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

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

By

Kate Sargent

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Claremont Graduate University in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Women's Studies in to  
the Graduate Faculty of Religion

Claremont, California

2011

Approved by:

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Dr. Helena Slessarev-Jamir

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We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis of Kate Sargent and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Women's Studies in Religion.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Articulating the Ethic: What the Evangelical Movement Says about Sex and Sexuality

#### Introduction

Evangelical culture is a juggernaut, and now has permeated every level of American society. Much of this 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 slippery term. The Oxford English Dictionary 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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 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

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<sup>1</sup> “Oxford Dictionaries,” [www.askoxford.com](http://www.askoxford.com), [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/evangelical?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/evangelical?view=uk) (accessed March 17, 2011).

conversion.”<sup>2</sup> Sandler’s definition is applicable, but all of these terms need a certain amount of unpacking. 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 goes on to define it 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.”<sup>3</sup>

That is somewhat clearer, but still couched in insider language. Perhaps it is impossible, even for a self-designed outsider like Sandler,<sup>4</sup> to enter into a discussion of Evangelical culture without availing oneself of so-called “Christianese”. 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, in this paper, I am reticent 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 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

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<sup>2</sup> Lauren Sandler, *Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement* (New York: Viking Adult, 2006), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> A self-proclaimed liberal, feminist, secular Jewish atheist who nonetheless wrote an insightful and well balanced book about the Evangelical youth movement.

“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.

By and large those within the Evangelical movement, in addition to the criteria listed above, are conservative and fervent in their dedication to their faith, and unwilling to accept any authority as higher than God and the Bible. They believe in *sola scriptura*, or “scripture alone”<sup>5</sup>, and tend, particularly in the youth movement, towards anti-authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism. The defining text, in regards to Evangelical studies thus far, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* by Mark Noll, was first published in 1994.

Noll, a self-proclaimed Evangelical intellectual, spends much of the book decrying the lack of intellectualism within the Evangelical movement in America. He is unwilling to give up either, and therefore is caught in a truly untenable position. He states his case in his first sentence, stating, “The scandal of the Evangelical mind is that there is not much of an Evangelical mind.”<sup>6</sup> He does not intend to imply that Evangelicals are brainless, but rather that they have abandoned intellectual pursuits in favor of other things, to the detriment of both themselves and their movement.

For many unfamiliar with the Evangelical Movement, Noll acts as a gateway, providing a point of entry into Evangelical discourse. Thus, it would be

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<sup>5</sup> Although of course that is impossible. Nothing exists in a vacuum and all interpretations of scripture come with millennia of baggage and interpretations. They just do not acknowledge that they view scripture through pre-conceived biases.

<sup>6</sup> Noll, 3.

helpful at this point to look at his definition of “Evangelical”, and how it compares to Sandler’s, academic insider versus layman outsider. Sandler’s definition is parsed out above. Noll cites the British historian David Bebbington for assistance in formulating the key elements of modern Evangelicalism. They are, “conversionism (an emphasis on the ‘new birth’ as a life-changing religious experience), Biblicism (a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority), activism (a concern for sharing the faith), and crucicentrism (a focus on Christ’s redeeming work on the cross).”<sup>7</sup>

For two such diverse sources, they arrive at remarkably similar definitions. Thus it is safe to reach some basic conclusions about the essential characteristics of the Evangelical movement, and the people who inhabit it.

I can speak of the Evangelical movement in this way because I am a former insider. In the name of full disclosure, I grew up in a Non-Denominational Church and embraced the Evangelical movement from a young age. I was active all throughout elementary school and high school and attended a Christian university affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Alliance, an avowedly Evangelical denomination with a focus on world missions. Ironically, while I was attending that school, I became disenchanted with the Evangelical movement, largely because of their conservative politics and their undercurrent of misogyny.

My story is not a unique one. Many people who have left the Evangelical movement have written of their experiences, although a surprisingly small number have chosen to look at the Evangelical movement from a scholarly perspective, which made research for this project challenging. For a movement

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<sup>7</sup> Noll, 8.

that can claim upwards of 98 million adherents<sup>8</sup>, scholarship on the Evangelical movement is still in its infancy. Noll's book was first published in 1994, a mere seventeen years ago.

### **Articulating the Ethic**

In order to understand how this state of affairs came about, 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:

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.<sup>9</sup>

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 you do not maintain your "sexual purity", you are damaged goods and you will have a hard time finding a Christian man who will want to marry you. The finding and marrying of a Christian man is one of the chief occupations for good Evangelical girls. Thus a woman's inherent value is equated with her sexual status. Or, as Shannon Ethridge, 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

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<sup>8</sup> Sandler, 254.

<sup>9</sup> Ethridge, 148.

plaything.”<sup>10</sup> There is no room for nuance, and no room for failure. After all, a banana cannot be put back in its peel, 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 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 become 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

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<sup>10</sup> Ethridge, 188.

<sup>11</sup> Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), 107.

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.

### **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 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.”<sup>12</sup>

That is his book, and for that matter, his wife’s book *Captivating* too, in a nutshell. Men are warriors and women are princesses. Men desire battles and fights 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 read *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.

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<sup>12</sup> John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2003), xi.

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.”<sup>13</sup> Is it any wonder that Evangelical girls are significantly more likely to experience a forced sexual encounter?<sup>14</sup> 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 *Rebellion*, 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>15</sup> This will be discussed in a more in-depth way in chapter one.

There is a theme that runs through much of the literature about sex aimed at young Evangelicals. It 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 you 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

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<sup>13</sup> Rose, 1215.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Miller and Merav Gur, “Religiousness and Sexual Responsibility in Adolescent Girls,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* no. 31 (2002): 401-6.

<sup>15</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.

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.

In this paper I intend to discuss these issues and how they pertain to the way in which sex, sexuality, and the female body are treated in the discourse of the Evangelical movement, particularly with regard to teenage and young girls. This analysis includes the abstinence movement as well as more general ideas about gender, sex, sexuality, and how they intertwine. While I will look at some of the underlying hermeneutical and theological beliefs which lead to the Evangelical movement's current stance on sex and sexuality, I will spend most of my time with the popular literature aimed at young women, purporting to teach them how to be "Godly women".

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, and 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 ethic, one that is sex-positive while still teaching abstinent behavior.

### **Hermeneutics and Context**

Evangelicals draw from several places in the New Testament when making a case for abstinence. The most common (although by no means the only)

verses cited by the books written by Evangelicals for Evangelicals on the topic of sex and sexuality are as follows:<sup>16</sup>

-Matthew 5:28: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

-Mark 7:21-23: “<sup>21</sup>For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup>greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' ”

Acts 15:29: “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.”

-1 Corinthians 5:11: “But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. “

-1 Corinthians 6:18: “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body”

What these and similar verses have in common is the Greek word πορνεία, or *porneia*, which literally translated means fornication or illicit sexual intercourse, and is most commonly translated in the New International Version of

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<sup>16</sup> All Bible references are taken from the New International Version, which is the version most often referenced in the books used for this paper.

the Bible as “sexual immorality”. It occurs twenty-six times in the New Testament, in twenty-four distinct verses.<sup>17</sup>

Most Evangelical justifications for abstinence are drawn from the New Testament. References from the Hebrew Bible inevitably draw arguments about covenant and law, and since most aspects of the Hebraic law are no longer practiced by modern Evangelicals, it is simpler to reference the New Testament, which has undisputed authority.<sup>18</sup>

Within the Evangelical movement, fornication has been defined as sex that takes place outside of the confines of marriage<sup>19</sup>. As a consequence, sex within marriage becomes highly idealized. Mark Regnerus has an interesting perspective on this phenomenon.. “Christians are to restrict sex to marriage no simply because God or Jesus said so – they did – or because Bible stories always honor marital sexuality and disparage other sexual relationships – they do not – but because doing so reflects God’s promise keeping nature. And marital sexuality is thought to reflect God’s intentions for humans.”<sup>20</sup>

Sex for Evangelicals, therefore, denotes a mystical union. It is the joining of two souls as well as two bodies, something that mirrors the God/human relationship. “Many Christian traditions formally articulate that marriage – and, by extension, sex – is essentially a portrait or reflection of God’s relationship with

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd Edition*, 3rd ed., ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Regnerus, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Ethridge, 24.

