



Good Christian Sex: Why Chastity Isn't the Only Option-And Other Things the Bible Says About Sex

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Moving beyond the deep-seated cultural feelings of shame that have long fueled the conflict between Christianity and sex—and the belief that there is only one right and valid way to practice one's sexuality—this renowned University of Chicago pastor uses enlightening personal stories and examples from theology to show how sex is powerful and holy.

For years, Christians have been told to adhere to one singular path when it comes to sex: abstinence and purity. Yet this limited focus ignores the reality that people's sexual and romantic lives differ widely, even among those who consider themselves devout believers. Church leaders have often refused to address the topic—or have preached in ways that are harmful to the emotional and spiritual growth of the faithful in the pews.

Pastor McCleneghan is determined to reshape the issue—and fundamentally transcend this disconnect between sexuality and spirituality that has left many Christians feeling guilty and sinful. Written in her measured, non-judgmental voice, *Good Christian Sex* combines humorous personal anecdotes with theological research to transform how Christians think and talk about this basic human need, offering a new understanding that reconciles human love and religious faith.

Breaking with outdated conventions, McCleneghan explains how the Bible and Christian tradition inform our beliefs about desire, pleasure, nudity, fidelity, premarital sex, and the variety of sexual practices, and encourages Christians to talk about their bodies, their sensuality, and their longings in a frank, positive, and realistic way. Warm, insightful, and honest, *Good Christian Sex* is a message of hope, that at last lifts the veil of shame felt by many religious people.

Good Christian Sex: Why Chastity Isn't the Only Option-And Other Things the Bible Says About Sex Details

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From Reader Review Good Christian Sex: Why Chastity Isn't the Only Option-And Other Things the Bible Says About Sex for online ebook

Brian says

This is a heretics look at scripture. This book is neither Christian nor theologically sound. Eisegesis is when you take scripture and assign your own agenda and feelings to the interpretation of it, and this book has many examples of that. Don't bother, actual Christians, with this book. It's complete and utter garbage.

Robert D. Cornwall says

Sex is generally something Christians don't talk about, at least not very often, especially among my generation of Christians who remain relatively traditional in their sexual ethics. We're not as traditional as our parents, but even though there was liberation in the 1960s, by the time I came of age in the mid 1970s, at least in my hometown, we had returned to "normalcy." Sex was something that some people engaged in but good Christians (in my circles) tried to put off till marriage (heterosexual marriage, of course). While, even good Christians pushed the boundaries, we tried to refrain from going all the way (intercourse). Things have changed over the past forty years, even in Christian circles.

Bromleigh McCleneghan, the author of "Good Christian Sex" is of a different generation than me. I'm going to guess she's a millennial, which would mean her parents are probably of similar age to me. Her experiences and understandings of things represent that change of generations, especially when it comes to sex outside of marriage. That of course, requires some discussion of what we mean by sex! This book is an attempt to explore this question for Christians who wonder if, as the subtitle suggests, chastity is the only option. McCleneghan, who is an ordained minister, and the daughter of a United Methodist pastor, doesn't believe so, and she makes a good case for her position.

I found the book to be fascinating and enlightening and even a bit frustrating. The frustration is of my own doing. I simply found myself trying to bridge the gap between her experience and my own, and that's not just generational, it also stems from being in different camps. In the end, however, while I struggled with parts of the book, especially the role that alcohol seems to play in the conversation, I think we're at a healthier place today than yesterday.

I should also note that I've been married for 33 years, and so dating my history is nearly ancient! Nonetheless, I'm deeply interested in the topic. I am, after all, a pastor. I minister to people who are single and dating and wondering what is appropriate behavior. I've also recently written my own book on marriage and the Bible - Marriage in Interesting Times: A Participatory Study Guide. In many ways, I wish I had read this book before writing my own. Nonetheless, I believe that these two books can serve to open an important conversation about sex, intimacy, commitment, and marriage.

The book is part memoir and part word of wisdom. McCleneghan shares pretty openly about her own experiences, including her first sexual awakening as a young teen and her first full sexual experience as a college student, and continues on through her journey toward marriage and commitment to one partner.

The book is premised on the idea that pleasure is good and a gift of God. There are, of course, appropriate and inappropriate ways of experiencing pleasure. With that as a foundation, she invites to take a journey from first experiences of pleasure (often self-stimulation) and awakenings of desire, through first kisses and sexual experiences. She raises an important point in the book about definitions of sex and misinformation regarding whether oral and anal sex are really sex. Yes, the book is frank, and that is good.

