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PART ONE



**THIS
CULTURAL
MOMENT**

FAITH UNDER FIRE

Christ and Culture



I cannot recall a time in my life when I didn't want to be an educator. I've always loved learning and then sharing what I had learned with others. My mother was a teacher throughout my childhood, and some of my fondest preschool memories include lining up my dolls and playing school. As I grew older and went to grade school, my love for education flourished, which eventually led me to pursue an English major with the hopes of teaching high school students.

That I could influence the trajectory of others' lives by empowering students to become agents of change within their spheres of influence was catalytic in my decision to become an educator. Early in my teaching career, I came to realize education is less about transferring knowledge and more about helping students steward their vocation, education, and opportunities for the sake of the common good and unto eternal purposes. A continued desire for learning and encouraging students led to further studies in education and English, and I eventually completed my PhD in these fields.

Perhaps the most fundamental and insightful lessons I have learned

in 20 years of teaching and studying is how my personal development influences my students' growth. In short, I cannot offer my students what I do not possess. To cultivate the best in my students, as their professor, I had to first cultivate the best in myself. Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* is one of the simplest and yet most profound books I have read on this topic. In it he states, "Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together."¹

My love for learning and teaching led me to a career in education, but my love for the Lord and my students' spiritual flourishing motivated me to teach at Christian universities. During my first teaching position at California Baptist University, the Lord led me to work on anti-human-trafficking curriculum and this opened the door to other justice efforts. Eventually the Lord moved my family to Waco, Texas, and He provided an opportunity to mentor students through my position at Baylor University, contribute to meaningful research, and continue my involvement in justice work. This was all I needed to feel fulfilled in my vocation.

In the last decade, I've worked with several faith-based ministries and non-faith-based organizations whose efforts were aimed at elevating women and children. And with each activist step, I invited my students into the journey. If my work entailed anti-trafficking efforts, I included students and anti-trafficking stakeholders in the research, the classes, and the meetings with activist leaders. In my work with Propel Women, a global ministry dedicated to equipping women to lead well in their vocational spheres of influence, I invited female students to conferences where I was speaking and shared articles I wrote for Propel's publications. Because Baylor is a Christian university, I intentionally selected faith-based articles for my students that highlighted how the church can better support women. Little did I know that the Lord was using my time in

higher education and the justice arena to prepare me for a national platform.

**STANDING ON TRUTH, WALKING IN LOVE,
AND FORGIVING THROUGH GRACE**

My former students would probably attest to my unwavering commitment to faith-driven justice work, particularly regarding protecting women and children. So, it was likely just as shocking for them as it was for me to witness my public assertion—that females need protected spaces that are separate from males—go viral on social media in January of 2021. At the time, I was serving as a university lecturer at Baylor University when my friend, Dan Darling, posted what I considered to be a sensible tweet on Twitter. He expressed his unease with the newly implemented Title IX executive order, stating it was unfair and unsafe for females and that we (the church) should all be concerned. I wholeheartedly agreed! The exchange went as followed.

Dan's Tweet:

The executive order on transgender issues and the expected overturning of the Mexico City policy on abortion are both anti-science and bad for human flourishing. And it will take some courage to say this publicly.

My response:

What if I don't want biological boys in the bathroom with my biological daughter? Do the 99% of us who do not struggle with gender dysphoria have a voice? No? Cool.

Then I retweeted the exchange. And that was it...for about a week. I don't recall an immediate response or outrage. There were a few civil and supportive comments and likes, mostly from like-minded

Christian colleagues and acquaintances. There were also the usual trolls and bots, which were especially prevalent on Twitter before Elon Musk bought and rebranded the platform the next year. I mostly muted or blocked those accounts. It was difficult to discern which accounts belonged to real people and which were spam, and I didn't have a reason or the energy to try and decipher. But unbeknownst to me at the time, a handful of students decided this exchange was precisely the fodder they needed for their fight to have the university sanction an LGBTQ+ student group on campus. For years, and mostly behind the scenes, a group of students advocated for one of the nation's largest Christian universities to affirm and sanction an LGBTQ+ student organization.

