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# Virgin Nation

*Sexual Purity  
and American Adolescence*

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dominated the evangelical moral agenda, Dobson was alarmed by the prevalence of premarital sex:

I have never considered myself to be a prophet of doom, but I am admittedly alarmed by statistical evidence of this nature. I view these trends with fear and trepidation, seeing in them the potential death of our society and our way of life.<sup>104</sup>

Since that time, Dobson claims that his views on family, adolescence, and sexuality have remained consistent, even if his metaphors no longer invoke the same degree of alarm, especially in a young generation who never had to learn to “duck and cover.”<sup>105</sup> What emerged in Dobson’s rhetoric was a new articulation of ideas almost as old as the country itself. With the assistance of a new therapeutic pulse within evangelicalism, Dobson highlighted the intersection between self-preservation and national security and successfully transmitted the moral codes of an older generation into a psychology of adolescence. By constructing a nationalistic moral agenda that positioned adolescents on the forefront of the battle lines, Dobson primed a new generation of evangelicals for cultural and political activism.

## *Chapter Four*

### *New Purity Revolution*

IN LATE JULY 1994, over 20,000 adolescents descended upon the National Mall, despite the rain and humidity, and found themselves caught in the thrall of a sweaty, rock-'n'-roll-induced fervor. With loud musical performances, big crowds, and multimedia excitement, the evening’s events, according to its widespread media coverage, suggested a tone of adolescent, reckless abandon.<sup>1</sup> However, these youth were not the wayward slackers of Generation X, but evangelical Christian teenagers poised to take a public stance on a very personal matter: sexual purity. In fact, these teenagers were into the third day of a national youth conference sponsored by Youth for Christ, the evangelical organization committed to showing teenagers that following Jesus isn’t about boring sermons, stuffy church music, and quiet contemplation of one’s misdeeds. But, even as Christian pop music helped to lift the shared burden of social disaffiliation often carried by evangelical adolescents, a nearby public display stood as a stark reminder of these young people’s distinction from their nonreligious peers.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier that morning, a large cohort of these young people staked 211,163 pastel-colored cards into the lawn like tiny crosses. On each card were these words:

Believing that True Love Waits, I make a commitment to God, my family, my friends, my future spouse and my future children to live a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence from this day until I enter a biblical marriage relationship.

The True Love Waits (TLW) pledge was first uttered only sixteen months prior by fifty-six teenagers at Tulip Grove Baptist Church in Hermitage, Tennessee. These teens were the first to take the pledge, a publicly spoken commitment regarding sexual abstinence until marriage.<sup>3</sup> By the weekend of the Youth for Christ event, the pledge had made its way from a small town in

Tennessee to the Southern Baptist National Convention in Orlando, Florida, and into numerous local churches nationwide, where pledgers each signed two cards—one for themselves and one to send back to TLW headquarters in Nashville. Though short of the goal of 500,000 signed pledge cards, the expansion of the pledge was impressive in its ability to captivate adolescent evangelicals and garner support from dozens of other Christian denominations and parachurch organizations.

Though not the first of its large-scale displays, the True Love Waits rally, held in conjunction with Youth for Christ's DC '94, introduced the nation to young people who boldly and publicly declared their virginity and saw their sexual status as a witness to the transformative power of Jesus Christ. But, unlike previous gatherings of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), this event marked a new ambition for the young people—to stand as exemplars of social renewal in a nation whose future was threatened by the legacy of the sexual revolution. To this end, 150 white-ribboned purity activists attended the week's pinnacle event: a special session with President Bill Clinton. Though two years later the president would sign a bill into law providing unprecedented government funding for abstinence education, his remarks that day elicited disappointment, as he commented upon the limitations of government to influence sexual behavior. Though he lauded their commitments, the president's lack of formal backing prompted the movement to seek other venues for its social and political goals.

Just twenty years prior, young people of a different generation were known for publicly declaring their right to sexual freedom. The new 1990s young evangelicals, schooled in the destructive consequences of sexual excess, likewise found themselves fueled with political and spiritual fervor and able to find a national stage—including an audience with the president, no less—for their cause. Why, given that evangelical Christians were already convinced of the emotional, physical, and spiritual hardships resulting from premarital sexual activity, did they feel the need to publicly declare an already accepted value of their religious subculture?

For this first wave of publicly declared purity advocates, personal faith commitment and political activism went hand in hand, a strategy first made politically viable due to the feminist assertion, rooted in 1960s counterculture, that personal choice, self-expression, and point of view are more than sturdy platforms for political involvement. In their stance, these young evangelicals employed the same political and cultural strategies

that buoyed the antiestablishmentarianism of the baby boom generation. With the resurgence of Christian fundamentalism, young evangelicals found a politicized evangelical culture that was both appealing and accessible. At the same time, they also found themselves the beneficiaries of an evangelical-Republican alliance forged in the late 1970s that created a political landscape highly amenable to the social concerns of conservative evangelicals. Together, these two factors explain the rapid expansion of the purity movement when it officially emerged in the form of the first church-based national abstinence organization.

