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NON-TOXIC MASCULINITY

RECOVERING HEALTHY
MALE SEXUALITY



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WHAT IS “PURITY CULTURE”?

A BRIEF GENERATIONAL HISTORY

I FIRST READ *I KISSED DATING GOODBYE* when I was eleven. I remember the cover clearly. It depicts a well-dressed man wearing a fedora, head tilted forward, face obscured beneath the shadow and rim of the hat. I also remember the back cover, which shows the author, Joshua Harris, face no longer obscured, looking up toward the camera from a relaxed, crouched position on the ground. To my pubescent, homeschooled brain, there was something admirable and cool about Harris. His handsome features and demeanor were striking to me. I saw a man who had journeyed through the turbulent teenage years of sexual and relational development and emerged unscathed and respected by his family, peers, and the broader Christian community.

Boy Meets Girl, the sequel to *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, tells the story of Harris’s courtship with his future wife, Shannon. This cover consists of two romantic and wholesome photographs of the young couple, one on the front and one on the back—apparent paragons of Christian sexual virtue, blessed by God with joy, peace, and security in their relationship.

I internalized the anti-dating rhetoric of these and other books, and I aspired to the joyful future that Harris and others held out in front of me. As a tween, I remember having what seemed at the

time to be high-stakes discussions with friends about whether “going out” was a sin. My parents and I shared an understanding that dating was dangerous and to be avoided, especially with non-believers. I also remember wondering about the earliest age at which I could expect to get married, since being ready for marriage was, after all, the only context in which you could allow yourself to explore a connection with someone of the opposite sex. Thoughts like these regularly swirled in my twelve-year-old brain.

There were other books: *Passion and Purity*, *When God Writes Your Love Story*, *Sex Is Not the Problem (Lust Is)*, *For Men Only*, *Real Marriage*. The list goes on, and I read them all, but certain books loomed larger than the others. Purity culture is often most associated with Harris’s anti-dating rhetoric, but Arterburn and Stoeker’s *Every Man’s Battle* was, I believe, even more influential in the formation of Christian young men during the Purity Movement and beyond. In my conversations with various men in preparation for writing this book, *Every Man’s Battle* came up over and over. I could spend a lot of time quoting from and critiquing the views of sexuality in *Every Man’s Battle*, but others have already done an excellent job dismantling purity culture classics.¹

Purity culture wasn’t just about the books. It was and is a *culture*. Often people were more shaped by face-to-face relationships with parents, pastors, and peers who spoke to them in even more unhelpful ways than the books. A youth pastor doesn’t have his sermon filtered by an editing process or a publisher. Parents aren’t held to the standard of public discourse when they reprimand their children about dating. Your fifteen-year-old friend had no idea what he was talking about when he told you making out with your girlfriend would ruin your future marriage. The logic of purity came fast and thick for many growing up in the church during those years. What are some of the historical factors that gave rise to this culture?

DEFINING PURITY CULTURE

Purity culture was most prominently expressed in the Purity Movement of the 1990s and 2000s, a movement centered in America and spearheaded by evangelical, white, politically and socially conservative Christians. Books and conferences played a significant role, but the strong emphasis on sexual purity was never limited to them. It existed before, and it continues to exist afterward.

Purity culture involves more than a specific view of sexual ethics. For instance, the view that sex should be reserved for marriage has been around for as long as human civilization. This is not a uniquely Christian perspective. Extramarital abstinence has been (and continues to be) advocated for by people of many faiths, including Judaism and Islam, as well as those subscribing to no faith at all. Yes, people have always had sex outside of marriage, but the moral norm of abstinence is much larger than a Christian movement of the past few decades.²

Rather, purity culture is a cultural movement that defines itself in opposition to a wider cultural movement, the sexual revolution. Purity culture is not only characterized by the *what* of evangelical sexual ethics. It is also about the *why* and the *how*.

