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Kate Sargent

Claremont Graduate University, [kathryn.sargent@cgu.edu](mailto:kathryn.sargent@cgu.edu)

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# Talking and Not Talking: Sexual Education and Ethics for Young Women within the Evangelical Movement in America

Kate Sargent  
*Claremont Graduate University*  
*School of Religion*

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Evangelical culture is a juggernaut, and has now permeated every level of American society. Much of the culture's strength is due to the powerful youth movement within Evangelical denominations. A great deal of its propaganda is aimed at "youth" and "youth culture" in the form of music, books, and technology. Young people are the "heart and soul" of the Evangelical movement. They embrace it, and then perpetuate it. "Evangelical" is an admittedly elusive term. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2011) defines evangelical in two ways, both as an adjective, "1 of or according to the teaching of the gospel or Christianity. 2 relating to a tradition within Protestant Christianity emphasizing Biblical authority and personal conversion. 3 fervent in advocating something," and as a noun, "a member of the evangelical tradition in the Christian Church." For the purposes of this paper, the second adjectival definition is perhaps the most useful, although all four definitions are apt when discussing the Evangelical movement in North America.

As Lauren Sandler (2006) defined it, "to be an Evangelical Christian, you typically need to believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God; you've got to be game to save souls; and you usually need to have some sort of crisis conversion" (7). Sandler's definition is applicable, but all of these terms require a certain amount of explanation. Although this sort of language is common within Evangelical circles, they are less common in the secular world at large. The first two criteria, believing the Bible is the "infallible word of God" and desiring to "save souls" are more easily accessible than the third term, "crisis conversion." Perhaps realizing this, Sandler (2006) goes on to define conversion as "the moment when your heart opens to God and you accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior. That's when you commit your life to absolutism" (7). This definition is somewhat clearer, but still couched in insider language. Perhaps it is impossible, even for a self-designed outsider like Sandler,<sup>1</sup> to enter into a discussion of Evangelical culture without availing oneself of so-called "Christian-ese." However, for the purpose of this paper, Sandler's definition provides a good point of entry into the Evangelical movement.

It would be helpful at this point to take a moment to reflect on why I am reticent in this paper to use the term "Evangelical Church." I dislike that term because, unlike other denominations, there is not a clearly defined singular "Church" within the Evangelical movement. One can be a Nazarene, a Baptist, or a Pentecostal; one can belong to a First Church

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<sup>1</sup> A self-proclaimed liberal, feminist, secular Jewish atheist who nonetheless wrote an insightful and well-balanced book about the Evangelical youth movement.

of God or an Evangelical-Free Church, or any multitude of other denominations, and still be considered Evangelical, both by oneself and by the world at large. The denominational differences are so wide-ranging that one cannot refer to a single monolithic “Evangelical Church.” Thus we must refer to the Evangelical *movement* and understand it not in denominational terms, but rather as many different groups of people who all agree on a few core principles, though they differ widely on many other issues.

For a movement that can claim upwards of 98 million adherents (Sandler 2006, 254), scholarship on the Evangelical youth movement is still in its infancy. Most of the sources for this paper have been drawn from within the movement, although external sources have been consulted when available. In this paper I intend to discuss the ways in which sex, sexuality, and the female body are treated in the discourse within the Evangelical movement, particularly with regard to teenaged and young girls. I will focus on the way young women are talked to about sex, and how they are socialized and educated to regard sexuality and gender. I will spend most of my time with the popular literature aimed at young women, analyzing the underlying theology and theory at work. I will extrapolate, through the use of the (admittedly limited) data regarding sexual activity among young Evangelicals, including but not limited to the age of first sex, the rate of non-penetrative sex acts, the results of the current ethic, and how it is affecting the lives of young women in America. By the end of this paper I hope to be able to suggest an alternative, sex-positive ethic, while still leaving open the option to teach abstinent behavior.