True Love Waits was founded in 1993 by Southern Baptist youth minister Richard Ross as a Christian sex-education program with the sole purpose of promoting premarital sexual abstinence.<sup>4</sup> Influenced by surveys that indicated religious devotion was not a deterrent for adolescents engaging in sexual activity, TLW set out to challenge youth to a higher standard. The hallmarks of TLW are its public displays of signed pledge cards—DC '94 was only the first of these. In February 1996, the group displayed 360,000 pledged cards stacked on top of each other at its "Thru the Roof" event at the Georgia Dome. In 2004, the group displayed over 460,000 cards from twenty different countries during the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece. Beyond these events, the organization makes available for purchase plentiful Bible-study materials (including its own *True Love Waits Bible*), event guides and planners, the use of its logo, and purity rings for churches, communities, and other organizations that wish to participate in any of TLW's detailed initiatives. Though founded in conjunction with the Southern Baptist church, TLW quickly established itself as a nondenominational program that transcended the theological and liturgical distinctions of socially conservative, churchgoing Americans.

Unlike TLW, the second abstinence group with national ambitions that emerged in the mid-1990s did not seek political endorsement at its inception. Initially concerned with their own county's rate of teenage pregnancy, Denny and Amy Pattyn, youth ministers from Yuma, Arizona, began a local program that encouraged churchgoing youth to adopt abstinence until marriage as a tenet central to their Christian faith commitment. Amy even traveled to Mexico to purchase silver rings for the young people to wear as a sign of their commitment.

In its nascent stages, Silver Ring Thing (SRT) was hesitant to accept government funding: the organization began in 1993, after Denny Pattyn eschewed public funding that expected him to downplay the role of faith

in his abstinence teachings. He was disgusted by the government's insistence that his abstinence work be devoid of all religious content. This directly contradicted his belief that the promotion of sexual abstinence was a ministry and, as such, held no substance without reference to religious belief.<sup>5</sup>

However, by the time the Pattyns moved their organization, along with their ambitions for a national audience, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2000, the political climate had changed in favor of faith-based groups seeking federal funding. Under the new guidelines, Pattyn felt encouraged rather than constrained by the possibility of federal funding and contacted his senator, Rick Santorum (R-PA), to help him apply to the Maternal and Child Health Special Programs of Regional and National Significance (SPRANS) block grant.<sup>6</sup> SRT was awarded the grant and received \$700,000 for 2003. The grant was renewed the following two years, with SRT receiving total federal funding in the amount of \$1,400,000.

The emergence of the contemporary purity movement would not have been possible without federal initiatives that brought sexual abstinence into mainstream political discourse. The first abstinence funding, introduced in 1981, sparked a controversy that was not resolved until 1996, during which time evangelical leaders chose to move beyond political means to develop church-based programs addressing the cultural crises associated with premarital sex. After the fits and starts of the Clinton administration, which only responded to calls for federally supported abstinence education as they converged with larger economic concerns, the abstinence movement garnered a huge boost with the election of George W. Bush. With the newly extended faith-based initiatives funding policy, religious-abstinence organizations enjoyed newfound access to federal resources.

Still wary of the fickle nature of government policy and their own mercurial relationship with Washington, evangelicals in the 1990s sought other avenues for social transformation. Because of leaders like James Dobson, evangelicals established both political and therapeutic approaches to restoring moral order to America. While some fought for moral restoration over the body with political and moral persuasion, contemporary purity advocates sought transformation *through* the body, believing that the transformed bodies of sexually pure adolescents held promise of a similarly transformed society.

Leaders and youth of the evangelical purity movement shared the goal of large-scale moral and spiritual transformation, which required

numerous strategies drawing upon the rhetoric of personal sexual rights, the therapeutic discourse of personal well-being, and the cultivation of an activist youth movement adept at cultural criticism.<sup>7</sup> For the purity movement, the main obstacle to national moral restoration remains sexual immorality, and sexual abstinence becomes the catalyst for course correction. Asserting this, the movement positions sexual purity, and the adolescents who embody it, as an embattled sexual minority poised to save America from the repercussions of its own moral turpitude.

### *Government-Sponsored Sexual Purity*

In the landscape of sexual purity, True Love Waits and Silver Ring Thing emerged as the clear frontrunners of a movement that encompassed hundreds of smaller community organizations, churches, schools, crisis pregnancy centers, and nonprofit agencies. Unlike other groups, these well-known organizations successfully transcended religious, organizational, and national boundaries to introduce the mandate of sexual purity onto both the national and international stages. Though the contemporary sexual purity movement, like its nineteenth-century counterpart, is comprised of numerous groups working on a variety of initiatives, TLW and SRT have been the groups most successful at situating purity work and rhetoric firmly within the American mainstream. In practical terms, these organizations found their legs because of the political efficacy of the evangelical-Republican alliance established in the late 1970s. Ideologically, they represent the aftermath of the same rhetoric of sexual fear that helped to propel the religious right into power.

