

More thoughts on private morality

I'm back with another column, and I'm still being a killjoy.

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue

Published on October 10, 2025

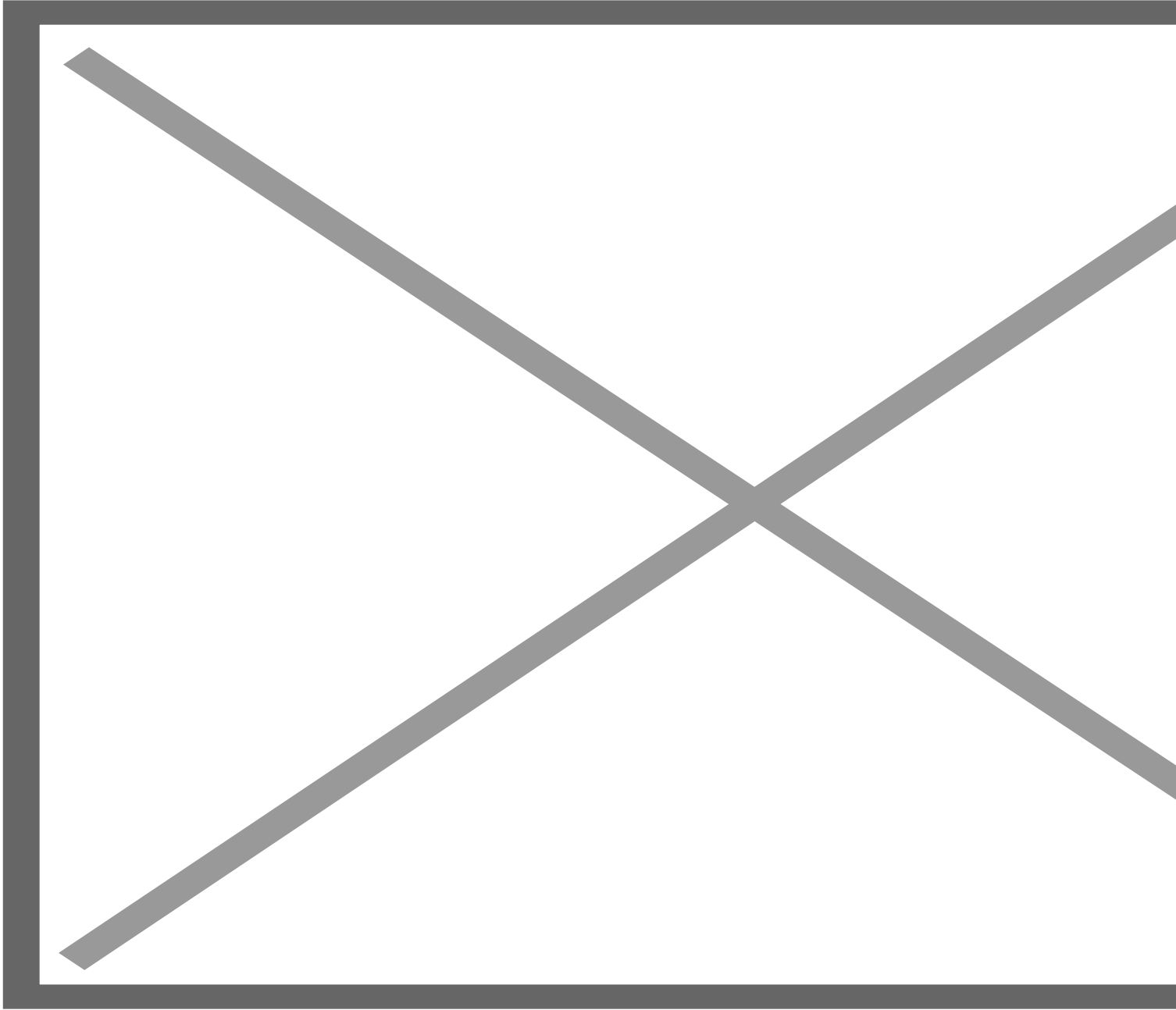


Illustration: ToolX / E+ / Getty

In [my last column](#), I argued that mainline Christians ought to worry a bit more about private morality, to be a little more willing to risk being moralists and scolds. As long as I'm being a killjoy, I might as well go all the way. Here I consider some areas of ostensibly private morality that may have larger implications than we want to realize.

It's football season. As we savor the crisp fall air and the smell of cheap stadium beer, we'll be ignoring a settled scientific consensus: American football destroys people's brains for fun and profit. Repeated head trauma cannot be avoided in this sport, and it turns out that repeated head trauma is bad for you. Moreover, though the sport compensates its best players with money and glamour, it also attracts people who lack other ways of making a decent living—and becomes one more way they suffer disproportionately. This argument can be extended to other sports, such as boxing, hockey, and mixed martial arts. God formed these people's skulls for a reason, and that reason isn't my entertainment.