Just over a week after making the statement on Twitter, I awoke to nearly a hundred emails, social media messages, and texts from concerned former students and colleagues. I learned that morning from their outreach that the Baylor student paper, *The Lariat*, ran an article originally titled something along the lines of "Dr. Crenshaw is transphobic and needs to be fired." (The title was later updated to state *controversial* rather than transphobic.) The article claimed, that in spite of making the LGBTQ+ faculty safe list for years, I was no longer considered a safe person because I would not accept the transgender narrative wholesale. Concerned friends and stakeholders asked if I was doing okay, and they expressed their condolences for the student newspaper's dishonorable characterization of me. By the end of that spring semester, I received 788 forms of written communication, the majority of which were encouraging. I know the precise number of messages I received because the inpouring was so overwhelming, I hired a former student to triage the communication. It was too engulfing for me to tackle alone. And perhaps it's not too surprising, but the worst of the slander was committed under dark anonymous accounts.

There were dozens of hurtful messages, both public and private. I received messages accusing me of being transphobic, unsafe, privileged,

evil—if you can imagine a slanderous comment along these lines, then I’ve probably heard it. The cruel commentary was hurtful, but the words that were hardest to shrug off were the ones directed toward my children. Some went as far as threatening to find them at their school and “hurt them like you’ve hurt us.” Those are fighting words for any mama. There was also a university alum who worked for a leading Big Tech company who publicly bullied that she wanted me fired, that she would ensure I never stepped foot on her campus again. If you’ve followed J.K. Rowling’s similar controversy and the world’s response to her assertions that biological realities like male and female are fixed and not fluid, then you have some context for the messages I received as well. It was all quite painful. What I endured was much less viral or persistent, and the ramifications were less dire. An important distinction, though, is that Rowling’s backlash wasn’t crucifying her in the name of Christianity. Mine was. The support I received was comforting, but the outrage was cutting. And that’s what I found most difficult to reconcile, if I’m being honest.

My husband and I amusingly refer to the *Lariat* article as, “the slander heard ’round the Christian world.” Because the very day it went to press, a flood of supportive exchanges and media inquiries poured in too. For every threat or mischaracterization, I must have received ten times the number of supportive communications. I received welfare checkups from several colleagues who vowed to write character letters on my behalf. There were thoughtful undergraduate students who rallied to my support with a counter petition, publicly requesting I remain on campus and in my position. I am forever touched by their spiritual maturity—that these students, most of whom I had never met, would choose to comfort and pray for me; it was balm to my broken heart. In their grace, I saw Christ’s love manifested. There were also a handful of presidents and senior administrators from other colleges and seminaries who called or emailed to express their sympathies. They shared in my reasonable concern that

if this could happen at a Christian university like Baylor University, what could that mean for other colleges? These campus stakeholders wanted my advice for getting ahead of any potential theology breach or a media scandal.

To be charitable, I think these aggressive students believed they were “doing justice.” Some even outright told me so. They believed canceling me was a form of advocating for anyone on campus who might identify as transgender. Their heart to care for marginalized students was admirable, but their methods were misplaced. Biblical justice seeks to do good work based on God’s moral standard, holy Word, and plan for eternity. Its methods and outcomes evidence the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). And to be fair to the student article, I should note about two weeks after it went to press and went viral, the Baylor provost released a faculty free speech statement. The statement was released not just on my behalf but for the sake of all faculty’s right to their voice. For that, I was deeply appreciative. That there was no mention of faith informing the free speech statement was a bit disappointing. It was the sort of press release statement that could have come from any nonsectarian public university. I cannot imagine how difficult it was for the administration to navigate student outrage. In the last five to ten years, the news has highlighted the increase of campus protests. So, I sympathize with those at the helm of schools navigating choppy waters. Some factions of college students have become increasingly vocal and vindictive. But perhaps I naively thought Christian college students and stakeholders would respond differently. As journalist Brian Kilmeade noted during my *Fox and Friends* interview, we’ve seen this sort of cancel-culture behavior at Berkley and Baylor. His implication was that even Christian colleges are resorting to non-Christlike reactions in the public square, sometimes over issues of church orthodoxy.

I’m often asked if I chose to leave Baylor or if I was asked to leave. For the record, I left on my own accord. I finished teaching that spring’s

Honors College course on human trafficking, but I declined an offer to teach a summer course or sign a 2021-2022 contract. My departure wasn't made in anger, but in recognition that healing required distance. My soul genuinely needed respite after the ordeal. *The Lariat* later issued a retraction for the article's title, which was responsible of them. I imagine that journalistic decision to change the title from "Dr. Crenshaw is transphobic" to "Dr. Crenshaw is controversial" was not one made easily. I applaud the student newspaper's efforts to be more honest in their reporting.

