining the power of the advice-writers' messages, are central to evangelicalism's ideological effectiveness. The seeming contradictions are in fact the

key to the advice-writers' success, because this is how audiences are stirred up and involved emotionally. Much of the advice literature is reassuring and valuable; without a doubt, for instance, Dillow and Pintus's calm endorsements of regular exercise and self-acceptance can help many women. Similarly, Eldredge's rugged antimaterialism and thoughtful critique of intra-male rivalries could be very beneficial. (At the same time, Dillow, Pintus, and Eldredge have all advanced vicious homophobia.) The good cop-bad cop strategies are also constantly being adapted and updated as the perceived needs for therapeutic self-help escalate under the emotionally bruising impact of daily life in a perpetually insecurity-inducing culture, and even more so as the sexual landscape of America changes. The use of men's movement and new age thinking in Eldredge's *Wild at Heart* is as indicative of the therapeutization of evangelicalism as is the continual absorption of secular sex and marriage self-help innovations in evangelical advice books as well as workshops, conferences, retreats, and associations. But Stephen Arterburn, Fred Stoeker, and Shannon Ethridge have really taken evangelical sex advice in new directions. They rail against porn even as they produce porn. They endorse being Christian as the only good and proper way to be, yet they also document exponential rates of Christian hypocrisy in unprecedented and elaborate detail.

Consider Kevin, who is married with three kids. While working with the youth group at church, he met a beautiful fifteen-year-old girl. "She's a knockout, and looks more like twenty," he said. "Sometimes I'd ask about boys she's known and dated, and we'd joke and laugh a lot. . . . We'd get to talking a little trashy . . . it was exciting. Last week, when my wife and kids were out of town, I gave this girl a ride home. We got to talking dirty

again, and somehow I bet her that she wouldn't pull her pants down for me. She did. I lost my senses, and I drove her to a park and we had sex. I'm in real trouble! She told her parents about it, and they may press rape charges!"⁷²

Is this story supposed to be somehow representative? After a while, it begins to seem so.

What *is* the appeal of reading a story like this? Beyond the fantasy-stimulating elements, its appeal may also be due to the way it taps into the taboo zone of marital misery. Again, beneath the surface buzz, there appears to be the sobering implication that a whole lot of American marriages have gone sexually dead. The Christian pornographers do not hesitate to describe this ravaged landscape almost as graphically as they describe the fantasies they deem inappropriate. These tales of a haunting marital morass resonate in the Bible Belt, but they are tapping into a deep reservoir of apprehension and disquiet in the secular world as well.

To anyone reading its sex and marriage advice literature, the Religious Right's core message to its followers becomes abundantly clear: *you really can have it all*. You can feel virtuously superior to and voyeuristically outraged by sexual minorities and abortion seekers. And you can know that God forgives all your own prior sins, and that He promises you decades of spectacular sex in marriage.

Delving into the messy vicissitudes of marital heterosexuality, however, was by no means how the Religious Right got its start in the business of sexual politics. Back when most Americans were less easily intimidated about their own sex lives, a mere fifteen years ago, the focus of Religious Right activism lay elsewhere. Reinforcing contempt for homosexuals was how the Religious Right made it big in the first place.