<sup>20</sup> Regnerus, 21.

his people [...] In this way, sex points beyond humanity to a divine relationship that hints at the very character of God.”<sup>21</sup>

All of this makes sex a hot topic in Evangelical circles, but any sex outside of heterosexual marriage is presented as a heinous sin, and anything associated with sex is, as an unintentional consequence, seen as dirty and wrong. Thus young Evangelical girls have no outlet for healthy discussion of their bodies and their sexuality. They are told that masturbation is a grave sin, an act of fornication.<sup>22</sup> 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.

### **John Eldredge: Wild Men and Mild Women**

People are reading John Eldredge. His book *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* can be found everywhere from dorm rooms and on men's retreats to Mexican drug cartel recruitment meetings.<sup>23</sup> First published in 2001, it has sold millions of copies and spawned multiple workbooks, journals, lesson plans, and countless other iterations,<sup>24</sup> and it has ranked in the top four

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Shannon Ethridge and Stephen Arterburn, *Every Young Woman's Battle* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2004), 43-50.

<sup>23</sup> Alfredo Garcia, "Evangelical's Bestseller Is a Must-Read For Members of Mexican Drug Cartel," *Washington Post*, July 10, 2010. Accessed online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/09/AR2010070905154.html>

<sup>24</sup> Brandon O'Brien, "A Jesus For Real Men," *Christianity Today*, April 18, 2008. Accessed online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/april/27.48.html>

best-selling Christian books on the whole by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association.<sup>25</sup>

Eldredge, who directs Ransomed Heart Ministries in Colorado with his wife Stasi, puts forward the basic premise that men in the Evangelical movement have somehow lost the knowledge of what it means to be truly masculine, in God's image. In the beginning of *Wild at Heart* he states it 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."<sup>26</sup>

John Eldredge appeals to people within the Evangelical movement because he speaks their language. He is an insider; a former employee at Focus on the Family, he left to become self-employed, which apparently included re-discovering what it means to be truly "masculine".

According to Eldredge, societies efforts to "tame" men have done a great disservice not just to men, but to women too. Men are born to seek adventure in the great outdoors, not spend their lives indoors in a suit. Society has tried to make men into something more "safe", and ultimately more feminine.

"Where are all the *real* Men?" is regular fare for talk-shows and new books. *You asked them to be women*, I want to say. The result is a gender confusion never experienced at such a wide level in the history of the world. How can a man know he is one when his highest aim is minding his manners? (emphasis his)<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sally K. Gallagher and Sabrina L. Wood, "Godly Manhood Going Wild? Transformations in Conservative Protestant Masculinity," *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 2 (2005): 135-59.

<sup>26</sup> John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2003), xi.

<sup>27</sup> Eldredge, 6.

Eldredge is clear. Men cannot truly be men if they do not want to get their hands dirty, if they prefer reading to rock-climbing, or choir to canoeing. No *real* man would ever prefer to be indoors “minding his manners” when there are battles to be fought, horses to be broken, and wilderness to be mastered. It is only the forced feminization of men by society (with the Church’s complicity) that makes men think otherwise.

One mark of Evangelical writing and teaching is a reliance on popular culture as a tool to remain “relevant”,<sup>28</sup> and Eldredge is no exception. He references film nearly as much as he does the biblical narrative, and at several points he compares Mister Rogers, the children’s television host, and William Wallace as portrayed in the movie *Braveheart*. It is not hard to guess which figure he thinks best represents authentic manhood. “As I’ve said before, [paintings of Jesus] leave me with the impression that he was the world’s nicest guy. Mister Rogers with a beard. Telling me to be like him feels like telling me to go limp and passive. Be nice. Be swell. Be like Mother Theresa. I’d much rather be told to be like William Wallace.”<sup>29</sup> His clear privileging of violence over compassion is troubling, not only because it gives a prominent position to one particular interpretation of scripture while dismissing others out of hand, but also because it can be used (as it was with the drug cartel) as an excuse to perpetrate acts of violence.

He objects to the “feminization” of Jesus, and offers instead a blood-drenched warrior. The compassion of a figure like Mother Theresa receives scorn

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Eldredge, 22.

from Eldredge. Perhaps her empathy for the poor is appropriate for a woman, but becomes inappropriate when applied to a male figure like Jesus. Eldredge sees kindness and empathy as “weak” and “passive”. At no point does he address the strength of character that is required to be constantly kind, particularly to those whom society has deemed unworthy of notice.

This is the world that John Eldredge has wrought. *Wild at Heart* was the precursor to the new “masculinity movement” and related “real-man” centered Evangelical initiatives,<sup>30</sup> and gender essentializing does not even begin to describe what is happening in his writing. His books have invaded the collective consciousness of Evangelical movement, and this is particularly true of teens and young people. In them, there is no room for young women who desire an active life outside of familial obligations, and even less room for young men who do not.

### **Understanding Every Young Woman’s Battle**

The book *Every Man’s Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time* was first published in 2000 by Waterbrook Press. It quickly became a “go-to” book for men in the Evangelical movement, and was selling upwards of twenty-five thousand copies a month just a few months after it was first published,<sup>31</sup> and shortly thereafter followed similar books, such as *Every Woman’s Battle*, *Every Young Man’s Battle*, and *Every Young Woman’s Battle*, as

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<sup>30</sup> O’Brien, *Christianity Today*.

<sup>31</sup> Lisa Miller, “Don’t Look, Don’t Touch: A Revision of the Christian Advice Book *Every Man’s Battle*,” *Newsweek*, July 24, 2009.

well as multiple workbooks, journals, lesson plans. As of 2009, the series had sold over three million copies.<sup>32</sup>

These books espouse a very negative view of sexuality. It is something to be conquered, and, in men at least, it is a ravaging beast, seeking out any that it can destroy. Sexuality is personified as something that is almost apart from the human. It is not completely separate, the (multiple) authors and contributors do acknowledge that sexual desire is a part of the human experience; however they treat it with much distaste, as a lower function that must be controlled and suppressed.

All of the books in this series ascribe very essentialized forms to gender and sexuality. In chapter six of *Every Man's Battle*, the authors present their ideas about what, exactly, a man is. This boils down to four main points: first, men are naturally rebellious. One only has to look at crime statistics to see the evidence for this, they say.<sup>33</sup> The result? Men want to “rebel” against God's standards.<sup>34</sup> Second, men find the “straight” life boring.<sup>35</sup> By the “straight” life, they mean the life of responsibility: working, paying taxes, spending time with family, i.e. all the burdensome things that interfere with the fun and carefree lifestyle that men so desire to have. Third, men have a strong and regular sex drive. Men who do not

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> They point out that men are perpetrating most of the violent and sexual assaults committed every year, but spend almost no time looking at why that is. It seems that if masculinity is so inherently wild and violent, as they seem to imply, that it would be pertinent to spend some time examining just why men feel the need to savagely attack others, particularly women. But no, for the authors it is much more important to make sure that these wild beasts are not have impure thoughts about the models on the covers of magazines.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Arterburn, Fred Stoeker, Mike Yorkey, *Every Man's Battle: Every Man's Guide to Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2000), 62.