In 1981, President Reagan signed into law the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), which addressed concern for the escalating rates of teenage pregnancy.<sup>8</sup> This bill, sponsored by senators Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and Jeremiah Denton (R-AL), was a direct attempt to shift federal funding away from comprehensive sex education that provided information on contraception—an approach that conservatives like Hatch and Denton believed was responsible for escalating rates of sexual promiscuity, teenage pregnancy, and abortion.<sup>9</sup> By allowing two-thirds of the funding to support already pregnant teenagers while the other third provided funding for abstinence education, the bill gained support among Democrats who did not share Hatch and Denton's views.<sup>10</sup> In truth, the bill passed as a result of a political deal in which liberals agreed to support the AFLA in exchange for conservative support of funding for family-planning clinics.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the seemingly conservative bent of the 1980s, the controversy pitting safe sex against abstinence-only education, which would eventually become a hallmark of political discourse, began with a compromise.

Still, controversy was quick to follow, and from an unlikely source. In 1983, a group of federal taxpayers, clergymen, and the American Jewish Congress filed the first lawsuit through the American Civil Liberties Union, claiming that the AFLA's funding of religious organizations that promoted abstinence violated the First Amendment's insistence on religious disestablishment. Though the clergy initially won their case, the Supreme Court overturned the ruling in 1988, prompting the ACLU to proceed with its own appeal. Finally, in 1993, an out-of-court settlement determined that religious organizations that received funding for abstinence education must abide by the following stipulations: abstinence education must not include religious references, must be medically accurate, must respect the "principle of self-determination" regarding contraceptive referral for teenagers, and must not allow grantees to use church sanctuaries for their programs or to give presentations in parochial schools during school hours.<sup>12</sup>

That same year, the Southern Baptist church officially launched its True Love Waits initiative at Tulip Grove Baptist Church in Tennessee. Though it has never received federal funding, the organization has been integral to maintaining the relevance of sexual abstinence within political discourse, primarily through the public displays such as the National Mall demonstration. Despite their disappointing meeting with President Clinton during DC '94, Richard Ross and TLW gained support among a Republican-controlled Congress just two years later, when they found themselves instrumental in the creation of a little-noticed provision in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996.

In 1996, clergyman a support coordinator for True Love Waits, testified at a Senate Appropriations Committee chaired by Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA). He provided a brief mission statement and history of the organization and submitted a fact sheet that chronicled the explosive growth of and increasing media interest in True Love Waits. His testimony challenged abstinence efforts that focused solely on lowering pregnancy rates and limiting the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. He claimed, on behalf of the True Love Waits organization, that this approach neglects the negative emotional and moral consequences of premarital sexual activity and sends the message to youth that premarital sex

is okay as long as one practices safe sex. These negative consequences were the focus of the organization he represented and were in fact the impetus for its founding.<sup>13</sup> Though numerous other groups were represented during the hearings, the particular concerns of Turner and True Love Waits reemerged later that same year in the context of the highly anticipated PRWORA.

Debates surrounding the act while it was still a bill intensified with the publication of Charles Murray's *Wall Street Journal* editorial "The Coming White Underclass." Though not particularly concerned with the issue of government-funded abstinence-only education, the language of Murray's essay and the values of the purity movement together heavily influenced the welfare reform policies soon to be instituted.

In his essay, Murray argued that rates of illegitimacy among white women were escalating to such a degree that the white middle class was in danger of falling to the same economic level as the black underclass. Though out-of-wedlock births had long been frequent among African Americans, Murray quickly dismissed the phenomenon as old news and turned to, in his opinion, a more pressing concern: the demise of the white family and white social and economic status. Murray blamed the failure of social policy for this demise.

But the white illegitimacy rate is approaching that same problematic 25% region at a time when social policy is more comprehensively wrongheaded than it was in the mid-1960s, and the cultural and sexual norms are still more degraded.<sup>14</sup>

Murray's suggestions for federal and social adjustments were based on his belief that women should not raise children that they cannot support and that the government should not be responsible for providing them assistance, such as subsidized housing and food stamps.

That year, with a Republican Congress and a Democratic administration, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act accommodated both Murray's suggestions and the cause célèbre of True Love Waits with a key addition to the bill: a little-noticed provision regarding abstinence education. Unlike the AFLA of 1981, this provision limited funding to abstinence-only programming: sex-education programs that promoted abstinence as the only assurance against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases and did not provide information regarding contraceptive use.

By joining the concerns of social welfare and abstinence-only education, the federal government acquiesced to Murray's assumption that single parenting was tantamount to economic decline, an argument he supported with evidence from the black underclass. For Murray, the crisis was not the economic standing of blacks, who he assumed already suffered from economic decline due to the prevalence of single motherhood, but the risk that whites would soon fall to this same level. Thus, the federal government, unwittingly or not, imported Murray's racist views into public law when it approved a bill that asserted out-of-wedlock births as a major cause of economic decline. With the federal institution of abstinence-only education and unprecedented opportunities for funding, the purity movement was launched onto the national stage at the same time that Murray was raising concerns regarding the loss of white economic and social status. By constructing welfare reform based on language from both Murray and True Love Waits, the US government helped to mobilize a faith-based abstinence movement on the premise of racialized, class anxieties.

