

Adolescent Conceptions of Purity and Self within Canadian
Evangelical Protestantism

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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University of Alberta

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Abstract

This research broadly examines how people consider two opposing but compelling ideas and whether they synthesize the two concepts or reject one of them. Specifically, I focused my research on evangelical Protestant adolescents who participate in church youth groups and look at how they negotiate messages about sex and sexual purity from popular media and their church.

Through the ethnographic methods of participant-observation and interviews, I collected data about the beliefs of youth participants, youth leaders, and congregants who had previously participated in the youth group. While most resources indicated that some blending and negotiating between the messages presented by media and the church would occur, the research did not support this: rather, youth rejected the messages from popular media in favour of the message about sexual purity from their church.

In this thesis, I discuss the way that the history and belief system of evangelical Protestantism contribute to the rejection of the messages about sex from popular media by youth participants, as well as the factors in participants' lives that position sexual abstinence as a legitimate option for evangelical Protestant youth.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Stephanie C. Brown. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, “Conceptions of Sexual Purity and Identity among Evangelical Protestant Youth”, Study ID Pro00030835, 25 April 2012.

Acknowledgements

I wholeheartedly thank the congregants of Praise Church for allowing me to conduct research in their community and for granting me access to their lives. In addition, I thank the members of my examining committee for their assistance and guidance: Dr. Gregory Forth, Dr. Stephen Kent, and Dr. Helen Vallianatos. Finally, I thank Dr. Gregory Forth and Lindsey Warkentin for their editorial efforts.

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Chapter 1: Background

1.1. Introduction

Growing up, I was abstractly aware of people who intended to remain sexually abstinent until marriage. This was the late 1990s and early 2000s, what some consider the ‘heyday’ of the modern sexual purity movement. In 1996, the United States Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act which contained Title V. This provision “provided a five-year, \$250 million grant for abstinence-only sex education” (Doan and Calterone Williams 2008: 15). At the same time, multiple mainstream celebrities announced their intention to stay ‘pure’ until marriage and the Candie’s Foundation told girls through magazine ads, “Be Sexy: It Doesn’t Mean You Have to Have Sex”. I did not think of it much until I was an undergrad and picked up a copy of *Glamour* magazine. In January 2007, *Glamour* ran an article about purity balls by Jennifer Baumgardner. Purity balls are events where daughters pledge to remain abstinent and fathers pledge to protect their daughter’s virginity until she is married. Typically, purity balls take the form of a formal dinner and dance attended by a father and his daughter(s). Girls are generally between the ages of twelve and eighteen, although some fathers bring girls as young as four (Baumgardner 2007: 1). In addition, I had heard stories of Christian youth engaging in oral or anal intercourse in order to ‘save’ their virginity for their future spouse. This interesting combination of ideas—the attempt to follow the Christian tenet of sexual purity while experimenting with premarital sexual activity—made me question how youth who engaged in ‘alternate’ forms of sexuality in the attempt to remain sexually pure identified as Christians, as adolescents, and as sexual beings.

Subsequent research did not yield many answers. Through Brückner and Bearman's research, I discovered that the incidences of youth using 'alternate' forms of sexual intercourse were factual and statistically significant, although still relatively rare (2005: 276): however, their article, as well as a paragraph in Doan and Calterone Williams' *The Politics of Virginity: Abstinence in Sex Education* (2008: 76), were the only resources found that discussed this phenomenon scientifically or at any length¹. On the other hand, I did find many resources that examined sexual abstinence. However, these are overwhelmingly concentrated on research in the United States, and focused on the effect of the abstinence-only education system prevalent in the United States since 1996. Research examining sexual purity in Canada is nearly non-existent. One reason may be that Canada has a less vocal religious population (Malloy 2009: 352-354), likely due to the focus on multiculturalism versus the assimilationist policies of the United States; another may be the different political systems (2009: 356). Additionally, Canada teaches comprehensive sexual education, largely believed to be more effective at teaching students to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies (Kohler, Manhart, and Lafferty 2008; Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011). In response to this dearth of information on the Canadian abstinence movement—if there even is a Canadian abstinence movement—I chose to examine how Canadian evangelical Protestant adolescents consider two opposing but compelling ideas: that is, whether they amalgamate the concepts of sexual purity and the use of alternate forms of sex or reject one of them in favour of the other. I focus my research on participants of the youth group at an Evangelical Missionary Church in Alberta I call

¹ See Blank (2007: 5) and Mullaney (2006: 154) for brief mentions of this practice.