<sup>35</sup> The obvious implication being that they sure do enjoy the gay life, but that is not what the authors are implying.

receive regular sexual release through the only approved method (heterosexual intercourse with one's spouse) become insatiable, aroused sexually by everything from a co-worker in a fitted jacket to a woman on a billboard. They cannot help it because it is how they were made!<sup>36</sup> This leads to the fourth point (and arguably one of the main points of the book), that men are aroused sexually through visual stimulation. This is something that women can never understand, because, according to the authors, "they aren't sexually stimulated in the same way. Their ignitions are tied to touch and relationship."<sup>37</sup> According to the authors, for men seeing something that they find visually stimulating is the equivalent of "stroking an inner thigh or rubbing a breast".<sup>38</sup> This causes obvious problems, because while most women do not go around having their inner thighs and/or breasts rubbed by random men on the street, men are accosted visually everywhere that they go, and are thus in a state of constant arousal.

This line of thinking has gained prominence within Evangelical discourse in the last fifteen or so years, largely due to books like *Wild at Heart* and *Every Man's Battle*, although traditional Christian discourse has never shied away from discussing the base nature of male sexual urges. One only has to look at the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo to see the seeds for the sexual ethics presented in these books. There has always been something else that goes along with these ideas about the insatiability of male sexuality; however, that is a certain blaming of women for providing temptation to struggling males. This has manifested

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<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to note that the authors spend more time in this section than in the previous two combined. Obviously, sexual arousal is far more important than a proclivity for violence or irresponsibility.

<sup>37</sup> Arterburn, 66.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

differently throughout history, usually involving some sort of modesty injunction. That is where the book in the *Battle* series which is aimed at young women comes in to play. In *Every Young Woman's Battle*, girls are cautioned to make sure that the way that they dress is not going to cause the young men around them to “stumble” by tempting them sexually.

“Now consider this,” Ethridge writes. “You know that young men are visually stimulated at the sight of a woman’s body, especially a scantily clad body. You may also know that godly young men are trying desperately to bounce their eyes away from sexually stimulating images. Are you acting lovingly or selfishly if you know these things yet insist on wearing clothes that reveal as much of your sleek curves and tanned skin as possible?”<sup>39</sup>

The gender binary established through these books places men and women in static roles, established at the beginning of time itself. In *Every Young Woman's Battle* the authors ascribe these essentialized norms to Adam and Eve, stating that,

God placed in Eve the desire to be emotionally connected and involved in caring for and nurturing others [...] He gave her and all the females, the responsibility of being the nurtures of the human race, and He placed in her exactly what she would need to fulfill that responsibility: the desire to be emotionally intimate. A woman is made to cradle, caress, converse with, and care for the object of her affection.<sup>40</sup>

In this model, women are glorified incubators, selflessly nurturing not just their mate, but everyone else, as well. This description is an outmoded, reductionist, and incredibly harmful representation of what it means to be feminine. They do not reference in any way the desire for sexual pleasure when

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<sup>39</sup> Ethridge, 93.

<sup>40</sup> Ethridge, 19.

describing this paragon of femininity. After all, this is a passage that is supposed to be describing why women and men are created to “be fruitful and multiply”.<sup>41</sup>

If there was ever a place to mention healthy physical desire, this would be it. The authors certainly do not shy away from discussing Adam’s sexual needs and the role that they would play in his fruitful multiplying. “God placed in [Adam] exactly what he would need in order to fulfill his responsibility: the desire to be physically intimate and experience pleasure. A man longs to reach out and touch, fondle, embrace, and expel all of his energies making love with the object of his affection.”<sup>42</sup>

It is unclear why this description of sexual desire is only attributed to men and not to women. The authors cannot mean to imply that women do not experience sexual desire, even though that seems to be the implication from their descriptions of vital manhood and womanhood. Their description of Adam’s desire for Eve (and, subsequently, a man’s holy desire for his wife) seems as if it could be used to describe the desires of either gender for physical intimacy. However, the authors do not choose to make that connection.

They do not deny that women experience physical pleasure during sexual activity, but they do assert that women do not ever truly seek sexual intimacy in order to experience physical pleasure. That is something that happens to men, not to women. No, women seek sexual intimacy because their “heart is crying out for someone to satisfy [their] innermost desires to be loved, needed, valued, and

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<sup>41</sup> Genesis 1:28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

cherished.”<sup>43</sup> Women are, naturally, controlled by their *feelings*, not by any sort of base physical desire. After all, no one wants to imagine a nurturing, maternal figure achieving orgasm.

The authors sum up their troubling analysis with a pithy maxim: “guys *give love to get sex*, and *girls give sex to get love* (emphasis theirs).”<sup>44</sup> Their unyielding definitions of “true manhood” and “true womanhood” once again bolster up the idea that men are uncontrolled beasts, willing to do anything for sex, and that it is the responsibility of women to lovingly, untiringly, keep them in check, for their own good. It is an unwinnable scenario for women.

The authors are not above using guilt to drive their point home. They want to make sure that the young Evangelical women who are reading this best-selling series know without a shadow of a doubt what their responsibilities are.

If you want to be a young woman of sexual integrity, you may need to let go of some of your freedoms (in dress, thoughts, speech, and behavior) in order to serve the interests of others out of love. Not only will God provide this knowledge of how to act with integrity, He will also honor you, if you apply this knowledge and act with responsibility.<sup>45</sup>

Obviously, one cannot be a woman of integrity and still desire sexual, emotional, or physical freedom; that is not the divinely ordained role for women. Women are called to sacrifice themselves for others, whether that means sacrificing one’s wardrobe in order to prevent the sin of men, or sacrificing one’s sexual desire, or one’s body in the bearing of children. Women are created for the service of others, and sexual pleasure has no place in that paradigm.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ethridge, 29.

This assumption is unfair to both young men and young women. It presupposes that young men will be unable to guard their own minds from lustful thoughts, and it reverts to age-old ideas about woman as temptress and seducer. Somehow simply by being female and having a developed female body, women are responsible for the corruption of men. After all, if, as Matthew 5:28 says, any man who looks lustfully at a woman has committed adultery in his heart with her, and young men are incapable of not looking lustfully at young women who dress in any way provocatively, it is the fault of young women when young men sin. Is it any wonder that the undercurrent of misogyny that runs through Evangelical discourse is impossible to banish?

### **Surveying Modesty**

The first generation of young Evangelicals who were raised under the tutelage of John Eldredge and the *Battle* series has begun making their own forays into the discourse on sex, sexuality, and gender. The Harris family has made three notable contributions to this discussion: Joshua, Alex, and Brett. 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>46</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

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<sup>46</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.

create a blog, titled “the Reblution”<sup>47</sup>, 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 around the slogan “Do Hard Things” (also the title of their first book, complete with an introduction by Evangelical folk hero Chuck Norris). As they explain it on their website,

The battle cry of The Reblution is just three words, but it's an explosive concept: Do Hard Things. That's it. And "do hard things" is a mentality. It's a mentality that flies right in the face of our culture's low expectations. The world says, ‘You're young, have fun!’ It tells us to ‘obey your thirst and ‘just do it.’ Or it tells us, ‘You're great! You don't need to exert yourself.’ *But those kinds of mindsets sabotage biblical character and competence* (emphasis mine).<sup>48</sup>

It is an echoing of Eldredge’s distaste for the “passive” male Christian (although the Harris brothers do not limit their rhetoric to men), and his desire for what he sees as a more active and aggressive form of Christianity. The Harris brothers expend much effort encouraging their followers to “do hard things,” whether that means donating pocket money to charity or spending vacations doing volunteer and/or mission work.<sup>49</sup> It also involves a change in basic attitudes one’s personal life.

