

LOSING THE BOND WITH GOD

Kailla Edger, PhD

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LOSING THE BOND WITH GOD

**Sexual Addiction and
Evangelical Men**

Kailla Edger, PhD

*Sex, Love, and Psychology
Judy Kuriansky, Series Editor*



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For my father, Adam, because of his guidance,
for my mother, Bogna, because of her support,
and for my husband, Bryan, because of his love.

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SERIES FOREWORD

What do Jesus, Freud, the 12-Step Program and I-Thou existentialism have to do with each other? Everything, in Kailla Edger's exploration of the plight of evangelical men suffering from sexual addiction. In her eye-opening and intellectually challenging book, *Losing the Bond with God: Sexual Addiction and Evangelical Men*, Edger brilliantly weaves men's personal accounts about their sexual behavior with academic knowledge and religious, sociological, cultural, and psychological inquiry to give the reader insight into a world to which few would have access. Amidst the recent years of scandals within the evangelical sect and its very public figures (such as Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker), this book takes us through the lives of eight evangelical Christian men who self-identify as sex addicts and their journey through risk and surrender to reach a new understanding of God, giving us a profound perspective that enlightens all professionals and the public. Put in a framework of the newer modes of accepted research that uses qualitative methods, we learn about the deep dynamics and conflicts as well as the process of recovery of a group of men who subscribe to a particular set of morals that further complicates their urges. Edger, a former therapist at Pittsburgh's Gateway Rehabilitation Center, knows full well about the nature and process of addiction, which shows in her book. As a psychologist myself who honors personal inquiries, appreciates understanding cultural issues, and thrives on dynamic and existential exploration, I knew this book would be a fascinating exploration. Through testimonies and the author's expert commentary and analysis, we are led not only to understand, but also to confront, deep questions about religion, sexuality, and

the nature of “sin.” The men’s stories are riveting, set in solid academic context, and mixed with learning about five curses, the nature of forgiveness, and even criteria to see whether one is evangelical. Regardless of our own religious persuasion, we are drawn into their world—and realms of sex, religion, morality, and the nature of beingness itself—to explore the loss and recovery of a bond with God and self.

*Dr. Judy Kuriansky,
Series Editor*

INTRODUCTION

Evangelical Christianity and sexuality may never before have been so markedly paralleled as when Ted Haggard, former president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), stated in Alexandra Pelosi's documentary *Friends of God*¹ that all of the surveys said that evangelicals had the best sex lives of any other group. To connect evangelical Christian beliefs with sexuality may seem odd until one considers the substantial amount of literature that evangelicals produce about sex. In addition to this, media coverage about the sex scandals of several evangelical leaders has continued to create negative connotations about evangelicals and their sexual practices. The list of transgressing evangelists has grown over a 20-year period, painting the evangelical movement in a negative light: the alleged affair of televangelist Marvin Gorman with a congregation member in 1986;² exposure of televangelist Jim Bakker's infidelity, also in 1986;³ televangelist Jimmy Swaggart's sexual encounters with a prostitute made public in 1988;⁴ evangelist, comedian, and self-proclaimed former satanist Mike Warnke's affairs uncovered in 1991;⁵ Assemblies of God pastor Frank Houston's confession in 2000 about past sexual activities with a teenage boy;⁶ former president of NAE Ted Haggard's affair with a male escort exposed in 2006;⁷ Paul Barnes's confession and resignation because of homosexual acts, similar to Haggard's, in 2006;⁸ and Assemblies of God general superintendent Wayne Hughe's charge of sexual activity with a teenager in 2007.⁹

The creation of the "Christian Men's Movement," has been, perhaps, a natural response to the increased exposure of sexual transgressions within the

evangelical movement, and it reached its zenith in the 1990s¹⁰ as Christians cultivated an increased number of men's sexual self-help literature and sexual purity organizations. Neil T. Anderson, the president of Freedom in Christ Ministries and a Christian counselor, noted that most people he counseled for sexual addictions were evangelical Christians "attending churches like yours and mine."¹¹ Significant numbers of clergy struggling with cybersex addiction¹² have also continued to grow in this technological age. In response, evangelicals have continued to try to address the problem of problematic sexuality, providing an increased number of self-help literature and support groups. Organizations like Men's Life, The Gathering, The Master's Men, Man's Authentic Nature, and Every Man's Battle have continued to flourish in response to the needs of evangelical men, and their expansion within the movement shows no signs of stopping.

Interestingly enough, although religious involvement has contributed to decreasing other addictive behaviors such as substance use and gambling, religiosity has not been shown to inversely affect sexually addictive behaviors.¹³ Despite this evidence, evangelicals' attempts to help remedy sexually addictive behaviors among its congregational members still expand, and many of these interventions have resulted in the creation of men's movements.