Praise Church² and examine how the participants negotiated messages about sex and sexual purity from Praise Church and mass media.

1.2. Evangelical Protestantism and the Evangelical Missionary Church

What, then, is evangelical Protestantism? Before noting the differences between evangelical Protestantism and other Christian denominations, it is important to note the commonalities within Christianity generally. First and foremost, all Christians believe in Jesus Christ as a messiah and the saviour of humanity. This is expressed through their belief in a triune God: that is, a supernatural deity existing in three parts, known as the Father (God), Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit or Ghost. Additionally, all Christians use the Bible—comprised of the Old and New Testament—as the guiding document of the religion, although there is variance in how the denomination interprets the text as well as whether a specific denomination uses additional text(s). A major feature of evangelical Protestantism is their interpretation of the Bible as the literal word of God (Warner 2008: 13) whereas some other Christian denominations, most notably the Roman Catholic Church, interpret the Bible metaphorically (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2nd edition: sec. 108-114).

Evangelical Protestantism was born in the late 1790s, with “a series of religious revivals known as the Second Great Awakening” (Warner 2008: 11), and rejected the fatalism of previous Protestant denominations. Rather than accept predestination, as, for example, Calvinism had, evangelical Protestants strive at every moment to remain free of sin; as Warner states, “Where the Calvinist can never be sure whether [they are]

² All names of people and places related to the research site are pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

saved, the evangelical is beset by an altogether different kind of anxiety: the fear that once saved, he or she might stumble and sin, and in doing so, cease to be saved” (Warner 2008: 13). John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church and modern evangelicalism, prescribed a “program of endless works” (2008: 13) in order to keep his congregants from falling from grace: sin needed to be fought daily, and on all fronts. The goal, then, is “Christian perfection” (2008: 13):

Evangelical ministers rejected the Calvinist view that salvation lay entirely in the hands of God and instead stressed the ability of individuals to overcome sinfulness through their own actions. They believed that by working "ceaselessly to make themselves and others perfect," individuals could help...bring about the Second Coming of Christ (Erllich 2006: 152-153).

This focus on Christian perfection leads to a constant battle to avoid sin by the evangelical Protestant and a deep reliance on Jesus Christ to save them on a daily basis. Christ, then, is part of daily life for the evangelical Protestant (Hendershot 2004: 4).

A number of practices or beliefs are characteristic of evangelical Protestantism. First, it is expected that evangelical Protestants will actively express their faith in both word and deed (Warner 2008: 13). This may take the form of personal testimony, active proselytizing, good works in the evangelical Protestant’s community, or a personal struggle to follow a godly life. Additionally, a conversion experience, or the experience of being ‘born again’ as a Christian, is deeply important within evangelical Protestantism. Many evangelical churches perform ‘credobaptisms’—also known as adult baptisms, although children can be baptised, so long as they can profess to being a believer—as opposed to infant baptisms. They do so because, for evangelical Protestants, “only an individual decision to follow Jesus will suffice for salvation” (Ammerman 1998: 57). In addition, and as mentioned previously, evangelical

Protestants take the Bible as the literal, infallible word of God, rather than as a metaphorical document. This literal interpretation of Scripture combined with the lack of a head of church—such as the Pope—means that the evangelical Protestant is able to have a deeply personal and emotional relationship with God (Warner 2008: 18). Finally, evangelical Protestantism is characterized by the belief that “Christ atoned for man’s sins” (2008: 13) and salvation requires the constant overcoming of sin in the Christian’s life through reliance on Jesus Christ (2008: xii).

The category of ‘evangelical Protestantism’ is broad and vague, and the line between evangelical Protestantism, non-evangelical Protestantism, and fundamentalist Protestantism can be a fuzzy one. However, it is important to note that many evangelical Protestants distance themselves from “any kind of liberal thinking, whether political or spiritual” (Hendershot 2004: 2). In addition, evangelical Protestants are “in the world but not of the world” (2004: 10), engaging with those outside of the religion in order to share the gospel, while fundamentalists tend to have more separatist tendencies.

My research focuses on an Evangelical Missionary Church in a small urban centre of Alberta. The Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada (EMCC) was founded in 1993 through the merging of the Evangelical Church of Canada and the Missionary Church of Canada, the former which grew out of Wesley’s Methodism and the latter which grew out of the religious revivals of the mid-nineteenth century. As suggested by the name, Evangelical Missionary churches encourage their congregants to evangelize both at home and abroad: the EMCC’s mission statement declares that, “The EMCC is passionately committed to introducing people to Jesus Christ, discipling believers and facilitating the multiplication of healthy churches in Canada and worldwide”

(Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada 2014: “His Mission—Our Mission”). Additionally, the EMCC is socially conservative in its beliefs: official statements indicate a denial of evolution in the creation of humankind and pro-life sentiments (2014: “What We Believe”), although these beliefs were less explicitly stated in sermons at Praise Church.