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<sup>47</sup> Yes, that is a combination of “Rebellion” and “Revolution”.

<sup>48</sup> Alex Harris and Brett Harris, “About the Reblution,” *The Reblution*, <http://www.thereblution.com/about/reblution.htm> (accessed April 4, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Their goals are not, necessarily, bad, although they do represent a somewhat troubling first-world mentality.

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.<sup>50</sup> 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 one-hundred and fifty thousand answers from sixteen hundred young men.<sup>51</sup> 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.

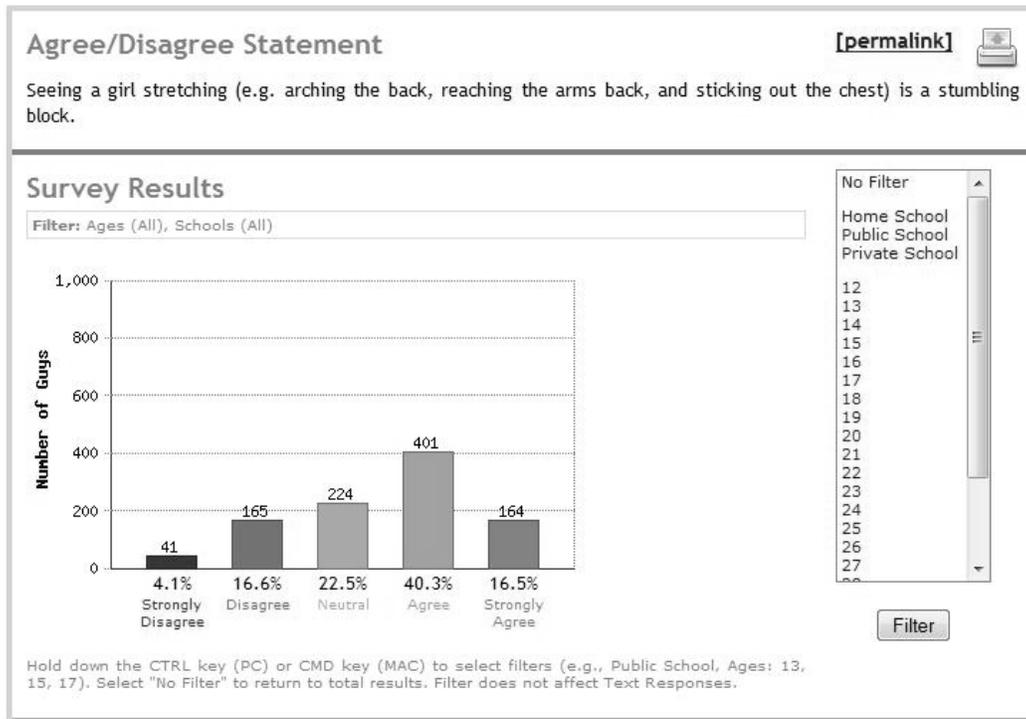
The survey results are sorted into ten categories: General/Other, Swimsuits, Undergarments, Shirts/Dresses, Layering, Skirts, Posture/Movement, Makeup/Jewelry/Hair/Shoes, and Open Questions. Each section contains the answers to questions about what, exactly, constitutes modest or immodest attire and 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 (see figure 1)”.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The Rebelution Blog, “Announcement: The Modesty Survey”, December 2, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



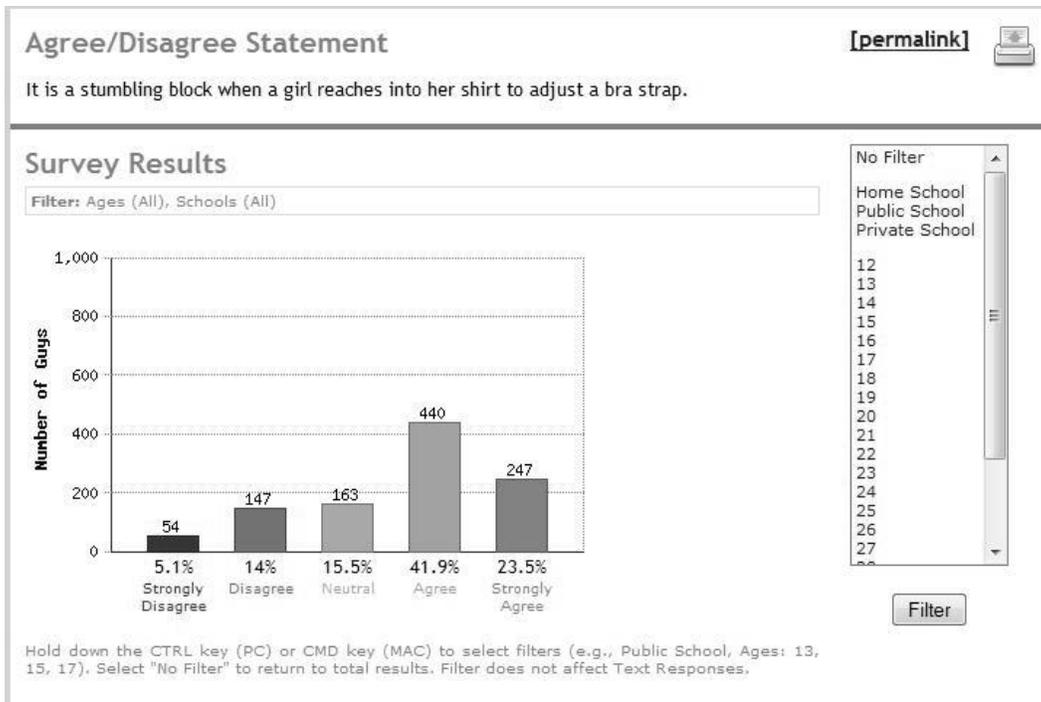
*Figure 1: Survey Results*

While it should still be the responsibility of young men to control their own thoughts (particularly if they view those thoughts as sinful), seeing a young woman thrust out her chest in such a manner could be understandably distracting.

Many of the answers, however, 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 (see figure 2).<sup>53</sup> Thus women lose their personhood and become sexual objects, reduced to walking and talking vaginas.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</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



*Figure 2: Survey Results*

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, they are overtly sexual beings who must constantly guard their behavior, lest they “tempt” their fellow Christians to sin. This while simultaneously being portrayed as the “weaker” sex, who were created to be helpers and nurturers, not 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?

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them to sin. This always struck me as invasive and inappropriate, not to mention strangely dominating and voyeuristic. But that is what happens when you teach young men that they have a right to decide what is and is not appropriate for young women to do and wear.

## **Don Miller and Mark Driscoll: Gender Essentialism for the Twenty-First Century**

Don Miller is, seemingly, a fairly normal American Christian. Born in Houston, Texas in 1971, he grew up attending a mainline Evangelical church. In many ways his experience mirrored that of many people of his generation. He was raised by his mother (who was also active in the church), his father was largely absent from his life. He moved to Portland, Oregon at the age of Twenty-one, where he attended Reed College and received a degree in Literature. He has been active (in varying levels) in the Christian church for his entire life. Indeed, there is very little that is extraordinary about Don Miller, which is perhaps why he was able to become a prophetic voice for a generation of young Christians.