I wouldn't wish the experience on anyone. The old cliché "there is no such thing as bad press" is not true. I really could have done without that attention. Even still, through this experience, I'm thankful to have learned firsthand the power of Christ's example of forgiveness. I had to learn how to forgive professed fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who were being cruel and using His name to do so. But I recognize I am not alone in this, that most of us have felt this feeling of betrayal before. While at times I was tempted to harbor resentment, the Lord and my church family continually reminded me that I, too, have been forgiven much. And even when my flesh didn't want to, the Holy Spirit indwelling in me prompted me to pray for those who, in that moment of time, felt more like enemies than neighbors or brothers and sisters. My heart sincerely desired unity within the body of Christ. For the sake of the gospel and common good work, we have some reconciliation to do in the church body. I've also come to learn that the contemporary Western church needs a better apologetic to discern how to engage in social justice from a biblical worldview.

FORGIVING OTHERS

I have never experienced church hurt, at least not to the extent that it was deep enough to rock my faith in the Lord or question the love I've received from the body of Christ. But if Baylor is an extension

of the church, as she professes to be, I have learned in a very painful and public way how to forgive those who intentionally malign your character, threaten your career and kids, and never come to you and ask your forgiveness. At some level, I imagine the experience was akin to what some have experienced by way of church hurt. After we came out of the fog of that semester, and the press storm subsided, and the job offers began to trickle in, I could feel the tangible presence and comfort of the Lord in a way I had not for months. As my husband and I sat on our back patio one evening in early May, the warmth of the setting sun on my face, I was enveloped in the Lord's peace. My husband and I decided that night we were going to be intentional and charitable with our forgiveness—even when someone hasn't asked or repented. Because how much more have we been forgiven by the blood of the Lamb? And how much less did we deserve it?

That isn't to say we don't establish boundaries. Healthy, biblically based boundaries protect us so we can engage in good work. One of the family boundaries we established after that season was reevaluating where we choose to give our time and money. Specifically, we still donate to and partner with various parts of Baylor's campus. Through the business school, my husband continues to guest speak, mentor students through a Christian leadership program, and judges an ethics competition each semester. I, too, guest speak and mentor students through the same Christian leadership program. We want to model how to bless someone who hurt you, even if that hurt is a whole university. And for this reason, we continue to frequent Baylor football and basketball games. As donors, we've taken our boys to the President's Suite for donor events. And when we hosted an event on behalf of the Museum of the Bible, we could have chosen several Waco venues, but we selected Baylor. Bringing even more of the Bible to campus was quite healing for my heart. But what was perhaps the most redemptive for me was coleading a Baylor Business School Chapel with my husband for the fall 2024 semester. Teaching

God's Word alongside my husband, who is my best friend and greatest cheerleader this side of eternity, was restorative to my soul. That redemption and restoration healed me so I can further partner with those desiring the same redemption and restoration through Jesus.

Forgive, Set Healthy Boundaries, and Be Fruitful

I've learned the hard way not to let the actions of a few dictate my feelings or distort the truth about the health of the whole. Judge a tree by the whole of its fruit, not by a few that have become infected, spoiled, or rotted. Those need attention, certainly, or they could infest the rest. But a few are not indicative of the whole. Hurt happens; it's inevitable. Hurt people will hurt you. And sometimes, however unintentional, you will hurt others as well. Either way, I can say now with more authority than I could have before the trial, we cannot stay hurt; by the blood of Jesus, we do not have the luxury or the right. No matter how the pain was inflicted, the only way to get from hurt to healed is by way of forgiveness. It doesn't matter if the offender apologized or not. It doesn't matter if the wrong was made right or not. It doesn't matter if the whole system is unjust or not. Forgiveness is less about them and more about you. It's about the condition of your heart. You can forgive with boundaries. You can forgive with accountability. You can forgive and still feel an ache in your heart. That's reasonable and biblical. But you have to forgive. Because how much more have you been forgiven? There is so much beauty and health to be found on the other side of bitterness and hurt. At the core of biblical justice is redemptive grace. As Christians, we extend grace to others because we know we have been given grace in the form of Christ's death and atonement for our sin, a gift we could never repay.