Important to this research is the EMCC’s stance on marriage and sexual intimacy. For biblical reasons, the EMCC considers heterosexual marriage between Christians as the sole legitimate union and heterosexual marriage as the only acceptable context for sexual expression:

Marriage is part of God's design in establishing the family. We believe that marriage is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. This heterosexual union is the only appropriate relationship within which the joy of sexual intimacy is to be expressed. We affirm such marriage as God's design for a lifelong loving relationship, sexual intimacy, and the birth and nurture of children. Christian marriage is intended for those who share a common faith in Christ. Such a marriage is blessed of God” (Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada 2014: “What We Believe”).

These beliefs were affirmed by a sermon presented in the spring of 2012 and posted on Praise Church’s website. The EMCC has congregations in seven of Canada’s thirteen provinces and territories, with missions in over twenty countries (2014: Our Congregations; Countries).

1.3. Praise Evangelical Missionary Church

Praise Church is located in an urban centre in Southern Alberta and between 400 and 550 congregants attend normal Sunday services. Although exact statistics are unavailable, and it is difficult to make generalizations about a group this large, the average congregant appeared to occupy an upper-middle class socioeconomic status,

indicated by their clothes—which were fashionable and relatively new—and by their mannerisms. In addition, Praise Church appears to have a young, active congregation: many seniors attended their ‘traditional’ service, but their ‘contemporary’ service was consistently full, primarily with young adults and young families, often with young children (Fieldnotes 2012: 24 June).

Praise Church generally practiced with a more conservative worship style than some other evangelical Protestant groups; I am unsure if this is related to their denomination or to the church specifically. During the service, congregants tended to sit or stand quietly, with some swaying or moving slightly during the singing of worship songs. In addition, some congregants would raise their hands—either at chest level, with palms facing toward the congregant, or with one hand above the head, palm facing outward, toward the altar—while singing; it was explained to me that this was done either as a sign of surrender to God or as a physical sign of praising God (Personal correspondence 2012: Jordan; Taylor). During prayer, usually after the sermon, those who requested a blessing from the pastor would go to the altar to be blessed by the pastor or by friends and family through the “laying on of hands” (Fieldnotes 2012: 27 May). Although some youth participants discussed more charismatic worship practices—for example, speaking in tongues (2012: 19 June), bibliomancy (29 May), and faith healing (2013: 3 May)—these practices were not seen or discussed during Sunday services.

1.4. Abstinence and Sexual Purity

In following the lead of my research participants, I use the terms abstinence and sexual purity more or less interchangeably throughout this research, although there are some minor differences between the two terms. Abstinence is the “principled and unerring refusal to engage in a particular activity” (Warner 2008: xi) and implies a sense of agency in refusing to do something. In the case of sexual abstinence, one is refusing to engage in sexual intercourse. Mullaney’s definition goes further, stating that abstinence involves “breaches of *expected doings*” (emphasis in original, 2006: 2). Therefore, because society expects that one will engage in sexual intercourse before marriage, not to engage in premarital sex becomes a statement about one’s identity.

Abstinence can also be conceived of as voluntary suffering through self-denial either in order to prevent external evils or to create a void for something else to fill. In the first conception, abstinence is simply considered the safest route to take: according to early American abstainers, “the only safe way to handle...vices was to give them up” (Warner 2008: 10). In this framework, because sexual activity outside of a committed relationship—such as marriage—runs the risk of leading to sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, and heartbreak, to suggest anything other than abstinence is irresponsible and dangerous (Greslé-Favier 2009: 12).

Giving up something tangible and short term—particularly true for sexual abstinence before marriage—in exchange for something “ineffable and long term” (Warner 2008: 5) is the second way of conceiving of abstinence: it is a sacrifice. This theme is particularly poignant for Christians, as worldly sacrifices emulate the sacrifice Jesus Christ made in His salvation of humanity. This conception of abstinence is based

on the idea of delayed gratification: by giving up something now, one will be rewarded with something exceptional at a later date. In the case of evangelical Protestants, this takes the form of a superior marriage (White 2012: 246), as well as a stronger relationship with God.