### Articulating the Ethic

In order to understand how young women within the Evangelical Movement are thinking and feeling, one must understand the underlying mindset about sex and sexuality being taught to Evangelical teens from a very young age. Girls are presented with analogies like the following from *Every Young Woman's Battle*, one book in a popular series about sex written by and for Evangelicals. The author describes it this way:

Imagine a big strip of clear packing tape. It's sticky, eager to bond with anything it touches. Once attached to a cardboard box, it won't come off without tearing the box and leaving paper residue on the tape. The piece of tape might still be sticky enough to bond to something else, but the more you attach and remove it from other things, the less sticky it becomes. Eventually it loses its bonding ability altogether. (Ethridge and Arterburn 2004, 148)

Whether the comparison is to packing tape, a cake with all of the frosting licked off, or a banana out of its peel, the message is the same: if a young woman does not maintain her “sexual purity,” she is “damaged goods” and she will have a hard time finding a Christian man who will want to marry her. The finding and marrying of a Christian man is one of the chief activities for “good” Evangelical young women. Thus, a woman's inherent value is equated with her sexual status. Or, as Shannon Ethridge (2004), one of the authors of *Every Young Woman's Battle*, so eloquently states it, “Every time you choose to passionately kiss or touch a guy in a sexual way, you are sending a message that he can treat you like his little plaything” (188). There is no room for nuance and no room for failure. After all, a banana cannot be put back in its peel (Ethridge and Arterburn 2004, 148), and packing tape once attached to a box is ill-equipped to bind to another.

This rhetoric removes a young girl's agency and violates her potential for sexual experience and enjoyment. According to a survey conducted by Mark Regnerus (2007) for his book *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*, teenaged girls within the Evangelical movement are 92% more likely to feel guilt about sexual behavior than their male counterparts (107). There is something profoundly disturbing about that statistic. Girls are tasked with not only maintaining their own sexual purity, but that of their "brothers in Christ" as well, and the shame that they experience when they fail to do so is confounding.

Young women are made to feel as if their bodies are somehow corrupt, and that their sexual drive can have only one form and appropriate outlet. Yet how can someone be expected to throw away a lifetime of sexual repression and taboo in one day? This is essentially what the Evangelical movement asks of its adherents. They are taught that sex is something to be avoided at all costs, and that it is a corrupting influence that will taint every aspect of their lives. When one has sex, one becomes a fundamentally different person, used and fit only to be discarded. On the day of their wedding, however, they must somehow embrace their sexuality, since it is now within the approved parameters. There is no structure in place to help young women (and men) deal with the sudden shift in sexual mentality. For all the talk of saving sex for marriage, they are almost never taught what to do when that blessed event occurs. The emotional dissonance is staggering.

### Talking and Not Talking

The abstinence movement, which is perhaps best exemplified by True Love Waits, an organization which made popular the "abstinence pledge" for Christian teens (membership cards and all) in the early 1990s, is one of the strongest movements among Evangelicals. Since 1994, 3 million teens have taken the True Love Waits pledge, according to the organization's website, a number that has been verified elsewhere (Bearman and Bruckner 2001, 859-912). For almost twenty years, teens and young adults have been making the following pledge (or a similar variant): "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship" (LifeWay Student Ministry 2012, "FAQ"). There is no longer a question of the rightness or wrongness of sex before marriage; the conversations happening now in youth groups around the nation center on strategies for maintaining sexual purity and how to deal with those nasty urges.<sup>2</sup> The answer, all too often, is woefully un-nuanced, largely relying on gender stereotypes and essentializing.

Sex is a hot topic in Evangelical circles, but any sex outside of heteronormative marriage is presented as a heinous sin, and anything associated with sex is, as a consequence, taboo. Thus, young Evangelical women have no outlet for healthy discussion of their bodies and their sexuality. Popular books such as *Wild At Heart* by John Eldridge or *Captivating* by his wife Staci, and *Every Young Woman's Battle* by Shannon Ethridge and Stephen Arterburn, present outmoded gender stereotypes as accepted fact with the goal of showing young girls what godly womanhood looks like, something addressed more fully below.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper I will be dealing with heterosexual sex and identification, as homosexuality is still considered sinful and outside of the norm. It is a completely different issue within the context of Evangelical Christianity.