She speaks of playing fair, the role of sex as a single person, a chapter on vulnerability and one intimacy -- both are important chapters. She speaks of history, and for many younger adult Christians history with exes might be a different than it was for my generation (perhaps). The final two chapters provide important capstones. Chapter eight speaks of fidelity and what that means for Christians. Fidelity doesn't mean one never has more than one partner, but for most people eventually there will be a decision to be in partnership with just one person, so as to make a life. Usually that involves marriage (and for same-sex couples that is a hard won right in our country). Chapter nine is a necessary one because relationships don't always work out. So the question is, does one stay or go if the relationship begins to falter?

We are sexual beings. The question is, how do we live as sexual beings as Christians? What does the Bible say and what guidance does theology provide? To what extent does love connect with sex and sex with love. The author notes that they are not one and the same, but they are often intertwined. Finding the right path is not easy, but Bromleigh McCleneghan offers us a foundation for having this conversation. For that we can be thankful, even if the reader is from a different generation with differing expectations. (I will say more in a review to be posted on my blog).

Kathy says

I'm surprised this book has so many bad reviews. Obviously, the people who chose to read it already had a motive - to read it in order to give it a bad review, so they can reinforce their own religious beliefs.

I chose to read this book because of emerging out of years of marriage and now being single again. How do I navigate my sexuality as a Christian?

What a breath of fresh air. I thoroughly enjoyed this book. The author lives and breathes the love of God and has chosen to embrace her sexuality as a pastor! I love it! She's not ashamed of who she was and is - she's candid and real, like we all need to be but often aren't and hide ourselves from the world, especially the church. This book resonates with a deep part of myself that I've denied. I'm a very sexual woman and have battled to reconcile my faith with who I am. I also thrive on relationships like she does. I loved reading about her adventures in dating, but most of all I loved the gentle way in which she revealed what she believes God thinks of sex - how powerful and sacred it is, how enjoying safe and loving sex makes us better and more loving and more vulnerable people. How offering ourselves in lovemaking to another person is actually an act of courage, faith and vulnerability, not a disgusting act of sin and evil. God created sex and he made it beautiful. Religion has put it into a very narrow little box. What clinched it for me is that often people stick to all the rules and get married and it still doesn't work out - that's what happened to me. That sometimes it's wise to get to know a person sexually first before being able to make that deep and lifelong commitment. I also resonated with how adultery is very different to sex before marriage because it ultimately wounds another human being. She described lust in such a good way as not following a sexual desire but actually looking to another person to fill a void in one's life that only God can fill. It makes so much sense! It definitely goes against my upbringing - in evangelical, fundamentalist Christianity, but the truths gently presented in this book have changed my thinking and opened my eyes to what the Bible is really saying. This

book isn't a theological book, it's actually more poetic. At times, I found it a little too poetic to understand, but I enjoyed the deep and philosophical message behind it. I just wish it could've been longer. :)

Leigh Kramer says

"Most of us want to love and be loved, to find relationships in which we can be ourselves and also experience the thrill of desire...As a pastor, as a Christian, I hope the simple acknowledgment that there may be more than one acceptable- holy and just- way to live as sexual beings is a blessing an invitation to those who have been taught that God's way is singular and exclusive."

I am so grateful McCleneghan decided to write this book. I appreciate her care with language, definitions, and applications as she lays out her theology, particularly the chapters on desire and singleness. I wish this book had been around 15 years ago! I would have framed some of my experiences- and lack thereof- in such a different light. The last few years my thinking has evolved toward much of what McCleneghan lays out but I couldn't have explained why. There is so much I want to say about how liberated and affirmed I feel after reading this. McCleneghan makes space for us to go beyond purity culture and examine how we truly respect and love our potential romantic partners before and/or after marriage. This isn't anything I've seen discussed before in church but it's the discussion I've longed for, especially in my "advanced" single state. I'm sure there are plenty who will question her approach but I for one find it to be a refreshing call for grace and freedom. It is a call to lay down any shame. It is a call for joy and self-acceptance. It is beautiful.

Disclosure: I received an ARC from HarperOne in exchange for an honest review.

Carol Merritt says

I was cynical of any book with "sex" and "Christian" in the same title. I've read them before and knew the formula--dish out mortal shame, add fanciful gender stereotypes, and mix in some unrealistic puritanical expectations. But Bromleigh McCleneghan defied my worries with Good Christian Sex and left me with a faithful celebration of intimacy and pleasure. From a first sexual encounter to decades of marriage, McCleneghan's wisdom guides us through the nature of love.