While abstinence does not necessarily carry a connotation of morality, the concept of purity does. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first entry under the word 'purity' is: "The state or quality of being morally or spiritually pure; sinlessness; freedom from ritual pollution; ceremonial cleanness; innocence; chastity" (3rd edition: s.v. "purity."). Therefore, to have become sexually impure is to have sinned. Sexual purity, according to Christianity, is primarily attributed to the retention of one's virginity until marriage—although avoiding lustful thoughts and remaining 'pure of spirit' is also important—after which one can be sexually active exclusively with one's spouse. However, the concept of virginity is ambiguous and problematic, and it is this ambiguity that led to this research question.

Hanne Blank's book, *Virgin: An Untouched History* (2007), examines the way that virginity is a cultural construct based on historical circumstance with no material or medical definition, nor a clear definition in any texts, either in the past or present (2007: 3-5). As Blank states, "The broadest and most general way to define virginity... would be to say that virginity is a human sexual status that is characterized by a lack of any current or prior sexual interaction with others" (2007: 6). She adds that what is implied by 'sexual interaction' can vary greatly. However, there is a focus on heterosexual, penetrative sex: across history and cultures, the insertion of a penis into a vagina has been the marker for loss of virginity (2007: 10). Due to this focus on heterosexual

penetrative sex, participating in other sexual acts—for example, oral sex, fondling, or homosexual sex, particularly for two females—leaves the definition of ‘virgin’ open for interpretation. Can one still be a virgin if penetrative sex has not occurred? And if one conceives of oneself as a virgin after non-penetrative sexual acts, can one then still be considered sexually pure?

Blank additionally focuses on the way that virginity has typically been conceived as a state of being exclusively for females. Not only do men not possess that supposed hallmark of virginity, the hymen,³ but even the etymology of the word ‘virgin’ comes from the Latin *virgo*, meaning girl or never-married female (Blank 2007: 10). More importantly, “virginity has never mattered in regard to the way men are valued, or whether they were considered fit to marry or, indeed, to be permitted to survive” (Warner 2007: 10). A woman’s sexual status, however, has historically been deeply connected with her value as a human. To be clear, the control of adolescents’ or unmarried people’s sexuality, both male and female, by parents or members of the senior generation is extremely common, although the reasons for this concern, the methods of control, and what adolescents can and cannot do sexually vary greatly (Schlegel 1995). In some societies, premarital sexual relationships are condoned as an outlet for adolescents, although there are often several cultural constraints placed on these relationships (1995: 185, 186, 187).

There are several theories for why virginity has played such an important role in women’s lives. First, an argument typically put forward by evolutionary psychologists,

³ The hymen, a “small flexible flange” (Blank 2007: 33), has often been used to ‘prove’ whether a woman is a virgin or not through an examination of whether the hymen has been torn. However, hymens vary widely, with many tearing during non-sexual activity and others not tearing, even after multiple penetrative acts, sexual or otherwise (2007: 38-39).

is that sexuality is controlled due to the way humans evolved and is a resource-management strategy. Looking specifically at sexuality, evolutionary psychology claims that women have evolved to find a resource-rich mate who will help support any offspring, while men have evolved to attempt to access as many fertile females as possible with as little resource investment as possible (McKinnon 2005: 7). Women's sexuality, then, should be controlled to ensure paternity: according to this theory, women everywhere should be prohibited from engaging in premarital sex and pressured or forced to be monogamous in marriage. McKinnon provides examples of a number of exceptions to this 'universal' theory of sexuality, including the cases of the Etoro and Kaulong, where men avoid sexual activity with women—"hardly an optimal strategy for advancing their reproductive success" (2005: 88). Additionally, cases that point toward a lack of male proprietary behaviour exist to refute the idea that men need to regulate paternity in order to 'invest' in women: the Lesu of Melanesia are a particularly good example. Monogamy, polygamy, and polyandry are all accepted forms of marriage and premarital and extramarital affairs are accepted, even condoned (McKinnon 2005: 104-105) as "a valued social practice that men and women engaged in with equal pleasure and frequency" (2005: 105).