During the Bush administration, when funding for abstinence-only education reached its peak, organizations could apply for funding from three different sources, including the Special Projects of Regional and National Significance, or SPRANS, which provided funds for groups promoting abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education to adolescents aged twelve through nineteen. Administered through the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), SPRANS provided funding through a competitive grant process to community-based organizations committed to creating a supportive environment for adolescents committed to sexual abstinence.<sup>15</sup> After its inaugural year, when thirty-three groups received \$20 million in federal grant monies, the community-based program increased its funding dramatically, providing \$104 million to over 100 organizations by 2005. The most prominent among these recipients was Silver Ring Thing, which, as mentioned at the opening of this chapter, received almost \$1.5 million over the course of three years beginning in 2003.<sup>16</sup>

Even with this funding, Denny Pattyn remained wary, having witnessed other organizations lose their religious focus when tied to government regulations. He hoped to avoid financial dependence upon the federal government and refused to accept funding if it meant being unable to proselytize. However, the federally required adjustments to his organization proved insignificant, and Pattyn accepted the funds, allowing the group to establish its nonprofit status. The organization made its best

effort to comply with federal regulations, but soon found itself at the center of a lawsuit brought by the ACLU, whose complaint toward the Department of Health and Human Services accused the government office of neglecting to "sufficiently monitor or audit the use of funds" by a faith-based group.<sup>17</sup> Though SRT had been providing an alternative secular event for students not wishing to attend the faith-based part of a show it produced, the ACLU claimed the provisions separating the faith-based portions of the show from the secular components were insufficient. Furthermore, the ACLU's own research contended that Silver Ring Thing utilized abstinence education as an evangelistic tool, the funding of which would be a clear breach of the Constitution's establishment clause. The claim was supported by SRT's IRS filings, which were listed under the name of another organization: the John Guest Evangelistic Team.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these setbacks, SRT made several attempts to prove its compliance with federal law shortly after the legal complaint was filed. Regardless, in August 2005, a letter from Harry Wilson, assistant commissioner for the Administration on Children, Youth and Families and one of the defendants in the case, alerted the organization that its funding had been suspended. Pattyn and colleagues displayed a lack of concern at this injunction and announced to the media that this lawsuit had in fact aided the organization by generating enough private donations to offset any eventual loss of federal funds.<sup>19</sup>

The election of President Barack Obama in 2008 caused a significant shift in the federal government's participation in abstinence-only education. A liberal Democrat, Obama took the executive office with little faith in abstinence-only education and promised to defund the programs that the previous administration had so ardently supported. But as with Clinton's welfare reform bill, abstinence-only education reappeared during the negotiations for the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA). Though it's unclear what negotiations transpired, the Affordable Care Act was eventually signed into law with a section that included the restoration of funding for abstinence education. At present, only thirty-one programs have been approved for funding, and only three take an abstinence-only approach: Heritage Keepers Abstinence Education, Making a Difference!, and Promoting Health Among Teens! Abstinence Only Intervention.<sup>20</sup> Only Heritage Keepers offers abstinence education to high school students, and the choice to include that organization on the list of evidence-based programs raised a great deal of criticism from advocates of safe-sex education, who claimed that its inclusion was a political



ploy to placate conservatives.<sup>21</sup> Despite some acquiescence to abstinence-only advocates, the Obama administration has shifted political favor away from support for abstinence-only education. Though many conservative activists find this deeply troubling, many evangelical leaders within the purity movement recognized the folly of tying goals for social transformation to the political climate.

### *The New Sexual Revolution*

The first wave of purity activism emerged as part of an evangelical youth culture increasingly engaged in political and cultural activism. The ideological descendants of the Jesus People, who, twenty-five years earlier, successfully integrated the rhetoric and aesthetic of the counterculture with the hardline moralism of Christian fundamentalism, young purity advocates willingly stepped into the role of moral exemplars.<sup>22</sup> The use of countercultural rhetoric allowed them to defy mainstream mores of sexual freedom and promiscuity, and to assert a traditional sexual identity as the avant-garde of the sexual revolution. Claiming to be a sexual minority, sexually pure adolescents positioned themselves as new sexual revolutionaries owed personal respect and a political voice.

"So many of us are coming out of the closet," seventeen-year-old Lara McCalman told the *New York Times* on June 21, 1993. "I have had so much fun saying no. I'm a virgin and proud of it." In the first months of True Love Waits's activity, public proclamations such as McCalman's were not uncommon. Capitalizing on a revolutionary rhetoric that praised young people's defiance of certain cultural and moral norms, leaders of the purity movement sanctioned their own forms of counterculturalism that proved highly appealing to the increasingly activist evangelical youth culture. Headlines such as "Abstinence with an Attitude, Why Virgin Is No Longer a Dirty Word," "Baptist Youth Wage Their Own Sexual Revolution," "A Revolt against Casual Sex," and "Rebels with a Cause" helped further establish the purity movement as both a direct descendant and hostile critic of the 1960s counterculture that championed youth rebellion and free love.