Brooks Robinson says

I found this book difficult to rate, but ultimately had to settle with it being an "ok" text. First the pro's: I found this book to be humorous at times, it makes some important distinctions, and raises important questions. Some important distinctions and questions that were raised in the book: what is sex in the first place (the author's respondents could not agree); just because you have/had sex within marriage, does not make it a just or a loving sexual experience; the author also raises contextual concerns regarding Scripture/tradition that need to be unpacked and explored; and the author hopes to connect with our experiences today. For these pro's, it makes for a good conversation partner with more traditional/conservative texts in sexual ethics.

However, there were a number of concerns not resolved, or not adequately defined, that make this book only "ok." For example, the author raises the question I noted above: what is sex in the first place? A question

raised toward the beginning of the book and not really sorted out (beyond it being about intimacy and vulnerability). Without clarity here, it is unclear what the author actually means by sex (except when distinctions such as oral, vaginal, etc. are made). Is laying down next to your partner naked what the author intends to mean by sex, as one of the respondents said, or is all of what the respondents said considered sex? We are led to believe so....but suppose one's experience of vulnerability and intimacy is laying next to a person fully clothed, would this count as sex? Or does the author specifically have something in mind? This stems from the methodological problem of the book, which favors subjective experiences, and these make for a poor normative ethic without further abstractions (whose experiences? hers? Clearly not, since she makes distinctions that her own experience is not the experiences of others; thus how do we determine what is "good" christian sex in the first place?). This is seen in her play with the conservative sexual ethics we are led to believe exist (no citations sort of some personal remarks made a friend or two---but this isn't the whole story see Dennis Hollinger and Beth Felker Jones on this topic), if it is based off of experience there is no reason to take the author's criticisms of conservative sexual ethics seriously if one's experiences align more properly with the conservative sexual ethic. The conversation is over if you don't have the experience of being a white, middle class woman, who is a main-line Protestant.

This favoring of experiences ultimately renders her distinctions and the balancing between pleasure (a pre-moral good) with other goods, the dual love commandments, and the just relational approach unworkable. For example, without further clarity about what is required in the dual love commands (what does it mean to "love" in this command? What is required to act out this love command?), and how to properly assess the ordering of goods the author briefly mentions, the subjective experience of the agent dictates the parameters through which one understands greater goods and how one interprets the commands to love God and others. For example, the author assumes that we should dispense with certain biblical teachings because they don't align with our contemporary context....but how does the author derive an ought from an is in this case (i.e. what we *ought* to do from what *is* the case in experience)? How does the author know what to dispense with and what not to dispense with in Scripture? Further, the just relational approach (while I can agree with some of its outcomes), coupled with experience, lacks teeth as an ethical approach. I can think of a number of ways in which I can satisfy the author's four ethical points and yet go into strange sexual directions... (but maybe the author is okay with these strange sexual directions?) Again, without adding teeth and clarity to the love commands and how to rate various goods, it is ultimately left up to the experiences of the agent. It is also unclear how the author holds together the need to exegete Scripture, in order to dispense with the traditional and "simplistic" interpretations, and use a biblical ethic where the author does, for example, the quoting of the dual love command without any explanatory work the author sorta of does elsewhere. Also, why does the author not quote Jesus in Matthew 19:4-5 in the simplistic fashion of the love commands? Her exegesis is also not entirely clear either (I can cut some leeway here since it is a pop-level text...but the author did start to go down this path). Finally, marriage plays a minor role in this book where it should play a greater role, given how the author is trying to recapture sexual ethics which has traditionally been understood as finding meaning within marriage. We must have a meaning of marriage if it has been traditionally understood to be the only place where "good Christian sex" can actually happen.

Jonathan Gilbert says

Why would anyone want to read this heresy? It violates 1 Corinthians 6 pretty much the whole chapter to begin with. The Ten Commandments thou shall not commit adultery which is defined as sleeping with another not your spouse. But I will give her credit it matches up to revelation 10:10. Other than that it's heresy. OH and if you don't know revelation 10:10 I recommend opening a bible and reading it. I will be praying for all who agree with this book that their eyes be open to the true word of God.

