

BEYOND PURITY CULTURE:
EXPLORING HISTORY, IMPLICATIONS, AND ALTERNATIVES

By

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ABSTRACT

SHELBY DUNCAN HOWARD

BEYOND PURITY CULTURE:

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Under the direction of Nicole S. Symmonds, Ph.D.

This thesis offers a careful examination of the history and ethical implications of the purity culture movement upon the American evangelical teenage population and offers an alternative approach coined True Love Honors. The harm experienced by many participants in True Love Waits and other evangelical purity culture programs creates a moral dilemma for the American evangelical church today to reflect and develop a new ethical framework for sexual ethics for adolescents. The purpose of this research is to explore primary and secondary accounts of purity culture to understand specific ethical problems within the movement unto research of applicable ethical frameworks and approaches that may offer the substance lacking in the current sexual ethical norm. The concluding results identify three particular areas of lack which may be redressed by an ethic informed by feminist care ethics and privileging the values of autonomy, consent, and honor. For further study, I recommend the intersection of LGBTQIA+ youth with purity culture, contemporary thought on purity culture by Joshua Harris and other public figures of the early movement, and trauma-informed study on purity culture unto victims of sexual and domestic violence.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Key Terms Defined

Purity Culture is the general, all-encompassing term for the American evangelical Christian sexual ethic that encourages unwed individuals, especially teenagers to pledge and maintain abstinence before marriage. This term also refers to the atmosphere of the social groups affected, both in participating churches and within schools that teach an abstinence-only sex education.

Abstinence-Only Ethic/Education: Abstinence-only refers both to the sexual ethic focused on refrain from pre-marital sexual activity and to the sex education style in public and private education which primarily or solely teaches abstinence as pregnancy and STI prevention. It is an ethic built upon Scripture, tradition, and the tradition of Scriptural interpretation. The abstinence-only education trend is one that is common in Southern school systems, of both the Christian private and public variety. The degree of the abstinence-only education varies, including forms that fail to address any other birth control options at all and refrain from teaching sexual anatomy and mechanics to those that touch upon contraception while maintaining that abstinence is the only 100% effective avoidance technique and is therefore best.

True Love Waits has become a broad term commonly used interchangeably with “purity culture,” as it is the forerunner of the movement that remains the most common curriculum. It also refers to that particular curriculum and movement developed in the 1990s by Richard Ross with the support of the Southern Baptist Convention and Lifeway Christian Resources.

Silver Ring Thing: Starting in 1995, Danny Pattyn founded this American virginity pledge program which used concert-style conferences to promote the program and encourage teens to

sign the pledge. In 2004, SRT went global and gained a presence in the United Kingdom. SRT has recently rebranded as “Unaltered” as of 2019, though I will refer to it primarily as Silver Ring Thing or (SRT), for the sake of historical accuracy employing use of the literary present.

True Love Honors refers to the alternative Christian sexual ethic for teenagers I propose in chapter five, which is centered upon three pillars: honor, consent, and autonomy.

Introduction to the Ethical Quandary

In the fall of 1992, Richard Ross proposed the idea of True Love Waits to Lifeway Christian Resources as part of a Christian Sex Education campaign. The campaign gained rapid support from Lifeway, the Southern Baptist Convention, and other Evangelical Christians across the country. By the following year, youth groups had already started using the curriculum and signing abstinence pledges, conferences were being held for teens, and Richard Ross gained national attention when he appeared on the Today Show. Silver Ring Thing, which has now rebranded as “Unaltered,” picked up steam in 1995 as a concert-style conference that encouraged teens to take the purity pledge. Ever since, the model of True Love Waits has become a staple in the ethical upbringing of American evangelical youth as well as in that of youth in the Catholic tradition and many other places in the world where True Love Waits has been exported. Within the purview of this project, though, is the exploration of the history and implications of purity culture specifically upon evangelical youth in America and the alternative approaches to Christian sexual ethics which may benefit that demographic.

Since the 1990’s, the sexual ethic prescribed by adult evangelical Christians to their teenage counterparts has been focused on an abstinence-only sexual ethic that begins and ends with the imperative “do not have sex before marriage.” This sexual ethic takes a few different

forms, sometimes focused on the value of waiting as honoring to one's own body and mind or as honoring to "God's design" for sexuality and sometimes presented with the promise of a magical marital sex life. I will identify two waves of purity culture, as part of the significance, because even within True Love Waits, the phenomenon is ever-changing, never as stagnant as we may be led to believe. This first wave of purity culture is best exemplified by the Silver Ring Thing movement, which was a youth conference targeted at high school and college aged students, encouraging them to sign abstinence pledges. The second wave of purity culture, the generation to which I belong, started younger with middle school students and was more established as normative for evangelical youth. The 1990s Christian counter-cultural movement was less relevant by the later aughts and early 2010s, which meant that True Love Waits narrative had shifted from a cool, alternative lifestyle to the normative expectation of good evangelical teens.

Assuming that purity culture is ever-changing, I think it is not only appropriate but responsible to contribute to the conversation by critically engaging the preexistent sexual ethic that derives from purity culture in search of gaps to create a more substantive Christian sexual ethic for teenagers. My personal experience with purity culture, as the product of True Love Waits myself is certainly informative, but the larger issue is far more expansive than my own experience. I do not wish to demonize or destroy the values that True Love Waits holds dear, as I am able to identify good intentions in the program and in the social movement thereby created. However, the failures and insufficiencies of purity culture continue to grow ever more glaringly obvious. It is for that reason that I engage in this research project: to identify more substantive and responsible Christian ethic designed for teenagers.

Thesis Question and Sub-Questions

What meaningful virtues afforded by alternative Christian sexual ethics do abstinence-only sexual ethics stunt in evangelical youth in America?

This primary research question will serve as the focal point for this study. In an effort to pursue a more substantive Christian sexual ethic for American evangelical youth, we must be prepared to engage in ethical study of meaningful virtues present in alternative ethics. The operative assumption of this question which undergirds the entire project is that True Love Waits is insufficient. The purpose is not to minimize the virtues that purity culture does afford but to find ways to support other meaningful virtues as well in a more substantive ethic.

What are the history, implications, and habits of and associated with purity culture in America?

This question will be addressed in chapter one.

What moral sources of authority have and ought to inform sexual ethics for American evangelical adolescents?

This question will be divided into the second and third chapters by the distinction of “have informed” and “ought to inform.”

What alternative approaches exist and how can they do more help than harm to American evangelical youth?

This question will serve as our guide for thinking through conclusions and solutions in the fifth and final chapter.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2: History, Implications, and Habits

In the second chapter of this thesis, we will engage research questions regarding the history, implications, and habits of purity culture within the American evangelical context. This section is primarily concerned with identifying the historical elements that have shaped the movement to answer the question what has purity culture been for American evangelical youth, and what has it become? As I have identified in my introductory remarks, the relatively young phenomenon has already seen a second generation of students become adults, as the eldest of Generation Z is currently in their early twenties. This chapter takes note of the distinctions between the two generations who have grown up under the purity culture sexual ethic and seek to give language to some of those key differences while maintaining the integrity of purity culture as a larger movement. A portion of this section is devoted to the personal accounts of some such young adult inheritors of purity culture from the work of Christine Gardner's *Making Chastity Sexy*.

Beyond the history and development of purity culture, this chapter also considers the elements of sexual ethics engaged (whether intentionally or unintentionally) by True Love Waits that are not strictly confined to sexual activity or lack thereof. These elements pertinent to the field of sexual ethics include modesty and body image, objectification and animalization of individuals, and the exclusion of LGBTQ+ youth. Perhaps most directly connected to purity culture is modesty. Part of True Love Waits involves the development of teenagers who are pure in heart, which of course leads to conversations regarding lust. Let me begin with the acknowledgment that purity culture is extremely heteronormative in language and in practice, but we will deal with that at greater length in the second chapter. Those conversations regarding

lust, being heteronormative as they are, begin with teaching the teenage males to not lust after their female counterparts while teaching the teenage females to dress modestly as to support their brothers in Christ in their pursuit of purity.

The issues with such language abound, but they primarily hinge upon three concepts: the notion that the female's purity hinges upon her support of the male's purity, the objectification of young women by such unnecessary attention to their pubescent (and often pre-pubescent) bodies and animalization of young men by the creation of cosmic battle for their sexual desires, and the complete disregard for LGBTQIA+ youth. Though this latter omission is unsurprising since the American evangelical church is known for being typically unaffirming of the LGBTQIA+ community, it is a large gap in a sexual ethical framework. The assumption of heteronormative relationships excludes youth who are not engaged in cisgendered heterosexual relationships and misses opportunities to deal with sexual ethics substantively as a result. The issue of sexual abuse also raises questions, some of which the chapter will explore. This chapter will engage with all of these implications and habits concerned with purity culture in addition to the historical elements previously mentioned.

Chapter 3: Moral Sources of Authority which Inform Purity Culture

The third chapter will engage the moral sources of authority most prevalent in the language and material of purity culture, pulling from both *True Love Waits* and *Silver Ring Thing*. With a primary focus on Christian ethics, this work will rely most heavily upon the Wesleyan quadrilateral in its considerations of primary sources of moral authority, which include: Scripture, experience, reason, and tradition. In this chapter, we will engage the sources of moral authority that have informed and continue to inform the purity culture sexual ethic, which I have identified most prevalently as Scripture and tradition.

The ethical source of tradition is evident in the development of the purity culture movement over the last thirty years, wherein much of the general message has remained the same. The tradition of abstinence until marriage continues in True Love Waits today, and it is a tradition that did not begin in 1992. The tradition of abstinence has been practiced throughout Christian history in various groups for various reasons. Celibacy is a respected tradition in many denominations and other religious expressions beyond Christianity. We of course recognize American evangelical purity culture as a distinct phenomenon, but its most basic belief is one that is based in a deep tradition of Christian celibacy, a feature that has been used as a selling point for True Love Waits.

Scripture is the second source of moral authority most common to purity culture, as the curriculum includes both direct and indirect references to God's design for sex and marriage as well as passages regarding sexual immorality. I will argue in this chapter that the most informative source of moral authority for purity culture, though, is actually the *tradition of Scriptural interpretation*, which refers to the methods by which Scripture has been interpreted traditionally over time and continues to be handed down. As many adherents to purity culture would concede, pre-marital sex is not explicitly in the Bible; therefore, the Scriptures employed in support of the movement are employed in that way by interpretation which allows the reader to understand them to encompass pre-marital sexual activity.