Here's how I define the term: *Purity culture refers to the theological assumptions, discipleship materials, events, and rhetorical strategies used to promote traditional Christian sexual ethics in response to the sexual revolution.* We'll get into more of the details of purity culture teaching in chapter two. For now, we can summarize by saying it was characterized by a strong emphasis on (1) premarital sexual abstinence for young people, (2) sexual freedom and fulfillment within heterosexual marriage, and (3) the assurance of blessing for those who lived according to this ethic and consequences for those who transgressed it. Again, purity culture is not co-extensive with the Purity Movement. It involves many other interconnected strands of the recent evangelical story, ranging from the Council on Biblical Manhood and

Womanhood, to Quiverfull, to Focus on the Family, and to Mars Hill Church in Seattle.

Rooting out toxic masculine sexuality in the church isn't simply a matter of correcting some of the excesses of teen-targeted rhetoric from the 1990s. This story is much bigger than that.

A GENERATIONAL HISTORY

The messaging of the Purity Movement didn't come out of nowhere, and understanding the past is an important part of understanding the present. As we look around at the ongoing sexual brokenness in individual Christians, pastors, and churches, we would do well to ask ourselves hard questions about our history as American Christians. Only then can we begin to explore how we might change course and become a different type of church with a different type of men. I offer here a brief generational overview of the Purity Movement in American Evangelicalism.

Baby boomers—Authors of the sexual revolution. The years following the end of WWII were characterized by optimism, economic growth, and babies.³ Many Americans still romanticize the 1950s. With no more enemies to fight, men returned home to an American paradise to enjoy their well-earned freedom and peace. At the center of this idyllic American life was the family: a happy and adoring housewife tending to beautiful, well-mannered, well-dressed children. This is the era of *Leave It to Beaver*. A respectable and hard-working man could expect to come home from work every evening to marital bliss.

However, the world baby boomers were born into is not the world they came of age in. While the causes and effects of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s are complex, a rejection of traditional marriage and family morality was at its heart. The existential threat of nuclear war, a new wave of feminist ideology, and the introduction of the birth control pill combined to release a world-shaking force of youth liberation. The familial, sexual paradise built

around a central father figure grew unappealing to the emerging generation. Historian Doug Owsram writes, “Of the many ironies in the history of the baby boom, the most prominent is that it, a generation [baby boomers] which so often scorned the ideals of family and home, was descended from a generation that valued home so much.”⁴

The sexual revolution turned the world upside down.⁵ There has never been anything quite like it in world history. Its effects are felt today and will continue to be long into the future. For example, during this period, many women came to see traditional sexual systems as oppressive and repressive. They took ownership of their sexuality and reproduction in unprecedented ways. LGBTQ+ people began to coalesce into a community for the first time. New forms of contraception made casual sex more common and, supposedly, less risky. Baby boomers charted a new course for sexual attitudes and behavior.

In other ways, though, boomers weren’t that different from previous generations. By the 1980s, the Vietnam War had ended, and the threat of nuclear war and communism was beginning to wane. Baby boomers were now established adults, and many got married and had children and bought houses with yards in the suburbs. Some began to speak out against the sexual permissiveness of the new Western culture. Christian leaders warned that American society would soon collapse due to moral decadence, the same thing, they argued, that had caused the fall of the ancient Roman Empire. These leaders saw the fallout of the sexual revolution wreaking havoc in society—out-of-wedlock births, teen pregnancy, divorce, fatherlessness, STDs, and AIDS. Many felt they needed to fight back against these cultural forces, providing an alternative to sexual liberation. A renewed emphasis on “sexual purity” emerged.

This movement was not, in my view, a simple return to biblical or historically Christian principles about sex. It was primarily a reaction against the sexual revolution. Historic Christian assumptions about

sexuality were being challenged and rejected at a rate never seen before. To combat this trend, a slew of Christian organizations appeared with particular emphasis on “family values.”⁶ On the surface, the emerging emphasis on sexual purity was a well-intentioned attempt to mitigate people’s suffering by commending God’s design for human sexuality. However, I will argue that many of the theological and cultural foundations of the movement were sub-Christian, even worldly.