BUT CHURCH, HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Like our country, colleges have also undergone profound cultural shifts over the last few years. Namely, there have been changes in

how students and administrators approach free speech, emotional and mental health, safe spaces, and power dynamics between authority and compliance. Particularly since 2020, we've witnessed a rise in accusations of microaggressions, or that a failure to agree with someone's perspective is hate speech. As a result, students have become conditioned to interpret any ideas they deem remotely controversial a form of violence against marginalized groups. Across the country, college campuses have scrambled to acquiesce to outraged students by way of trigger warnings, bans on microaggressions, a strict regulation of speech, and the crippling illusion of college campuses as a haven or "safe space." Social justice ideologies on campus have reinterpreted words, ideas, and behaviors as forms of violence. This frames subtle—or even perceived—insensitivities as dire threats to vulnerable students. In this kind of climate, emotional comfort takes priority over everything.

I'm not a particularly political person, at least not in the sense that I closely follow politics. Quite honestly, it was a bit of a political refresher when my fifth grader first began learning what the three branches of American government do. I may or may not have rewatched a few *Schoolhouse Rock!* videos on YouTube to sort out what branches and bills do. But in 2021, I was paying attention to the shifts in political policies as they pertained to Title IX. President Biden's executive order directed schools receiving federal funds include gender identity in Title IX protections.² Under those new guidelines, biological males who identify as transgender girls must be allowed to compete on girls' sports teams. With one executive order, the "expansion of protection" utterly undermined fair competition as well as Title IX's established purpose.

I maintained then and now that erasing historically protected sex-based spaces for females—restrooms, locker rooms, camps, prisons, and safe houses—leaves women and girls even more vulnerable to sexual assault. And efforts to allow biological males into female-only spaces

threaten to undermine critical protections and privacy for women and girls. Research validates these concerns. In my anti-trafficking work, I learned the vast majority of sexual assaults are committed by males and against females. For example, 82 percent of juvenile sexual assault victims are female, with 90 percent of perpetrators male.³ Opening restrooms and changing facilities based on gender identity rather than biological sex enables predatory males access to vulnerable females. The progressive retort I sometimes hear back to this argument is typically along the lines of, “Well, that’s transphobic to assume trans-identifying females (biological males) would ever sexually assault biological females.” Foremost, I disagree with how culture now defines “transphobic” as anyone who refuses to accept the narrative wholesale.

That rhetorical misappropriation aside, even if we were to suspend our disbelief that all trans females are safe, we are still at a loss for how to gatekeep predators who have evil intentions. Comprehensive research is lacking in this area, but estimates converge around 10-15 percent on the percentage of sexual assaults against young females occur specifically in bathrooms or locker rooms. And unsurprising, 96 percent of those assaults were committed by men.⁴ The risk of assault is amplified for incarcerated women primarily because prison staff consists of males.⁵ But there is also reason to consider how housing transgender prisoners according to gender identity rather than sex could further expose female inmates to assault. In her *Wall Street Journal* article, “Male Inmates in Female Prisons,” journalist Abigail Shrier notes the spike of reported sexual assaults in California prisons correlated with the same year biological males were allowed to transfer to biological female prisons.⁶ Housing transgender prisoners according to gender identity rather than sex could expose female inmates to assault. Likewise, up to 63 percent of homeless women have experienced violence or trauma from men.⁷ Removing female-only shelters leaves abused women without refuge. Given this data,

it's no small wonder 56 percent of women surveyed expressed concern about their safety, privacy, or comfort if required to share spaces like bathrooms or locker rooms with men.⁸

To be clear, I am not opposed to transgender identifying people, and my heart aches listening to stories of their distress and trauma. I believe every human being deserves dignity, compassion, respect, safety, and protected rights no matter how one identifies. Gender dysphoria is real, it causes severe emotional distress, and it is an increasingly diagnosed disorder in counseling. When studying gender identities for a biblical counseling certificate at Southwestern Seminary, I read several respected Christian counselors' thoughts and approaches to this growing ailment. If you're interested in further reading, I recommend the works of Drs. Mark Yarhouse, Preston Sprinkle, and Andrew Walker. For a less academic but theologically trustworthy source, Jackie Hill Perry provides a biblical perspective on finding identity in the Lord rather than in sexualities.