Evangelical men's movements were designed to help evangelical men deal with sexuality and relationship issues, and since their inception, many have expanded substantially in numbers. Promise Keepers, a conservative evangelical organization that focuses on helping men keep their promises to their families by concentrating on men's responsibilities to be leaders in their families,¹⁴ is one of the largest evangelical men's movements that incorporates interventions for sexual addictive behaviors.¹⁵ From 1990 to 2008, Promise Keepers had five and a half million men involved in its organization.¹⁶ Smaller evangelical men's movements such as Men's Life, The Gathering, The Master's Men, Man's Authentic Nature, and Every Man's Battle have also grown in numbers, and most evangelical men's movements continue to be conservatively focused. This creates difficulties for many evangelicals who seek help for their sexual issues and also identify as homosexual (and believe that this orientation is not a problem).

Because most Christian men's self-help literature on sexuality is written by and for conservative evangelical Christians,¹⁷ the message about how to address problematic sexual conduct is heavily one-sided. This kind of dominant view is concerning because misdiagnosing conditions and implementing ineffective therapeutic interventions could easily occur within a rigid framework. In one study, this was shown to be the case. Of all of the Christian college men who struggled with sexual morality issues because of their masturbation and sought help for what they identified as a sexual addiction, only five percent displayed the presence of clear addictive patterns over a two-year period.¹⁸

Because identifying problematic behavior is highly subjective, it is often influenced by religious values. Although evangelicals are directed toward God's redemption, how to gain redemption is not always clearly defined, and this leaves evangelicals open to subjective interpretations and advice.¹⁹ Varying interpretations in evangelical literature and organizations are often prescriptive and rigid as well as ambiguous, so this additional combination may further enhance confusion and anxiety among evangelicals.²⁰

Theoretical insights and personal stories about being a sexually addicted evangelical are frequently presented in evangelical self-help literature, but scholarly research has been lacking, and conclusions have largely been dependent on presuppositions and common sense. Although sex and Christianity have been widely studied in many domains,²¹ sexual addiction in the specific tradition of evangelicalism has been minimally examined, and the apparent void demonstrated a need for further exploration of this topic.

Although it was evident to me that evangelical teachings significantly influenced evangelical men's views on sexuality and may also have had an impact on their views about sexual addiction,²² it was unclear to me how evangelical Christianity influenced the sexual conduct of men who identified as sexual addicts and evangelical Christians. I wanted to create a rich insight into the question of how. How are evangelical Christian men who identify as sexual addicts influenced by their religious principles? How do they heal from the spiraling-down effect of sexually addictive behaviors when their morals uphold chastity until marriage, demand monogamy when married, and shun pornography and masturbation as sinful behaviors? How do homosexual evangelicals heal from sexual addictive behaviors? How do these evangelical men understand sexual addiction? These were some of the questions I wanted to answer.

Defining the exact nature (and terminology) of sexual addiction has continued to be an issue within the helping professions, and ubiquitous definitions and labels have left much up to personal interpretation. It has been hypothesized that people often think they are addicted because they equate their behavior with addiction,²³ and this is a valid concern among evangelicals. Because evangelical literature about sexual purity often parallels the concept of sexual addiction, many evangelical Christians could speculate that their unwelcome sexual desires are a result of being sexually addicted.²⁴ In order to understand the implications of sexual addicted evangelicals, it should also be appreciated that many evangelicals may have a unique conception of psychological problems. For numerous evangelicals, psychological problems are understood to be rooted in a "sinful and spiritually fallen condition."²⁵ Evangelicals' viewpoints about pathology are spiritually based, so sexual addiction is often understood differently by evangelicals than in the general population.

Although evangelicals have long been revolutionaries throughout religious history, pioneers of change, particularly in the sexual domain,²⁶ the journey of

change has stopped for many denominations, and conservative absolutist stances are among the most popular today. Revolutionaries continue to campaign within the evangelical movement, and homosexual evangelicals are among the most controversial groups. Disagreements about sexual morality continue in the evangelical movement, and the explanation through history provided in this book illuminates the culmination of some evangelical stances, the start of others, and the ongoing disputes and rationales that continue. In an effort to promote the understanding of this diverse movement, the explanation of the multifarious nature of evangelicalism is explained while still communicating the authority of each divergent evangelical stance.