Generation X—Promoters of sexual purity. In the second half of the twentieth century, sex and family were seen as central battlegrounds for the soul of America.⁷ In this sense, the story of the Purity Movement was spurred on by Christian Nationalism,⁸ a belief that the United States is a Christian nation, chosen and blessed by God, and that it is the responsibility of the church and individual Christians to make sure it stays that way.

But the Purity Movement wasn’t just about protecting the soul of America. It was also about protecting the souls of individual children and young adults. Christian parents whose children were born in the 1980s and ’90s wanted something different, better, for their kids. Generation X (born 1965–1980) was deployed by the Christian subculture to promote the ideas around sexual purity as a response to the sexual revolution. Historian Sara Moslener writes,

Just twenty years prior, young people of a different generation were known for publicly declaring their right to sexual freedom. The new 1990s youth 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.⁹

These emerging adults served as mediators between baby boomers and their children, the millennials.

Christian musical artist Rebecca St. James was a notable Gen X proponent of purity values. Her song “Wait for Me” captured the

hearts and imagination of young Christian girls who envisioned a handsome, noble young man “waiting” to marry them. Singing from the male perspective, the rock-rap hybrid group DC Talk included two purity-themed songs (“I Don’t Want It” and “Kinda Girl”) on their 1992 album *Free at Last*. But, the most prominent of these Gen X proponents of purity culture was Joshua Harris himself, whose books became emblematic of the movement. *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* sold over one million copies.

Millennials—*The children of purity culture.* Though the seeds of purity culture had been sown and were bearing fruit as early as the 1980s, it was in the 1990s and 2000s that the movement reached its height. Thus, millennials, the generation born between 1980 and 1995 are at the center of purity culture’s consciousness. I was born in 1991 into a generation of white evangelical Christianity with a fully developed and carefully maintained machine of pro-abstinence rhetoric and resources.

My youth group experiences included several multi-week teaching series about sex, dating, and saving yourself for marriage. Every two years, my church would host hundreds of students for a “Purity Retreat” at a camp in Michigan—three full days on nothing but sex, dating, relationships, porn, masturbation, and so on. One of these retreats ended with a student-parent ceremony that included me signing a purity pledge that hung on a wall in my bedroom until I moved out for college. My parents gave me a purity ring at this ceremony, which I wore every day for years. (For a while I wore it on my left-hand ring finger, but I switched it to my right hand after getting too many weird looks and questions from friends, teachers, and coworkers. A couple years into college, the ring broke in half. I tried not to read too much into this.)

Some millennials look back with not much more than an amused eye roll when they think about purity pledges and ’90s-era Christian music. Many don’t feel they were harmed or malformed by this culture. I don’t mean to paint an entire generation of Christians

with broad brush strokes, but the neutral-to-positive experiences of some do not invalidate the negative experience of others (and vice versa). I'll just speak for myself: it's possible there are positive consequences of purity culture that I'm not aware of or don't fully appreciate. If I'm honest, my experiences in purity culture often feel like scars rather than blessings.

But purity rhetoric wasn't the only cultural challenge Christian millennials faced with regard to our sexuality. The arrival of the smartphone and high-speed internet combined to make pornography far more accessible than ever before. Most young men I knew both in the church and outside of it confessed, if pressed, to watching porn. For Christian guys, this was a constant weight of shame added to the obsessive messaging and pressures we received from purity culture.

LGBTQ+ millennials were also becoming increasingly open about their experiences. This created another layer of difficulty and confusion for Christian teens whose purity culture resources either didn't mention non-heterosexual experiences at all or responded to them with simplistic and dehumanizing solutions. "Pray the gay away" and "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" were regular Christian tropes of my teen years. The practice of reparative therapy was common, wherein same-sex-attracted teens or adults were subjected to dehumanizing treatment with the express intent to "convert" them to heterosexual desire. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Christians did precious little during this time to counter the cultural tendencies of dehumanization endured by LGBTQ+ teens and adults.