Miller, who is now Thirty-nine years old, he was Thirty-one when he wrote *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, a book which changed the landscape of what it meant to be “Christian” for millions of people, particularly young people (his target audience). He was able to speak to a generation of Christians who grew up watching the rise and fall Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker (as well as countless other so-called ‘televangelists’) as well as the rise (and now, fall) of the Moral Majority and the Religious Right. He, like almost all of his generation, grew up in an American Christian tradition swathed in excess and power. Naturally, he became disillusioned.

Miller is an interesting figure, because he is not extraordinary. He, while smart, is not a genius, while reasonably articulate he is not a great orator, his writing is competent but not astonishing. No, Don Miller is not extraordinary, and

that is why he was able to speak so successfully to his audience. He was disillusioned with institutionalized Christianity in America, and decided to write about it. And because he was normative as a young Christian, his writing struck a chord with his peers.

His writing is not academic. In fact, there is a troubling undercurrent of anti-theological thinking that runs through his work.<sup>55</sup> Rather, he has purposefully simplified his writing, hoping to appeal to a larger audience. This method, while no doubt successful, did lead to a certain sloppiness of expression that can be incredibly dangerous when one is writing about faith.

This is what makes Miller a potentially dangerous figure. He wrote a book that has been read by millions and assigned as a class text in courses at Evangelical universities, but his writing is often somewhat muddy, and needs much clarification, which leaves room for certain ideas that he, quite possibly, would not agree with.

For example, when speaking about a couple who were good friends of his, he said, “My best friend, Paul, Married my friend Danielle. People change when they get married, it is true. Danielle was a fiery feminist when she married Paul; now she isn’t so much a feminist, or at least she isn’t active. She is very much in

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<sup>55</sup> I am aware just how loaded that statement is, so allow me to unpack it, somewhat. Miller seems to have great affection for the academics in his life, particularly those he meets at Reed College, but ultimately he sees faith and belief as something that cannot be achieved through academic means, and in fact that it is harmful for one to seek to understand God through theology and the mind, rather than through feeling and the “heart” and “soul”. What he fails to acknowledge is that those ideas are themselves a form of theology. He thinks of theology as a dry list of attributes and characteristics, and refuses to acknowledge that there are people who have genuine spiritual experiences through these academic pursuits.

love with him, and he with her.”<sup>56</sup> It seems likely, looking at the rest of his work, that Miller is not anti-feminist, or at least not completely. However, statements like this, when written in a book that has come to be so highly influential, are troubling.

It is not surprising that Miller has friends who would identify as former feminists, as he is closely affiliated with Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington. The head pastor there, Mark Driscoll, has created a community of Evangelicals that at first glance appears as if it would be progressive. “This is a land where housewives cradle babies in tattooed arms, where young men balance responsibilities as breadwinners in their families and lead guitarists in their local rock bands, and where biblical orthodoxy rules as strictly as in Hasidism or Opus Dei.”<sup>57</sup>

Driscoll has quickly become one of the most influential pastors for young Evangelicals. His appeal is similar to the appeal of Miller, although he is more dynamic. He is effective and appealing because he became disillusioned with Christianity in America, and he decided to do something about it. He advocates for a return to more conservative and traditional faith, and this includes gender.<sup>58</sup>

In his book *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* Driscoll lays out what he sees as the five main evidences for God-established male headship. First, “God calls the race ‘man’ and ‘mankind,’”<sup>59</sup> second, “By naming Eve, as he did

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<sup>56</sup> Miller, Donald, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 143.

<sup>57</sup> Sandler, 46.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe (RE: Lit)* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2010), 123.

the animals, Adam was exercising authority over her”<sup>60</sup>, third, God holds Adam accountable for allowing Eve to sin, fourth, (related to the third point) it is Adam’s sin, not Eve’s, which causes the fall of mankind, and fifth, the Bible tells men to “lead their homes as Christlike heads and wives are to submit to their husbands”.<sup>61</sup>

Driscoll’s very narrow view of gender roles has shaped the lives of the women and men in his congregation. “Following Mark’s reading of prescribed gender roles, women quit their jobs and try to have as many babies as possible”.<sup>62</sup> Women are to be “lovely helpers”, coming alongside men to support and sustain them. Driscoll instructs women that they “should only marry a man that they trust enough to follow”<sup>63</sup>, as they are created to be governed by men.

Driscoll has defined Mars Hill as “culturally liberal and theologically conservative”<sup>64</sup>. Being culturally liberal makes him attractive to young Evangelicals who do not want to have to give up their pop culture interests, and thus he has created an Evangelical community that “celebrate[s] twenty-first century secular culture alongside nineteenth century gender roles”<sup>65</sup>. Mars Hill Church is one of the fastest growing churches in America,<sup>66</sup> and Driscoll’s brand of modern gender essentialism is gaining in popularity among young Evangelicals.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Sandler, 46.

<sup>63</sup> Driscoll, 124.

<sup>64</sup> Sandler, 56.

<sup>65</sup> Sandler, 45.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 2

### Chapter 2: The Results of Talking and Not Talking About Sex for Evangelical Youth: Statistics and More

#### Taking a Look at Abstinence Education

Between 1996 and 2005, nearly one billion dollars was spent in the United States to fund abstinence only education. According to Susan Rose in her article “Going Too Far? Sex, Sin and Social Policy,” from the journal *Social Forces*, she states: “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.”

She goes on to describe a video titled “No Second Chance” (a video distributed by Evangelical conglomerate Focus on the Family) 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,” and quotes, directly from the video, the response of the on-screen “educator” when a young boy asks what will happen if he has sex before marriage. She responds, “Well I guess you just have to be prepared to die. And you’ll probably take with you your spouse and one or more of your children.”<sup>67</sup>

These scare tactics are federally funded. During the Bush administration there was nearly a fifty percent increase in federal funds allocated specifically for

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Rose, “Going Too Far? Sex, Sin and Social Policy,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 2 (Dec. 2005): 1207-32.

abstinence only education, roughly 205.5 million in 2006, despite any clear evidence that it was at all effective. In fact, one could easily argue for its ineffectuality, considering that the United States has more unintended teen pregnancies per-capita than any other fully industrialized country.<sup>68</sup>

A report commissioned in 2004 by Representative Henry Waxman (D, CA) found that 80%, eleven out of thirteen total, of abstinence only programs that were federally funded contained errors and misinformation about reproductive health and sexuality.<sup>69</sup> This included false information about the effectiveness of various forms of contraception, with particular emphasis on the effectiveness of condoms.

One curricula made the claim that condom use results in unplanned pregnancy one out of every seven times.<sup>70</sup> One particular curricula, *Me, My World, My Future*, published by Teen Aid, Inc., a not-for-profit organization based in Spokane, WA, teaches that condoms are permeable not just to sperm, but to viruses such as HIV as well. “Think on a microscopic level. Sperm cells, STI organisms, and HIV cannot be seen with the naked eye — you need a microscope. Any imperfections in the contraceptive not visible to the eye, could allow sperm, STI, or HIV to pass through.”<sup>71</sup> Obviously, anything that cannot be seen by the naked eye is comparable in size and durability.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Henry Waxman. “The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs,” United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform, Special Investigations Division, December 2004. i.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Waxman, 13.