Overall, this book provides the reader with a better understanding of evangelical men and the issues they face around sexual addiction. The book is divided into two parts. In *Part I: The Framework*, I provide background about the evangelical movement and present some of the most dominant issues specific to sexuality within the movement—sexual purity, gender roles, attitudes regarding homosexuality, and marriage. In *Part II: The Analysis*, I present a cumulative summary of the sexually addicted evangelical male. The information presented is a movement beyond anecdotal discussion, providing research-based information from individual interviews I conducted with evangelical Christian men who self-identified as sexual addicts. Personal experiences along with direct quotes from interviews are presented throughout both parts of the book, and these testimonies are only available as a result of eight very open and generous individuals willing to share their intimate life stories with me, stories that were often difficult to tell. Without their openness and dedication to this project, none of this would have been possible, and I immensely thank them for entrusting me with their personal accounts. Only their first names are used, and I have altered those to protect their anonymity.

Part I

THE FRAMEWORK

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Chapter 1

A CHANGING EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT AND THE CONCEPT OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH

The word “evangelical” comes from the word *euangelion*, meaning “good news,” or “tidings.” Evangelicals are defined as being “gospel people.” They are called to share the good news of the gospel, and on this point, all evangelicals agree.¹ Evangelical Christianity is not a denomination but a movement with no formal constitutional guidelines for faith and practice. Evangelicals participate in hundreds of different denominations within the movement, and some even oppose each other.² Most evangelicals are Protestant, and Protestant evangelicals have further branched out to Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptist denominations. Evangelical traditions also include Anglicans, Methodists, Holiness people, Pentecostals, Calvinists, and Arminians, among others.³ Although evangelicalism is a Christian tradition, it is distinctly different from its Christian counterparts. There are also differences within the evangelical movement, and many denominations of evangelicals exist. The denominational spectrum spans from varying degrees of conservative attitudes to more liberal stances, and varying belief systems continue to expand, adding to the diversity and richness of evangelicalism.

ECUMENICAL EVANGELICALS

One division within evangelicalism is the “New Evangelical” movement, which was born in the 1960s and 1970s, changing absolutist thinking for many evangelicals who chose to swing toward an even more liberal stance.⁴

New Evangelicals have been better known as “Ecumenical Evangelicals” and have comprised the “New Evangelical Left.”⁵ Ecumenical evangelicals (a) are typically more open to extensive ecumenical cooperation with other Christians, (b) retreat from the belief that the Bible is absolutely without error and assert a limited biblical inerrancy or believe in the infallibility of the Bible only in matters of faith and practice but not necessarily in historical or scientific information, and (c) they also claim that past evangelicals have been naïve and supportive of an oppressive status quo, insisting that political involvement and liberation efforts of all that are oppressed are part of living the gospel.⁶

FUNDAMENTALISM AND CONSERVATISM

Fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals have often been classified as the same, but the groups are distinct from one another. Fundamentalists maintain the “seven fundamental doctrines of authentic Christianity: inerrant verbal inspiration of the Bible, virgin birth, miracles of Christ, physical resurrection, total depravity of the human being, substitutionary atonement, and premillennial second coming.” Conservative evangelicals are usually socially conservative and have conservative views such as the belief that marriage should be between a man and a woman and that life is created at conception; therefore, they often oppose the legalization of gay marriage and abortion. Although conservative evangelicals have typically carried on the intent of fundamentalism, they have been more open and critical in thought.⁷

POST-EVANGELICALISM

In 2003, Dave Tomlinson presented his dissatisfaction with the existing evangelical culture’s tendency to be too organizational and doctrinally practiced. He coined the term “post-evangelical” as he proposed a less rigid dogma for evangelicals who have “been driven to the margins by some aspects of evangelical church culture with which they cannot honestly identify.”⁸ Again, another part of the movement was born.

Despite significant differences among evangelical groups and ongoing transformations within the movement, all evangelicals still make up one family and are insistent on a common doctrine. Although evangelicalism is better known for its differences than its similarities,⁹ the following six characteristics are typically understood to be universal in the movement, composing the common doctrine for all evangelical believers:

1. Absolute authority of the scripture as the source of knowledge of God and how to live a Christian life
2. Jesus Christ understood as God incarnate and the savior of sinful humankind

3. The lordship of the Holy Spirit
4. Personal conversion as necessity (being born again)
5. The need to evangelize individually and as a church
6. Importance of the communion of Christians for spiritual sustenance, fellowship, and development¹⁰

Just like many religions, different Christian denominations make absolute claims about having the right version of the truth, and evangelicals are no different. Despite evangelicals' disagreements about nonessentials (the practices and propositions unique to each belief system¹¹), there is one indisputable point in evangelical Christianity: Unless a person does not individually commit his or her life to Christ (i.e., if he or she is not born again), damnation is inevitable. For many evangelicals, their version of their religion is the only truth and any other variety of Christianity is wrong.¹²

As disagreements about evangelical core beliefs continue, so do the disputes about human sexuality. Evangelicals have historically had strong beliefs about sexual morality, and because divergent evangelical belief systems continue to multiply, debates within the evangelical community, with other religions, and with the general population still persist. Within the movement, most evangelicals continue to stand by their versions of religious understandings as the only truth.¹³ The main difference in evangelicals' belief systems is typically summarized between two stances: reactionary stances and revolutionary stances.

