

4-11-2019

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Paige Huggins
Belmont University

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Recommended Citation

Huggins, Paige, "The Abusive Implementation of Biblical Sexuality: The Not So Pure Purity Movement" (2019). *Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS)*. 5.
<https://repository.belmont.edu/burs/5>

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**The Abusive Implementation of Biblical Sexuality:
The Not So Pure Purity Movement**

Paige Huggins

Belmont University Research Symposium

April 11, 2019

- **Intro to Content and Argument**

Words like “virginity”, “sex”, and “sexuality” carry a good deal of weight in society and in the Church. Biblical perspectives have shaped church teaching on these topics, often leading to unhealthy and abusive sexual development in teenagers and young adults. The popular perspective on sexuality that has come to be known as the “purity movement” has in some ways led to abusive patriarchal dominance and unhealthy sexual perfectionism that can lead to unhealthy marriages. Along with flooding young teenage boys and girls with guilt over their natural sexual inclinations, it directs an unnecessary amount of social shame at rape victims, portraying them as damaged and impure for an event that they did not choose. Looking at the Biblical context and culture within which these certain words are found, and comparing them to their meaning in contemporary culture, it is clear that a breakdown in understanding has occurred. The desire to steward one’s sexuality in a healthy way and to worship and honor God with the body is beautiful and wholesome, but the way that some in the contemporary church have chosen to implement this through patriarchal standards and regulations placed on women has caused the Church to lose sight of its original purpose. Many Christian women steward their sexuality through the shame and guilt-driven culture taught by conservative churches. In this presentation, I will challenge this approach to Biblical sexuality, arguing that it can be abusive and counterproductive. My overall goal here is to help women who have been raised in this movement to be able to process and understand and to better identify the ways it has harmed them. By viewing sex and sexuality as a powerful and beautiful means of worshiping God, the culture of the “purity movement” that is fueled by shame and guilt will no longer be needed to give Christians reason to live morally.

- **Biblical Meaning vs Modern Meaning**

To start off, I want to lay out a better picture of what words like “virginity”, “sex”, and “sexuality” meant in Biblical times. The Old Testament never specifically discusses virginity, and the few words that could possibly mean “virgin” or “virginity” are highly debated. The perspective of Gordon Wenham that claims the word “*bētûlâ*, traditionally translated as ‘virgin’, means ‘girl of marriageable age’” has become a common usage among conservative Christians.¹ Erin Dufault-Hunter points out that “Scripture speaks surprisingly little about these topics. In contrast to the focus on sexual sin in some Christian circles, or on sexual satisfaction in others, the Bible remains relatively uninterested in the morality of sex per se.”² The act of sex and the stewardship of one’s sexuality is simply seen as being an integral part of God’s good creation. The choice of sexual restraint, on the other hand, at certain times seems to be introduced into the Biblical texts because of the extreme power and force that sexual desires hold, “with the potential to fracture familial, social, national, and even cosmic bonds.”³ This sheer vigor that comes with the act of sex is what gave it such high value and importance in not only Biblical culture, but also in our culture today.

Due to the patriarchal structure that existed in ancient Israel, and still exists in many ways in modern culture, “sexual restraint [took] the form of male control of female sexuality.”⁴ Because of this, “virginity was both expected and valued in girls prior to marriage”⁵. This double standard of holding women to “virginity” more firmly than men is still ever present. In the Old Testament world, a woman who had “lost her virginity” before marriage was only punished if she tried to lie about it. Otherwise, she was simply not worth as much when it came to the bride-

¹ Joel B. Green, “Virginity” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, edited by Carolyn Pressler (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 811.

² Joel B. Green, “Sex and Sexuality” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, edited by Erin Dufault-Hunter (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 719.

³ Carolyn Pressler, ed., *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 811.

⁴ Pressler, *DSE*, 811.