Chapter 4: Moral Sources of Authority which May be Helpful

The premise of this thesis that a more substantive Christian ethic is possible hinges upon the conviction that experience is an important moral source of authority, though it is often absent from purity culture dialogue. It is the experience of people who have grown up in purity culture, who have been ignored by purity culture, and who have been harmed by purity culture, which

shed light into the future of Christian sexual ethics for teenagers. When we ask about the experiences of the people involved, we are able to see a little bit more of what we ought to do next. We can take a cue from Womanist theologians and ethicists who propose that the lived experience of the unheard is essential to a substantive and empathetic Christian ethic. This chapter will engage with feminist care ethicists to think through the ways experience ought to inform our Christian sexual ethic for teenagers.

I will also recommend that reason be added to the mix of moral sources of authority for this sexual ethic, most prevalently in terms of sex education. A large element of the True Love Waits movement is education, yet the education is quite limited in terms of substance. The education of youth, especially in schools ought to consider reason as a moral source of authority, to acknowledge the reality of sexually active teenagers. If sex is still happening, it makes sense to craft a sexual ethic that is informative and helpful beyond the imperative to not have pre-marital sex.

Chapter 5: Alternative Approaches

This final chapter will explore alternative approaches to sexual ethics for American evangelical youth with special attention to the virtues that may be afforded by such alternative approaches that were found lacking in the abstinence-only variety. Such virtues we will discover include consent, autonomy, and honor. A sexual ethic that begins in a place of consent, boundaries, respect, and autonomy might land in a different place than the ethic that begins with a prescriptive abstinence, but those virtues afforded are significant for adolescent and adult beings who have sexual natures alike. Studies are inconsistent in answering the question of if Christian teenagers are even waiting to engage in sexual activity until marriage, which could naturally cause one to question the effectivity of purity culture to achieve its goals. We will not

spend time debating that impossible question, but we will notice the ways in which purity culture has certainly marked American evangelical adolescents and seek alternative approaches to sexual ethics that afford those meaningful virtues of honor, respect, consent, and autonomy.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY, HABITS, AND IMPLICATIONS

As outlined in the introductory chapter, this second chapter is devoted to wrestling with the question: *What are the history, implications, and habits of and associated with purity culture in evangelical America?* The nature of this project is deeply personal to me, so the work of this chapter is in part reflective of my own experiences, in part historical analysis, and in part ethical consideration of the implications and habits which spring forth from the purity culture movement in evangelical America.

An Introduction to the History of Purity Culture

Though the virtues of purity, chastity, modesty, and preservation of virginity (especially in young women) are certainly neither new nor unique to the Church or the world at large, the purview of this project will only deal briefly with thinkers or groups preceding the 20th century or in cultures and contexts beyond that which has been defined. The three primary pillars of purity culture that we will deal with historically are Silver Ring Thing, True Love Waits, and *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Each of these items distinctly participated in the forging of a purity culture movement in the 1990s which remains relevant in the evangelical American context thirty years later.

The first piece of this 90s trifecta of purity culture is Silver Ring Thing, which Christine Gardner reflects upon in *Making Chastity Sexy*¹. Silver Ring Thing, or SRT, was founded in 1995 by Denny and Amy Pattyn in Arizona as a movement of concert-style conferences directed

¹ Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns*. 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1525/j.ctt1ppqsn>.

at teenagers and young adults to encourage that group to pledge and pursue purity as a form of following Christ. They are able to boast both purity pledges and Christian conversions in the hundreds of thousands.² SRT has been known as Unaltered since 2019, when it underwent an internal rebranding with expansionary language to become a movement still concerned with purity but more broadly with “fullness of life within God’s design.” They currently offer educational resources and trainings for parents, retreats for teens, group-style curriculum, and a conference now known as the “Unaltered Tour.”³ This expansion enables the organization to speak to more issues they find relevant to teens beyond purity, though it seems that purity is still an important piece to that life within God’s design.

Silver Ring Thing, though not the first chronologically, best represents the first wave of purity culture and the move to the more recent phenomenon of a second wave purity culture. In first wave purity culture, we see an audience of older teenagers and college students. The majority of Gardner’s interviewees involved in SRT were aged 16-22 when they pledged their purity at these concert-style conferences.⁴ Second wave purity culture, by contrast, is less in the style of 1990s counter-cultural Jesus conference and more along the lines of small group curriculum, which lends itself more easily to a younger audience. Second wave purity culture also, like Unaltered is able to take a vaguer approach, promoting a “fullness of life” lifestyle betterment quality. I came up in purity culture on what I consider the cusp of second wave purity culture. I underwent True Love Waits curriculum in church under adult supervision as a 12 year old student. My younger siblings who are now in middle and high school, by contrast, have not experienced formal purity retreats, balls, or curriculum in their youth group experience. Instead,

² “What Is Unaltered?” accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.unaltered.org/whatisunaltered>.

³ “What Is Unaltered?” accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.unaltered.org/whatisunaltered>.

⁴ Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns*. 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1525/j.ctt1ppqsn>.

they are taught more broadly about “dating and relationships” with abstinence still interwoven within the message.

True Love Waits, which bears the name most closely associated with the purity culture movement, began as a Christian sex education campaign for the Southern Baptist Convention. The True Love Waits project was launched in 1987 and presented to Lifeway in 1992. By 1993, the first six resources of True Love Waits were released as a Christian Sex Education series, the first commitment cards were signed, a first True Love Waits rally was held in Washington D.C., and Southern Baptist Convention youth groups were first introduced to the curriculum. In 2003, “True Love Waits Goes Home” was launched, emphasizing the role of parents and changing the language of the purity pledge to bring in a portion for parents to pledge their guidance on the student’s quest for living a pure life. In 2007, True Love Waits began a global effort to push into African countries including eSwatini (formerly Swaziland), Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya. The last update to the True Love Waits Timeline on the Lifeway website is 2010 with the launch of “A Path of Purity,” which is an updated curriculum to emphasize a challenge to “parents to use life markers to reinforce messages of purity, each one guiding the teenager to understand and adopt a lifestyle based on biblical standards of purity.”⁵ Similarly to the rebranding of Silver Ring Thing, the move toward language of pure “lifestyle” is evident in the 2010s.⁶

The final piece to our 90s trifecta of purity culture is not as directly related to curriculum and pledges to purity, but still deeply relevant: *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris. *I*

⁵ Information pulled directly from LifeWay’s website: “History Of True Love Waits | Lifeway” accessed March 26, 2022, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/product-family/true-love-waits/history>.

⁶ This dating especially supports my timeline and theory of second wave purity culture, as I stated that I place myself upon the cusp of this shift. I took my True Love Waits purity pledge in 2011.

Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Relationships and Romance was released in 1997 as a personal take on dating that challenged many teens and young adults to pursue courting relationships, which differed from mainstream or secular dating in the boundaries set of group dates and emphasizing sexual purity to the end of better relationship experiences and marriage. Harris's book has an interesting history which will serve as a transitional piece to the implications and habits of purity culture. Joshua Harris published the work at the age of 21, placing him within the target age demographic of *True Love Waits* and *Silver Ring Thing* at the time of the purity culture movement's inception. Harris's book has sold over 800,000 copies and has been both praised and criticized since its publication. The primary points of criticism deal with the lack of autonomy provided for young women, the hierarchical nature of the gendered language, and the discouragement of young men and women by Harris to form coed relationships. Since 2016, though, Harris has apologized for the harmful portions of the book and deconstructed his own beliefs about purity, sexuality, the Church, and God.⁷ Harris's retraction in recent years demonstrates the challenges of purity culture long-term and the validity of the concerns which ought to be taken seriously by the American evangelical church. For if one of purity culture's most notorious authors may even see the gaps, how many more can we recognize by privileging the experiences of women raised in purity culture?⁸

⁷ Harris announced via social media in 2019 his divorce from wife Shannon (married 1998) and that he no longer identifies as Christian. <https://www.instagram.com/harrisjosh/>

⁸ Joshua Harris's experience with purity culture and the deconstruction of his own work matters on its own. I also think that the experiences of those who have been harmed by the shame, misogyny, and homophobia of purity culture writings and teachings matter on their own. This is a sentiment Josh Harris himself shares in his apology statements on his social media accounts and professional website.

Habits of Purity Culture

The habits of purity culture can be argued and dissected endlessly, but I will draw our attention to three pertinent habits of purity culture: complementarianism, objectification, and the promise of marital bliss. I will start with the complementarian habit, move into the habit of objectifying metaphor usage, and conclude with the habit that promises successful, happy marriages as the reward for abstinence.

The complexities of the impact of complementarianism is beyond the purview of this project, but it will come up in our work in unpacking the habits and implications. As such, I think it necessary to clearly define complementarianism. Complementarianism, for our purposes, may be defined as a theological worldview characteristic of evangelical American Christianity which subscribes to traditional roles of the sexes, defining the role of women as subservient to men both in family and church structures. The general idea behind the name is that Christian men and women are divinely created with distinct skills and abilities which “complement” one another, and this distinction extends to the division of labor and authority. Egalitarianism, on the other hand, is the worldview that seeks gender equality and rather focuses on the equality of creation and redemption among the genders. I choose the word “genders” intentionally in my working definition of egalitarianism, for it is important for this essay to remember that the egalitarian worldview allows for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in a way that is often not afforded by the complementarian counterpart. The subordination of women under men begins young with purity culture, prioritizing male pleasure, male experience, male temptation, and male leadership. We will later deal with modesty, which is an implication that comes out of complementarianism as well as objectification.

The objectification habit occurs in a way that is philosophically connected to complementarianism, but I posit it as distinct for it does not necessarily objectify women alone. One time in the hall of my undergraduate religion floor, some classmates and I were waiting for our next class to start and we decided to waste the time by sharing the different things we heard our purity compared to in youth group. My personal favorite was the piece of tape that was no longer sticky after being passed around the room of clammy handed middle schoolers. What I noticed is that each and every example of metaphor used for our bodies via virginity depicted the young men and women in the room as objects. It is difficult to imagine oneself as autonomous moral or sexual agent when one has been objectified so.