Dave says

OK. As soon as some see “Why Chastity Isn’t the Only Option,” they will stop reading and dismiss this book. That will be their loss. This is an interesting, challenging, thought provoking book. At the same time, it is in many ways very traditional.

There is a lot of ground covered in these pages. We explore the connection between our bodies, soul and spirit. We look at romance novels, the “Disneyfication of our cultures ideas about love,” chemistry, desire, vulnerability, celibacy, knowing God, and social conformity. We discuss Harry Potter, Plato, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Jerome and Carol King.

Lest you think the author is promoting meaningless promiscuous hook-ups, or “cheating,” let me first mention Chapter 8: Be Faithful. This section is all about fidelity. We do look at some erroneous ideas concerning fidelity. Especially those shoved on us by religion. Ms. McCleneghan states, similar to what I said in my “Tribbles” article, that there is a difference between lust and “appreciating someone’s God-given hotness.” (That’s a great phrase!) We are sensual beings, and that is not in opposition to fidelity. We look at what fidelity is not, as well as what it is.

The 1st topic after the introduction is masturbation, or as Bromleigh likes to call it, “self-stimulation.” Despite the cultural baggage, our author states that it’s “normal to touch your sex organs for pleasure.” Here we’re told that such activity is a “pre-moral good,” and “a gift from God.” We have addressed the oft misused Biblical story of Onan, as found in the 38th chapter of Genesis. There’s also a good quote from Caitlin Moran about masturbation being a perfect hobby: “It doesn’t cost anything, I don’t have to leave the house, and it isn’t making me fat.”

Chapter 2 talks about desire, and how desire is “love trying to happen.”

The Bible’s “Song of Solomon” enters here. When we stop jumping through hoops trying to pass that writing off as a metaphor of God and The Church, we can see it is a very, very racy love story. Here’s where probably the most controversial premise of this book is stated as “Some Christians like to claim that all sexual intimacy outside of marriage will necessarily feel cheap and damaging, but many of us know that that’s simply not true.”

So there’s the main premise that’s stated on the cover. Chastity isn’t the only option outside of marriage. Here I have to interject.

Many of us had grandparents who told our parents to wait to have sex until after they were married, even though they themselves hadn’t waited. Then many of us had parents who told us to wait, even though they didn’t. Then many of us told our children to wait, even though we didn’t. And many of our children will tell their kids to wait, even though they didn’t. It’s like some false standard we feel bound to keep passing on, even though we know it’s not usually the norm. What we need is good sex education where abstinence is an option, but not a hypocritical mandate.

Now back to the book.

“Jesus came that we might have life, even pleasure, and have it abundantly (John 10:10)”

Chapter 3 gets into ethics, and why it’s not good to keep “banging everyone we possibly can from the moment puberty starts.”

That “sexual sin is less about particular acts...than the way partners treat each other; sexual sin is about a lack of mutuality, reciprocity, and love.” We also look at some of the differences between the teachings of mainline Protestantism, and the fundamentalist evangelical religious right that I was a part of. (There are many “Christianities.”) There’s some great discussion of the supposed “clear and knowable will of God,” and we look at the books of Exodus and Luke in regards to that.

The fourth chapter talks about, among other things, being single. “God is not a jerk” is a great quote from

this section. We're also told "If celibacy starts to stand in the way of abundant life for singles, they can rightly let it go. Straight, gay, bi, trans, intersex: we are beloved."

"Naked" is the title of chapter 5, and tells us a lot about being real and vulnerable. As in chapter 1, there's also some sexist fundamental assumptions we need to discard. On the heels of vulnerability, the sixth chapter speaks of Intimacy. "Through sex we can practice attention, invitation, hospitality, and the means of grace." In chapter 7 we look at how to deal with our sexual history, and that "there's no such thing as a perfect life lived with no hard lessons." (Chapter 8 we covered 1st.) The 9th chapter is about the theology of leaving and staying. Some relationships last. Some don't. Sometimes you need to leave. And not just for "infidelity." McCleneghan closes the book with "The Nature of Love." God is love. Love is God. "Sex marks us; love changes us. So does God." A great quote here is "I do wish...that religious people, if they must speak of sex, would cease and desist in the propagation of terrible theology and bigotry."

I've barely skimmed the surface of the material here. I do have one small complaint. It's one I've had with other books. The title. I hate the title. And that's not because I can't say it without hearing it in the voice of Dr. Ruth. Maybe (as is some other cases) it was the publisher's mandate. Of course, a small matter.