⁵ Pressler, *DSE*, 811.

price that the groom paid to the father of the girl. A “bride-price” signified that marriage and sex were viewed as a way to ensure economic stability through the combination and expansion of a family. It was a transaction between two men. It was a way of survival, not a core means of personal identity as it is now viewed. As Dufault-Hunter points out, the realization that the Bible does not put near as much time toward this topic as we give it credit for “should temper our postmodern tendency to grant too much to sexual expression, either as dangerous to true spirituality or as crucial for human fulfillment.”⁶

While, marriage today is not a transaction between two men, there are still many remainders of this tradition. For one, a father typically literally walks a woman to her husband on the wedding day and the pastor asks who it is that is “giving this girl away”. Many people will answer with “her father and mother do”, but this tradition is based in the idea that the father is handing over his property. The “purity ring” is another example of the patriarchy’s standards. The tradition of the “purity ring” signifies when a girl becomes old enough to feel sexual attraction towards another human, typically during early puberty. She will receive a “purity ring” or “promise ring” as it is also known. Much like a marriage ring, a “purity ring” signifies a commitment to preserve or “save herself” for her future husband. It is a promise to her father that she will not “give herself away” before then. The intentions behind this tradition can be quite inspiring and beautiful when viewed simply as a commitment made out of a deep love and reverence for God, love for family, and love for self, but it is rarely just made out of these. Rather, it is also made with shame, guilt, and a distorted and unhealthy fear of God.

- **Abusive Implementation Within the Church**

⁶ Erin Dufault-Hunter, ed., *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 719.

“Virginity”, “sex”, and “sexuality” are clearly inseparable from, and beautiful parts of, how God made humans in order to show reverence. The way the church has implemented such reverence to God through restraint, however, is where problems begin to arise. While the intent behind the rise of the “purity movement” of the 1990’s locates itself a Biblical vision of stewarding sexuality, the roots of this movement began back in the late 19th century. The late 19th and early 20th century was a time when women began to wake up to the inequality around them, and this troubled many men. The “purity movement” was in some ways a “religious” way of upholding inequality and keeping women in their place of submissive helpers and subordinate to men. Brandi Miller notes that across many denominations,

“leaders in churches perceived the rise in feminism as subverting the gospel by enticing women, whom they previously had significant power over, to reject their perception of God’s intention in Genesis 3 to be helpers and subservient members of the Christian experience.”⁷

She also adds a clarification to this, “God never ordained the patriarchal ownership of women’s bodies and virginity by their fathers or church leaders – the culture and religious institutions of 1200 BCE did.”⁸ Being a helper and a subservient daughter of God can be a worthy calling. Jesus himself was known to be the ultimate helper and the truly subservient one to God, and it is safe to say that Jesus is not inferior to males.

In a more specific sense, the “purity movement” has used shame and guilt as a driving force to keep women from “gaining equality” by masking patriarchal dominance behind a “healthy fear of God”. While these two words, shame and guilt, tend to be used interchangeably in

⁷ “The Evangelical Social Construct of Virginity,” The Salt Collective, Brandi Miller, Accessed November 18, 2018. <http://thesaltcollective.org/evangelicals-social-construction-virginity/>

⁸ Brandi Miller, “The Evangelical Social Construct of Virginity.”

modern society, it is important to understand their differences in this context. The concept of “guilt involves the awareness of having done something wrong; it arises from our actions” while shame is “a painful feeling about how we appear to others (and to ourselves) and doesn't necessarily depend on our having done anything.”⁹ The “purity movement” uses guilt to help enforce basic standards of how women should steward and protect their sexuality, but it also uses shame by way of the “fear of God” to maintain the high ground. In this use of shame, women are judged for simply having sexual feelings even if they never act upon them. It ends up causing women to suppress their sexual desires, and in the end, it can have some nasty consequences.

Beyond the Church and into Politics, Media, and Society

This abusive way of implementing Biblical stewardship of sexuality does not stop at the doors of the sanctuary, but rather these Christian morals have infiltrated modern society through politics and media. One heartbreaking example of this can be found in the Texas Sex Education Instruction Manual for public schools. The subtitle of this state policy literally reads “Shame and Fear-Based Methodology.” The document explains three categories by which the state of Texas has chosen to implement sexual education. The three categories are: “1) exaggerating negative consequences of sexual behavior; 2) demonizing sexually active youth; and 3) cultivating shame and guilt to discourage sexual activity.”¹⁰ As one state among many in the Bible Belt, both in Texas as elsewhere the ideas and beliefs of the church tend to work their way into the public aspects of their society, even into the state level of legislation.