The third habit of purity culture is the promise of marital bliss, both relationally and sexually. Unfortunately, we know that this promise is a myth. Allow Joshua Harris to take the focus once more. He did everything right by the standard of purity culture dating and marriage and quite literally wrote the book on Christian dating, yet his marriage ended in divorce. The good end of purity culture for teenagers is the promise that God will bless their marriage, including their sex lives, if they will honor God and future spouse with their virginity. Of course this promise is not substantiated by the biblical witness or by sociology, but it is a promise many Christian teens believe nonetheless. What is interesting to me is that as an adult I learned that this promise of marital bliss is not only mythical, but it is intentionally mythical. The week before my wedding, my husband's youth pastor called him to tell him to lower his expectations sexually, that the sexual marital bliss takes some time, and that sex will not be all that it is cracked up to be at first. Now, we do not have time to unpack all of that, but my loving and egalitarian husband was quick to notice in speaking with me about it later that day that this marital bliss promise we

had begun deconstructing long before was a myth that was taught to us by people who did not even buy into it themselves.

Implications of Purity Culture

Though there are many implications of purity culture which vary by experience and identity within the evangelical hierarchy, we will focus upon three: questioning discouraged, modesty, and disembodiment. The average evangelical teen is not given proper space to ask questions. I remember a Sunday school classmate in my sophomore year of high school asking questions about Jesus as a man and as a human in relation to what sexuality could be like for Christ who is fully human and fully God. She was shamed for asking those questions, which in retrospect were interesting questions that could have easily led to conversations both regarding Christology and sexuality. Not only were her questions shot down in class, but my pastor's wife chose to speak poorly of her later to me for how inappropriate she was by asking such questions.⁹ Questioning is discouraged when the questions do not fit the mold of preparation and convention framed by youth workers, but more fundamentally, the message "Do not have sex before marriage because it is displeasing to God and bad for your future marriage," does not beg many a question, if any at all. It is also certainly unbecoming of a young evangelical woman to take up enough space to ask uncomfortable questions.

Modesty, as an implication of purity culture, is most often taught in terms of the need for young girls to keep their bodies covered so as not to unnecessarily tempt their male counterparts with their shoulders, legs, cleavage, etc. Based in Romans 14:13, the theological implication is

⁹ This same conversation was significant for my experience with grooming endorsed by the church, which I think is very important to the conversation around harm which can come out of purity culture, though I do not have the space to deal adequately with the topic.

that part of young women's purity is dressing in such a way as to keep young men's thoughts pure.¹⁰ A young woman's modesty is part of her own purity because pure young women are not temptresses. In *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, Beth Allison Barr, recalls what is surely a common experience with a Christian camp's unwritten dress code which forbade tank-tops for this virtue of modesty.¹¹ However, as we have already begun to see, the implication of modesty bears the potential for harm to young women's body image and an inappropriate responsibility placed upon their little shoulders.¹²

Linda Kay Klein reflects in 2018 book *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* upon her experiences and the experiences of other women like her within the evangelical American church, especially in a youth group setting that promoted purity culture. One notable chapter in her book takes the audience back to one of Klein's memories of a youth group retreat in which her female friend (13 at the time) was berated by a female adult leader for her lack of modesty, though not bodily. Klein's friend was too loud, too inquisitive, too much. The adolescent girl was accused of being that way for the attention of boys due to her own internal insecurity. If an implication of purity culture is the expectation of modesty in young women, it is vital to understand that this modesty extends to the whole being of seventh grade girls.¹³ The gospel of modesty then does not only

¹⁰ "Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister." Romans 13:14. New International Version. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%2014%3A13&version=NIV>

¹¹ Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*, (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress), 2021.

¹² Joshua Harris frames the responsibility of girls as a request for them to "help" their brothers in Christ in that particular way. This "helper" language is compelling because it mirrors the teachings of complementarianism, wherein women are responsible for helping their male counterparts, especially their husbands.

¹³ Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Touchstone), 2018.

refer to Barr's "sanctifying modesty,"¹⁴ but to the shrinking of young women's beings: to be smaller, to be quieter, to ask fewer questions, to offer less insight, to yield to male speakers, to not impose.¹⁵

Disembodiment is a complex piece to the puzzle of purity culture's implications. Disembodiment here refers to the disconnectedness one may feel toward one's own body as well as the view resultant of the habit of objectification of "other" bodies which separates another's self from their physical form. Disembodiment in the context of this implication is regarded with an entirely negative view. Disembodiment in this case does not pertain to an independent self-actualization which yields a higher enlightenment freeing oneself from one's bodily constraints. Rather, this kind of disembodiment we are dealing with cannot be of that latter nature for it would necessarily involve autonomous choice, whereas this disembodiment is mapped onto people by teachings of others in higher positions of power than the objectified bodies.

Disembodiment is evident in the shame felt and experienced by young women who struggle with feeling like their bodies are dirty and bad. It also happens for young men who are taught that their sexual desires are too strong for them to control on their own, and their "sisters in Christ" ought to aid them in that pursuit of their purity by way of modesty. Disembodiment occurs then for the young male's own body where his sexuality is dangerous and for his view of young females who have been objectified before him. According to their website, one of Unaltered's new initiatives involves teaching parents how to talk about pornography with their

¹⁴ Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*, (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress), 2021, 154.

¹⁵ In the Living Proof Ministries blog, Beth Moore reflects similar sentiments about shrinking herself in a complementarian, modest woman-driven way: <https://blog.lproof.org/2018/05/a-letter-to-my-brothers.html>. I find this reflection that she often opted for flats over heels to appear shorter than the men she would be speaking alongside of generative for further reflection upon the motives behind the complementarian modesty obsession. However, this trail is beyond the purview of this chapter.

teenagers. American opinions on pornography are varied both within and beyond the evangelical church, making statistics on teenage pornography consumption varied at best, but we do know that the American evangelical church has grown increasingly concerned with pornography usage especially by teenage males. This concern for the American evangelical church ought to raise questions about how teachings that lead to trends of disembodiment might be reinforced by sexual exploration that can be disconnected from another's body. On the other hand, girls are hardly ever talked to about pornography or independent sexual exploration.

But the effects of disembodiment do not necessarily have to be as complex and nuanced as that which relates to teenage pornography consumption or self-exploration. The implications of disembodiment are evident in the mundane situations as simple as something I experienced recently. I was shopping at a thrift store a few weeks ago and picked up a pair of pants that were marked a size that I do not normally wear, but I could tell that whether they had been improperly labelled or shrunk by their previous owner, those pants would fit. I did not even think about trying them on, I just bought them because I knew they would fit. And I realized when I got home and tried them on (they fit beautifully) that though this was a normal situation for me now as an adult, my 16 year old self could have never related to this mundane experience. For years, I had such little awareness of my own body that I could not have picked up a pair of pants and thought to myself, "This looks to be about the width of my waist and hips." Let me be clear that this is not an issue of body dysmorphia as related to disordered eating, which could also be discussed in reference to modesty and the trauma of becoming a woman when your body is a shameful, sexual thing, but as that was not my experience, this was an issue of something else. This was an issue of disembodiment. I have spent the better part of the last decade learning how

to exist within my body, and only recently have I realized that I finally can recognize the size of my own waist.

One interesting item of note on this particular topic is the absence of responsibility of young men to manage their own sexual desires or pluck out their eyeballs. The logic tracks, though because of the complementarian habit of purity culture which necessarily places the burden of sin on women over men, for women were the “first” to eat of the forbidden fruit in the garden. But the perhaps unintended implication of such complementarian view is a diminished view of male sexuality that reduces the male sexual being to animalistic, uncontrollable being who is hardly autonomous. What is so interesting phenomenologically is the reductionary nature of such a theology that was intended to place the male sexual being in the highest seat of the sexual beings hierarchy has actually reduced him to a sexual animal. Purity culture therefore bears harmful implications for both adolescent heterosexual females and males. The young men may have a pass on their responsibility to engage responsibly with their own sexual desire while maintaining the higher seat of hierarchy, but they are simultaneously dishonored not to mention underprepared for sexual intimacy both immanent and future.

CHAPTER 3

MORAL SOURCES OF AUTHORITY FOR PURITY CULTURE

In this chapter, we will dedicate time to the pursuit of understanding purity culture's ethical origins. We have already dealt with its historical origins, which have led us to the question of which sources of moral authority have informed the purity culture sexual ethic? We will also deal with the operative ethical frameworks for purity culture. The four sources of moral authority most commonly analyzed in Christian sexual ethics, collectively referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, include reason, experience, Scripture, and tradition.¹⁶ Among these sources, purity culture privileges Scripture and tradition most. It is the particular intersection of these two sources, the tradition of a rigid literal Scriptural interpretation which serves as the most authoritative moral source. I also argue that reason is privileged as a moral source of authority as indicated by the ethical/philosophical frameworks, while experience is the most explicitly neglected source, especially in 21st century purity culture. A fifth source of authority we will explore for its pertinence within a youth group dynamic is that of trusted religious leaders.¹⁷ The primary ethical frameworks of purity culture include deontology and consequentialism. Let us begin there.

¹⁶ Ted A. Campbell, "The 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral': The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth," *Methodist History* 29 (2): 87–95, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000835272&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. 1991.

¹⁷ David P. Gushee and Glen Harold Stassen, and Glen Harold Stassen. *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, second edition, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 2016.

Ethical Frameworks for Purity Culture

From an ethical framework perspective, the foremost ethical framework operating within purity culture is deontology. This rules-based ethical framework is grounded in an understanding of biblical sexual morality and immorality as clear-cut and uncompromising. Sexual immorality is, in this view, any and all sexual activity that happens beyond the confines of homosexual monogamous marriage. This view connects to the tradition of Scriptural interpretation, which we will discuss later in this chapter. The weakness of the deontological approach generally is the rigid nature of an approach that frames all actions as right or wrong in and of those actions themselves. Another limitation of the deontological framework for this topic is the impersonal nature of deontology. As Deak and Saroglou conclude in their research, an ethical framework of care can help religion guard against the “antisocial consequences of impersonal deontology.”¹⁸ Feminist care ethicists, who will inform Chapter 4, would certainly agree with that concept. Deontology is impersonal, and therefore offers a natural word to the awkward conversations about purity for teens. Additionally, impersonal deontology makes sense for the topic due to the abstract nature of purity as a concept. Purity is a difficult and abstract concept, as it exists in an idealized liminal space between doing and being. Similar to the concept of “righteousness,” Christians have much to say about the concept but struggle to understand and teach what it actually is and how one may pursue or achieve it.