The sex taboo leads to ignorance of both their own bodies and the mechanics of sex, protection, and sexually transmitted infections. In an interview with the *Washington Post* Peter Bearman (in Connolly 2005), a professor at Columbia's Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy, said, "The sad story is that kids who are trying to preserve their technical virginity are, in some cases, engaging in much riskier behavior [...] From a public health point of view, an abstinence movement that encourages no vaginal sex may inadvertently encourage other forms of alternative sex that are at higher risk of STDs." According to Bearman's research, "Just 2 percent of youth who never took [any sort of] pledge said they had had anal or oral sex but not intercourse, compared with 13 percent of [teens committed to an abstinence pledge]" (in Connolly 2005). This is what is known in Evangelical circles as "technical virginity," the idea being that as long as there has not been vaginal penetration by a man's penis, one is still, technically, a virgin. According to a study published in "Pediatrics: The Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics", 13% of teens interviewed thought that there was zero chance of contracting HIV from oral sex (Halpern-Felsher et. al. 2005, 845-851). That is a staggering, and unacceptable, statistic. Abstinence-only education, whether it is being taught in the youth room or the classroom, leaves teenagers woefully ill-equipped to deal with the realities of sex.

A study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that "personal conservatism (a close or rigid adherence to religious creed) was shown to pose risk against sexual responsibility. Adolescent girls who scored high in personal conservatism were more likely to be exposed to unprotected sex, including forced sex, and more likely to allow males to have sole control over birth control use" (Miller and Gur 2002, 401-406). By not teaching young people about realistic protection along with abstinence, the Evangelical movement does a disservice to its youth. Young people are engaging in sexual activity, whether oral or vaginal, and refusing to educate them about the importance of contraception is placing them at extreme unnecessary risk. The statistic stated above shows that teens are distressingly misinformed about the possible risks of oral sex. It would seem that it would be in the best interest of abstinence educators to present accurate information about the risks of unprotected oral sex, as a scare tactic if nothing else. They certainly use similar tactics when speaking about vaginal intercourse.

According to Susan Rose (2005) in her article "Going Too Far? Sex, Sin and Social Policy" from the journal *Social Forces*, "In abstinence-until-marriage materials, sex is often equated with death, disease and danger; fear surfaces as the primary message and tactic used to persuade young people to steer clear of sex before or outside of marriage" (1208). She goes on to describe a video titled "No Second Chance" which is commonly used in abstinence-only curriculum. "The abstinence-only video [...] juxtaposes discussions of having sex outside of marriage with images of men dying from AIDS" (Rose 2005, 1208). Sex education based on fear and misinformation is all too prevalent. The idea is to implant a deep fear of disease, guilt, shame, unwanted pregnancy, sin, and social ostracizing in Evangelical youth as a deterrent for pre-marital sex. It is not working. Most studies find Evangelical teens to be just as likely to engage in sexual behavior, but 29.7% reported that they did not use contraception at first sex, and 66.6% of Evangelical women interviewed stated that their first sex fell before the age of 18 (Jones, Darroch, and Singh 2005, 281). These statistics deal only with vaginal intercourse. As stated above, Evangelical teens are 13% more likely than their secular counterparts to participate in oral sex prior to vaginal sex. So, Evangelical teens are engaging in sexual activities; they are just doing it without the tools necessary to protect themselves.

### Sexual Ethics of Gender

In addition to the troubling ethics of sex mentioned above, young girls within the Evangelical movement are inundated with essentialized gender roles. The ethics of sexuality and gender play an equally important role in defining sex within the Evangelical movement. Perhaps the most prominent example of this can be found in the writings of John and Staci Eldredge. In the introduction to his book, *Wild at Heart*, John Eldredge (2003) states his thesis thus: “[Men] need a deeper understanding of why they long for adventures and battles and a beauty—and why God made them just like that. And they need a deeper understanding of why women long to be fought for, to be swept up into adventure, and to be the Beauty. For that is how God made them as well” (xi).