⁹ “The Difference Between Guilt and Shame,” Psychology Today, Joseph Burgo PhD, last modified May 30, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/shame/201305/the-difference-between-guilt-and-shame>

¹⁰ Kelly L. Wilson, PhD and MCHES, *Texas Sexuality Education Instruction: Shame and Fear-Based Methodology*, ed. David C. Wiley, PhD, and Brittany Rosen, MEd and CHES, pg. 3, http://jhetonline.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/Texas_Sexuality_Education_InstructionWilson.14164053.pdf

Much like within the churches who are a part of the “purity movement”, the topic of sex within Texas public schools is treated as a taboo. When explaining how sex education is treated in school, Kara Haug writes, “My health class consisted of separating the boys and girls into different rooms and we watched a short video on periods and breast development and that was it. The video turned off and there were no questions or discussion.”¹¹ The taboo sort of stigma that surrounds this topic is in some ways due to the “purity movement’s” values being integrated into schools. From the start, kids are told that it is weird to use the actual words that refer to their “private parts”. Kara explain that, “When we make things secretive like our genitals by starting off giving them names such as woo woo, diamond, wee wee, or down there, then we are making them weird. We are saying that one of the most sensitive, important, necessary, and pleasurable parts of our body is strange and peculiar. This is the beginning of shame.”¹²

Emily Timbol points out that “Even the media is obsessed with maintaining the lie that virginity is a Christian’s greatest virtue.”¹³ From young girls to grown women, both social and news media is consistently labeling females with derogatory and shameful titles for simply being the sexual beings. These platforms have created a place for “purity movement” virtues to be reemphasized and idolized through a public shaming of women who “fall short”. From a young age, girls now grow up with these shaming messages constantly before their eyes, reinforcing the idea that they should be ashamed of their bodies and the things they feel. They are told the age-old lie, found nowhere in the Bible, that their worth and identity is found in the way they steward their sexuality.¹⁴ While social and news media does also create a place for women to publicly

¹¹ “Don’t Make it Weird: Comprehensive Sexuality Education Without the Shame,” Grace Unbound, Kara Haug, Last modified May 4, 2018, <http://www.graceunbound.com/blog-1/?author=545d7596e4b01d77329d4ebc>.

¹² Kara Haug, “Don’t Make it Weird.”

¹³ “The Damage of Overvaluing Virginity,” HuffPost, Emily Timbol, Last modified Sep 13, 2012, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/emily-timbol/the-damage-from-overvaluing-virginity_b_1668113.html

¹⁴ Stewardship of one’s sexuality **is** extremely important because doing so is one big way we express our worship and reverence to the Creator, but it **is not** where one’s worth and identity is found.

stand up for themselves, and I am very thankful for that, it does not change the fact that these platforms have been used to reinforce the patriarchal dominance over women through public shaming of “improper” stewardship of the female sexuality.

A society that holds itself accountable to Biblical stewardship of sexuality could be beautiful, but the “purity movement” has ensured that this mindset of “accountability” is commonly just judgment and shaming. The problem is, this mindset adds unmerited social shame and judgment to already suffering rape victims, even as “One out of every six women will be the victim of an attempted or completed sexual assault in their lifetime.”¹⁵ In other words, at least one sixth of the women our society is shaming for poor stewardship of sexuality did not have a say in the event that happened.

- **Why the Church May Not Agree That It Has Been Abusive**

Despite all that has been addressed, there are still many who do not believe the “purity movement” is abusive. Southern Baptists’ are one denomination among many that greatly encourage premarital abstinence through programs like the “purity movement.” In this tradition, “Teenagers are taught to think primarily in terms of earthly ‘values,’ saving themselves for their spouse so that one can avoid negative consequences in their future marriage or walk with God.”¹⁶ The problem with this argument is that this way of “saving oneself” for a spouse has been shown to sometimes lead to marriage struggles. In this type of restriction, Miller says, “we communicate that sex is problematic in and of itself and that it will be magically fixed or ok in marriage”¹⁷ when this is just simply not true. Women end up entering marriage still ashamed of their bodies and greatly struggle to enjoy sex due to the guilt that is still associated with the

¹⁵ HuffPost, “The Damage of Overvaluing Virginity.”