Unfortunately for the adolescent population most impacted, though, purity cannot be impersonal when it becomes tied to sex and sexuality because sex and sexuality *are* personal. This limitation of the deontological ethical framework makes it an insufficient framework for a

¹⁸Csilla Deak and Vassilis Saroglou. “Valuing Care Protects Religiosity from the Antisocial Consequences of Impersonal Deontology.” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 29 (2): 171–89. doi:10.1163/15709256-12341339. 2016.

Christian sexual ethic. Rules-based ethics typically fail to substantially encompass an ethic for a faith that insists upon a deity who looks upon the heart and a messiah who preaches good news to the poor in spirit, so in the context of a deeply complex characteristic of the human experience, deontology simply cannot fully frame a substantive ethic. In the case of purity culture, I also argue that a deontological ethical approach is unhelpful because of the dualistic thinking which oversimplifies sex and sexuality for adolescents. I posit that a population experiencing puberty along with other neurological changes is the last population that should be given an ethical framework that lacks nuance. Perhaps a rules-based ethical framework can manage to convince some adolescents to abstain from sex before marriage, but it is largely ineffective in the long term and insufficient for an operative ethical framework for those who have sex in marriage.¹⁹

I have a distinct memory of being twelve years old during my youth group's True Love Waits series. One Wednesday evening as we were closing out the curriculum portion of youth group, my youth pastor very casually said almost as an aside, "And remember, purity is not just about sex. It's about the other sexual acts you can do that lead to sex, so make sure you're avoiding all of that." My 12-year-old self had some questions, but there was no time to say, "Well, what do you mean by that, Pastor? Is kissing included in that taboo list of sexual don'ts?" And when the following week had the message of "don't ask where 'the line' is, because if you have to ask then you're already lusting and heading down a bad path." I wonder now as an adult

¹⁹ Over 70% of respondents to this study reported having premarital sexual relations. Janet E. Rosenbaum and Byron Weathersbee. 2013. "True Love Waits: Do Southern Baptists?: Premarital Sexual Behavior among Newly Married Southern Baptist Sunday School Students." *Journal of Religion and Health* 52 (1): 263–75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-010-9445-5>.

who studies sexual ethics if it ever occurred to my pastor that some of us weren't heading down any paths and were just twelve.

This personal anecdote is pertinent for this conversation on the insufficiency of a rules-based approach to sexual ethics for Christian teens insofar as it discourages questions. What questions could a sixth grader formulate regarding how to later interact ethically with their married sexual partner when the rule is to strive to think about sex as little as possible prior to holy matrimony? If having sex is wrong, doing "other" ambiguous sexual things is wrong, and asking or wondering about boundaries is wrong, then it is very difficult to move into a more nuanced space that privileges autonomy and honor of all parties.

I often say that I was taught to say "no" before I was taught that the "no" was mine to give. I also cheekily remark to my friends frequently that I did not consent to purity culture. Both remarks are true of my experience and are largely indicative of my own coping through humor, but I think that they represent my early ethical questions around the lack of substance to purity culture. How could we have started with an absolute rule? Perhaps it is because sex is a cultural taboo, or perhaps it is because the target demographic is coming of age, but whatever the reason, when the absolute rule is where an ethic starts, it is also the rule where the ethic ends. "Do not have sex before marriage," is an absolute, inarguable rule which does not leave room for question or elaboration. Therefore, the Christian sexual ethic is presented to teens as a simplified, easily solved problem that places sexual desire as inherently problematic or sinful prior to

marriage then assumes that no sexual ethic is needed within marriage.²⁰ The problem with this lack of substance is that there are consequences to this negligence.

As an individual impacted by the abstinence movement in my secular sex education as well, I would argue that consequentialism is also an operative ethical framework within purity culture ethics, at least theoretically. Consequentialism is present in this ethic in two distinct forms: the positive and the negative. The latter is less complex, so I will begin there. The negative consequentialism of purity culture is what is common in abstinence-only or abstinence-heavy sex education. It often sounds something like a reminder that no contraceptive method is 100% effective, so being sexually active (in cisgendered, heterosexual relationships) will always run the risk of sexually transmitted infection or unplanned pregnancy. In the words of the health class/gym teacher from satirical 2004 film *Mean Girls*, “If you have sex, you will get chlamydia and die.”²¹ The positive side of purity culture’s consequentialism is evident in the magical married sex narrative, which is most often directed to the young men, more than the young women, though both groups have heard it.

One of the selling points of purity culture, of the move to kiss dating goodbye is the promise that abstaining now will improve your future marriage. This promise is commonly referred to as the “mind-blowing sex myth” by critics of purity culture. However, the mind-blowing sex myth is not sold solely in terms of married sex life; it also refers to intimacy and righteousness. When a young Christian couple abstains from sex until marriage, they are also promised that their relationship will be better for it because they have avoided that deadly sin.

²⁰ This consideration might lead to conversations around sexual coercion and physical abuse within marriage. A good resource for understanding this experience and theorizing the ethical responsibilities of the Church is Ruth Tucker’s *Black and White Bible, Black and Blue Wife: My Story of Finding Hope after Domestic Abuse*, (2016).

²¹ *Mean Girls*, directed by Mark Waters, (Paramount Pictures, 2004) <https://www.amazon.com/Mean-Girls-Lindsay-Lohan/dp/B000HZGBJC>.

This consequentialist ethical framework is slightly more substantive than the deontological framework, but it still misses the mark in its limited foresight. What has been the experience of many evangelical adults after purity culture are difficult transitions to being sexually active in marriage, fear of intimacy, and shame around body and sexuality. These issues and others are consequences of purity culture that are experienced by people who did follow all the rules. Unfortunately, a weakness of consequentialist ethics is that no person can ever accurately anticipate the future consequences in full. It is for these consequences among many others that this work matters.

Additionally, I argue that the failure of purity culture to consider the consequences of True Love Waits is indicative of a lazy consequentialist ethic, or perhaps even a deontological ethic disguised as consequentialist. The operative ethical framework remains the rule of “do not have sex before marriage,” the primary justification for which remains the moral conviction that it is sinful in and of itself. Sin as prescribed by nature of “God said so,” is a rule, not a fully formed concern for future consequences, unless that consequence is the wrath of God. In that case, punishment for sexual sin as a focal point might make the purity culture ethic a bit more consequentialist after all, but I maintain that it is a half-baked consequentialism.

Moral Sources of Authority Informing Purity Culture

One of the primary sources of moral authority for the purity culture ethic is Scripture. Scriptural authority is so integral to True Love Waits that in 1996 a group of evangelical leaders produced a teen-centric study Bible called the True Love Waits Bible. This Bible, subtitled “A Bible of Commitment and Truth” is a New International Version translation that is supplemented with “facts and information that make the Word simple and clear – with the True Love Waits

theme woven throughout.”²² This need of purity culture to supplement Scripture with its own interpretive choices has led me to argue that while the primary source of moral authority is often claimed to be Scripture, it is sometimes actually tradition – namely a particular tradition of Scriptural interpretation. This tradition opts for an interpretation of sexual immorality that encompasses all sexual activity outside of monogamous heterosexual marriage, including sexual activity before one enters marriage. This traditional view of sex and marriage is the cornerstone to the purity culture ethic because the few passages of Scripture which pertain to sex “outside of marriage” are read through a traditional hermeneutic.²³ The passages do not speak for themselves, neither are they plain and simple. Additionally, in reference to the “tradition” which is often assigned by American evangelicals to the Christians of the New Testament themselves,²⁴ philosophers such as Michel Foucault trace this particular expression of sexual purity to the social Victorian bourgeoisie.²⁵

Hebrews 13:4 is perhaps the most popular verse employed in support of the purity culture ethic, stating, “Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers.”²⁶ The traditional view of sex and marriage which presupposes the immorality of premarital sex interprets premarital sexual activity as actions that dishonor or defile the “marriage bed.” Another oft-cited purity culture verse is 1 Corinthians 7:2, where it is written, “But because of cases of sexual immorality, each

²² Adapted from the abstract on the Amazon purchase page. <https://www.amazon.com/True-Love-Waits-Bible-Niv/dp/1558196218>.

²³ “Hermeneutics” refers to theory and study of Biblical interpretation, or the lens through which we read the Bible, that which informs our interpretation.

²⁴ This false history is common to the fundamentalist claim to “tradition.”

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books), 1990.

²⁶ Hebrews 13:4, New Revised Standard Version.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+13&version=NRSVUE>.

man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.”²⁷ This verse, like the former, is read on its own, outside of context which would provide greater insight into the author’s intended meaning. For the purity culture ethic, this verse indicates marriage and faithfulness within marriage as a sort of solution to sexual immorality, reinforcing the idea that all sexual activity outside of marriage is immoral. All other passages referencing sexual immorality, then, come to be, at least in part, concerning premarital sex.²⁸

Trusted religious leaders make another significant moral source of authority for purity culture, due to the power dynamics at play in a youth group setting between youth pastors/workers and students and due to the emphasis in second-wave purity culture upon the role of parents in the teaching purity to their students.²⁹ Youth pastors and youth workers are trusted authority figures in the lives of students who also bear authority from God via church affiliation, which makes their authority as religious leaders morally authoritative. What is interesting in terms of this moral source of authority for second-wave purity culture is the sharing of religious authority with the parents. This presents an interesting dynamic of authority for the parent-child relationship because the parents are let into the realm of trusted religious leaders as well. Furthermore, three decades into the purity culture phenomenon, the youngest generation of purity culture recipients have a history of religious leaders who have taught and practiced abstinence, reinforcing the moral authority of their direct religious leaders. This third generation is distinct from the first two because it is the first group who has received the moral imperatives largely from individuals who were also recipients of those imperatives in their own

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:2, New Revised Standard Version.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%207&version=NRSVUE>.

²⁸ “What Does the Bible Say about Sex before Marriage?” GotQuestions.org, Got Questions Ministries, April 1, 2022, accessed November 28, 2022. <https://www.gotquestions.org/sex-before-marriage.html>.

