

How do evangelical interpretations of homosexuality shape engagement with contemporary culture?

Introduction

Evangelical interpretations of homosexuality have become one of the most defining and contested aspects of the movement's engagement with contemporary culture. While evangelicals have historically emphasised the authority of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV), personal conversion (John 3:3, NIV), and moral transformation (1 Cor. 6:18–20, NIV), the rapid cultural shift toward LGBTQ+ inclusion has placed evangelical sexual principles under intense scrutiny. For many evangelicals, debates over homosexuality are not merely ethical disagreements but touch the core of theological anthropology (Gen. 1:27, NIV), biblical authority, and Christian discipleship (Rom. 12:1–2, NIV). As a result, interpretations of homosexuality have become a symbolic battleground through which evangelicals negotiate identity, cultural authority, and public witness (Gagnon, 2002, Burk 2010, House and Moslener, 2023).

Drawing on the featured discourse, the essay aims to exemplify how hermeneutics, moral judgment, and cultural formation interact to produce a distinctive evangelical position, at odds with contemporary culture. This essay argues that evangelical interpretations of homosexuality shape cultural engagement in three interrelated ways: First, by reinforcing theology and doctrine rooted in hermeneutical commitments; second, by intensifying political and cultural conflict through moral boundary-setting; and third, by exposing internal tensions shaped by purity-culture frameworks.

Context: Evangelical commitments and the symbolic weight of sexuality

As Western societies have become more affirming of sexual diversity, evangelicals have increasingly interpreted these evolutions as challenges to biblical fidelity. Evangelicalism's historical commitments to biblical authority (Ps. 119:105, NIV), personal conversion (John 3:3, NIV), and moral transformation (1 Cor. 6:18–20, NIV) have long shaped its approach to sexuality. Thus, creating lifestyle choices that are made visible as symbols, distinctively different from secular thinking. For example, Burk (2010) argues that evangelical commitment to Scripture requires a clear moral stance on homosexuality, insisting that the New Testament's prohibitions (1 Tim. 1:10, NIV) are unambiguous and that revising traditional interpretations represents capitulation to cultural pressure. In this way, homosexuality becomes a litmus test of evangelical orthodoxy. I took this symbolic function to explain why debates over sexuality have produced highly publicised denominational splits and why evangelicals often adopt defensive or oppositional postures toward contemporary culture. Indeed, all my sources recognised how this issue has become a conduit for broader concerns about secularisation, cultural authority, and the future of evangelical witness. Finally, even where internal diversity exists within

evangelicalism, the cultural prominence of LGBTQ+ issues has elevated homosexuality to a defining boundary marker.

Hermeneutical foundations: Gagnon and the defence of traditional sexual ethics

Robert Gagnon's *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (2002) remains one of the most influential evangelical defences of the traditional position. Gagnon argues that Scripture consistently prohibits same-sex sexual behaviour (Lev. 20:13, NIV; 1 Cor. 6:9, NIV) and that these prohibitions are grounded not in cultural situation but in divine design. His hermeneutical method: historical-grammatical and integrating theology, locates sexual ethics within the creation narratives, where male–female complementarity forms the basis for marriage and sexual union (Gen. 2:24, NIV). As he writes, “Marriage in general and sexual intercourse in particular is thus evaluated as an attachment of two complementary beings into ‘one flesh,’ a reunion with one’s sexual ‘other.’ No such justification is, or can be, provided for same-sex unions” (2002, p. 155).

Gagnon's argument rests on two key claims. First, that male–female complementarity is intrinsic to God's design (Gen. 1:28, NIV). Second, that biblical prohibitions of same-sex behaviour derive from this design rather than from cultural prejudice. Because the creation order is universal, Gagnon views the biblical witness as unified and authoritative: “the story remains authoritative... Male and Female are ‘perfect fits’... of divine design and blessing” (2002, p. 62). He further argues that the Levitical prohibitions are grounded in this creation logic (2002, p. 111) and that Paul's writings reflect the same theological framework (2002, p. 229). This hermeneutical framework shapes evangelical cultural engagement in several ways:

First, it reinforces a countercultural identity: if Scripture and culture diverge, evangelicals must side with Scripture (James 4:4, NIV). Cultural acceptance of homosexuality is therefore interpreted as moral decline. Second, it disqualifies alternative interpretations, as more inclusive readings are often dismissed as theologically compromised. Third, it justifies political activism: if sexual ethics are rooted in divine design, defending them becomes a public responsibility rather than merely a private conviction. Gagnon's work thus provides the intellectual scaffolding to resist contemporary sexual norms. Yet his emphasis on complementarity also raises questions about how evangelicals interpret embodiment, gender, and desire. I considered that these questions become more pressing when considered alongside purity culture dynamics, and importantly throughout Gagnon's writings, I did not detect anything less than a profound respect for, and duty of care to, individuals inadvertently unable to match divine designs.

Moral boundary-setting and culture-war dynamics: Burk's contribution

Where Gagnon provides the hermeneutical foundation, Burk (2010) articulates the moral and pastoral implications of sexualities. Responding to McLaren's call for pastoral caution,

Burk insists that evangelicals “cannot defer judgment on the moral status of homosexuality” (2010, p. 10). For him, ambiguity undermines scriptural integrity, discipleship, and public witness (Eph. 5:1–3, NIV). He argues that without moral clarity, evangelicals cannot function as “salt and light” in a permissive culture (Matt. 5:13–16, NIV). Burk appeared to frame evangelical engagement in three key ways. First, homosexuality becomes a defining issue for evangelical identity. Those who affirm traditional teaching are seen as faithful; those who question it are portrayed as capitulating to secular relativism. Second, a culture-war mentality is reinforced. Burk frames the debate as a struggle between biblical truth and moral decline (2 Tim. 4:3–4, NIV), legitimising political lobbying, public campaigns, and legal challenges. In defence of traditional sexual ethics, Burk argues, “Evangelicals are right to ask how Christians can be salt and light in this kind of a culture while having no clear, biblical word on homosexuality” (2010, p. 2; cf. Matt. 5:13–16, NIV). Evangelical interpretations, therefore, have significantly shaped debates over same-sex marriage, anti-discrimination laws, and education policy. Third, pastoral practice becomes morally charged. While Burk affirms that Christians should “love and minister to homosexuals” (2010, p. 11), his emphasis on moral judgment can overshadow pastoral sensitivity, creating significant challenges for LGBTQ+ individuals within evangelical communities. (2010, p. 12). Burk’s critique of McLaren illustrates the tension: if evangelicals allow for “legitimate context for some homosexual relationships,” he argues, “the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex” (2010, p. 1). This concern reveals an underlying fear that relaxing moral boundaries will destabilise evangelical identity and undermine church authority.

Yet this boundary-setting also contributes to negative cultural perceptions. Critics such as Ozanne (2018) argue that evangelical approaches often lack compassion and fail to account for lived experience. Burk’s framework, while internally coherent, can therefore appear externally inflexible, reinforcing the stereotypes that evangelicals are bigoted, intolerant or politically partisan. Interestingly, Burk examples a presentation on 1 Thessalonians delivered by a seminary theologian who framed traditional family identity as an obstacle to liberty and that a just society would not “... limit who can have sex with whom,” (2010, p. 4). On the one hand, Burk maintains that “Christians must never shrink back from declaring the truth of God revealed in the Bible, even if that truth runs counter to the culture.” However, he recognises, “There is another way. Christians and churches can love and minister to homosexuals while still holding fast to biblical norms for human sexuality.” (2010, pp. 11–12; cf. John 13:34, NIV). Quoting John Piper (1992) Bethlehem Baptist Church, “We believe that Christian churches should reach out in love and truth to minister to people touched by homosexuality” (2010, p. 12), presumably because Burk, like Piper recognise that people struggling with temptation are at least engaging and are entitled to patient assistance (Gal. 6:1–2, NIV).

Purity Culture and the formation of evangelical sexual ethics

House and Moslener (2023) broaden the analysis by examining the purity-culture framework that has shaped evangelical attitudes toward sexuality. Purity culture, influential in the 1990s and early 2000s, promoted abstinence (1 Thess. 4:3–5, NIV), gender complementarity, and the ideal of “biblical marriage.” It created “entire youth ministries around the goal of encouraging adolescents to pledge themselves to sexual abstinence until entering what they called a ‘biblical marriage relationship’” (2023, p. 1). Although primarily focused on heterosexual behaviour, purity culture profoundly influences evangelical thinking about homosexuality by reinforcing rigid sexual norms.