While not on the same scale as the sexual revolution itself, the Purity Movement mixed with other cultural forces to create a cocktail of tension and confusion for many Christian teens. Even now in our late twenties, thirties, and early forties, the sons and daughters of purity culture are peeling back the layers of what it all meant for us. As one man I spoke to put it, "I feel like I've had to

completely relearn my sexuality as an adult and unlearn so much of what evangelicalism taught me, not just about sex, but also about myself.” In chapter two, I’ll begin to unpack what it is about purity culture that many in my generation have found unhelpful in retrospect.

Gen Z—New challenges, no vision. The pace of social change in our culture is rapid—even disorienting. The newest generation of young people, Gen Z, faces its own unique challenges. The sexualization of popular culture continues unabated. What has changed is that teen pregnancy has dropped in recent years in America. Some argue this is a function of better sex education or access to contraception. It may simply be because teens are having less sex.¹⁰ Does this signal that society has taken a turn toward traditional sexual values? Not exactly.

Mental health has replaced drugs, drunk driving, and teen pregnancy as the great challenge faced by the emerging generation. Teen use of antidepressants was steadily increasing in the years before Covid-19,¹¹ and difficulty attaining these prescriptions during lockdowns—combined with the stress and strain of remote learning—may have contributed to a further spike in teen mental health issues during the pandemic.¹² A larger-than-ever percentage of young people’s social lives takes place online, a trend that the pandemic only accelerated. When I was growing up, social media was an online supplement to in-person gatherings. Today, the online world is often the locus of social interactions for young people. These and other trends have radically altered and complicated the sexual landscape of American teenagers. Social media platforms are sexualized and eroticized in a disembodied mode. Algorithms designed to prey on the curiosities of children and adults serve up whatever type of sexualized content captures one’s attention. For adults, online dating is now the norm, but most people don’t enjoy using these apps.¹³ The church and Christians should have wisdom to offer about these new sexual practices, but

the rhetoric of “saving yourself” for marriage seems less and less relevant to the challenges faced by young people today.

Moreover, Gen Zers (and millennials) have increasingly adopted the new, liberated consensus on human sexuality. This consensus prioritizes authenticity, consent, and personal expression. The Purity Movement’s messages about sexual restraint before marriage and sexual freedom within heterosexual marriage ring hollow to a generation that rejects traditional categories.¹⁴

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The narrative I’ve traced in this chapter is admittedly selective, representing one slice of a complex cultural story.¹⁵ While it may be oversimplifying to describe these patterns in generational terms, such generalizations can sometimes be helpful for seeing the big picture. Older Christians who lived through the sexual revolution reared their children on an abstinence-focused, heteronormative, patriarchal ethic. Now, many millennial children of the Purity Movement have rejected cultural and sexual ethics they grew up with.

The jig is up, as far as millennials and Gen Zers are concerned. The church has too often become a place of hate, sexual repression, false promises, and, worst of all, abuse. These people are either leaving behind traditional modes of Christian spirituality or rejecting the faith altogether. Younger adults who grew up in the church are asking hard questions—questions that older generations of Christians seem unwilling to face: Is there any connection between purity culture and the broken masculinity that plagues the church? Why do so many people carry scars from purity teaching? Is this simply another generational instance of youthful angst? Rebelliousness? Or are the messages of purity culture harmful in themselves?

Was purity culture the faithful return to biblical sexuality that many Christian leaders made it out to be? Is it possible that the

central tenets of purity culture are incompatible with the faith that Christians profess in an embodied, crucified, and resurrected Savior? Maybe, viewed from a certain perspective, purity culture never had any business calling itself a Christian movement in the first place.

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