How about eating meat? I find few things in everyday life to be as satisfying as a decent hamburger. But the climate impact is devastating, and a cow is a conscious creature. I try to avoid supporting abusive farming practices, the concentrated animal feeding operations—aka torture chambers—that blight my region. But today's fake meat tastes all right, and you can hit your protein macros with powders or filtered milk, so there are few nutritional reasons to eat even a freely ranging animal whose happy life ended in a quick death. My belief in human exceptionalism isn't strong enough to afford me a claim to anything more than a share of animals' eggs and milk. I think it's good for people who want to hunt to do so, if they eat their kill; we need folks to maintain that hard-won expertise for everyone's sake. But I can't steer around the conclusion that most of us should eat meat rarely if ever.

Speaking of steering, what about speeding? I'm a careful driver in town, but I hate traveling, and so on the freeway, I speed. I tell myself that I'm being responsible: I watch the road, check my blind spots, and never touch my phone. Science suggests that I'm fooling myself. Almost nobody boasts the kind of reaction times that you'd need to safely drive 90 miles per hour. This is partly a structural issue—we should build more high-speed rail. But it's also an individual issue. I should slow down.

Is this getting uncomfortable? It is for me, too. Let's make it worse and talk about our browser histories.

This one's especially ticklish, for several reasons. First, if statistics are to be believed, most of us have feet of clay when it comes to pornography. Second, I think Christians need to be arguing for the legalization and unionization of sex work. Not because we think sex work as such is good, though some do, but because every version of prohibition has left vulnerable women under the coercive power of the worst guys on earth. Prohibition means that every cop, every regulator, has a potential side gig open to him as a blackmailer and a pimp. Whatever we do, we can't enable that.

Third, the mainline denominations are still figuring out what we think sexual morality demands. When we have left behind complementarian nonsense, ceased to stigmatize bodily pleasure as such, and abandoned theological-ethical frameworks based on the life sciences of 13th-century Paris, we have fundamentally changed what sex is. How do we understand erotic art and fantasy in light of those changes?

And fourth, in sexual fantasy there is often a vast distance between what something looks like and what it means emotionally to the people involved. I have met kind, ethical people who are into kink, non-regressing adults who are furies. I have met polyamorous people who are enacting toward each other something that has to be called faith, though it is not the sort of faith I practice. I have even met cis straight men who think their wives are full-fledged people. (I've tried to be one of those men; ask my wife how I'm doing.)

But all that said, I hope we can agree that a sexuality based on real, not playacted, aggression or dislike is antihuman, and a sexuality based on cynical indifference is only somewhat better. Straight men—in particular, though not exclusively—are often encouraged to think that desiring someone and genuinely liking them are mutually exclusive. Even the most charitable account of pornography would allow that a lot of it rests on, even dramatizes, that assumption. It's no accident that one of the stylistic trademarks of Trumpism is a porn-brainedness that the average frat boy would struggle to keep up with.

Perhaps some porn evades these strictures. It still involves a relationship that is lopsided, that forecloses responsibility. I don't think you're supposed to be able to watch another person have an orgasm without feeling warmth, adoration, protectiveness toward them, and a parasocial relationship with a stranger on a screen gives you nowhere to place that. All you can do to say "You're amazing" is pay—which, if you're going to be involved in that world at all, you should do, because the people on the screen have bills of their own to worry about, but it still seems fundamentally impious.

I used to be highly critical of sex work for this reason. Now I'm not, because I reached the staggeringly obvious conclusion that this same argument applies to a lot of waged labor. Writing and teaching are sacred, and yet I accept payment for both. Parenting is sacred, and yet there are nannies. So I won't say a mean word to someone who does sex work, but I don't think God intended any of this. Perhaps the disharmony is so deep that we must start not with criticism but with mourning—for everyone, including ourselves and our own role in this.

There are, of course, erotic art and writing, which theoretically don't exploit real people. These can often be mean-spirited and antihuman in their own way. Where these are used to skirt laws against the sexual exploitation of children, they are worse than anything else I've mentioned. Apparently there are also AI girlfriends now, but I can't form an opinion on this subject because I'm too busy vomiting.

People (especially the young) are horny or just desperate for information; spouses travel or find themselves forced to live apart; appetites mismatch; life disappoints. Pure repression doesn't work—that's one of the few things we have learned, or should have learned, from modernity. And so even ethically serious Christians will continue to find themselves casting about for optimally ethical ways of, well, letting off steam, alone or with others. I have no idea what else to say, except that I wonder what it would mean to understand inconvenient horniness as a version of one's own drive toward union with God.

What an uncomfortable topic. Next time, I'll take it easier on all of us and talk about gossip.