That is his book in a nutshell, and for that matter, his wife’s book *Captivating*, too. Men are warriors and women are princesses. Men desire battles and women desire to be desired. When I was an undergraduate, Eldredge’s books were gaining popularity in Evangelical circles. Most of the young men I knew were reading *Wild at Heart* as something only a little short of canonical, and we young women followed suit. We thought that these were the roles that God had ordained for us, both male and female.

The gender politics as articulated by Evangelical sexual rhetoric are astounding. “It is the story of sex as the tale of predator and prey—and women, beware. Men are considered to be sexual beings who beyond a certain point, cannot hold back” (Rose 2005, 1215). Is it any wonder that Evangelical girls are significantly more likely to experience a forced sexual encounter than their secular counterparts? (Miller and Gur 2002, 401-406). This kind of rhetoric places an inordinate amount of responsibility on young women. They are expected to guard their own virtue as well as the virtue of the young men around them. In no place is this made more explicit than in the so-called “Modesty Survey” conducted by Alex and Brett Harris. Used for their Evangelical youth organization Rebelution, they asked young men to rate the activities and attire of young women numerically, according to what was most likely to cause them to “stumble.”<sup>3</sup>

A theme that runs through much of the literature about sex aimed at young Evangelicals goes something like this: “Men are visually stimulated. That means that what they see turns them on, and they have no control over that. Thus it is the responsibility of women to make sure that they do not become overly stimulated, because that is something that they can control.” The implication being, of course, that if a man becomes “turned on” by something he sees, it is the fault of the woman he saw, and thus she, not him, should be held accountable for his actions and his “sin.” This is not something that most writers would be willing to state explicitly (because of the natural implications for rape and sexual assault) but the implications are all there, leading one to draw the inevitable conclusion.

### Surveying Modesty

The first generation of young Evangelicals who were raised under the tutelage of John Eldredge and his ilk have begun making their own forays into the discourse on sex, sexuality, and gender. The Harris family—Joshua, Alex, and Brett—have made some notable contributions

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<sup>3</sup> The phrases “stumbling block”, or “causing someone to stumble”, etc., are common in the Evangelical vernacular, and will therefore be referenced in the following pages. They can be taken to refer to something (or someone) that causes impure thoughts or actions in someone else. It is used almost exclusively to refer to sexual thoughts or actions.

to this discussion. Joshua Harris is best known for his book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, first published in 1997, which makes an argument for “courtship” rather than dating, for young Evangelicals.<sup>4</sup>

More germane to the topic at hand is the work of his younger brothers, Alex and Brett. At the age of sixteen, twins Alex and Brett Harris decided to create a blog, titled “the Rebelution,”<sup>5</sup> which developed into an organization focusing on young Evangelicals in which they would discuss issues facing Christian youth in America. They were prompted to begin this endeavor by what they saw as an epidemic of apathy and low-expectations, and they set out to combat it; hence the apt tag line of their organization, “A Teenage Rebellion against Low-Expectations.” They began blogging in 2005, and quickly gained exposure and notoriety in Evangelical circles. They developed their ideology based on the slogan “Do Hard Things” (also the title of their first book, complete with an introduction by Evangelical folk hero Chuck Norris).

In pursuit of this goal, they created the so-called “Modesty Survey.” The idea began as a conversation between the women’s and men’s forums on the Rebelution website (named “the Attic” and “the Garage”, respectively) about what constituted modest attire and behavior, and how young women could help young men maintain sexual integrity (The Rebelution Blog 2006, “Announcement: The Modesty Survey”). This, in turn, led to the creation of an interactive survey where young women could submit questions that would be answered by young men. They received hundreds of questions, and over 150,000 answers from 1,600 young men (The Rebelution Blog 2006, “Announcement: The Modesty Survey”). They compiled the data and created graphs and text-based diagrams to show girls just how, exactly, they cause their Brothers in Christ to sin.