No matter how a person identifies—by sexuality, gender, race, religion, level of education, their profession, their social economic status—every American citizen deserves equal protection under the law. Where we seem to be at an impasse, unfortunately, is on how to implement policies that do not infringe on the rights of other groups. In this case, for instance, research shows most females oppose permitting biological males access to biological female spaces.⁹ So while transgender females (males who identify as female) should not have to live in fear for their safety, most Americans would assert biological females should not have to compromise their safety or success either.

WHERE IS THE CHURCH?

There appears to be a slow but growing consensus around maintaining biological sex as a binary assigned at birth, particularly among Christians, which is good news. In fact, a Pew Research survey shows the pendulum has swung a bit in favor of defining gender by biology

and not postmodern ideologies. Accordingly, the gap between those who believe gender is fluid and constructed from individual identity, and those who believe gender is derived from biological sex, is among those who consider themselves “non-religious” and those who consider themselves Christians. (Evidently, the survey did not include enough Jewish, Muslim, or Mormon participants to parse out those religions.) The 2002 Pew Research Center survey states:

Growing shares of Americans believe that a person’s gender is determined by their sex assigned at birth, which finds major differences by religion on this question and others about transgender issues. For example, a majority of White evangelical Protestants say society has gone too far in accepting people who are transgender, while religiously unaffiliated Americans are far more likely to say society has not gone far enough.

Among U.S. adults 60% now say that whether a person is a man or a woman is determined by their sex assigned at birth. This figure is even higher among White evangelicals (87%) and Black Protestants (70%). Among Catholics, the share who say a person’s gender cannot differ from sex at birth has risen from 52% in 2021 to 62% this year. By contrast, a majority of religiously unaffiliated Americans (58%) say a person’s gender can be different from their sex assigned at birth.¹⁰

Considering the amount of research evidencing inherent biological differences between males and females, given the DSM-5 psychological disorder undergirding transgender identity, bearing in mind the data on how many females prefer separated spaces for their physical safety and emotional wellbeing, it is flat astonishing how

controversial this public debate has become.¹¹ The evidence is overwhelming in favor of upholding sex as a binary and creating policies on this premise. The reality of male-on-female violence exists, and for this reason, sex-segregated spaces remain critically important havens from harm for women and girls. Erasing them requires ignoring biological and statistical realities.

My friend Dr. Katie McCoy wrote an excellent book, *To Be a Woman: How Biblical Womanhood Sets Women Free*, that helps the contemporary church understand how to define womanhood from a biblical framework. It was the book I wish I had read before entering into conversations about gender and sex. McCoy's book was released in 2022 against the cultural tensions around the question "What is a woman?" Her book articulates a biblical vision of womanhood that affirms female dignity and significance. One of McCoy's concerns is that modern secular feminism has distorted views of womanhood and motherhood. She contends that feminism, and other postmodern critical theories of the same ilk, have led to identity confusion. In contrast to culture, McCoy offers Christians a better perspective. She not only offers a biological case for how females differ from males, but even more important for Christians, she underscores a biblical framework for gender distinctions.

LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD

In retrospect, maybe my tweet was a tad snarky, and perhaps it was a little out of character for me to be so bold, especially for the world to see on full display. Still, in full transparency, I maintain I wasn't aiming for snarky, or cheeky, or pugnacious, or anything along the lines of looking for a fight. I also wasn't directing the rhetorical and hypothetical question at any particular person or even a group, except for perhaps President Biden and his administration. I was impassioned by the injustice occurring to biological women and the complicity of those who stood by silently. Social media has become the

contemporary public square, and while I knew that at a subconscious level, I was completely unprepared for the backlash I received from ideologically progressive Christians.

As surprising as it has been to witness the political debate surrounding Title IX, no amount of prior study could have prepared me for experiencing firsthand the level of discord LGBTQ+ narratives have caused in Christian circles. Perhaps I'm naive, but I assumed we, the church body, were on the same page about this. What my 2021 tweet, and the firestorm that ensued as a result, spotlighted was not only the lack of agreement on this cultural issue but also the lack of discipleship younger Millennials and Gen Z have received. There is an apparent deficiency in biblical literacy and Christian apologetics. More than ever, the time has come to address contemporary social justice issues from a Christian worldview perspective.