²⁹ “What Is Unaltered?” Accessed November 28. <https://www.unaltered.org/parents>.

adolescence. As a second-generation purity culture kid, this phenomenon had begun, as a few of our younger leaders had practiced True Love Waits, but the older leaders were adults before the 1990s.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have dealt carefully with the questions of which sources of moral authority have informed purity culture and what ethical frameworks are operative in the worldview of the phenomenon. The moral sources of authority most pertinent to purity culture include Scripture and tradition, and trusted religious leaders are also morally authoritative. The tradition of Scriptural interpretation is the intersection between those two most prevalent moral sources of authority. Deontological ethics is the primary ethical frameworks for purity culture, privileging the moral rule first. Consequentialism is another ethical framework partially informative for purity culture, as it also considers future consequences. We have explored the limitations of these and will move into alternative sources of authority in the next chapter.

As we will flesh out in the next chapter, I will take a different approach to Christian sexual ethics for teenagers that will privilege experience additionally. The trajectory of purity culture has already demonstrated the lack of long-term substance and answers to critical, nuanced questions about sex and sexuality. My approach is largely in the feminist care ethics vein, though I will also offer a brief teleological rationale as well. The feminist care ethicists such as Virginia Held, Carol Gilligan, and Sara Moslener are informative to my ethical framework, as they hold the ideals of autonomy and honor that I do and privilege the experiences of women who have been negatively impacted by patriarchy in the Church in many ways, including purity culture. The teleological framework is a conversation partner to the deontological framework of purity culture. A teleological framework is concerned with that

which is a good *end*, which I argue is teenagers as healthy and whole beings. This framework is helpful to the conversation because it does not directly oppose the teachings of abstinence, as my aim is not to completely deconstruct purity culture but to offer alternatives that are more substantive. A teleological approach does not preclude the choice to abstain from sex before marriage; it shifts the focus to allow for nuance and choice to pursue a sexually ethical life with or without abstinence.

CHAPTER 4

MORAL SOURCES OF AUTHORITY WHICH MAY BE HELPFUL

In this chapter we will explore alternative ethical thought and additional sources of moral authority which may be helpful for a substantive sexual ethic for teenagers generally and that are particularly useful for the alternative approach to Christian sexual ethics for teenagers which we will explore in the fifth chapter.

An Alternative Ethical Framework

One helpful alternative ethical framework is one that derives from feminist care ethics and is adjusted to a teenage audience and a topic of sex and sexuality. The primary concern of feminist ethics is the dismantling of patriarchal oppression for the sake of gender equality. One of the primary philosophical moves of feminist ethics is the decentering of male concerns and experiences in favor of centering the female. For feminist care ethics, an ethic of care and justice is the grounding framework for interacting with the world in morally acceptable ways. In this chapter, we will work with the feminist care ethical framework to develop a more helpful and substantive Christian sexual ethic for teenagers.

The first objective of this work, chronologically, is to decenter the patriarchal elements of purity culture and center the subjugated group: teenage girls. This objective may be pursued conceptually, as we listen to more female voices, namely teenage girls themselves and women who have grown up in purity culture, but practical ways of decentering patriarchy in our church bodies are also possible. A practical reclamation of Scripture and church history may look like actively choosing to learn and teach stories of women in the Bible – especially those of Deborah, Hagar, Huldah, Bathsheba, Phoebe, Lydia, and many others who are often left out of the Ruth,

Mother Mary, and “Proverbs 31 woman” camp.³⁰ In teaching the lesser known stories of women in the Bible and learning about women in early Christian leadership, this centering of the female experience is possible, and the path toward dignity and equality may begin. For Anne Bennett, “women’s liberation involves every facet of life and meaning.”³¹ The task of women’s liberation, then involves sexuality, purity, and modesty – all of which in the current state of purity culture subjugate young women under their male counterparts.³²

The centering of women is then a necessary task in the journey to create a more substantive sexual ethic for Christian teenagers, but it is a difficult work. This recentering requires the admission that women have been harmed by patriarchy in the Church, which is not an admission easily given in this context. Additionally, as Sarah Moslener observes in *Virgin Nation*, the early members of the purity culture movement situated themselves along the margins, as a minority subculture that pushed back on societal norms for their identity as pure teenagers.³³ This identity is an interesting complexity in the conversation for it requires a reconsideration now as purity culture has become the norm within evangelical youth groups.

Moslener argues that this claim was a false identity from the start of the movement, a false sense of oppression meant to embolden young Christians unto faithfulness and determination in the face of persecution. I think she is correct in assessing the “marginalized group” narrative as an exaggeration from my own experience as well as my assessment of the

³⁰ Anne McGrew Bennett, “Overcoming the Biblical and Traditional Subordination of Women” In *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*. Edited by Lois K. Daly. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 1994, 143.

³¹ Ibid.

³² This subjugation is often moralized by relating it to women as called to submit to their husbands in Ephesians 5, but that justification is misplaced and entirely inappropriate. Even under complementarian marriage thought, no middle school girl needs to submit to her male classmate as she would a husband.

³³ Sarah Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2015, 119.

section on this very topic in *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. As a second-generation purity culture kid, I cannot speak to the resistance 90s purity culture kids faced, but I can say with confidence that I was rarely, if ever made, to feel like an outcast oddball for my silver ring in the decade that I wore it. Only a few of my friends at my public school wore purity rings, but several of my friends were committed to abstinence. But my many other friends who were sexually active never seemed to care that I was abstinent, which makes sense retrospectively, as those friends were not taught to think about their bodies as scary objects of temptation and objectification the way I was. In fact, I was told in church that I should expect people to ask me about my ring and use it as a tool for evangelism. The one and only time a public school classmate asked me about my ring, a peer pointed in the direction of my left hand and asked, “What’s that?” I regret to share that I launched into my full speech about my purity pledge and my commitment to save my virginity for my husband and felt like I had successfully taken a stand against sexual depravity in “the world.” She said, “cool.” We were thirteen, and she was actually trying to ask me about my eraser in the shape of a farm animal next to my left hand.

In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Harris devotes a chapter to rules for dealing with questions and negative feedback from others when they learn about his reader’s decision to kiss dating goodbye in favor of purity.³⁴ The advice in this chapter is fairly practical, encouraging humility and discouraging defensiveness in potential conversations with peers and elders who do not quite “get it.”³⁵ His general attitude toward the dating world around him is summarized in the concluding remarks of the chapter, which offers primary source insight into the false narrative of oppression prevalent for early True Love Waits adherents. Harris wrote,

³⁴ Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships*, Chapter 11: “You Don’t Date? What Are You, Nuts?” (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1997), 149-159.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 151.

When you get one of those ‘You don’t date? Are you nuts?’ looks from people, adopt the apostle Paul’s attitude when he described the abuse we suffer for following Christ: ‘Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure it; being defamed, we entreat’ (1 Corinthians 4:12-13 NKJV). The Bible tells us we’re to hear the pain of ridicule without flinching.³⁶

Harris and his contemporaries viewed the pushback they might receive for dating differently as ridicule, abuse, and persecution. He offers a few examples in the chapter of “situations you’ll most likely face,” but these situations are fictional parables, which are useful to make a moral point but not quite substantive enough in my opinion to create a narrative of persecution out of. It is for this reason that lived experiences of those who have been harmed by purity culture must be centered instead.

Once this recentering has occurred, it is possible to consider other areas which may be rethought through the feminist perspective. Righting the issue of disembodiment is a necessary next step to deal with in creating this alternative approach to sexual ethics for teenagers, because it pushes against patriarchy and empowers the women thus negatively impacted. One of the primary implications of purity culture I have noticed in my research of the subject and in my own reflections upon my experience with the purity culture ethic is that of disembodiment. Purity culture leads to disembodiment for several reasons beyond the purview of this paper, but one particularly significant reason is that it teaches a shaming of the female’s body for its potential to be sexualized while also teaching that the female body is primarily not her own, and from a very young age. The intersection between purity culture and modesty is quite potent for this reason. By teaching bodily autonomy and consent, a reclamation of the female body is

³⁶ Ibid., 159.

possible in a feminist framework that is concerned with dismantling patriarchy and from a place of care.

Furthermore, Moslener identifies purity culture as a fear-based ethic³⁷ which is ultimately concerned with salvation.³⁸ In her view, purity culture is harmful because it creates power dynamics built upon shame and fear within children. Such an ethic is easily abused if ever ethical in the first place. Purity is the teleological end goal for purity culture because it yields righteousness in marriage for both parties. However, purity is also spoken of in language that identifies sexual impurity wholly with sin and sexual purity wholly with salvation from that sin.³⁹ Additionally, it was common in the first wave of purity culture to entertain the notion of “renewed virginity,” which essentially means that the abstinence pledge can act as a redemptive decision of repentance for past sexual activity upon the promise of turning away from it. This language is deeply connected to evangelical salvation language. Therefore, a departure from such language is necessary for better sexual ethics and a more sacred view of Christian conversion.

A virtue ethic approach that lends itself well to our alternative purposes is also possible under this feminist care perspective. However, the virtue is wellbeing, rather than purity. I would argue that the virtue of purity culture is not really purity but rather eternal salvation, as is the virtue for most evangelical concern. Moslener does not explicitly apply a virtue ethic approach to this phenomenon, though I think it certainly aligns with her observations on the connection between purity and salvation. Additionally, a teleological framework may also be a worthy

³⁷ Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 158.

³⁸ This part is interesting because Moslener observes that the purity movement’s primary concern is with salvation as exemplified in the body, so a “sexually pure and disease-free body” is the outward reflection of an internal purity. However, eating disorders are extremely common among young girls in purity culture. I would argue that purity culture’s disproportionate attention to the teenage girl’s body contributes to this development of eating disorders. Womanly development is shameful, so you stay as small as possible to not attract attention which would make you impure. This note is not within the purview of this paper or the larger project, but I find it generative for later work.

³⁹ Paraphrasing and synthesizing *Virgin Nation* points on Silver Ring Thing across the text.

conversation partner for this alternative ethic, but in a new way. As we watch the development of purity culture play out three decades into the philosophy, we can see the harm done by purity culture on several groups of people, most significantly women. The sexism of purity culture is felt; therefore, a framework concerned with the end results of empowerment and care for women is more substantive than the deontological approach of purity culture.