¹⁶ Moore, *Southern Baptist Sexual Revolutionaries*, Pg. 7.

¹⁷ Brandi Miller, “The Evangelical Social Construct of Virginity.”

action. This specific approach to “saving oneself” for marriage carries harmful baggage into the relationship that can prevent sex from ever being what it is meant to be, even in a proper marriage. This can create a strong and unhealthy tension between spouses and can also directly affect one’s relationship with God in a counterproductive way seeing that it can keep one from fully being able to worship and show reverence toward God through this act.

The other problem with the Southern Baptist’s stance on this issue is that when their members inevitably can not meet these standards, the church’s response is simply that, as Russel Moore has said,

“We should be thankful in many ways, to be sure, when we hear the testimony of one who was baptized at an early age, nurtured in the children’s and youth departments of a local church, went away to college and far from the Lord, engaged in immorality and rebellion throughout young adulthood, and then rededicated his [or her] life to Christ after settling down and beginning a family.”¹⁸

Emily Timbol offers an alternative view: “Maybe, instead of raising young people to be terrified of sex and the repercussions they’ll face if they do mess up, Christian leaders should spend time talking about how amazing it can be when it’s within the relationship for which it was intended.”¹⁹

This alternative brings the conversation back to the root of why the Bible says sex exists in the first place. Gen 1:28 says that it is so that humanity can “be fruitful and multiply.”²⁰ Beyond that though, both 1 Cor. 3:16-17 and 6:19-20 refer to the human body as a “temple of the Holy Spirit”²¹, and they call humanity to “honor God with [their] bodies.”²¹ In Rom. 12:1, the author

¹⁸ Moore, *Southern Baptist Sexual Revolutionaries*, Pg. 8.

¹⁹ HuffPost, “The Damage of Overvaluing Virginity.”

²⁰ Gen 1:28 (NRSV)

²¹ 1 Cor 3:16-17, 6:19-20 (NRSV)

calls humanity to “present [their] bodies as living sacrifice[s], holy and acceptable to God – this is [their] spiritual worship.”²² While this last verse is talking about more than just sexual stewardship, it is still applicable here. The human body is a sacred thing in itself, a place for the spirit of God to reside. The act of sex can have the effect of new life being cultivated and later birthed, but the physical act is also a form of cultivating life and worshiping God in the moment. As Sarah Coakley so beautifully puts it, “we need to understand sex as really [being] about God, and about the deep desire that we feel for God—the clue that is woven into our existence about the final and ultimate union that we seek.”²³

- **How this Knowledge Helps Women**

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ [...] So God created humankind in [God’s] image [...] male and female [God] created them. [...] God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good.”²⁴ From the start, God created and viewed humanity as beautiful and good, as God’s own reflections, including each human’s sexuality. Sex and Sexuality are beautiful and integral parts of who God created us to be, but our identity is not found in our sexuality. That is just a beautiful part of being human. Our identity is found in the simple fact that we are reflections of God, and our sexuality is a beautiful way of expressing our reverence toward our Creator. When women are told this, they can be freed from the lie that their bodies and emotions are sources of shame.

Furthermore, understanding the “purity movement’s” social influence can help women identify and overcome the abusive expectations that are reinforced in these platforms. It can prevent women from falling for and trying to live by the well-masked lies that our society now

²² Rom 12:1 (NRSV)

²³ Sarah Coakley, “Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality” in *Anglican Theological Review Essay*. 230.

²⁴ Gen 1:26-27, 31 (NRSV)

constantly tells. Identifying and breaking down these public lies can free women up to live into their sexuality in a way that is even more accurate to the way God intended it, and it can also do the same for their private lives, i.e. their current or future marriages. Breaking free of this abusive way of stewarding one's sexuality can free sex to be what it was meant to be in the first place within these marriages rather than sex still being a taboo of sorts even after "saving oneself."