The survey results are sorted into ten categories: General/Other, Swimsuits, Undergarments, Shirts/Dresses, Layering, Skirts, Posture/Movement, Makeup/Jewelry/Hair/Shoes, and Open Questions. Each section contains the answers to questions about what constitutes modest or immodest attire and behavior. Some questions seem perfectly appropriate and understandable; for example, 56.8% of respondents answered affirmatively to the statement that “Seeing a girl stretching (e.g. arching the back, reaching the arms back, and sticking out the chest) is a stumbling block” (The Rebelution Blog 2006, “Announcement: The Modesty Survey”).

Many of the answers display a very troubling tendency within the Evangelical movement towards the over-sexualization of everything female and feminine. For example, when asked whether seeing a girl discreetly adjust a bra-strap underneath her shirt constituted a “stumbling block”, 65.4% responded in the affirmative, with 15.5% neutral, and only 19.1% responded in the negative (The Rebelution Blog 2006, “Announcement: The Modesty Survey”). This reductionist viewpoint results in women losing their personhood and becoming sexual objects, reduced to little more than walking and talking vaginas.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> I considered including an analysis of Harris’ book in this paper, but ultimately decided against it. Good analysis of his writing has been done elsewhere, and his focus on male initiated courtship, while interesting, did not raise any issues that were not being discussed elsewhere. In addition, while his book is still widely read and fairly influential, it does not have the same immediate cultural relevance as the other authors being discussed, including his younger brothers.

<sup>5</sup> Yes, that is a combination of “Rebellion” and “Revolution”.

<sup>6</sup> When I was an undergraduate at an Evangelical institution, it was quite common for young men to approach their female classmates to tell them just how they were causing the young men around them to sin. This always struck me as invasive and inappropriate, not to mention strangely dominating and voyeuristic. But that is what happens when

It is precisely this sort of mentality that is so harmful to Evangelical women. By placing the onus for sexual temptation and sin squarely on the shoulders of women, the Evangelical movement forces women into an untenable position in which they are overtly sexual beings who must constantly guard their behavior, lest they “tempt” their fellow Christians to sin. This is a woman’s role: while simultaneously being portrayed as the “weaker” sex, women were created to be helpers and nurturers, never taking the lead but always playing a supportive and complementary role to their men in their lives. How can a woman who has been socialized to submit to a man then turn around and deny him sexual gratification? How can two such disparate identities be contained within one woman?

### **The Possibility of a Sex Positive Ethic**

Most Evangelicals would, at least nominally, agree that there is nothing inherently negative about sex. Sex, when it is performed within the appropriate parameters (a monogamous, heterosexual marriage), is healthy and good within Evangelical discourse. The issue, of course, is that sex is spoken about most frequently, particularly to young people, in negative terms. Rather than focusing on the positive aspects of a healthy sexual life, albeit a delayed one, the sexual discourse within the modern Evangelical movement focuses on the negatives of sex, framing it as not only a heinous sin, but as something that will irrevocably change a person at every level of their personality.<sup>7</sup>

This is the reality of sex that is drilled into the brains of young Evangelicals. Yes, they are taught that one day, in the distant future, sex will cease to be this horrible, dirty sin and become something wonderful and life-giving, but that is a future of which they are barely able to conceive, and for which they are unprepared.

Imagine it like this. Suppose a person was raised knowing that reading before the age of 21 was a dangerous sin, that even knowing how to read, and knowing all the reasons why it would be good to wait, would probably cause them to fall into temptation and pick up a book. Now suppose that person, who has grown up not only illiterate but taught to actively fear the written word, is, on their twenty-first birthday, sent to live all alone in a library, and expected to pick up *Hamlet* and dig in.

This is what life is like for young Evangelicals. They are taught about the evils of sex for their entire lives, and then expected to somehow flip a switch on the day of their wedding and feel comfortable engaging in sexual activity, usually with little to no preparation about what to expect.

### **Creating Space for Body Awareness**

There is a way to teach abstinence without being negative towards sex or spreading misinformation. The Evangelical movement does a disservice to its young adherents by assuming that they will be unable to handle the plain truth about sex. Young women suffer more

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you teach young men that they have a right to decide what is and is not appropriate for young women to do and wear.