Perhaps more troubling were the scientific errors that were uncovered by the report. In addition to general mistakes, such as listing the numbers of chromosomes received from each parent as twenty-four instead of twenty-three, were more insidious claims: one curricula, *WAIT Training*, published through the Christian publishing house LifeWay, erroneously stated that HIV can be transmitted through sweat and tears.<sup>72</sup>

The Waxman report also found that many of the programs were, unsurprisingly, teaching outdated or outright false information about the risks of abortion. This includes *Me, My World, My Future* stating that, “Studies show that five to ten percent of women will never again be pregnant after having a legal abortion”, when in fact recent studies have shown that there is no correlation between elective abortion and infertility.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the nearly 170 million dollars that goes to funding abstinence education yearly in the United States, a survey conducted in 2000 found that 67% of Americans believe that comprehensive sex education should be taught in high school, which would include information about how to obtain and correctly use contraception. Surprisingly, the numbers were slightly higher among those who self-identified as conservative Christians, with eight out of ten in support of comprehensive sex education for high school students.<sup>74</sup> If almost 70% of the nation supports comprehensive sex education, why is so much money going towards funding abstinence only programs?

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<sup>72</sup> Waxman, 23.

<sup>73</sup> Waxman, 17.

<sup>74</sup> Rose, 5.

## Abstinence Pledges: True Love Waits

So-called abstinence pledges, which are perhaps best exemplified by *True Love Waits*<sup>75</sup>, an organization which made popular the term “abstinence pledge” for Christian teens (membership cards and all) in the early 1990s, is one of the strongest movements among Evangelicals. Since 1994, over 2.5 million teens have taken the True Love Waits pledge, according to the organizations website,<sup>76</sup> a number that has been verified elsewhere.<sup>77</sup> 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."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Which, coincidentally, is also owned by LifeWay.

<sup>76</sup> “[www.truelovewaits.com](http://www.truelovewaits.com),” True Love Waits, [http://www.lifeway.com/tlw/downloads/pdf\\_tlw\\_overview.pdf](http://www.lifeway.com/tlw/downloads/pdf_tlw_overview.pdf) (accessed January 11, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Peter Bearman and Hannah Bruckner, “Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 106, no. 4 (Jan. 2001): 859-912.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., [www.truelovewaits.com](http://www.truelovewaits.com).

**TRUE LOVE WAITS**  
**Commitment Card**

**MY COMMITMENT**  
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.

**Signed:**

**Date:** April 5, 2011

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*Figure 3: The Downloadable Commitment Card*

This is normally a ceremony that happens either in front of one's Church or youth group, or even at a "purity ball", where a father escorts his daughter, receives her pledge of abstinence, and presents her with a ring, in ceremony specifically designed to mirror her presumed future wedding, at which point her father will transfer her virginity into the care of her husband. There is no such correlating ceremony for young men, where their mothers receive their pledge of abstinence until the time when they can entrust their son's virginity into the care of his wife. This is an interesting omission that once again springs from the underlying assumption that women must simultaneously define their sexuality and purity by the desires of the nearest available man, in this case her father, and in the future her husband.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

The True Love Waits website offers many free resources, including the downloadable Commitment Card (see Figure 3), but they are also very much in the abstinence business, and thus they offer a large variety of purity products. This includes many forms of purity rings, in a spectrum of metals, from sterling silver to gold and platinum, but it also includes t-shirts, stickers, bracelets, and necklaces. If one can put a logo on it, chances are they have.

### **Defining “Sex”: Activity versus Intercourse**

All of these issues are exacerbated by the fact that there is not any one definitive definition for either sex or virginity. The Oxford English Dictionary defines virginity as “the state of never having had sexual intercourse”<sup>80</sup>, but that is of limited use without a good, working definition of what constitutes sexual intercourse. What “counts” as sex, and what does not?

In her book *Virgin: The Untouched History*, Hanne Blank says that she was prompted by the inquiries of the students that she was working with as a sex-educator to figure out just what, exactly, the official, medical definition of virginity was. The idea being that by defining what, precisely, made one a virgin, she could then extrapolate what, exactly, constituted sexual intercourse.

The search proved to be much more difficult than she anticipated. She eventually found herself in one of the best medical libraries in the country, the Countway Medical Library at Harvard University. She says that she was “vexed

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid., [www.askoxford.com](http://www.askoxford.com)

to discover that most of the medical textbooks I was looking through didn't even bother to discuss virginity, and those that did rarely seemed to define it.”<sup>81</sup>

In fact, she was unable to find any conclusive definitions. There are certain things that are nearly universally considered to be “sexual intercourse”, such as vaginal penetration by a penis. Beyond that, the lines get blurry. For example, does oral sex fall into the category of “sexual activity” or “sexual intercourse”? The semantics in this case are very important for young Evangelicals. Sexual activity might be frowned upon, but one could still refer to oneself as a virgin after participating in it. The same cannot be said of sexual intercourse.

Once again it is helpful to look to the Oxford English Dictionary for help in defining these terms.<sup>82</sup> The OED defines “sexual intercourse” as “sexual contact between individuals involving penetration, especially the insertion of a man's erect penis into a woman's vagina, typically culminating in orgasm and the ejaculation of semen.”<sup>83</sup> This is a helpful (and non-heterocentric) definition. If one were to accept this as authoritative, than activities such as oral and anal sex would fall under the category of sexual intercourse, and therefore one who engaged in these activities would no longer be able to refer to oneself as a virgin. This definition also has the added benefit of eliminating so-called “technical virginity”.

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<sup>81</sup> Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2007), ix.

<sup>82</sup> As has probably become obvious, the OED is my dictionary of choice, and will be used throughout this paper.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, [www.askoxford.com](http://www.askoxford.com).

## Technical Virginity: It's All About Penetration

The ignorance of even the most basic workings of sexual interaction that is prominent within the Evangelical Movement has led to a phenomenon known colloquially as “technical virginity”. In an interview with the *Washington Post* Peter Bearman, 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.<sup>84</sup>

According to Bearman's research, “Just 2 percent of youth who never took a pledge said they had had anal or oral sex but not intercourse, compared with 13 percent of [teens committed to an abstinence pledge].”<sup>85</sup> These forms of sexual intercourse are seen as somehow “less sinful”.<sup>86</sup> Thus, as discussed above, one enters the murky area of defining what is and what is not sex, and therefore what is and what is not sin. If oral sex is not sex, then it follows that engaging in oral sex is not engaging in a sinful behavior.

Thus the definition of “technical virginity”, i.e. the idea being that as long as there has not been vaginal penetration by a man's penis, one is still, technically, a virgin. This idea is perpetuated through a stiffly heteronormative

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<sup>84</sup> Ceci Connolly, “Teen Pledges Barely Cut STD Rates, Study Says,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2005.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> A claim which, according to both traditional and popular Protestant theology is not possible, as, supposedly, God views all sins as equal.

view of sex and sexual interaction that (whether rightly or no) is seen to define sex as vaginal penetration by a penis.

A lack of proper education about the mechanics of sex can also lead to unsafe behavior. 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.<sup>87</sup> That is a staggering 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.

That same study found that 20.8% of the teenage girls interviewed had had oral sex, versus only 14% who had engaged in vaginal sex. The interviewees (of which the average age was 14.54) also reported, nearly universally, a belief that oral or anal sex was both significantly less risky and more appropriate for their age group than vaginal sex.<sup>88</sup>

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 control birth control use.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Bonnie L. Halpern-Felsher, Jodi L. Cornell, Rhonda Y. Kropp and Jeanne M. Tschann, “Oral Versus Vaginal Sex Among Adolescents: Perceptions, Attitudes, and Behavior,” *Pediatrics: The Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* 115, no. 4 (April 2005): 845-51.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Lisa Miller and Merav Gur, “Religiousness and Sexual Responsibility in Adolescent Girls,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* no. 31 (2002): 401-6.