Rabbi Nilton Bonder stated that individuals with reactionary stances insist "that there is an absolute good and right for every situation," but people who subscribe to revolutionary stances argue that what is considered "good" and what is considered "right" is often in opposition. Bonder advocated for the revolutionary stance, noting that there is an expected imbalance in life, and the tug of war between what is right and what is good is usually at odds and needs to be balanced for individuals to live stable lives. "Maintaining this tension is a challenge not only in relation to oneself but in relation to someone else."¹⁴ Although the belief in God and spiritual matters is vitally important to evangelicals, the social world in which all people are situated is often ignored in theological thought, particularly moral arguments in which individuals learn how they should behave and interact.¹⁵

Father Leo Booth argued that rigid religious values create dysfunction among many believers and that many individuals fall prey to religious addiction.

Because most religious addicts believe themselves inherently worthless and powerless, they look outside themselves for some religious authority who functions as a go-between, an intermediary who tells them what God is like and what God wants them to do. Thus religious addicts never experience God firsthand, never truly get to know God. They only know what somebody has told them about God. If what they are told about God is dysfunctional, their relationship with God becomes dysfunctional.¹⁶

Booth outlined 16 symptoms of religious addiction, and many of these behaviors are common within the evangelical movement. Ten of the symptoms were evident among the evangelical men that I interviewed, and those symptoms are distinguished in bold.

1. **Inability to think, doubt, or question information or authority**
2. **Black-and-white simplistic thinking**
3. **Shame-based belief that you are not good enough, or you are not “doing it right”**
4. **Magical thinking that God will fix you**
5. **Scrupulosity: rigid, obsessive adherence to rules, codes of ethics, or guidelines**
6. **Uncompromising judgmental attitudes**
7. **Compulsive praying, going to church or crusades, quoting scripture**
8. Unrealistic financial contributions
9. **Believing that sex is dirty**
10. Compulsive overeating or excessive fasting
11. **Conflict with science, medicine, and education**
12. Progressive detachment from the real world, isolation, breakdown of relationships (as related to one’s religion)
13. Psychosomatic illness: sleeplessness, back pains, headaches, hypertension
14. **Manipulating scripture of texts, feeling chosen, claiming to receive special messages from God**
15. Trancelike state or religious high, wearing a glazed happy face
16. Cries for help; mental, emotional, physical breakdown; hospitalization (as related to one’s religion)¹⁷

Booth noted that embracing literal and absolute interpretations of biblical scriptures opened the door to dysfunctional religious attitudes, and he warned against this type of attitude among Christians.¹⁸ Because these kinds of unwavering reactionary stances are common among individuals in the evangelical movement, the view that there is an absolute good and an absolute right for every situation becomes problematic for many evangelicals in their lives. When evangelicals fail to fulfill rigid expectations that are set by the doctrines, the bond that was initially established with God begins to suffer. Because evangelicals’ personal identities align so closely with their relationship with God, a host of consequences usually arise when they begin to diverge from that relationship.

Chapter 2

THE LOSS OF MAN'S BOND WITH GOD

According to Jung,¹ the journey toward the image of God is necessary for psychological health, and a belief in God gives people meaning in their lives and a basis in history. Jung also believed that Christianity had lost its bond with God because it became too “externalized, formalized, and institutionalized.”² Jung presented the subjectivity of religion as a positive thing and questioned the objectification of religious ideas.

For many scholars, the aim to objectify religious beliefs becomes problematic from the onslaught, starting with the concept of knowledge. Because knowledge is historical, all knowledge is dependent on interpretation.³ This makes knowledge subjective. Religious beliefs are formed by presuppositions and interpretations rather than proven facts. Regardless of this notion, most people are resistant to changing their presuppositions even when they are presented with overwhelming evidence to support opposing views.⁴

Many Christians, evangelicals included, depend on the message of the Bible, yet varying interpretations are vast among churches. The reasons for these variations stem from the nature of the biblical text itself and from the history of diverging denominations.⁵ For example, evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses interpret the Bible literally, yet their differences in belief systems about the way life should be lived and the particulars about Jesus' life are considerable. Although many evangelicals are aware of the philosophical developments of human knowledge and understand the limitations of that knowledge among all religions, including their own,⁶ an absolutist attitude toward the truth of one's own tenets and the falsehood of other religions' tenets still typifies evangelicals' attitudes.