A second theory—that the control of sexuality is related to concepts of inheritance and lineage—is based on economics. This theory argues that in societies where goods and status are inheritable, sexuality will be regulated in order to ensure one's biological children receive the fruits of one's labour. In turn, these children can be used to raise the status of the family (Blank 2007: 28). In this way, the virginity of unmarried women and fertility in marriage becomes of the utmost importance. The

institution of marriage then serves to legitimate any heirs to the family's resources and status. Any premarital relations are controlled to prevent pregnancy outside of marriage: it has been proposed that "the stabilization of property rights and the resulting desire to pass on one's property to legitimate heirs, rather than any innate jealous tendency, were what motivated men to begin restricting the sexual behaviour of their wives" (Baumeister and Twenge 2002: 168). This theory, however, does not take into account societies that practice matrilineal inheritance, such as traditional Tuareg groups (Rasmussen 2005: 161-162), or where patrilineal inheritance coexists with encouraged premarital promiscuity: for example, among the Pokot of west central Kenya whose full adult status is dependent on sexual experience (McKinnon 2005: 96).

Third, the argument that sexual control is related to the more general subjugation of women is often associated with feminism and typically blames patriarchal forces for the repression female sexuality. Patriarchy is defined as "the predominance of men in positions of power and influence in society, with cultural values and norms being seen as favouring men" (*Oxford English Dictionary* third edition: s.v. "patriarchy."). The 'subjugation of women' theory argues that women's sexuality is controlled in order to preserve the gender hierarchy whereby men are privileged. In this hierarchy, women are commodified and viewed as possessions for men to use to gain further privilege and power. Female sexuality is repressed in order to repress women's existence as autonomous creatures: to give women autonomy "could potentially undermine male control" (Baumeister and Twenge 2002: 168). Typically, traditional gender roles, beliefs about an innate femininity, and control of female sexuality are used to relegate women to less-valued spheres: there is "a long-standing ideological tradition in the United

States, one which attempts to preserve male and upper class privilege by using allegedly innate traits of ‘nurturance’ and ‘emotionality’ to define and control female sexuality” (Field 1983: 2).

Field argues that the control and repression of sexuality serve the interests of the more powerful group in class societies by maintaining class boundaries and by creating an easily exploitable workforce:

In class society, then, there are two overlapping groups endeavoring to maintain their vested interests: ...upper class men, seeking to protect their control of the means of production; and...men as a caste, seeking to protect the privileges and services which devolve from the economic subjugation of women. Repression of female sexuality serves both interests (1983: 9).

Field’s analysis argues that female sexual repression is most often found in class societies, particularly capitalist societies: she cites numerous “non-class”, typically foraging, societies that “permit [considerable] sexual variety to both sexes” (1983: 5). This does not, however, take into account the subjugation of women in other non-class or non-capitalist societies.

Finally, social exchange theory combines subjugation theory with the idea that women are active agents in their lives and in society. It posits that women use the resource available to them—sex—in order to have certain wants or needs fulfilled by men. Using a model of supply and demand, women use their sexuality as currency; it is, therefore, in their best interest to keep the cost of sex high. If sex is harder to obtain, the price will remain high (Baumeister and Twenge 2002: 171). In short, men have a vested interest in subjugating women, and women have a vested interest in suppressing female sexuality:

Women benefit economically if men are starved for sex, whereas men

benefit sexually if women are desperate for money and other resources. The female control theory is thus congenial to feminist analysis in that it provides a motive for the alleged male quest to seek power over women. If men recognize that they have to offer women something of value to obtain sex, then they have a clear interest in keeping women in a perpetual state of need and deprivation. Keeping women poor and powerless would improve men's chances for obtaining sex. ...[Conversely,] heavy emphasis on direct socialization by females of other females [is necessary] to convince women and girls not to be highly sexual. Women might also punish overly sexual women through informal sanctions such as ostracism and derogatory gossip (Baumeister and Twenge 2002: 172).

Social exchange theory has been able to explain a more sexually permissive culture during certain periods of Western history. If women are granted the right to enter the workforce and obtain their own resources, they are also able to relax the controls on sexuality: "when women have plenty of alternative sources of power, they have less need to restrict men's access to sex, and so they can relax the controls on female sexuality (2002: 175).

There is evidence of social exchange theory occurring in the ethnographic record. Using the Human Relation Area Files, a study from 1986 found that in areas with greater male power, there was greater suppression of female sexuality (Reiss 1986 in Baumeister and Twenge 2002: 174), which could be used to explain increased sexual permissiveness in more egalitarian societies. Additional ethnography has also bolstered social exchange theory. Women were found to police other women's sexuality and sexual "trade-offs" were negotiated for other gains. For example:

In one country study after another, we found women making 'trade-offs,' negotiating their sexual pleasure and autonomy in exchange for other gains. For example, in the Philippines, Mexico, and Egypt women accept unwanted marital sex in exchange for husbands' cooperation in housework, or to stave off quarrels or domestic violence. In Egypt women adapt to female genital mutilation, or to a wedding night defloration ritual they find painful and humiliating, to secure public respectability and the freedom to come and go (Petchesky 2000: 94).