I fear that some who may need this the most will resist reading it. There are many others who will find great hope in these pages. I don't know that I agree with everything here, but that's no big deal. And any book that kindly speaks of the great Anne Lamott has already gained some degree of my approval.

Lee Hull says

Good Christian Sex provides a voice and a witness that has been sorely lacking in books about sexuality and faith. With her characteristically charming writing style (she's brilliant, engaging, and downright funny), Bromleigh McCleneghan invites the reader into a thoughtful conversation that goes beyond do's and don'ts to the conviction that our bodies and our relationships can be a means of grace through which we come to know God's love.

Joshua says

Most Christian books about sex say the same thing: don't do it, unless you're straight and married. Obviously this is not the reality of our lives (for nearly all of us,) so this pronouncement is less than helpful.

McCleneghan argues for a sexual ethic that does not necessarily adhere to the unrealistic one mentioned above. She does not prescribe an "anything goes" ethic, however. Knowing that sex is, in the words of Frederick Buechner, "like nitroglycerin, it can be used either to blow up bridges or heal hearts,"

McCleneghan advocates for faithfulness and mutuality in the context of any kind of relationship. This book is perfect for young adults who have divorced their spiritual life from their sexual one - due to the unrealistic expectations of purity culture. She makes a convincing case that human sexuality should not be thought of as something apart from our spiritual life. A well-written book that will appeal to general audiences.

Rebeckah Vernon says

The author of this book should repent! There is no need to re-evaluate scripture that has been easily understood for thousands of years. This "pastor" is leading many onto error and it's shameful! The rhetoric of this book should, in no way, be linked to Christianity. If I could rate it less than one star, I would. While sex

may be a beautiful gift, it is for the marriage bed! I pray for the blind who are being led by the blind, and my soul is grieved by the other "pastors" who are endorsing this book. A general rule when reading Christian literature: If it doesn't line up with the inherent and uncompromising Word of God, it's garbage.

Martha says

McCleneghan uses her own admittedly privileged experiences as a conversation partner with modern scholars, voices from the Christian tradition, and scripture as she explores pleasure, desire, ethics, waiting, vulnerability, intimacy, fidelity, and the past we carry with us. By making herself vulnerable, she invites readers to lower their defenses. Her personal stories are matter-of-fact without feeling exhibitionist, one of the challenges of writing about sex. She writes about God as the deity well-known to progressive Christians but also intuited by pragmatic believers at many points on the theological spectrum. Somehow there has to be more to the complicated feelings of love and desire than a list of rules; if we reject old-school norms that advantaged men and straight people, we need an ethic for this time and a way to hold ourselves accountable.

Her writing voice is intelligent, pragmatic, humorous, and authentic. She lands in a place that, I believe, makes Good Christian Sense.

McCleneghan is getting pushback from the conservative wing of the mainline church for being forthright. That's exactly what I love about her writing, even in the passages where I disagree with her conclusions. This is a great book for people who live in the real world, where pastors most often marry couples who already live tighter, where parents want to guide their teenaged and 20-something offspring, but don't want to be the hypocrites who say, "Do as I say but not as I did." This is a great book for anyone trying to put words on a responsible sexual ethic for the 21st century, when we reach physical maturity early and marry late. This is a great book for young people who are trying to figure out how to be real, how to be kind, how to be loving and lovable and loved. I highly recommend it.

Katherine Pershey says

In *Good Christian Sex*, Bromleigh McCleneghan might surprise you. She might even offend you. But she will never pander, and she will never condescend. She's like an uncommonly wise, witty, and faithful big sister, telling you just enough of her own story to help you figure out the contours of your own. I don't agree with everything she writes, but I am profoundly grateful for the framework she offers. I can't imagine a more liberating invitation for Christians to receive the good and gracious gift of sexuality.

B says

This book is teaching people that sex is a not a sacred, binding, lifelong, intimate gift from God to a monogamous man & woman (if you are truly following what the Bible affirms multiple times). The book twists scripture to help justify promiscuity and casual intercourse. You can call the people who don't accept heresy trolls all you want, but I'd rather be a "troll" to false teachings than a lemming to them.

Alina Borger says

McCleneghan argues that just, vulnerable, intimate, honest, pleasurable sex is good Christian sex--and that marriage is not a prerequisite to that kind of sex.

That may not *sound* revolutionary, but it totally is for my faith tradition. Re-imagining my own stories & experiences through these lenses has created a well of peace and acceptance so vast that the only place it could come from is God.