One of Sara Ahmed's working definitions of sexism in *Living a Feminist Life* is women as existing only in relation to men.⁴⁰ This sexism is a particular issue within the purity culture movement which may come off as benign but has lasting damage on women in terms of empowerment and embodiment. The rejection of this sexism for the benefit of women is in line with a feminist care ethic, created by Moslener as well as Carol Gilligan and Virginia Held. Gilligan's feminist perspective comes in the form of balancing care with justice. This particular work is helpful for our purposes because it seeks justice in a retributive and hopeful way while caring for women practically and valuing their stories. Virginia Held concurs that the feminist moral framework of justice and care is central to the moral value they (feminist care ethicists) privilege of good relationships.⁴¹ Good relationships is the end goal purity culture claims to seek, but after the years that have passed since the origin of the movement, we see that relationships have sustained harm. It is therefore to the benefit of the American evangelical church to consider alternative approaches, including feminist care ethics, which may offer better, more substantive ethics for the shared goal of good relationships with self and others.

⁴⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017), 150.

⁴¹ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2006, 13.

Moral Sources of Authority which Ought Inform: Adding Experience and Reason

Part of the feminist ethical project for Christian women is reconciling the Christian faith which has been used to oppress women with the continued commitment to the faith. Such reconciliation requires theological wrestling and grappling. It requires a nuanced approach as well as an openness to considering moral sources of authority beyond Scripture and tradition and seeking sights where those sources converse. A feminist theological wrestling with Scripture is not to diminish the significance of Scripture but rather to value it enough to talk back to it. Perhaps one of the reasons that tradition fails to be fully informative source of moral authority for teenagers in purity culture is that it has operated on its own, without the influence of Scripture.⁴²

I am personally of the conviction that experience – and especially the experience of oppression – on its own is authoritative for developing a Christian ethic.⁴³ This particular concern of developing a Christian sexual ethic for teenagers necessarily requires experience to enter the conversation due to the personal nature of human sexuality. The hesitation to include experience as a source of authority is complex, stemming from many ideas about humanity and sexuality, including Augustinian thought on human sexuality which is tied up with contemporary evangelical ideas of sin and sinfulness.

This hesitation is reasonable, as it is deep-seated and connected to beliefs that extend beyond topics of sex and sexuality. However, for the sake of a more well-rounded sexual ethic, the act of trusting one's own experience and the experiences of others is essential. Moreover, the

⁴² This is the core of Margaret Farley's concern in "Just Love and Just Sex" from *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group), 2006.

⁴³ While the feminist care ethicists privilege experience as authoritative, I nod also to womanist scholars such as M. Shawn Copeland, Renita Weems, Katie Cannon, and Emilie Townes who give language to experience as morally authoritative on its own.

experiences which must be trusted and centered are the experience of people, particularly women and LGBTQIA+ persons who have been harmed by a purity culture ethic which has previously neglected those experiences.

Reason teaches us that purity culture simply is ineffective and ethically is unsubstantive. In addition to believing the stories of those who have been harmed by the operative sexual ethic, we must also notice the trends in sociology which teach us the oft-promised ideal Christian marriage is a myth. Studies by the Pew Research Center show that current a “divorced” marital status is only marginally different between Protestant Evangelicals and the religiously unaffiliated, with Protestant Evangelicals actually at a 3% higher rate.⁴⁴

One particularly interesting and significant case of divorce for purity culture is the marriage of Joshua Harris, author of purity culture’s beloved *I Kissed Dating Goodbye. I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Relationships and Romance* was released in 1997 as a personal take on dating that challenged many teens and young adults to pursue courting relationships, which differed from mainstream or secular dating in the boundaries set of group dates and emphasizing sexual purity to the end of better relationship experiences and marriage. Joshua Harris published the work at the age of 21, placing him within the target age demographic of True Love Waits and Silver Ring Thing at the time of the purity culture movement’s inception. Harris’s book has sold over 800,000 copies and has been both praised and criticized since its publication. The primary points of criticism deal with the lack of autonomy provided for

⁴⁴ “Religious Landscape Study.” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, Pew Research Center, 13 June 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/marital-status/>. Also interesting, though not entirely within the purview of this paper, is that 55% of Protestant Evangelicals reported a “married” status as opposed to only 37% of the religiously unaffiliated. On the opposite end, 37% of the religiously unaffiliated group reported “never married” status, while the Protestant Evangelical group reported at only 18%. Cohabitation trends were also much lower among Christian and Muslim groups than other religious and non-religious groups in the study.

young women, the hierarchical nature of the gendered language, and the discouragement of young men and women by Harris to form coed relationships. Since 2016, though, Harris has apologized for the harmful portions of the book and deconstructed his own beliefs about purity, sexuality, the Church, and God. Harris and his wife Shannon divorced in 2019 after 21 years of marriage, which is noteworthy for our purposes because this divorce is a prime example of how a couple who adheres to the purity culture praxis is not protected by the myth of magical marriage from challenges or even divorce.

More importantly, though, Harris's retraction in recent years demonstrates the challenges of purity culture long-term and the validity of the concerns which ought to be taken seriously by the American evangelical church. For if one of purity culture's most notorious authors may even see the gaps, how many more can we recognize by privileging the experiences of women raised in purity culture? We also may reasonably question the effectiveness of purity culture in the first place. In other words, not only ought we to question "Do the benefits of purity culture outweigh the harm?" but also "Are teenagers actually waiting?" There can be no truly conclusive answer to the latter question, but enough evidence supports the legitimacy of the question. In a 2012 study on abstinence among religious groups, 94% of Jewish people and 79% of Christians reported having premarital sex, while only 43% of Muslims and 19% of Hindus reported the same.⁴⁵

I do not intend to communicate a pessimistic view of teenage abstinence that would suggest that abstinence among teenagers is a lost cause – I myself am a purity culture success-story by all True Love Waits metrics. However, I argue that reason should clue us into a need for

⁴⁵ "Turns Out, 'True Love Waits' Less Often for Jews and Christians," 2012.

something more. If purity culture is not entirely effective, then the American Evangelical Church ought to be concerned with building a sexual ethic for her teenagers which teaches honor, autonomy, and consent not only for the sake of their one-day married sexual relationships but for the sake of how they engage in sexual relationships responsibly now.

Challenges of Additional Moral Sources of Authority

Each of these proposed sources of moral authority bears unique challenges for the American evangelical context, which we will explore for the sake of taking a reasonable approach to the changes I endeavor to outline for Christian sexual ethics for teenagers. The first of these sources of authority I wish to privilege is experience, and the second is reason. Experience is a troublesome moral source of authority for the American evangelical church for several reasons both personally as well as communally, and the same is true of reason. I argue that these cautionary concerns may be deconstructed but may also be maintained while incorporating these two additional sources of moral authority. In other words, while some American evangelicals deconstruct their apprehension around trusting the experiences of themselves and others, the American evangelical Church itself is not necessarily required to abandon its hesitancy before it may begin to concede the authority of experience and reason.

The utilization of personal experience as a moral source of authority is challenging theologically for the average American evangelical because of the dualistic emphasis within evangelical faith traditions which draws a sharp divide between sin nature and Christ. A tradition that theologically emphasizes humanity's sinful depravity and the distrust of one's own "flesh" or deceitful heart can be expected to push back upon experience as a moral source of authority. However, I posit that it is possible to respect this apprehension while managing the fear by viewing experience as a moral source of authority that is interwoven with the others such as

Scripture, tradition, and reason. Margaret Farley views experience in this way, “experience is a given, providing data to be interpreted; but it is also something that is already interpreted, its content shaped by previous understandings of multiple influences.”⁴⁶ Farley realistically acknowledges experience as an ingrained, inescapable moral source of authority. The freedom she offers for those apprehensive to use their experiences and the experiences of others as ethical data is the assertion that experience makes its way into the way we understand the other sources of moral authority already. We therefore can be free to explicitly mine experience for helpful data, because that mining is already happening as we view the world around us. It is unnecessary to avoid it. Instead, we can name it and consider it carefully.

The challenge of reason for the average American evangelical is related to the distrust of science that is prevalent for many evangelical bodies. Science and reason are viewed as secular or modern and have thereby gained a bit of a taboo connotation. It is for this reason that we must remind our evangelical selves that we are autonomous, intelligent beings who are constantly reasoning. Additionally, we may take comfort as Christians in the idea that our critical thinking was made in the image of God and affirmed in the teachings of Jesus. We owe it to ourselves, our Scriptures, and our children to push back upon any discomfort with or fear of reason. The Bible is worthy of critical thought. Our sexual ethics are worthy of critical thought. And the people we minister to are worthy of critical thought.

⁴⁶ Margaret Farley, *Just Love*, 190.

Why True Love Waits: A Site of Insufficient Reason and Failure to Affirm Autonomy

In *Why True Love Waits*, evangelist and author Josh McDowell attempts to offer parents of teens in the 1990s a handbook for helping their children choose abstinence.⁴⁷ The book is an interesting example of early purity culture's ethical framework because it fearmongers in the name of reason. By creating a crisis of sexual activity, McDowell is able to effectively scare parents and youth leaders into teaching abstinence. Words like "crisis," "disturbing," and "horrors" fill the pages of his text in an attempt to convince the audience of the immanent danger of adolescent pre-marital sex, including unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection. One noteworthy characteristic of McDowell's work is that it is a persuasive piece of work, but the persuasion is not directed at teenagers, but rather the adults in their lives. McDowell is an evangelist and apologist by career, an identity that certainly springs forth from his work, but he addresses his plea for abstinence to the parents and youth leaders of teenagers, not to teenagers themselves. In fact, in the handy list of groups that could benefit from the book, students are the last group listed.

One of the core pillars of the alternative approach to sexual ethics for American evangelical youth is autonomy, for such autonomy is effectively denied in the methods of teaching abstinence by marrying sexual purity to innate value. Autonomy is also directly denied in works such as these where moral sexual agency is denied to teenagers. For McDowell and others, it is not for teenagers to choose abstinence but for their parents and pastors to choose it on their behalf. This violation of autonomy⁴⁸ is one of the paramount concerns for teenagers raised

⁴⁷ Josh McDowell, *Why True Love Waits: The Definitive Book on How to Help Your Kids Resist Sexual Pressure*, second edition, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.), 2002.

⁴⁸ I chose the term "violation of autonomy" carefully and will expound upon it briefly. In reflection of my experience with purity culture, "violated" is the most accurate word to describe my feelings around the specific failure of True Love Waits to teach that the "no" to premarital sex was mine to give. Additionally, I due to the

in purity culture. The proclamation that our bodies are not our own ought not be misapplied to grant power over the teenaged body to the church leader or parent.⁴⁹ For how well can a teenager learn to take ownership of their actions if they are not permitted ownership of their own bodies? It is quite presumptuous to even consider the autonomy of teenagers ours to police as the trusted adults in their lives in the first place.