In short, social exchange theory argues that because men possess a privileged place in society, they can control the resources necessary for survival. Women use that which is available to them—sex—as leverage for resources. Women who lower the ‘cost’ of sex—either because they enjoy sex or as a competitive advantage over other women—face the possibility of social ostracism or derision from other women who suffer because of the lowered asking price. While the language of social exchange theory is problematic in that it may perpetuate the commodification of women or the idea that women’s sexuality is the ‘property’ of men, it is a wide-ranging theory that has applicability to the control of sexuality in societies.

1.5. Sexual Purity and Christianity

Scripture and evangelical Protestant beliefs create a tenuous place for the sexual human being in evangelical Protestantism. The conflicting messages of chastity and the intention of God to unite men and women and have them procreate (Radford Ruether 2001: 74)—to “be fruitful and multiply” (*New Standard Revised Version* (NRSV) Gen 1:28)—along with the human urge to engage in sexual activity, have led to the prescription that sexual activity is only appropriate within the institution of marriage. To do otherwise is to plunge oneself into sin, risking damnation. This prohibition is evidenced through a number of passages relating to sexual purity in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. Within the New Testament, there are at least nine passages⁴ that refer to the importance of sexual purity in living a Christian life, most clearly in 1 Thessalonians: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from

⁴ NRSV Mt 5:8, 1Cor. 6:13, 18-20, Gal. 5:19-21, Eph 5:3-5, Phil 4:8-9, 1Thess 4: 3-8, 1Tim 5:22, 2Tim 2:22

fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God” (NSRV 1 Thess 4: 3-8). Through these passages, evangelical Protestants support their prohibition on premarital and extramarital sex.

Living in a state of impurity has a number of consequences, most seriously a breach in one’s relationship with God (NRSV Hos. 5:4-6). The lack of a head of church willing to interpret and disseminate the laws of the church, combined with the deeply personal relationship with God inherent in evangelical Protestantism (Warner 2008: 18) places the interpretation of Scripture on the shoulders of pastors or individual believers—some of whom are more conservative than others. For those who are more conservative, that which might possibly incite lustful thoughts or lead to sex—kissing, dating—can be interpreted as being as sinful as the act of intercourse itself. Conversely, it can also lead to more liberal interpretations, whereby alternative forms of sexual intercourse are not ‘real’ intercourse and are therefore acceptable. This individual decision-making ability positions evangelical Protestantism as ideal for this research: because decisions about what ‘sex’ means is individual, adolescents are (relatively) free to decide what acts are considered sinful within their personal relationship with Christ.

Alternatively, sex and sexual desire can be very beneficial for evangelical Protestants. As mentioned previously, conversion and the act of ‘choosing’ Jesus as one’s saviour is central to evangelical Protestantism. The “telling and retelling of conversion stories is a crucial aspect of evangelical identity” (Hendershot 2004: 97). Conversion stories detail how a person came to accept Jesus as their saviour and tend to be dramatic, detailing how the evangelical moved “from depravity to a sudden inflowing

of grace” (Booth 1995: 390). For adolescents who were raised in evangelical homes and who were ‘saved’ at an early age, sexual desire can act as a conversion story. Through the experience of lust, evangelical Protestant adolescents, who have not experienced “serious worldly transgression” (Hendershot 2004: 97), are able to participate in the community of believers through witnessing and the rededication of themselves to God.

1.6. Sexual Purity and Gender

A number of gender expectations are implicit in the sexual purity framework. These gender roles tend to be deeply heteronormative, with very strict gender roles assigned to the categories of male and female. Many of the beliefs in the sexual purity movement come down to the idea that God created men and women differently, and to go against one’s ‘natural’ urges is to fight both biology and God. This positions women as caretakers and mothers: passive, emotional, and with fewer, less intense sexual urges than men. Men, conversely, are protectors and breadwinners: aggressive, rational, and deeply sexual. As one abstinence-only curriculum states, “gender and sexuality are part of us from the very beginning of life.... Although men and women equally deserve respect, they were not made exactly the same emotionally, physically and psychologically” (Mast 2001: 6).