<sup>7</sup> One has only to recall the metaphors referenced above for an example of this. A banana that once out of its peel cannot be put back in, a piece of packing tape that has bonded to one box and therefore is now unable to fully bond to another, etc.

acutely under this taboo, not only because they are expected to be more pure than their male counterparts, but also because the female body, unlike the male body, does not have protruding genitalia. It is quite possible for women to go their entire lives without actually seeing their genitals.

Women have to actively work to see their genitals, unlike men who not only see their genitals multiple times a day, but who must also handle them. It takes very little effort on the part of a woman to have almost no direct physical interaction with her own genitalia. This fact, combined with the extreme taboo against female masturbation, results in women who have almost no personal knowledge of their own sex organs.<sup>8</sup>

This is both sad and dangerous. More than forty thousand women were diagnosed with cervical or ovarian cancer in 2006 (Jemal et. al. 2009, 107). These cancers are found and diagnosed through gynecological exams, but one first has to go to the gynecologist. Similarly, there were over 200,000 estimated new cases of breast cancer in 2006 (Jemal et. al. 2009, 107). If one does not either perform self-examinations or visit a doctor for an exam, health issues such as cancer can go undiagnosed.

There are other reasons why a lack of body awareness is troubling, however. For example, it perpetuates the covert belief that the female body is somehow unclean, somehow inherently bad or dirty, best left un-meddled with except when absolutely necessary. Again, few would claim these ideas if they were stated outright, but in this case, actions (or the lack thereof), speak louder than words.

Conversely, there is the idea that women, as the “fairer” or “purer” sex, must view their bodies as unsoiled temples, best left untouched, lest they become soiled. This at least casts the female body in a somewhat positive light, but is equally dangerous to the psyche of a young girl. Unlike than the previous example, which presents the female body as something dangerous, it also takes her body and turns it into something that does not quite belong to her, something unknowable.

One of the first steps towards creating a more positive and healthy sexual ethic should include de-mystifying the female body. If young women are taught to view their bodies not as either inherently dirty or as an untouchable “temple” but as *bodies*, capable of pleasure, they can begin to understand themselves as sexual beings. This does not have to include masturbation,<sup>9</sup> but should include at least a basic knowledge of what one’s body is, what it contains, what feels right, and what does not. The first person to ever touch a woman’s genitals should not be her husband. Young women need to know their own bodies before they can expect to share them with someone else.

### **Places for Positive Progression within the Evangelical Movement**

For most Evangelical teens, their “youth group” is where they get most of their religious education (since most do not attend religious schools). It is where they socialize with fellow

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<sup>8</sup> I can personally attest that this is, unfortunately, not uncommon, at least among women of my generation who grew up Evangelical. I have multiple friends as old as thirty-five who have never been to the gynecologist, never looked at their genitals, never touched themselves directly (always using a sponge or washcloth in the shower), and who have never used tampons.

<sup>9</sup> Although personally I think that there is nothing wrong with masturbation, I understand that it is considered a sin by many (but not all) Evangelicals.

Evangelicals, and where they are taught theology and ethics, much more so than on Sunday morning. Youth group, a less formal environment, creates more space for dialogue and alternative viewpoints.

In the youth group most young Evangelicals begin to figure out their personal theology. There they wrestle with their faith, and they begin to form the religious opinions that will stay with them into adulthood. The youth group is the perfect forum for teaching a new, positive, sexual ethic. Most Evangelical youth feel comfortable and accepted. They experience a safe environment that is less formal than a classroom or a regular Church service, but is still led by an authority figure who teaches and moderates discussion.

Sex talks are already happening in youth groups, so it would simply be a matter of changing the rhetoric. Youth groups already blur the line between religious and social discussions, thus it would be relatively easy to incorporate topics like healthy body awareness into the lesson plans. In addition, young Evangelicals typically begin to attend around the age of fourteen,<sup>10</sup> which is somewhat older than would be ideal for the formulation of a healthy attitude about sex and sexuality, but still young enough that they have not formed a concrete self-identity. At that age they would likely have an easier time re-orienting themselves to a healthier sexual ethic.