Additionally, the logical fallacy of the slippery slope undergirds the practice of choosing abstinence *for* teenagers and teaching abstinence before teaching choice. The trouble with this implementation of the slippery slope is that it is believed that giving agency to teenagers will be “too much” freedom that they are not ready for, and they will inevitably choose debauchery and immorality out of overwhelm. But teaching autonomy does not directly cause immoral decision-making. Perhaps there is a necessary transition to be made once teenagers enter the youth group, a transition that shifts from moral imperatives toward moral guidance. Regardless, though, if young adolescents are determined old enough to be taught that they should abstain from sex and that their bodies may be objectified, then they are certainly old enough to be taught that they are responsible for their bodily decisions, including those concerning sex and sexuality.

A significant argument for McDowell’s work is that purity pledges are effective, citing statistics that more recent studies might question. Let us accept that premise at face value for a moment, though, regardless of its statistical validity. The deontological ethic of True Love

power dynamics at play in the youth leader-student dynamic, I find “violation” an appropriate term because it nods to the misuse of trust. I want to acknowledge, though that the word “violation” is a heavy word that often bears the connotation of sexual abuse. I do not wish to conflate “violation of autonomy” with that sort of violation and would like to make this distinction abundantly clear.

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:18-20, “Shun sexual immorality! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple[g] of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” NRSV.

Waits, especially as explained by McDowell, values the rule of abstinence over the potentially harmful consequences and implications. If premarital sex is avoided, the rules-based ethic will consider that young Christian couple a success story, regardless of the internalized shame, self-hatred, or misogyny they may deal with.

Conclusion

Though I find the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” to be deeply problematic, I acknowledge it as a part of the current American Evangelical ethical framework. I posit that by adding reason and experience to that preexistent framework, the American Evangelical Church has not only space for but also the responsibility for teaching autonomy, honor, and consent to its adolescent population. If the American Evangelical Church must insist that premarital sex is an absolute sin, then they can hate premarital sex and can encourage their teens to abstain. But could they not also love their “sinner” teenagers by teaching them how to view their sexual partners and themselves as autonomous beings worthy of honor? By employing a feminist care ethic that centers the experiences of women and pursues care and justice, we can create a more substantive ethic for American evangelical youth that will teach autonomy, consent, and honor.

CHAPTER 5

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Now that we have established an understanding of the history and implications of purity culture, an overview of the moral sources of authority and ethical frameworks at work in purity culture, and a few ideas of additional sources and frameworks that might be helpful conversation partners or replacements, we can begin to theorize alternative approaches to True Love Waits in practice. We will also spend a bit of time thinking through the implications of the darkness we are working against: the shame and fear that must be addressed for such alternatives to be possible. Finally, we will land upon a True Love Honors alternative sexual ethic that prioritizes autonomy, consent, and honor of God, self, and others.

Josh Harris wrote another book entitled, *Sex Isn't the Problem, Lust Is*, which essentially explains the problem with lust for young Christians, especially males.⁵⁰ But I think that shame and fear are also great problems, which an obsession with fighting lust have worsened. If lust is the problem, then perhaps we ought to consider the problem with “lust.” Lust is certainly a biblical concept, one which Jesus himself warned against, but the problem with lust for purity culture is that lust is not defined well. Lust is presented as a vague concept of a powerful and inevitable force. It is associated with shame, but because the distinction between lust and healthy sexual attraction is not made, the two are easily conflated for the young teen. Vagueness plagues the True Love Waits movement, a mistake that has taken a toll on the people it intended to help. Perhaps the depth of the internalized shame over sexuality and fear of sexual expression was

⁵⁰ Joshua Harris, *Sex Is Not the Problem (Lust Is): Sexual Purity in a Lust-Saturated World*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2003)
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=725748>.

entirely unintentional. I like to believe that my youth leaders did not mean to harm me, but due to the experiences of people who have been harmed in that particular way, it is responsible and loving to reconsider the terms and methods of purity culture that cultivate such deep shame and fear. For this reason I am convinced that teaching autonomy is a necessary first step for any sexual ethic teaching designed for teenagers.

My central argument is not that abstinence and courtship are problematic or harmful, but that the lack of agency granted American evangelical teenagers to choose abstinence for themselves is harmful. As purity culture has become a social norm for the American evangelical church, the audience has grown increasingly younger. That age range shift is not a problem, but it does bear the responsibility for a more substantial sexual ethic. Most 6th grade students I know are vaguely aware of their own autonomy and moral agency in familiar situations. When we add sexuality to the conversation, another concept 6th grade students are vaguely familiar with, we can hardly reasonably assume that they will have an understanding of their own sexual autonomy let alone the concept of consent, both their own and their peers’.

This failure to teach consent is in my opinion a violation of autonomy. As an individual who remains hopeful for correction of the errors of purity culture, I maintain a position that the intention of purity culture was more misguided than malicious. The origins of the movement nod to a fear-based, hasty decision that has carried on for 30 years so far. The problem is not that kids ought to be sexually free as an alternative. The problem is that a singular vague imperative has masqueraded as a sexual ethic, and it has not been sufficient. That imperative of “don’t have sex or do sexual things or be sexual until marriage,” leaves much to be desired in terms of praxis as well as the larger ethical framework.

True Love Honors

Though the three pillars of a True Love Honors alternative ethic include consent and autonomy as well, I chose “honor” as the titular value because it identifies both the shortcoming of True Love Waits as well as the practical move away from a prescribed behavior and toward a posture of one’s heart toward God, self, and others. Additionally, waiting is a heavily self-centered concept, where honoring is not. We wait for things we want. If we wait impatiently or give up, then it is a moral failing of our own, and if we wait patiently then we may revel in our own virtuosity. But if we honor ourselves and others, we are focused on relationality. If we fail, there is space for repentance and forgiveness unto rebuilding, and if we succeed then the whole community is better for our success. Honoring is a way we can affirm both the dignity of those around us and the trust in ourselves to be able to exercise restraint when needed. I find this direction a much more substantive ethic and one that faithfully treats Jesus’s explicit imperative to love neighbor as self.

I propose that our groundwork for a True Love Honors ethic is based in an ethic of care. An ethic of care follows the “true love” motif by choosing to love and honor first. An ethic of care privileges relationship over rules, which is interesting to me. A move in protestant youth groups is to “make your faith personal.” This was a major push for me and I see it in all sorts of youth material and conferences – “own it.” So why start sexual ethics with a rule rather than a relationship? An ethic of care for our purposes is based on the understanding of the person of Jesus as one who loves, honors, and heals. Further, an ethic of care is one that believes that what is caring to an individual makes for a better community at large. And when it comes to sexual ethics, an ethic of care creates a space for victims of sexual abuse and sexual violence to receive support and to know that they were the sinned against, not the sinners.

I posit that the solution to the problem of True Love Waits is not to add more language to the purity culture principles. Instead, I argue to decenter purity and abstinence. Under the True Love Honors ethic, purity and abstinence may exist in tandem with consent, autonomy, and honor. However, an ethic that privileges these alternative values *over* purity provides an improved starting point without precluding the latter. Additionally, this recentering provides space for healing and empowerment, in the vein of feminist care ethics. This decentering is necessary because it recognizes the dignity of teenagers *before* shame enters. There is a great deal of redressing and undoing that must be done to faithfully attend to the men and women for whom shame has already entered due to purity culture. It is a work that is worthy of the time commitment and simply good. It is a work that feels holy to me. At the same time, it is the goal of True Love Honors to be a sustainable sexual ethic that does more than undo damage. True Love Honors can be an ethic that reclaims and reshapes, but it can also be a starting place for middle school students to first learn about their own autonomy and that of others, the gift of consent that belongs to each autonomous being, and the principle of honor which guides their every move in behaving responsibly as beings who have sexuality.

If the goal of the evangelical youth group is to support its teenagers by preparing them for the darkness of the world and offering countercultural teachings, then the first step should be teaching autonomy and consent as to honor oneself and others. Teenaged girls will be sexualized and objectified in the “real world,” so why should the Church not be a safe landing place for them to build the foundation of their autonomy and goodness rather than shame and depravity?

When I was in high school, I overheard a coed conversation about myself - specifically how I had “finally” developed physical characteristics of a woman, rather than those characteristic of a “12-year-old boy.” I felt immediately uncomfortable, but I did not have the

language to express that the core of my discomfort was that my autonomy had been violated by that conversation which objectified me without my consent. Because of purity culture, though, I believed that my discomfort was shame or “conviction” because I must not have been behaving or clothing myself modestly enough. I believed it was my fault, that I was unintentionally a stumbling block for the young males in the room and a failure of Christian example for my female peers.

I often wonder how differently that moment would have felt if my younger self had a concept of Christian sexual ethics that began with my own autonomy and the value of honoring self and others. In my most honest reflection, I think that I was old enough at that time to have developed a concept of my own autonomy, consent, and the moral obligation of my classmates involved in that conversation to honor me rather than to objectify. The trouble is that I was not taught those things in my formative teenage years. Instead, I was taught the moral imperative to say “no” to sex and sexuality, and I was taught that the moral obligation of modesty and protecting male eyes was my own burden. As an adult, the order of the teachings seems remarkably inverted. For that reason, True Love Honors starts with a simpler, deeply important foundation: autonomy.

Pillar 1: Autonomy

A True Love Honors ethic allows for a more natural transition for teenagers into “adult” conversations. The chronologically first pillar of True Love Honors is autonomy. One of the most jarring church experiences from my childhood and adolescence was when we started True Love Waits on Wednesday nights. Only a year removed from AWANA, I recall a shocking experience of suddenly being very aware of prescribed shame. In fifth grade, we got to play games and memorize Bible verses for prizes. My fifth grade Sunday School class memorized

Psalm 23, wherein God is described as the good shepherd who cares for us, his metaphorical sheep. But in sixth grade, God's greatest concern for my life was saving me from my wicked temptress self.

I describe that experience as jarring, because it felt like a sudden change in the social the theological teachings from my church leaders. Where there should have been a transition, transition was lacking. One day we were kids, and the next we girls were temptress stumbling blocks while the boys were sexual animals. We biologically understand puberty as a process, but purity culture fails to treat the accompanying conversations as a process. Although it is certainly appropriate to teach abstinence as a way to honor God, self, and others, it is inappropriate to do so immediately upon entry into youth group if the work has not been done to establish within the minds of teenagers that they are autonomous human beings who are entrusted with a body of their own with which they may choose to do good or to do harm both to themselves and others. Once time has been given to that complex subject, we can teach that autonomy comes with decisions to choose who one engages with and how.

