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Purity Culture & “True Love Waits”

If you want to start a riot among many young adult Christians, mention the words “purity culture.” It’s a “trigger” comparable to talking politics with your uncle over Thanksgiving dinner or yelling “Go Yankees!” at Fenway Park. The angst runs deep. Gospel Coalition editor Joe Carter defines purity culture as “the term often used for the evangelical movement that attempts to promote a biblical view of purity . . . by discouraging dating and promoting virginity before marriage, often through the use of tools such as purity pledges, symbols such as purity rings, and events such as purity balls.”¹

While a biblical view of purity seems like something Christians should easily affirm, parts of the 1990s youth ministry movement are now considered extremist and damaging to an entire generation. While I never attended a purity ball (thanks Mom and Dad), I was immersed in the movement without even realizing it, simply by attending and participating in evangelical youth events and ministries. Those of us who came to faith or came of age as Christians

during the 1990s had little understanding that one day our peers would look back with contempt at this phenomenon that emphasized the importance of sexual abstinence until marriage.

Some believe that a harsh focus on abstinence fueled a backlash of suppressed sexual addiction. After one recent horrific incident, a shooter attributed his killing of several women to his own sex addiction, which one writer comments is “an assertion many in the evangelical world recognize as an outgrowth of purity culture gone awry.”² Others focus on the shame that stemmed from inadequately maintaining the outward expressions of commitment taught in the movement.³ In an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, Katelyn Beaty wrote that “purity culture as it was taught to my generation hurt many people and kept them from knowing the loving, merciful God at the heart of Christian faith,” and was a “psychological burden that many of my peers and I are still unloading.”⁴

Nevertheless, the movement began with good intentions, hoping to provide an alternative to the sexual revolution and “safe sex” campaigning taking place across the country. Carter helps place the movement in the context of the era:

The purity culture movement began in the 1990s as Christians who were children or teens during the beginning of the 1960s-era sexual revolution began to have children and teenagers of their own. By the early years of 1990s, AIDS had become the number one cause of death⁵ for United States men ages 25 to 44, and the teen pregnancy rate had reached an all-time high.⁶ The number of premarital sex partners had also increased substantially since the 1970s.⁷

It is not radical to see those statistics as grounds for great concern or to desire an alternative to the mainstream message of the surrounding society regarding sex. Yet so many look back on the

purity culture movement with anything from an eye roll to full trauma. To begin to understand this phenomenon, one must go back to 1993 and the True Love Waits pledge.

TAKING THE PLEDGE

In 1993, being a faithful Christian teenager in American evangelical life meant "taking the pledge." This was done by signing your name below the following statement on a card, indicating that you were making the promises of the card—a type of oath—to God, yourself, and your future spouse (known on the card as your mate).

"Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, those I date, my future mate, and my future children to be sexually pure until the day I enter a covenant marriage relationship."⁸

Signing the True Love Waits card was second in significance only to walking the aisle at a church service (the means by which many give their lives to Jesus Christ in evangelical culture). The card wasn't something youth leaders randomly passed out and collected, as one might take an offering or distribute forms for an upcoming mission trip. This was a national initiative with all the bells and whistles. It resembled a Billy Graham evangelistic crusade, but rather than giving your life to Jesus and becoming born again, you committed to the card and its contents. Instead of walking the aisle to a song like "Just As I Am," you walked the aisle to a hypothetical future spouse whom you had never met but were making a pledge to at the age of fourteen—a promise to keep yourself a virgin for him or her. In 1994, True Love Waits⁹ held a rally in Washington, DC, with twenty-five thousand youth, displaying more than two hundred thousand commitment cards from students across the country, more than double what the Southern Baptist convention had hoped to see.¹⁰ Remaining a virgin until marriage was the goal and the promise, and

families traveled to Washington, DC, to make the promise known.

It's no surprise that purity culture and the True Love Waits movement didn't "solve" sexual immorality issues among young people inside or outside the church. But given the fact that countless people have come forward in recent years to share their stories of how purity culture had adverse effects on them or led to their actual abuse, we should consider where it went wrong. I believe the movement was aiming to fix the wrong problem with the wrong solution. Let me explain.

God's design for sex and sexuality is good. The Bible tells the story of Adam and Eve and emphasizes their oneness: "A man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh. Both the man and his wife were naked, yet felt no shame" (Gen. 2:24–25). This becoming of one flesh is more than sexual intercourse, but it certainly isn't less. In the New Testament, both Jesus (in Matt. 19) and Paul (in Eph. 5) reference this union of Adam and Eve as God's design for sex and marriage, pointing to it as God's historical and right context for sex to exist and flourish. Here are a man and woman, created for each other, united as one flesh, and they are naked without any shame. How is it that a Christian movement intending to promote God's good design could stir up so many negative feelings and thoughts for a generation of Christians?

We need to look no further than the next chapter in Genesis to see the script flip. Suddenly, this first couple, the apex of God's good creation, gets entangled in pain and shame.