### **Towards Creating a New Ethic**

Roughly 66% of Evangelical women engage in vaginal intercourse before the age of 18, and almost 30% of them do not use any form of contraceptive protection when they experience first sex. Thirteen percent of them do not believe that HIV can be transmitted through oral sex, and Evangelical teens are 13% more likely than their secular counterparts to engage in oral sex. The Evangelical movement does a grave disservice to its youth by not equipping them with the information necessary to make informed, well-reasoned choices. Instead, church leaders, educators, and youth ministers rely on scare tactics, guilt, and misinformation. Young women are not bananas. They are not packing tape. They are human beings with complex emotions, and the negative sexual ethics propagated by the Evangelical movement are doing them a disservice by treating them like they are not smart enough to make informed decisions about their sexuality.

The Evangelical movement fails young women when it teaches them that their bodies are dirty, or somehow untouchable. It fails them by not teaching them about sexual health, and when it gives them erroneous information about STI's and contraception, leaving them uninformed and unprotected. It fails them when it teaches them that men are unable to control their sexual desires, that it is the job of women to act, dress, and behave in a fashion that will not tempt men. This leads them to deduce that if they are assaulted, they must have somehow asked for it. Not talking about sex is no longer an option. At this point it has now become absolutely critical that the Evangelical movement find a way to have open and honest discussions of human sexuality. This does not mean abandoning abstinence or embracing promiscuity, but it does mean that the negative sexual rhetoric must stop.

A crucial first step in this process must be the end of extreme gender essentialism in regards to sexuality. As it stands, men (particularly young men) are portrayed as barely tethered

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<sup>10</sup> Most youth groups are comprised of high school and college aged people, with some variations depending upon the size of the Church and the needs of the particular congregation. But as a general rule, no one younger than a freshman in high school would attend the youth group proper.

animals, unable to control their sexual drives; the slightest thing can set them off. Young women are tasked with not providing temptation, be it in the form of a slightly too tight shirt or an inopportune hug. Female sexuality is thus portrayed as both unsafe (causing temptation without any conscious effort) yet also somehow controlled. This is, of course, because women are not tempted sexually in the same way that men are. Women want to talk about feelings and snuggle, while men want to roam the countryside ravaging maidens. This reductionist rhetoric is incredibly harmful, to both women and men. Not only does it imply that men cannot control their sexual urges (and thus gives them an excuse if they do not) but it blames women for causing men to be out of control.

Next, one must re-evaluate the way that abstinence is being taught, which currently is through mis-information and scare tactics. Rather than trying to frighten young people with the incorrect statistics about STIs and pregnancy, the Evangelical movement should focus on providing its youth with the tools necessary to make informed decisions about sexual activity because not doing so is resulting in them engaging in highly risky behavior.

Knowing about sex will not necessarily lead to having sex, but ignorance about sex leads people to make ignorant decisions. If a young Evangelical decides to have sex, it is better that they know how to properly apply a condom. In addition, more comprehensive sex education will lead to better marital sex later in life. Similarly, the unspoken taboo on female sexuality must be lifted. There is nothing inherently dirty or bad about the female body, and young women must learn how to know themselves. Pleasure is not bad. If one believes that God lovingly created the human body, one cannot discount the clitoris. It did not suddenly spring forth after the Fall. If God created men and women, then women were created with a clitoris, which has no purpose beyond providing sexual pleasure.

Sexuality needs to be recovered from the gutter. It is not wrong; it is not dirty. This is a sentiment with which most Evangelicals would agree while their actions tell a different story. By not being up front with accurate information about sex, they send the message that even knowing about sex is dangerous and possibly sinful. By not teaching young women about their bodies, they send the message that the female body is something dangerous and best left to the realm of men. By teaching that men are at all times barely in control of their sexual urges, they send the message that it is a woman's fault if she is sexually assaulted because she must have tempted him. This has to stop. The time has come for the Evangelical movement to change the way that it talks about sex.

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