Downplaying their commitment as a form of religious obedience, numerous young people portrayed themselves as defiant, independently minded individuals seeking personal fulfillment and the right to self-expression. The *St. Petersburg Times*, for example, reported that fourteen-year-old Monica Schoenthaler believed engaging in sexual activity was a

type of social conformity that stunted her personal identity: "I think, why go with the flow? Be an individualist. You can be like everybody else, but why do that when you can be yourself?"<sup>23</sup> Schoenthaler's call to sexual and personal empowerment did not prioritize any particular religious or moral belief, but relied solely upon the values of individualism, self-fulfillment, and personal development. Likewise, the *Baptist Press*, a media outlet supported by the Southern Baptist Convention, reran a *Newsweek* article that portrayed eighteen-year-old Alice Kunce as a "regular churchgoer, Sunday school teacher and feminist" whose political, not religious, commitments inspired her to commit to sexual abstinence: "One of the empowering things about the feminist movement is that we're able to assert ourselves, to say no to sex and not feel pressured about it."<sup>24</sup> Though Kunce's views were initially printed in a mainstream publication, it is telling that the *Baptist Press* picked up the story, indicating evangelicals' concern for connecting sexual abstinence with a form of self-empowerment reminiscent of feminist assertions of women's autonomy.

Other reports indicated the influence of queer activism: sexual purity was cast as the latest minority sexual status in search of cultural affirmation and political voice. Like McCalman, David Medrod proclaimed his virginity to the *New York Times* as a "coming out." Said Medrod, "It's awesome to be a virgin. I want to give that as a gift to my wife. I want it to be special, not something I do just to fit in. I feel there's a lot of people that are virgins, but they're afraid to come out."<sup>25</sup>

As members of a religious subculture that situates itself on the margins of a perceived inhospitable mainstream, evangelical adolescents understand their pledge not as a choice but as the expression of a sexual identity. They assert this identity in the face of ridicule and pressure to conform to accepted standards of sexual behavior. As Heather Rachel White describes it, the pledge has "positioned them as cultural outsiders hiding a despised sexual secret."<sup>26</sup> By invoking the metaphor of the closet, Medrod and McCalman stake a claim rather similar to queer identity politics. Like queerness, sexual purity is transgressive in the sense that it defies cultural and social norms. And, like queer identities, purity is transformative—even prophetic, to use theological language—in that it is a sexual orientation that witnesses to a new way of being that has the ability to transform the world.<sup>27</sup>

In 1994, *Washington Post* editorialist Colman McCarthy aided the movement's reputation as a counterculture initiative in his August 20 editorial, which discussed the then-recent True Love Waits rally in Washington,

DC. While many young people enjoyed live music and socializing, a small group of "sexual revolutionaries," as McCarthy called them, made their way to the White House. His piece lauded their efforts by referring to the sexually abstinent young people as courageous, even rebellious, individuals moving against the tide of social expectations. By his words, McCarthy helped the movement in its quest to reappropriate the rhetoric of sexual revolution,

If that sounds as though debauchery were the agenda, it's only because such notions of sexual liberation have come to be equated with reckless hedonism. A current and growing revolution differs from the conventional one: Its goal is abstinence, for teenagers to be liberated from peer and commercial pressures that push or cajole the young into premarital sex.<sup>28</sup>

Within a year of its founding, the purity activists of True Love Waits had successfully outlined the latest chapter of the sexual revolution and re-framed the entire 1960s counterculture according to the moral parameters of evangelical Christianity.

### *The Therapeutic Impulse of Sexual Purity*

As with many aspects of contemporary evangelicalism, the purity movement is highly indebted to a therapeutic rhetoric that fuses psychological language of self-care, self-development, and self-improvement with the spiritual message that authentic personal transformation is only possible with the assistance of Jesus Christ. Heather Hendershot's study of True Love Waits and the chastity literature that accompanies the movement is especially helpful for establishing how the purity culture articulates its particular form of this rhetoric.<sup>29</sup>

Like most evangelical therapeutic discourse, the chastity literature that Hendershot examined is heavily indebted to so-called secular definitions of the therapeutic and asserts a taxonomy of rehabilitation described in three stages: the eruption of the problem; the confession and diagnosis of the problem; and, finally, the solution or cure for the problem.<sup>30</sup> However, given evangelical understandings of sin, which is viewed not as a problem to be cured but a state to be endured, the third phase of this taxonomy poses some challenges. Thus, the best that chastity advocates can hope for is to help teens learn to manage their sexual desire (the problem

that needs solving) without providing any assurance that this problem will cease to exist.<sup>31</sup> Hendershot describes the therapeutic discourse of this body of literature as a "melding of health and religious language" in which chaste youth are encouraged to use words such as "purity, sin, health, recovery, redemption and temptation"—language that clearly denotes a high level of comfort with the blending of the spiritual and the psychological to create a therapeutic rhetoric that is distinctly evangelical.<sup>32</sup> A close analysis of this rhetoric reveals a variety of concerns that shape the therapeutic impulse of the movement, most of which focus on the desire to avoid the negative consequences of premarital sex. This generates a therapeutic rhetoric that asserts the physical, emotional, and spiritual consequences of premarital sexual activity.