When women are given the chance to see what the "purity movement" really is and are guided in how to maturely deal with this pain, healing and restoration can begin and reconciliation between males and females can be cultivated.

Annotated Bibliography

Burgo, Joseph. "The Difference Between Guilt and Shame." *Psychology Today*. Last modified May 30, 2013. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/shame/201305/the-difference-between-guilt-and-shame>.

The concepts of shame and guilt are integral parts of how the "purity movement" motivates and controls those who follow it, and this article by Joseph Burgo greatly contributes to a deeper understanding of how these two concepts are different from each other and both very powerful in their own ways. Understanding this difference helps the reader better understand the tactics behind the "purity movement".

Coakley, Sarah. "Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality" in *Anglican Theological Review Essay*. 230.

Part of breaking down the abusiveness of the "purity movement" is also finding other ways that Biblical sexuality could be implemented in a way that is not abusive. This article by renowned theologian and philosopher of religion Sarah Coakley presents multiple wise alternatives to this and repeatedly brings the topic back to the origin of its meaning, that being as a way of connecting with and worshiping God.

Dufault-Hunter, Erin. "Sex and Sexuality." In the *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, edited by Joel B. Green, 719. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011.

Understanding the Biblical intent of sex and sexuality is important in order to see how the “purity movement” has missed the mark in trying to implement it, and this article by Erin Dufault-Hunter does a great job of explaining it’s original Biblical intent.

Haug, Kara. “Don’t Make it Weird: Comprehensive Sexuality Education Without the Shame.” Grace Unbound. Last modified May 4, 2018. <http://www.graceunbound.com/blog-1/?author=545d7596e4b01d77329d4ebc>.

The effects of the “purity movement” have long outstretched the confines of the literal church buildings and environments and into society, and specifically into schools. Kara Haug’s article is helpful because it gives a first-hand account of what the sex education classrooms are like, the shame and guilt that immediately surrounds the subject, and the stigma that keeps kids from being able to really talk and ask questions about it all from the perspective of the sex education teacher.

Miller, Brandi. “The Evangelical Social Construct of Virginity.” The Salt Collective. Accessed Nov 18, 2018. <http://thesaltcollective.org/evangelicals-social-construction-virginity/>. In order to understand why the “purity movement” is not actually implementing pure Biblical sexuality, one has to understand how and why the movement began. This article gives an overview of the history of this movement, and it helps my reader see the differences in the biblical explanation of sexuality and the explanations that the movement live by.

Moore, Russell D. *Southern Baptist Sexual Revolutionaries*. Vol. 49. No. 1. Fall 2006.

Southwestern Journal of Theology.

https://swbts.edu/sites/default/files/images/content/docs/journal/49_1/49.1_Moore.pdf.

The Southern Baptist denomination is one of the denominations known for using the “purity movement” values in their teachings for youth and young adults. To understand how this is abusive, it helps to see the negative results that groups like this experience when following the movement along with seeing how the ways they think it is effective are contradicted by facts.

Pressler, Carolyn. “Virginity.” In the *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, edited by Joel B. Green, 811. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011.

Like with the “sex and sexuality” article, this article on “virginity” gives the needed historical facts and context in which this word was used in the Bible and understanding this helps my reader see the drastic difference in what this word meant then and now.

Timbol, Emily. “The Damage of Overvaluing Virginity.” HuffPost. Last modified Sep 13, 2012.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/emily-timbol/the-damage-from-overvaluing-virginity_b_1668113.html

Much like with Sarah Coakley's article, Emily Timbol's article presents startling facts about sex and sexuality in our current culture along with presenting wise alternative ideas for how society could better implement healthy stewardship of sexuality that more accurately reflects the intentions of the Bible on this subject.

Wilson, Kelly L. *Texas Sexuality Education Instruction: Shame and Fear-Based Methodology*.

Edited by David C. Wiley, PhD, and Brittany Rosen, MEd and CHES.

http://jhetonline.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/Texas_Sexuality_Education_InstructionWilson.14164053.pdf

This document written by the Texas state legislature is a rude awakening to just how much the shame and guilt-driven culture of the "purity movement" has invaded even the "non-religious" spaces within our culture, schools, and politics.