Pillar 2: Consent

A beautiful part of a more substantive alternative sexual ethic is that it does not preclude abstinence as a choice or even as a moral teaching. Once the foundation of respecting one's own autonomy, confidently exercising consent, and honoring both the autonomy and consent of others, abstinence could certainly be presented as a way to responsibly engage oneself and others in dating relationships. However, a True Love Honors ethic makes abstinence a choice, because sexual purity is no longer the goal or the operative priority. Abstinence becomes a method to prioritize autonomy and consent and a method to honor God, self, and others; it is now a possible

means to an end, no longer the end itself. Teaching consent matters practically because we must give teenagers choice.

Consent is important to this reframed ethic for three main reasons. First, teaching consent is a safety precaution. Young girls and boys are at a higher risk of repeated sexual abuse when they have not been taught that consent is theirs to give, withhold, and retract. Additionally, when abuse does happen, teenagers who have a working knowledge of consent can identify what was done to them as abuse more readily than teenagers who are given the responsibility to guard their peer's hearts and eyes. The second reason consent is central to this reframed ethic is that when students are taught that their consent as well as the consent of others is sacred, they are able to see a practical way they can honor themselves and others. How much more substantial is an ethic that teaches teenagers to hear people say "no" and respect that "no" than one that teaches teenagers to always say no unquestioningly.

The final reason I have identified for consent as a pillar for True Love Honors is that it empowers students to consent to an abstinence pledge if they so choose. In the earlier days of True Love Waits, purity pledges were often made at conferences which were largely directed toward older teens and college students. But by my turn to come of age under purity culture, we started True Love Waits curriculum at the age of twelve. Realistically, a purity pledge of a 12 year old is vastly different from a purity pledge of a 19 year old. One of the primary reasons for that difference is consent. A 12 year old child does not exercise the same level of autonomy as the 19 year old comparatively, and if that 12 year old has limited if any concept of consent, they may not understand that the purity pledge is their choice to take or to decline. I know this experience personally, for it was my own.

On the day I got my silver ring, my fellow middle school friends and I lined the stage at our large Baptist church. Our parents stood behind us, and we held a brief ceremony in which our parents presented us with the rings. I remember thinking it was a strange that our parents handed us the rings, since our parents had not been there on Wednesday nights when we had worked through a few weeks on purity. I had and have a good relationship with my parents, though, so their presence and participation in that ceremony did not bother me. But the one thing that is burned into my brain a decade later is that after our parents gave us our rings and we were about to all be seated, my dad hugged me and spoke the following words: “Mom and I are so proud of you for making this decision.” They were proud indeed, because my parents and all the parents had been told that we were these awesome pre-teens who decided to pledge our virginities to our future spouses before them, the Church body, and God.

However, what had actually happened was that we had been told for the six weeks leading up to that day that part of following God in a way that would please God was to pledge to wait to have sex until marriage. When my dad spoke those words to me, I remember immediately wondering what decision he was talking about. I can still feel the confusion building because I asked myself, “Decision? This wasn’t a decision. This is what we do. I made my decision to follow Jesus a few years ago, and they’re telling me now that this is part of the deal, but thanks, dad. I’m really glad that you’re proud of me.”

It is this personal story and the stories of so many young people who have been sexually abused that convince me of the necessity for a Christian sexual ethic that explicitly teaches and values consent. If we are teaching young people about sexual morality, the encompassing theme must be care. The first step must be instilling bodily autonomy. And the following step must be teaching consent.

Pillar 3: Honor of God, Self, and Others

I do concede that abstinence is largely believed to be a great form of honoring, but it is often solely for the sake of another, especially for the teenage girl. Teenagers in our churches need to know that they themselves are all autonomous beings who are trusted with the responsibility to give and withdraw consent based upon their own judgment. In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Josh Harris provides a section of reflection upon the distinct male and female responsibilities to each other as young singles. We will deal with the “boys’ responsibility,” but let us examine the girls’ responsibility first. The girls’ “equally important role” in the maintaining of each other’s purity is to dress modestly and behave in ways that will not draw attention to their bodies. Harris does concede that it is the boys’ responsibility to exercise self-control, but the girls are morally obligated to help because, “it’s time to start seeing other people’s purity as our responsibility.”⁵¹ The boys’ responsibility to the girls, then, is to guard their fragile hearts, because everyone knows that the boys struggle with sex drives, but the girls struggle with their emotions. By being sensitive to their emotional needs over their own sexual desires, the boys guard the girls’ hearts.⁵²

All of this responsibility toward each other is framed as “righteousness,” which is interesting due to some translation work. Righteousness as synonymous with personal sanctification is fundamentally minimizing biblical “righteousness”, which in some places may be understood as close to justice. The Greek word δικαιοσύνη is translated as “righteousness” in Matthew 5:6, “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *righteousness*, for they will be filled.”

⁵¹ Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1997), 97-99.

⁵² A paraphrasing of pp. 97-98. The psychological and physiological misinformation here is beyond the purview of this project, but I would like to note that this emotional/physical distinction between young men and young women is factually unbased and exclusionary to all LGBTQA+ youth.

This word is also translated as justice elsewhere, which is significant for our purposes in two distinct modes.

First, this decision that translators made for “righteousness” rather than “justice” serves as an example of the tradition of biblical interpretation that purity culture and many other Christian movements value as a subset of Scripture as a moral source of authority. Although justice is an alternative translation of “righteousness,” the tradition of δικαιοσύνην translated as “righteousness” is so strong that people might bristle at the thought of reading Jesus to bless those who thirst for justice. The second mode of significance here is the use of righteousness as closely related to evangelical “sanctification” regardless of translation work that does not necessarily support that interpretive move. If righteousness here and elsewhere might be more closely connected to the pursuit of justice, then personal sanctification or purification is no longer the objective, rendering a sexual ethic concerned primarily with personal purity less compelling.

Limitations and Areas for Further Development

To honor the self and others is a noble and pure pursuit. However, it is easy to see how heteronormative and male-centric the purity culture sexual ethic is. Additionally, the power granted to young men comes at the cost of being reduced to animalistic perverse individuals who struggle so greatly with their sexual urges that those under their authority are tasked with keeping them in line. We have all heard the adage “with great power comes great responsibility,” but in this case, with great power comes the ability to shirk responsibility if you mess up and blame it on your victims. But isn’t that always an advantage to power?

I cannot help but to wonder what would happen to our teenaged boys and young men if they were first taught that they and their female peers were equal autonomous beings empowered to self-control.⁵³ Beyond the autonomy of women, though, the erasure of LGBTQIA+ youth is felt in this particular context. The presumption that all teenage boys are attracted to teenage girls and vice-versa leaves the students who do not share a heterosexual sexuality in a liminal space of shame without direction. They are either implicitly or explicitly told that their gender-identity or sexuality is invalid, and the lack of validity renders them without further information.

Think about a teenaged boy who is bisexual, for example. If he is a boy in purity culture, then he has been taught that he is a physical being prone to lust and therefore should be very careful in friendships with girls. He knows, however, that he is also attracted to boys. Since he knows that his “natural attraction” to girls is the danger, he could very easily conclude that his attraction to boys is also a danger. With whom, then, is he safe to create friendships? Is isolation or consistent efforts to be guarded with peers the answer? As it is likely evident at this juncture, I remain unconvinced that simplistic avoidant tactics are acceptable as substantive solutions. Repressing one’s social needs for friendship out of fear of attraction is therefore not an acceptable solution for people of any gender identity or sexuality.

It is important to note that the criticism of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* included in this work refers to the book that impacted a generation of young people, their parents, and ministers and spurred the purity culture movement onward. The author of the book has apologized the harm done and publicly shared that he no longer subscribes to the general premise and many of the

⁵³ To be empowered to self-control is not to be beholden to it. Self-control may be taught in a positive way that focuses on the ability to choose our actions intentionally instead of feeling out of control. This positive view of self-control differs from a negative, suppression-focused self-control which I allude to as self-control to which we are beholden.

particularities of that book and many others including titles such as *Boy Meets Girl* and *Sex Isn't the Problem, Lust Is*. In the words of Josh Harris himself, “if a car serves some people but a flaw in its design causes damage to others, good intentions by the carmaker and even the endorsement of other customers do not override the problem.”⁵⁴

Sexual education is another implementation of a True Love Honors ethic, because healthy and comprehensive sex education trusts teenagers with the dignity of making informed decisions regarding sexual activity. The fearmongering of resources central to True Love Waits is given no foothold for True Love Honors, because depicting contraceptives as unreliable and sexually transmitted infections as horrific is neither dignifying nor truthful. A goal for a sexual ethic for teenagers can no longer be repression. The replacement ought to be healthy sexual expression. This does not mean that the church will be distributing contraceptives; it simply means that boys and girl can be friends and maybe the baggy t-shirts over bathing suits trend can finally be put to rest.

Moving forward, it is important to consider the limitations of the current normative sexual ethic for American evangelical youth as well as my own trajectory in this work. Care for victims of sexual violence must be paramount to any Christian sexual ethic. Trauma care is regrettably beyond the purview of this thesis, but it is an important implementation of a True Love Honors ethic because it takes seriously the call to honor self and others, to value autonomy, to trust experiences, and to teach consent.

⁵⁴ For Josh Harris's full apology statement, see joshharris.com/i-kissed-dating-goodbye/. The publication of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and Harris's other books on dating halted in 2018 following Harris's process of reevaluating his work in response to experiences of people who were harmed by the book.

Final Remarks

My own experience with purity culture was not fully negative. I appreciate some of the outcomes, which were promised by True Love Waits. However, even in my own life, the good intentions and the good outcomes do not override the core problem or the damage done in other ways. Even if my experience was as promised, the experiences of others matter, because those experiences are sacred and worthy of honor on their own. An alternative True Love Honors sexual ethic is designed to intentionally work on its own or to precede abstinence teaching. The “waiting” part of purity culture is not necessarily harmful. Items that are harmful include the implications of mandated modesty, control, hierarchy, objectification, oversimplification, and denial of autonomy. These harmful implications must be tossed out and can only be meaningfully replaced with a sexual ethic that empowers and honors teenagers. We are morally obligated to them.

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