The resources that promote abstinence before marriage present these heteronormative gender beliefs as biological fact rather than cultural creation. These beliefs promote problematic gender roles. Females are denied sexual agency and desire (Gresh 1999: 99) and are told that a woman’s ‘God-given role’ is within the home as a supporter of her husband and as a mother (Greslé-Favier 2009: 245). To feel sexual

urges or to feel unfulfilled by life in the private sphere is positioned as unnatural and against the will of God. Alternatively, males are often told that they are driven by “strong, even brutal, sexual impulses” (Hendershot 2004: 98) that could rage out of control at any moment.

These heteronormative gender roles and the idea of sexual purity are used to reinforce a traditional family structure. Most obviously, the purity movement promotes the institution of marriage, because heterosexual monogamous marriage is the only legitimate arena for sexual expression for evangelical Protestants (NRSV 1 Cor 7:1-9; Deut. 17:17). Additionally, the traditional gender roles promoted by “evangelical abstinence campaigns” (Hendershot 2004: 91) that position male and female gender roles as mutually exclusive promote heterosexuality through the concept of complementariness and the idea that ‘opposites attract.’ Finally, it is believed that if “cohabitation, rampant divorce, sex outside of marriage, and homosexual partnerships” are allowed to continue and replace traditional marriage, then people can expect “more poverty, more crime, more emotional problems, and more social chaos” (Hagelin in Greslé-Favier 2009: 55).

1.7. Abstinence and Society

Abstinence is promoted by evangelical Protestantism because it serves as a vehicle for a number of conservative Christian agendas, especially by privileging traditional hierarchies. This allows for the continuation of reassuring traditions and the reaffirmation of the status quo: “pro-abstinence discourses reinforce both the sense of being in the middle of a culture war and the menace facing young people’s moral and

physical health” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 236). Essentially, politicians and preachers can use the purity movement to promote an oasis of familiarity in the storm of “post-modern chaos” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 236) and immorality, increasing votes and people in the pews. The focus on abstinence brings together many key issues for evangelical Protestants including the importance of parental rights, the privileging of males over females, and the attempt to resist cultural change.

Parental rights are deeply tied to the abstinence agenda: that is, the way in which parents are in control of children’s sexuality. Many evangelical Protestants feel we live in a permissive, immoral, ‘sex-crazed’ world (Calterone Williams 2011: 417; Greslé-Favier 2009: 20, 181). They feel that parents do not have options when it comes to what their children know about sex and disagree with teaching about sex and contraception in schools (Calterone Williams 2011: 417). The purity movement is attractive to many adults, with its focus on “family values” (Bearman and Brückner 2001: 860), the promotion of abstinence until marriage, and the organization of ‘low-risk’ chastity celebrations, such as chaperoned rallies, concerts, and parties. Importantly, rather than being a movement “of, for, and by adolescents,” as it has often been positioned in popular media (2001: 860), the purity movement reflects how adults want youth to think about their bodies and sexuality. Conservative parents concerned about the influence of secular media and education on their children look to control their children’s access to the secular world, not only out of “legitimate parental care” but also as a way to assert “their control over their children’s interactions with the world outside of the family” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 184). This control, promoted from within the purity movement, denies “teenagers access to health information and a minimum of sexual agency” and

“reasserts the family as a hierarchical structure based on adultism that disregards youth as ‘citizens’ entitled to rights, duties and federal protection” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 223).

In addition to privileging adults over adolescents, the purity movement promotes a patriarchal system whereby males are privileged over females. Remaining sexually pure is significantly more important for women than it is for men, and women are held to a higher standard of sexual behaviour than “their more privileged counterparts, especially white adult males” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 222). The focus on virginity before marriage as the ultimate marker of a ‘good’ female combined with the heteronormative gender roles for women that are promoted by the purity movement ensures “the social domination of women in a very subtle, covert, and thus, symbolically violent way” (Willey 2010: 73).

The abstinence movement supports the superiority of traditional values of work, family, and religious worship over the ‘liberal’ values of the post-1960s cultural revolution. Evangelical Protestants use the rhetoric of a “culture war” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 177) to gain support for their abstinence beliefs and to invoke a moral panic. According to those in the purity movement, helping adolescents to remain abstinent is harder at present than in any generation before. Promoting this anxiety and maintaining a sense of being in a permanent state of crisis serves the evangelical Protestant agenda through strengthening “their follower’s commitment and their own influence over them” (2009: 199). Abstinence, then, acts as a force against change, a symbol used to support parental rights and promote the “idealisation of a pre-‘sexual revolution’ era when the ‘American’ values of ‘work, wedlock and worship’ were supposedly better respected” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 189). This in turn allows for the promotion of a “societal order

based on traditional hierarchies” and both of “these narratives... contribute to maintaining a sense of threat and decay” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 189), increasing the evangelical Protestant’s reliance on the church.