- Genesis 2:25: "Both the man and his wife were naked yet felt no shame."
- Genesis 3:7: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves."

In Genesis 2:25, nakedness carried zero shame. But I don't even have to turn the page in my Bible to see the exact same people, Adam and Eve, now realizing they were naked. Suddenly, they're busting out their sewing machines to cover themselves from each other. What happened that took us from no shame to frantically looking for clothes?

Sin.

The New City Catechism defines sin as "rejecting or ignoring God in the world he created, rebelling against him by living without reference to him, not being or doing what he requires in his law—resulting in our death and the disintegration of all creation."¹¹

The Bible is clear that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), and certainly this includes physical death. The sin of Adam and Eve led to their expulsion from the garden of Eden and to certainty of their eventual death as people who had violated the command of the one true holy God. But this death also breaks, distorts, and poisons the people and things God created. When we reject the good commands of God, choosing what we desire instead, we enter a world that is not as it should be, and we see the decline of society and creation as a whole. Brokenness is the new reality of this world and the people who are banned from the garden of Eden.

Pastor Paul Carter says that "it would be hard to overstate the significance and impact of human sin—cosmically, corporately and personally. The effect of sin is not just an issue for the planet or for the species—it affects us profoundly as human beings."¹² Yes, sin effects everything. What strikes me about the Genesis story is that the very first thing we see affected is Adam and Eve's view of nakedness. The sequence of the events is striking: "She took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together

and made coverings for themselves” (Gen. 3:6–7). Immediately after eating the fruit, Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened to their nakedness and they felt shame. Sin brought brokenness into the good world that God had made, and the first apparent change was to the sexual aspects of their bodies. Even being naked in front of your own spouse didn’t seem natural in this broken world.

Ever since this swift-yet-enormous shift, sin and its effects have gone full speed into the world, affecting every area of life. Sexual sin is a primary example of the fall’s catastrophic consequences. Who would have thought that eating from a forbidden tree would usher in a world of adultery, pornography, sexual abuse, abortion, fatherlessness, homosexuality, hook-up culture, cohabitation, and an abundance of shame? Yet God is sovereign over the brokenness and warns His people against departing from His design. Like any good parent, He is specific about the danger and commands the Christian to flee from both the temptation and the action (1 Cor. 6:18).

Enter the True Love Waits movement, which focused on “saving yourself.” The main reason for doing so was simple: your future spouse deserves it. I am not being unfair or making a broad swipe; this was the message. One’s future spouse was idealized as the ultimate motivation. Not only does this approach fail to recognize the only remedy for sin (forgiveness in the blood of Christ and full cleansing to walk in newness of life), but it exalts the created instead of the Creator, which is the definition of idolatry seen in all of Scripture. What you received was God’s design without God’s glory or God’s grace.

FORGIVEN? OR SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN?

I remember hearing about “secondary virginity” during the movement. This was for people who had already lost their virginity

before signing the pledge card. It was a type of second chance. However, your future spouse would probably be very disappointed or feel cheated by your lack of previous commitment to the future marriage. Katelyn Beaty writes, "One piece of youth-group folklore was a 'game' in which a cup would be passed around a circle. At each turn, someone would spit in the cup, until the last person had a cup full of spit. 'Would you want to drink this?' the youth pastor intoned. 'No. And that's how others will see you if you sleep around.'"¹³ I never saw or had heard of this activity, but the principle represented by that story was certainly taught. You needed to save yourself for marriage because you didn't want to be the one in your future marriage who wasn't a virgin.

Contemporary Christian music got behind the movement as popular 90s singer Rebecca St. James released the song "Wait For Me" toward the end of the True Love Waits craze in 2001. Five years after writing and releasing the song, she reflected, "It's a pretty well-known fact that guys would like to marry a virgin. I think the whole idea that a girl is singing that song and is waiting really appeals to them too and helps them to strive to be men of honor."¹⁴ I have zero doubt that St. James was sincere concerning her hope that the song would encourage a generation of Christians trying to walk in sexual purity. I'm sure she had a positive impact on many through her music, but even the lyrics of the song are in sync with the focus of True Love Waits. The emphasis is on the unknown future spouse, not on honoring God, being surrendered to Him, and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit for whatever life God ordained for you.

I remember a friend in college who broke up with her boyfriend (who was a genuine follower of Christ) because she asked him if he was a virgin and he told her that he had had sex with his high school girlfriend after their junior prom. He answered her question honestly, and she broke up with him. The reason was that she

had waited and didn't want to marry someone who hadn't. This was the generation raised in True Love Waits. It didn't matter that God had forgiven this young man; his failure made him ineligible in the mind of this young woman, as though he would never be as pure as she had been. The badge of honor in this culture was the card, symbolized by a purity ring around the finger, that one day would be handed over to a future spouse—a type of finish line and trophy ceremony disguised as a honeymoon for those who kept the pledge.