In another article titled “Religious differentials in the sexual and reproductive behaviors of young women in the United States”, 17.8% of girls aged 15-24 who identified as either Fundamentalist or Evangelical reported having had sex before the age of fifteen, and 66.6% reported having had sex before the age of eighteen. This study also found that a disturbingly large percentage (30%) of young women raised in a Fundamentalist or Evangelical<sup>90</sup> home reported not using any form of protection or contraception at first sex.<sup>91</sup> Of course, there are other variables that contribute to the likelihood of sexual activity, such as nationality and parental education level. Girls with mothers with less than a high school education reported higher percentages of sexual activity at a young age than girls whose parents, particularly their mothers, had a higher level of education.<sup>92</sup>

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 statistics stated above show that teens are woefully 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

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<sup>90</sup> The terms are used interchangeably within the article, and thus when referencing this article I have chosen to follow the lead of the authors.

<sup>91</sup> Rachel K. Jones, Jacqueline E. Darroch and Susheela Singh, “Religious differentials in the sexual and reproductive behaviors of young women in the United States,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* no. 36 (2005): 279-88.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

risks of unprotected oral sex, as a scare tactic if nothing else. They certainly use similar tactics when speaking about vaginal intercourse.

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. 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. In conclusion, Evangelical teens are engaging in sexual activities, they are just doing it without the tools necessary to protect themselves.

Another factor contributing to the lack of contraceptive use is the idea of planned sin versus unplanned sin. If you “slip up” or “get caught up in the moment” and have sex, it is often perceived as somehow less sinful than if you planned on having sex and thus obtained contraceptives. This not only encourages irresponsible behavior, it also denigrates active responsibility.

As Jessica Valenti described in her book *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*, “In these instances, sex is framed not as a deliberate choice but rather as something that just occurred, thus freeing young people-especially young women-from the judgment that's heaped upon those who actively choose sex.”<sup>93</sup>

“Getting caught in the moment” allows one to take on the role of passive participant, rather than active player, and this sentiment represents a disturbing

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<sup>93</sup> Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2009), 194.

trend towards rewarding irresponsibility and punishing responsibility. Why is unplanned action seen as somehow better than planned action?

## CHAPTER 3

### 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>94</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 that they are barely able to conceive of, and for which they are unprepared.

Imagine it like this. Suppose a person was raised knowing that reading before the age of twenty-one was a dangerous sin, that even knowing how to read,

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<sup>94</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.

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 somehow now 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 acutely under this taboo, not only because they are expected to be more pure than their male counterparts, but 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 bodies.<sup>95</sup>

This is both sad and dangerous. More than forty thousand women were diagnosed with cervical or ovarian cancer in 2006.<sup>96</sup> These cancers are found and diagnosed through gynecological exams, but one first has to go to the gynecologist. Similarly, there were over two-hundred thousand estimated new cases of breast cancer in 2006<sup>97</sup>. 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

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<sup>95</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>96</sup> Jemal, Ahmedin, Rebecca Siegel, Elizabeth Ward, Taylor Murray, Jiaquan Xu, Carol Smigal, and Michael Thun. “Cancer Statistics, 2006.” *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians* 56, no. 2 (24 February 2009): 107.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

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 must 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>98</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 Evangelicals, and where they are taught their theology and ethics, much more so than on Sunday morning. Youth group is a less formal environment, which creates more space for dialogue and alternative viewpoints.

It is in the youth group that most young Evangelicals begin to figure out their personal theology, where they wrestle with their faith, and where they begin to form the religious opinions that will stay with them into adulthood. Thus the

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<sup>98</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.

youth group is the perfect forum for beginning to teach 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 still led by an authority figure who could teach and moderate discussion.

Sex talks are already happening in youth groups every day, 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 things like healthy body awareness into the lesson plans., In addition, since young Evangelicals typically start attending around the age of fourteen<sup>99</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, they would likely have an easier time re-orienting themselves to a healthier sexual ethic.

### **Looking at Christian Sexual Ethics with Margaret Farley**

Consider, for a moment the work of someone who is currently doing Christian sexual ethics. Margaret Farley is not an Evangelical. She is a Catholic nun, a member of the Sisters of Mercy, and a professor at Yale Divinity School, as well as being one of the preeminent scholars of Christian sexual ethics. As such her explication of sexual ethics within Christianity have wider applicability, and the four main sources for doing Christian ethics that she outlines in her book *Just*

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<sup>99</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.

*Love* are relevant to the Evangelical movement, and can possibly provide a starting place for building a new ethic.

Farley's four main sources for doing Christian ethics are: Scripture, tradition, secular disciplines of knowledge, and contemporary experience. According to Farley, these four sources must interact with each other for any sort of comprehensive, workable ethic to be reached. All four sources have their relative merits and problems, and it is only when we can recognize the "limits of each of the sources when appealed to by themselves"<sup>100</sup> that one can begin to develop a cogent Christian ethic for the modern period.

Farley opens with a discussion of the Bible, both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The Bible can be a problematic source, for Farley, because the culture and traditions from which it was drawn were far from monolithic. There is no one Biblical culture, or one Biblical context, and therefore all interpretations of Biblical texts must be carefully nuanced with an understanding of culture, situation, and context. The Evangelical emphasis on the primacy of scripture makes this source particularly important, and Farley's emphasis on contextualizing the Bible, while problematic for more conservative Evangelicals, is none the less important for creating a new ethic.

Less problematic, although arguably just as complicated, is the use of faith traditions as a source for Christian ethics. This includes both official doctrine and theology as well as communal experiences interpretations of Scripture. Tradition,

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<sup>100</sup> Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2006), 183.

unlike Scripture, is mutable.<sup>101</sup> Well-established doctrines and traditions are not considered to be infallible, even by the most conservative believers. Thus tradition, as a mutable source, can be re-interpreted or discarded as it suits the needs of the modern culture. The tendency within the Evangelical movement to pick and choose what Church traditions they wish to follow can provide an opportunity for alternative dialogue.

The third source that Farley presents is what she calls “secular disciplines of knowledge”. This includes “not only philosophy but biology, medicine, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and even history, literature, and art.”<sup>102</sup> Essentially including “every discipline not based in or dependent upon revelation, that offers the possibility of insight into the aspects of creation we seek to understand.”<sup>103</sup>

This source, while essential for Farley, can be problematic depending upon how conservative<sup>104</sup> the interpreter is. Those who take a very conservative view of scripture are more likely to be uncomfortable with using secular disciplines to create a Christian ethic. Just as they would be more likely to look at the Bible as a cohesive whole, they are likely to view secular disciplines through a hermeneutic of suspicion.

The fourth and final source for building a Christian ethic, according to Farley, is contemporary experience. Experience is an essential part of all of the

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<sup>101</sup> There are some traditions, like Mormonism, that do not have a closed canon. For the purpose of this paper I will be addressing those branches of Christianity that consider the canon to be closed.

<sup>102</sup> Farley, 189.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Conservative in this context being defined as those who take a more narrow view of scripture and its divine source.

sources; Scripture, tradition, and secular disciplines are built on a foundation of personal and communal experience. For the purpose of establishing a Christian ethic, Farley narrows her definition to “the contemporary actual living of events and relationships, along with the sensations, feelings, emotions, insights, and understandings that are a part of this lived reality.”<sup>105</sup>

Humans cannot escape the influence of experience; everything we do is shaped by experience, either ours or someone else’s. Cultural norms and traditions are developed through the influence of past cultural experiences, which then go on to influence the way that people react to experiences now. As Farley puts it, “sex is sometimes *experienced* as evil precisely because it has been socially interpreted as evil”<sup>106</sup>.