House and Moslener highlight several dynamics relevant to evangelical cultural engagement. First, sexual purity becomes a measure of spiritual worth. They note that “spiritual formation and lessons in sexual restraint and shame went hand in hand” (2023, p. 1), creating an environment where deviation from heterosexual norms is heavily stigmatised. Second, purity culture sanctifies heterosexism and homophobia. Drawing on voices such as Klein and Anderson, they observe that purity-culture teachings “sanctified heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny” (2023, p. 2). Third, younger evangelicals increasingly resist purity-culture assumptions, critiquing its psychological impact, gender inequality, unrealistic expectations and “problematic legacies,” presumably, offering no special insulation from divorce (2023, p. 5). This scenario complicates evangelical engagement with contemporary culture by reinforcing the perception that evangelicals are morally rigid or sexually repressive. Moreover, purity culture’s emphasis on “the denial of bodily needs ... associated with Christian piety” (2023, p. 4; cf. Col. 2:20–23, NIV) creates a disconnect between evangelical sexual ethics and contemporary understandings of embodiment, identity, and wellbeing. The result appears to be a movement caught between defending inherited norms and responding to internal critiques that challenge the coherence and pastoral viability of those norms. This presents as not a good look, along with other sociological malaises mentioned, including ethnicity, supremacy and bodily dissociative disorders (2023, p. 3), which unfortunately fall outside this essay’s critique for now.

Evaluating how these strands interact to shape cultural engagement

Taken together, Gagnon, Burk, and House & Moslener reveal how evangelical interpretations of homosexuality shape cultural engagement and reciprocate in three ways:

First, they reinforce theological boundaries. Gagnon’s hermeneutics and Burk’s moral clarity establish homosexuality as a boundary marker of evangelical identity. This strengthens internal cohesion but narrows the space for interpretive diversity or pastoral flexibility. Second, they intensify cultural and political conflict. Evangelical interpretations often position the movement in opposition to contemporary sexual ethics. This fuels political activism and public confrontation but also contributes to perceptions of

evangelicals as intolerant or culturally combative. Third, they expose internal tensions. Purity-culture critiques reveal fractures within evangelicalism, particularly among younger believers who question the psychological and theological implications of inherited sexual norms. As House and Moslener note, some evangelicals have internalised the belief that “being a faithful Christian and experiencing oneself as a sexual being were incompatible” (2023, p. 7). Such tensions challenge the sustainability of traditional frameworks and complicate evangelical engagement with culture.

These three dynamics interact to produce a distinctive evangelical posture: one that is theologically confident yet culturally embattled, morally assertive yet internally divided.

Conclusion

Evangelical interpretations of homosexuality profoundly shape the movement’s engagement with contemporary culture. Rooted in commitments to biblical authority and traditional sexual ethics, these interpretations reinforce theological boundaries, intensify cultural conflict, and expose internal tensions. Gagnon provides the hermeneutical foundation for a countercultural stance; Burk frames homosexuality as a defining issue of evangelical identity; and House and Moslener reveal the cultural and psychological complexities that challenge evangelical approaches to sexuality.

Culture continues to evolve, and evangelicals face the challenge of balancing conviction with pastoral themes such as compassion, clarity with humility, and fidelity to Scripture with attentiveness to lived experience. Whether the movement can navigate these tensions without fracturing further remains an open question. As a Charismatic holding a conservative view, contemporary culture also exposes areas where evangelicals must reflect critically on how sexual ethics are taught, embodied, and lived, particularly within Christian marriages and communities where repressed or distorted understandings of sexuality have too often taken root.

Purity culture may well claim critical ascendancy, apart from the culture it views as morally collapsed. However, that same end of the cultural spectrum, which includes homosexual Christians, might well point to oaths undertaken by young evangelicals, their poor outcomes—underscored by divorce statistics—placing sacred and secular on par.

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