This threefold framework, however, has not always been as prominent within the purity culture's therapeutic rhetoric. In fact, early iterations of the therapeutic rhetoric, found in True Love Waits media and literature, focused primarily on the spiritual consequences of premarital sexual activity. Though some references to health issues such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are in evidence, True Love Waits initially sought to position sexuality (and sexual transgression) within the trajectory of adolescent spiritual development, with less concern for the physical and emotional consequences of premarital sexual activity. For its part, Silver Ring Thing has worked for over two decades to perfect a live performance that effectively and efficiently presents the organization's therapeutic process in less than two and a half hours. The SRT event presents skits, videos, and testimonials that lay out a spectrum of seemingly inevitable emotional, physical, and spiritual consequences that result from premarital sexual activity. The majority of an SRT evening is spent convincing the audience that the problem is severe enough to merit a behavior reversal.

In order to pinpoint causes for the "eruption of the problem," SRT strategically places its most attention-getting sketch in the first half hour of its live performance in order to clarify that premarital sexual activity is, indeed, a problem in need of a solution. Just after introducing SRT's high-tech, multimedia program, the evening's emcee, Matt Webster, retrieves four volunteers from the audience: three young women and one young man.<sup>33</sup> With humor, sincerity, and enthusiasm, he offers the young man a board on which was painted half a heart. He explains that this board represents the young man's emotional life. He then motions to each young woman and explains that, throughout the course of his life, the young



man had engaged in premarital, sexual activity with each of them. Matt then places the young man's heart-board into a vise, asks the volunteers to step aside, and retreats backstage. Seconds later, pyrotechnics explode, lights flash, music thunders, and Matt reemerges, sporting a hockey mask and operating a live chainsaw. As the audience screams and the volunteers fall to the floor, Matt hacks the heart-board into pieces. As the noise subsides and the volunteers catch their breath, Matt explains once again that due to the young man's intimate relationships with each of these young women, they will now each carry a piece of him for the rest of their lives. After Matt gives the pieces of the young man's heart-board to the three women, he holds up the piece of heart that remained. "This is what you will take with you when you get married," Matt says as he displays the remaining heart-board, reduced to a jagged-edged splinter of wood. This sketch asserts that premarital sex causes a significant spiritual and emotional rupture. Like jagged splinters of wood, sexually active youth tragically move from one relationship to the next, leaving pieces of themselves like worthless debris. The remaining core of the self, the soul, is left weakened, incapable of genuine intimacy, and less fortified against the challenges of married life.

"But tonight we're gonna give you the chance to start over and right now I'm gonna give you a whole new heart": Webster's promise is not to the young man alone, but to anyone in the audience ready to remake his or her fractured soul into one suitable for Christian marriage. This is just one of the many ways, though certainly the most effective one, in which SRT marks adolescent premarital sex as a problem in need of a solution. Following the establishment of this problem, abstinence advocates must move onto the second stage of therapeutic discourse: confession and diagnosis.

The confessional stage is quite effective, because even adolescents who have not broken their pledge continually monitor themselves according to the well-established confessionalism embedded in the movement. Students who have attended SRT events indicated in a survey conducted in 2006–2007 that many held themselves accountable not only to physical abstinence but to sexual purity, a more spiritually holistic concept that monitors behavioral, verbal, imaginative, and emotional boundaries. Upon betraying these boundaries, the students were quick to acknowledge their transgressions and identify the causes for their misdeeds. Julie Breyer, a student at Midwestern Christian College, maintained her pledge yet still felt the consequences of an intense emotional connection that she

described as giving "pieces of my heart to a guy I dated."<sup>34</sup> Her classmate, Jonathan Pierce, also noted struggles with lust and sexual temptation, "Even though I have physically kept myself pure; I know my thoughts have been tainted for a long time and it is a daily struggle to repent of that."<sup>35</sup> Still another, Walter Newsome, was even more frank about his own struggles:

I have not yet had sexual activity/intercourse (of any variety) and do not intend to do so before marriage. However, as a teenage male, I have certainly not been free from the ever-present and almost cyclical (as they sometimes seem) temptations of pornography and masturbation.<sup>36</sup>

This continual self-monitoring allows students to diagnose and rediagnose their particular challenges and assess how they are faring according to the expectations of sexual purity established during their SRT experience. That sense of self-accountability has become a natural outgrowth of the therapeutic rhetoric of the abstinence movement. It is important to note that individuals who have moved through these stages have not necessarily done so in a linear fashion. As indicated above, the practice of self-accountability presumed that students were not cured permanently but, rather, were given tools to negotiate setbacks more effectively.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the final stage, the cure, is often presented as a point at which to start over, rather than an achievable end point.

