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Why Some Evangelicals Are Trying to Stop Obsessing Over Pre-Marital Sex

Abigail Rine

In a recent summit on human trafficking at Johns Hopkins University, kidnapping survivor Elizabeth Smart made some surprising remarks about why victims of rape may not try to escape their captors. Her conclusion? They, like she, may have been raised in a culture that says a woman's worth is rooted in her sexual purity. Recounting an anecdote from a childhood teacher who compared having sex to being chewed like a piece of gum, Smart, a Mormon, tells her audience that she "felt crushed" after being raped: "Who could want me now? I felt so dirty and so filthy. I understand, so easily, all too well, why someone wouldn't run."

Smart might be the most famous figure to speak out against her conservative religious culture's sexual ethos, but she's not alone. Increasingly in recent weeks, prominent evangelical writers and bloggers have also decried the emphasis placed on sexual purity in conservative Christianity. While exposés of evangelical purity culture are hardly new (see, for one, Andy Kopsa's recent article in *The Atlantic*), what is noteworthy is that these criticisms are beginning to emerge from within conservative religious circles themselves.

The central thrust of these evangelical critiques is a rejection of the "damaged goods" metaphor. On her high-profile website, *New York Times* bestselling author Rachel Held Evans calls out the "horrific object lessons," like the one described by Smart, which aim to convince young people that "premarital sex ruins a person for good." Sarah Bessey, author of the forthcoming book *Jesus Feminist*, shares her own story of feeling condemned by the "true love waits" rhetoric of her church, which conveyed the message that she, as a non-virgin, was now "disqualified from true love."

Prodigal Magazine, an up-and-coming online publication that caters to twenty-something evangelicals, recently featured a candid piece on abandoning the concept of virginity. While deliberately keeping her own sexual history private, Emily Maynard, the author of the article, proclaims that she is no longer going to think of herself as a virgin or a non-virgin. "I'm done splitting my sexuality into pieces," Maynard writes, "I'm done with conversations about 'technical virginity' and couples who 'win the race to the altar.'... I'm done with Christians enforcing oppression in the name of purity."

Maynard's piece, as well as Bessey's account of feeling personally targeted and shamed by a "well-intentioned" preacher's sex talk, reveal another problem with the evangelical purity narrative: the assumption that its young Christian audience is a fresh crop of virgins. Research shows otherwise. A 2009 study conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that nearly 80 percent of unmarried evangelicals have sex before marriage. Not only, then, is the purity-focused Christian message sometimes harmful; it also appears to be ineffective.

Denunciations of purity culture are beginning to emerge from the evangelical ivory tower as well. Richard Beck, Professor and Chair of the Psychology Department at Abilene Christian

University, an evangelical school, expounds on the deeper implications of purity obsession both on his website and in his book *Unclean*, taking particular issue with the words and metaphors Christians use to frame sexual sin, especially for women. Beck argues that using the metaphor of purity imports a "psychology of contamination into our moral and spiritual lives," and this contamination is viewed as a permanent state, one beyond restoration.

Moreover, while women are subjected to the language of purity and seen as irreparably contaminated after having sex, the same is not true for men. According to Beck, a boy losing his virginity is seen as a "mistake, a stumbling," a mode of behavior that can be changed and rehabilitated. This, he argues, exposes a double standard at work in the language of sexual purity: women who have sex are seen as "damaged goods," but men who have sex are not.

Beck's analysis reveals how evangelical critiques of purity are increasing in nuance and complexity, but what remains all but absent in these accounts is a fleshed-out alternative. While these writers clearly advocate abandoning the language of purity, they seem reluctant to relinquish the abstinence ideal entirely—which creates an interesting tension. What, exactly, does a post-purity sexual ethic look like for evangelicals?

In response to this question, some evangelical writers, such as Anna Broadway and Rachel Held Evans, affirmed the traditional idea of saving sex for marriage. Broadway, author of *Sexless in the City*, hopes to reframe rather than reject the abstinence ideal. In her writing, she advocates a shift from a boundaries-focused sexual ethos to one that promotes and articulates positive practices, such as unmarried individuals living in community, rather than alone. When asked to describe a post-purity evangelical perspective, Broadway responded, "It's got to be way more holistic. ... We've done a very bad job of connecting single sexuality to married sexuality," despite that fact "both groups of people are called to sexual self-control." Broadway proposes emphasizing an overarching ideal of "self-giving love" rather than abstinence, which would put a positive spin on premarital chastity, as well as cultivate deeper awareness of "unhealthy sexual dynamics within marriage," from sexual selfishness to "outright abuse."

For Evans, the problem with purity is not the ideal of abstinence per se, but rather how it has been packaged and sold to evangelical youth. "So much of the evangelical purity culture focuses on identity," said Evans, "as if having sex with someone changes your very identity forever, making you unwanted and disgusting." In Evans' view, moving beyond the "damaged goods" narrative does not entail abandoning the ideal of premarital abstinence; in fact, Evans finds value in Christians speaking out about the "sacredness of sex" in a "culture that teaches casual sex as the norm." She is optimistic about evangelicals being able to disentangle "a conservative sexual ethic" from "shaming narratives" of purity culture that connect one's identity and worth to virginity.

Other writers appeared more willing to redirect this discussion away from marriage and abstinence to more fundamental concerns about emotional and spiritual health. Richard Beck, for one, asserted that the primary emphasis of a post-purity sexual ethic should be "making sure that sex and love are always united." For Beck, moving past purity involves less emphasis "on the physical act of sex and how that physical act is 'defiling' and more upon issues related to covenant faithfulness, care, and harm. ... God's interest in sex, then, is less puritanical than a concern about how we hurt and damage each other, physically and emotionally, in ways that often leave lifelong scars."

Beck also discussed an additional problem with an evangelical narrative that idealizes the marital benefits of abstinence: Evangelical marriages don't always last, and high-profile evangelical figures are not immune to sex scandals or marital infidelity. "I find the debates about marriage to be both distracting and often wildly hypocritical," said Beck. "My assessment is that until the evangelical culture gets its moral witness together regarding marriage it should forgo broad denunciations about sex."

Dianna Anderson, author of *Damaged Goods*, a forthcoming book on evangelicalism and purity, has written about evangelical sexual purity narratives for several years. Anderson, who was raised in a conservative Christian tradition, now considers herself "post-evangelical," and much of her book will explore a faith-based approach to human sexuality that echoes the cry for a more holistic narrative, while moving even further away from the abstinence ideal. Anderson's proposed model retains the concept of losing one's virginity, but redefines it as a "personal process determined by the individual" rather than an "event"—a move that recalls Maynard's Prodigal article on deciding to turn in her "V Card." In Anderson's view, sex should not be deemed appropriate by marriage, but by whether it is "mutually consensual, pleasurable, non-exploitative and safe." Although Anderson's sexual ethic emphasizes holism and health, like the other writers discussed here, she pushes these ideas further, and it will be interesting to see whether her alternatives are palatable to an evangelical audience.

If this collection of voices is any indication, the traditional battle lines of the abstinence culture war are beginning to blur. A revisionist evangelical view of sexuality appears to be emerging, one that doesn't revolve around that ultimate youth-group quandary—how far is too far? Although each of these post-purity perspectives diverges from the current evangelical narrative to varying degrees, the common thread among them seems to be a desire for a more holistic sexual ethic, one that remains thoroughly Christian while shifting away from the metaphor of purity to concepts of sexual health and wholeness. What is still unclear is whether these revisions will gain traction within evangelicalism or remain confined to progressive inlets of the evangelical subculture.