The purity culture of my youth launched a type of prosperity gospel wearing the disguise of piety. *If I remain a virgin until marriage, God will give me a future spouse who did the same. In fact, they don't deserve me if they failed to do what I did.* The aftermath of this anti-gospel thinking is a trail of human brokenness. There aren't enough fig leaves to cover up the damage. Imagine being a Christian teen who had succumbed to sexual sin in this culture, even one time. If you had committed the ultimate mistake of having sex, you had become damaged goods, so why quit now? What's done is done, right? So, in the next relationship, you could think, "I guess we will have sex, because I already lost my virginity, so what's the point now of abstaining?" The "secondary virgin" classification didn't seem to have mass appeal, so you might as well quit the race altogether.

At True Love Waits rallies, the testimonies were always, without fail, from college students or young adults (usually women) who had previously had sex outside of marriage and now were trying to do better as secondary virgins. The hope was that since God forgave them, maybe a future spouse would, too. Instead of championing the full and sufficient cleansing of Christ's atoning death, these poor people were often treating themselves as cautionary tales for a younger generation, urging others to not become like them. The invitation following the testimony would be to sign the

card. Picturing myself sitting in the bleachers of a gym and hearing that message, I remember my conclusion was always, "Gosh, I hope my future wife doesn't mess up like she did, especially if I'm gonna try to do this whole pledge thing. And I have to sign the card because I'm not going to be the person in this room everyone looks at with evil eyes if I don't!"

Purity culture walked into a world of sexual brokenness and provided the solution of following the rules and practicing abstinence so you wouldn't be the one on your future honeymoon who lost in the game. Is this what God had in mind at His creation of humanity? Certainly not.

What began as a good and worthy endeavor inadvertently produced Pharisees on one side of the True Love Waits card and people desperately grasping for fig leaves on the other. "Rather than emphasize the gift of sex within marriage, purity culture typically led with the shame of having sex outside of it."¹⁵ It is easy to play Monday morning quarterback and critique, yet the playbook was the biggest problem. Virginity does not provide moral superiority, nor does past sexual sin doom someone to finding a lesser spouse. We don't pursue abstinence from sex apart from marriage because someone we might marry one day "deserves it." We reserve sex for marriage because God has a design. When we depart from that design, we find more brokenness. This brokenness creeps into many of our relationships with other people. But, most importantly, it affects our relationship with God.

Something we must not overlook from the garden of Eden story is that the clothes Adam and Eve would use to cover themselves were provided by God Himself (Gen. 3:21). God is the healer of our shame, and the story after the fatal sin in the garden is one of recovery and pursuit of God's design in the lives of His people and in His world.

God not only made new outfits for Adam and Eve, He made a

promise. Those clothes would only last so long, and Adam and Eve didn't simply need their guilt and shame covered—they would need it removed. The consequences would be great.

I will put hostility between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring.
He will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

The LORD God said, "Since the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, he must not reach out, take from the tree of life, eat, and live forever." So the LORD God sent him away from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove the man out and stationed the cherubim and the flaming, whirling sword east of the garden of Eden to guard the way to the tree of life. (Gen. 3:22–24)

There was banishment and consequence, but there was also hope. From the offspring of this couple would one day come a Savior who would strike the head of the serpent by being struck Himself. Jesus Christ, born of a woman, would enter the brokenness of humanity, but never sin. He would take on the wages of sin and bring about a future restoration of all broken things by dying on a cross, rising from the grave, ascending to heaven, and coming back to establish a permanent kingdom where no darkness exists. In the meantime, God still has a design and an ethic for His people: to live as lights shining to a broken world.

WHAT NOW?

I fear we are experiencing an overcorrection to the failures and flaws of purity culture. Missteps by fallible human people do not erase or alter the infallible design of the holy and perfect Creator.

I have always thought the saying “don’t throw the baby out with the bath water” sounded weird, but it is the appropriate expression to describe what is happening among certain Christians regarding sexual ethics. We’re not simply correcting the flaws of purity culture and pursuing a different path of truth and grace. No, professing Christians are living with their boyfriend or girlfriend, affirming same-sex marriage, laughing at any call to modesty, and agreeing with a surrounding sexual revolution that God’s design found in the Bible is outdated or even oppressive. The church has a challenge in front of her if we are going to be faithful in not only declaring the whole counsel of God but also walking as faithful disciples, pointing a lost and broken world to a design that is for God’s glory, and for their good.

We must figure out how to uphold sexual ethics in not simply an anti-purity culture world, but amongst anti-purity culture Christians. Waving the white flag of surrender over something so clear and precious in Scripture as God’s design for sex and marriage cannot be the answer to correcting purity culture. The answer is to recover and pursue God’s design as He continues to restore a broken people to Himself, and to believe that this is far better than what any pledge card or deserving spouse has to offer.

God has a design and an ethic. We do not find it in purity culture, but in His Word.

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