While this is undoubtedly true, using experience as a source for Christian ethics can have many of the same problems as using secular disciplines. Those who view Christianity conservatively are going to feel very uncomfortable using extra-Biblical sources. While they are not, necessarily, advocating for *sola scriptura*<sup>107</sup>, anything that goes beyond traditional sources such as established theology and Church doctrine, is going to cause them some discomfort.<sup>108</sup>

Farley presents a well-reasoned and relatively moderate defense for her sources in developing a Christian sexual ethic. She efficaciously walks the line between conservative and liberal Christian traditions, and manages to create a

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Farley, 190.

<sup>107</sup> Although, as noted above, Evangelicals are big fans of this doctrine.

<sup>108</sup> Of course, as Farley has shown, those traditions are based on experience, and therefore experience is an inescapable source, but a conservative view of divine inspiration is going to downplay the human role in creating scripture and in some instances theology and doctrine.

well-defined and nuanced defense that will satisfy those who tend toward moderate views of the role of human experience in scripture versus divine inspiration. This, in addition to her four sources, that makes her an important figure for establishing a new Evangelical sexual ethic. She demonstrates very well how to work within a moderate space to create room for new viewpoints, which is a lesson that must be learned if there is going to be any progression towards creating a new, workable sexual ethic within the Evangelical movement.

### **Possibilities for Teaching Sex-Positive Abstinence:**

**Linda Dillow and Lauren Winner**

Linda Dillow has written several books aimed at helping married women enjoy sex. “The Church has erred greatly,” she said to Daniel Radosh when he interviewed her for his book *Rapture Ready! Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture*, “You can’t just say to your children, ‘Stay away from this-and then get married and all of a sudden turn around and delight in it.’ It’s kind of hard to shift gears in one day.”<sup>109</sup>

Dillow recognizes the problem, but her books are focused on helping women who have already internalized the Evangelical movement’s negative attitude towards sex. This is an important goal, but one cannot help but think that if she did similar work to change the current sexual education paradigm she could prevent more young women from turning in to the kind of married women who need to read her books. At least she recognizes that many women in the

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<sup>109</sup> Radosh, 260.

Evangelical movement “have spent so many years ‘damning up’ their sexual passions in an attempt to remain pure that they find it difficult to suddenly open the floodgates and allow sexual feelings to flow.”<sup>110</sup>

Her perspective is refreshing, and her attitude towards sex as a natural, healthy, and *good* gift from God to humanity can be a starting point for changing the way that sex is talked about within Evangelical circles. She does not address the issue of teaching abstinence, however she does write about the glories of sex within marriage. For Evangelicals looking for a way to talk positively about sex while still teaching abstinence, this is a good place to start.

Dillow may focus on married women, but her principles are more widely applicable. When she likens sexual pleasure to both a profound religious ecstasy and the intimate joining of two fleshs becoming one, she is helping to pull sex out of the gutter, while still allowing it to be erotic.

For many, these ideas are too racy. As she puts it, “there’s this fear that if you teach what God teaches in scripture-which is a free, wonderful, exciting sexual relationship in marriage- if you teach that, people will take license, and sex will get out of hand. They will give in too much to their desires.”<sup>111</sup>

Part of the problem is that such a book would need to be written by someone who has internal knowledge of the Evangelical movement and feels charitably enough towards it to write a book that would be simultaneously radical enough to be helpful and conventional enough to be widely accepted. Lauren Winner has the potential to write such a book.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

Winner converted to Christianity in her twenties. She has written extensively about her conversion, and recently she has started to write about the modern Church in America as a new insider. In her book *Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity*, she writes both about her personal decision to stop engaging in premarital sex, and the larger culture of abstinence within the Evangelical movement. By using her personal experiences she is able to create a sense of shared experience with her readers, and this sort of confessional writing is often very popular with Evangelicals.

Winner recognizes that there is something very wrong with the way the Evangelical movement talks about sex.

I have, by now, read countless books and heard countless lectures on singleness, chastity, and refraining from premarital sex. Many of these lectures and books seem out of touch with reality. They seem naïve. They seem designed for people who get married right out of college. They seem theologically vacuous. Above all, they seem dishonest.<sup>112</sup>

She is not arguing against teaching chastity or abstinence, rather she takes issue with the way that it is taught. This includes the negative attitude towards sex, although she does not focus on that in the same way that Dillow does. Instead she takes issue with the lack of openness and dialogue that characterizes the Evangelical sexual discourse.

“Too often the Church, rather than giving unmarried Christians useful tools and thick theologies to help us live chastely, instead tosses off a few

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<sup>112</sup> Lauren F. Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 15.

bromides-“True Love Waits” is not that compelling when you’re twenty-nine and have been waiting, and wonder what, really, you’re waiting for.”<sup>113</sup>

For Winner, the reason to wait has less to do with following blindly orders and more to do with embracing a definition of marriage that makes the sacrifice of abstinence an important part of creating a new familial bond, which mirrors the relationship of God to the Church and plays an important role in the communal life of the body of believers. Thus she frames her argument for abstinence in positive terms, rather than deriding sex and speaking negatively about sexual desire.

Both Dillow and Winner can agree that the sort of paternalistic attitude toward sex education is incredibly harmful. Not teaching Evangelical youth about sex does not prevent them from engaging in sexual activity, rather it ensures that when they do they will make poor choices. Teaching them not only the mechanics of sexual activity (so that they know what it consists of) but also why they should wait to engage in sexual activity, beyond “because God says so”, will provide young people with the tools to think critically about their actions.

Giving young people the information to allow them to make informed decisions is not just good for them, but it is good for the Evangelical movement as well. It would help to create a movement of thoughtful, well informed believers, who would be able to articulate not just *what* they believe, but *why*. Faith that cannot withstand basic sex education without crumbling cannot possibly survive in the wider society.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

## **Towards Creating a New Ethic**

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 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. Because of course, 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 virgins.

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 Sexual Transmitted

Infections's 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 should be lifted. There is nothing dirty or bad about the female body, and young women must learn how to know their bodies. 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 that most Evangelicals would agree with, 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.

### **Conclusion**

Evangelical culture has created an untenable situation for young women. The incredibly harmful practice of using any means available to deter young people from engaging in premarital sexual activity does unbelievable damage to the hearts and minds (not to mention the bodies that they are inadequately protecting when they do engage in these activities) of Evangelical youth.

66.6% of Evangelical women engage in vaginal intercourse before the age of eighteen, and 29.7% 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, they rely on scare tactics, guilt, and misinformation to prevent behavior that is happening anyway.

In my personal experience, the damage done by the “by any means necessary” ethic of the modern Evangelical movement is disheartening. I know many couples who, once they got married and were suddenly permitted to have sex, were unable to have fulfilling sexual relationships with their spouses because they were unable to shake the twenty-plus years of indoctrination about the

inherent taint of sex, even though they were engaging in sexual activity within the parameters described as acceptable by the Evangelical movement. The Evangelical movement failed them.

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, 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.

Abstinence-only education is not working. It only perpetuates gender stratification and essentializing while failing to provide youth with the tools to navigate the murky waters of sex and sexuality. Would it not be better to embrace an ethic that looked not at the end result but at the needs of individual teens, and that focused on creating moral, well informed people who will then make moral, well-informed decisions?

There is a way to teach abstinence without denigrating human sexuality. There is a way to talk about different roles for men and women without creating

unrealistic and harmful archetypes of femininity and masculinity. The time has come for the Evangelical movement to change the way it talks about sex. Something needs to change, and the sooner the better, before the Evangelical movement fails another generation.

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