### *Sexual Purity and Adolescent Spiritual Formation*

The therapeutic rhetoric of contemporary evangelicalism compels believers to understand their personal spiritual commitments in light of their individual well-being and self-development. For the purity movement, this means cultivating narratives that demonstrate the indistinctiveness of spiritual awakening and personal care. One such narrative appeared in a Silver Ring Thing newsletter and tells the story of Anna, who had lost her virginity at the age of fifteen and only slowly came to realize the repercussions. By the time she started feeling remorse for her sexual choices, she also began to recognize that she felt dirty, weak, and burdened. In short, Anna had sinned, and had done so so badly, she no longer had the ability to resist further temptation. Anna was already an active member in her church youth group, but her sexual activity marred her Christian

commitment and her reputation among her peers. When Anna and her youth group attended an abstinence event hosted by SRT, she heard a story very similar to her own, but with a very different ending.<sup>38</sup>

As an evangelical Christian organization, SRT situates sexual delinquency within a traditional conversion narrative that begins with the act of sin, followed by the conviction and repentance of sin, and culminates in the acceptance of Jesus Christ and obedience to God's will. Sexual sin is central to the salvation history of humanity and, according to most evangelical leaders, begins the metacycle of sin and redemption that frames all of human existence. Groups like Silver Ring Thing have modified this formula only slightly with revival-like events at which students like Anna are called forward to an altar that offers both personal salvation and sexual purification.

With sex as sin and purity as salvation, audiences are offered the gift of a new birth, an idea that revivalist Jonathan Edwards popularized during the Puritan awakenings of the eighteenth century. A new birth, of course, means a new body, and for Anna, whose "body had been tarnished by the fingerprints of others," this was a transformative moment. Anna's story followed the narrative formula of conversion testimony, except that her salvation was not only a recommitment to obey God but a renewed hope that she would meet the man "whom God has set aside for me."<sup>39</sup>

Anna's testimony exemplifies the relationship between sexual purity, marital ambitions, and personal salvation, a formula that the contemporary purity movement has found highly motivating for adolescents. The careful construction of sexual behavior as religious practice is as old as the Christian tradition itself. But the work to identify sexual purity as a central practice of Christian faith commitment is unique to the twentieth century because of its particular concern for the spiritual formation of adolescent believers. The evangelical purity culture has grown up around attempts to elevate sexual purity from moral code to Christian creed. For evangelicals who focus more on personal spirituality than theological tradition for the formation of Christian spiritual life, private, sexual acts, rather than doctrinal statements, are sites for reinforcing orthodoxy, especially during the formative years of adolescence.

The Bible as text and as object of personal devotion plays a central role for evangelical purity advocates. Creating a seamless relationship between sexual purity and personal salvation happens almost effortlessly, since, from their perspective, sexual purity is upheld by the Bible's narrative of

sin and salvation. The production and marketing of Bibles whose titles and parabiblical commentary center on themes of abstinence, sexual temptation, and purity further reinforce the connections between biblical authority and sexual purity.

Compelled by the idea of new beginnings, especially after defilement and destruction, purity advocates turn to scripture to help adolescents understand the creation of sexuality, its strictures, and the consequences for defying those strictures. When purity speaker and author Doug Herman writes for his younger audiences he encourages them to regard the Bible as the ultimate authority for sexual behavior. He asserts that the Bible incontrovertibly condemns premarital sex and helps readers recognize where and how the scriptures define appropriate sex. Most notably, he highlights the sexual metatext of the creation story, in which the first humans defy God's command to abstain from eating the fruit of a particular tree. In his retelling of the story, Herman exchanges the word *apple*—the object of desire and source of delinquency in this story—for the word *sex*, and in doing so shows his readers that "anything outside of God's plan brings death."<sup>40</sup>

Purity is an inherently theological concept for Herman, who subscribes to the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. To be human is to be impure and unclean, a state all are born into and can only escape with superhuman intervention. Though purity codes, especially in the Hebrew scriptures, address far more than sexual matters, the purity movement has elevated the value of sexual purity to such a degree that other ways of approaching the theological value of purity have become obsolete. Sexual purity began in *the beginning*, with Adam and Eve, whose complete acceptance of one another was a physical, spiritual, and emotional union. Herman's readers learn that "this is the spiritual and physical foundation of our sexuality."<sup>41</sup> Sexual purity for evangelicals is a new beginning, a sign of a new creation, and a chance to restore humans' relationship with God and return to the original paradise.

Evangelicals who insist on purity as a biblical mandate are not solely reliant upon textual evidence. The two most prominent purity organizations, True Love Waits and Silver Ring Thing, produce and distribute abstinence-themed Bibles that affirm the mandate both materially and visually. Whereas Broadman and Holman Publishers created and marketed the *True Love Waits Bible*, Silver Ring Thing produced its very own and thus provides a more accurate representation of how the purity movement utilizes bibles.

The *Abstinence Study Bible*, developed especially for SRT, is the most critical resource the organization provides its audiences. This Bible is only available to students who attend the SRT show and purchase a purity ring or make a public commitment to Jesus Christ. Tracy Webster, the SRT staff member who guided the Bible project and created much of its content, believes that a commitment to sexual purity is futile unless that commitment is rooted in "the Word of God." For SRT, that word is best spoken through the New Living Translation (NLT), so SRT president Denny Pattyn and Webster adapted a structure for the scriptures that would highlight the significant role of sexual abstinence to one's Christian faith practice. To do this, they organized two sets of reading plans: one for new believers and another for confirmed believers needing support in their abstinence commitment. New believers can utilize a section, entitled "First Steps for New Believers," that provides an introductory reading plan to the Bible itself. Webster found the commentary provided by evangelical minister Greg Laurie in the NLT to be a useful tool for explaining the central tenets of Christianity and responding to questions asked by new converts. These questions included: Why did Jesus have to die for me? Who is God? Who is Satan? What does God say about marriage?<sup>42</sup>

The SRT portions of the Bible, located both before and throughout the actual scriptures, offer resources to young people, including dating advice such as "always go out in groups," "keep the lights on," "avoid the horizontal," and "keep your clothes on, in, zipped and buttoned."<sup>43</sup> More important, SRT connects this set of advice to particular scripture passages that reinforce the primacy of sexual abstinence in the Christian faith. The primary text used by the organization is from the New Testament epistle 1 Thessalonians. When I interviewed her, Tracy Webster recited the passage without hesitation: "This is the will of God through sanctification that you should avoid sexual immorality that each one of you should learn to control your bodies in a way that is honorable." The NLT translation reads more directly: "God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin. Then each of you will control your body and live in holiness and honor." The most interesting aspect of this text is the note regarding the clause, "then each of you will control your body." The note provides an alternative translation for "control your body" that reads, "or will know how to take a wife for himself." The Greek translation, also noted in the NLT, provides the missing link between these differing interpretations: "will know how to possess his own vessel." The evolution of

this passage reveals a striking undercurrent to the quest for sexual purity. According to the initial note, there is a direct correlation between refraining from sexual immorality and taking a wife. Though SRT never addresses this underlying message of the text directly, the organization performs the subtext perfectly by asserting that God blesses people who wait to have sex before marriage. In our discussion of this particular text, Webster noted,

And we really believe that God blesses people who wait until they are married to have sex in a ton of different ways. And so it's not just the fear-based thing of like "God's gonna strike you down if you have sex." But more in the sense of you get so many blessings and good positive things when you do things God's way and you wait until you're married. Whether it's a first time commitment or even a recommitment. That this is all huge. So that's the main verse that we really focus on.<sup>44</sup>

Webster further explains that abstaining from sex before marriage is only part of her organization's campaign. SRT, like TLW, emphasizes sexual purity, a concept that expects adolescents to learn to control their bodies. In this sense, Webster argues, sexual purity, or control of one's body, is practiced and learned; it is not simply the automatic result of one's commitment. It is this practice of bodily control that requires a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

According to Denny Pattyn, one of the most pressing challenges for someone ministering to adolescents is verifying the authenticity of a person's spiritual transformation. He considers the difficulty of this transformation especially for students who, as was his experience while a young person, do not have the support of a Christian family and thus are more likely to fail in their commitment. Some of his students, he recognizes, make a commitment and never follow through, while others "mess up a couple of times" and then find their way back and get serious about their commitment. As a student who "messed up" more than once, Pattyn is not quick to give up on an adolescent who strays. But he is concerned with differentiating between those who are authentic and those who are not. Pattyn's own wisdom advises him to notice an adolescent's use of scripture. Students indicate an authentic spiritual transformation, according to Pattyn, when they are regularly reading the Bible and finding inspiration for their lives.

This type of inspiration is best understood in evangelical parlance as "the work of the Holy Spirit." For Pattyn and his organization, the third person of the Trinity is not merely concerned with the creation of a born-again identity. This same inspiration or work of the spirit is central to a successful abstinence commitment. According to Pattyn,

When you have the Holy Spirit living in you and you're in the back-seat of a car . . . what you really need is a voice within you that says "not with this guy, not with this girl, get out of there." That voice, that's very important to the process of what we're all trying to do, which is help kids wait.<sup>45</sup>

In making sexual decisions, adolescents, Pattyn believes, are not likely to turn to medical descriptions of STDs or to the conclusions of social scientific studies for encouragement. Instead, Pattyn argues, a silver ring with a biblical inscription helps remind them of a commitment to God and their future spouse. This biblical inspiration is a sign of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of teenagers, a sign that a student has been transformed both spiritually and sexually.

### *Conclusion*

As is evident from the careful construction of the *Abstinence Study Bible*, purity groups hold a high regard for the spiritual development of adolescence. As a relatively new stage of human development, at least in terms of the historical arc of Christian history, adolescence provides a unique challenge for adults. Even a brief excursion into the work of purity advocates demonstrates that the idea of sexual purity presumes an inherent link between sexuality and spiritual development, a link made more coherent through the use of therapeutic discourses. However, this linkage did not originate with contemporary conceptualizations of sexual purity. As chapter one demonstrates, the notion of adolescence as established within the field of developmental psychology was defined by the natural conflict between sexual desire and religious duty. In this formulation, Christian conversion became the mark of religion's triumph over sexual desire in order for the individual to properly mature from childhood to adulthood. In the 1970s, when evangelicals like James Dobson were articulating adolescent sexuality and spirituality within a new therapeutic

framework, these developments were reimagined as highly individualized processes, but as processes that held implications for the welfare of the nation-state. With the emergence of the contemporary evangelical purity movement, adolescent spiritual formations and sexual desire became co-belligerents in the task of raising a young generation of evangelicals who would stake their bodies and souls on claims of evangelical truth.<sup>46</sup>