In addition, abstinence can provide a way for the urban evangelical Protestant to maintain boundaries between themselves and their (outwardly) secular peers.

Particularly for those evangelical Protestants with a higher socioeconomic status, abstinence allows them to maintain their outsider identity while participating in Western consumerism. The use of sexual abstinence, in particular, allows evangelical Protestants to exaggerate the threat of moral decay and increased sinfulness of the ‘other’ to maintain boundaries between the ‘saved’ and ‘unsaved.’ This boundary maintenance is important, for, as Valeri states, “I exist by positing myself as not-them” (2000: 409).

Living in a secular urban area, and taking advantage of all that is available in that urban centre, evangelical Protestants require a way for members to set themselves apart.

Focusing on the importance of sexual abstinence before marriage serves this purpose.

1.8. Media and Evangelical Protestantism

Popular media—that is, mainstream content that is readily available through magazines, radio, television, and the internet—play an important role in this research. I propose that it provides an alternate option from the information provided to evangelical Protestant adolescents from their church and their parents. Generally, popular media reflect current cultural beliefs that encourage sexual experimentation before marriage (Doan and Calterone Williams 2008: 69). More troubling, popular media often emphasize “sexy female bodies [and depict] uncommitted and consequence-free casual

sex, with little attention to sexual health. At the same time, media stress the transformative and irresistible power of heteroromantic love and commitment” (Smith 2012: 321). Many resources discuss the increased sexualization, particularly of females, in popular media (Doan and Calterone Williams 2008: 68; Greslé-Favier 2009: 245; Valenti 2008: 63-64, 218). The prevalence of sex, especially premarital and extramarital sex, in popular media is something that is—understandably—deemed problematic for evangelical Protestants who seek to remain sexually pure (Gresh 1999: 9, 58, 128, 139).

Evangelical Protestants who are uncomfortable with the amount of sex prevalent in popular media have another option: Christian media. Although evangelical Protestants often are stereotyped as being “anti-modern,” they have survived by “being flexible and making accommodations to modernity” (Hendershot 2004: 5), which includes making extensive use of radio, television, magazines, and the internet both to spread the gospel and as an alternative to ‘unsafe’ secular media (2004: 8). In Alberta alone, there are nineteen Christian radio stations⁵ and one Christian television station⁶. Christian media is aimed primarily at those who are already ‘saved,’ although some is meant to “soften the unsaved consumer’s heart so that a one-on-one encounter with a saved friend, family member, or coworker might be more effective” (2004: 3).

Many aspects of Christian media have been appropriated from popular culture, although how the media are used is often very different from its original form: Hendershot cites examples of evangelical media producing “antimarijuana [*sic*] reggae songs or rock tunes advocating submission to parents” (Hendershot 2004: 13) and Christian rock and punk music that positions premarital abstinence as a way to rebel

⁵ CJLI; CJSI-FM; CIDV-FM; CJCA; CJRY-FM; CIAM-FM; CIAM-FM-1 through -7; CKOS-FM; CJGY-FM; CKVN-FM; CJLT-FM; CKRD-FM; CIHS-FM.

⁶ CTS

against what mainstream society expects (Hendershot 2004: 35). Christian media is primarily directed to youth, as it is believed they will be the most easily seduced by the pleasures of secular culture (2004: 34); Christian media speaks to adolescents already in the church, but recognizes that these adolescents are also ‘of the world’ and strives to make them feel less alienated from secular culture (2004: 34). Evangelical Protestant adolescents who choose to avoid popular media, then, are not missing out on popular culture; rather, they are participating in a uniquely evangelical popular culture (2004: 24).

1.9. Abstinence and Identity Formation

Choosing to be abstinent has consequences for identity formation, as Jamie Mullaney examines in *Everyone is NOT Doing It: Abstinence and Personal Identity* (2006). I use this resource extensively to examine and articulate the ways in which adolescents can create and maintain their identity through abstaining from sexual intercourse until marriage through a framework of religious belief. As stated previously, abstinence “entails a voluntary refusal to perform acts one can and is expected to do” (Mullaney 2006: 2). Although one’s social reality can encourage abstinence, agency is a key factor in identity formation through abstinence: “In a way different from those things over which we have no control, we may use our conscious and intentional decisions to abstain as important organizational pieces of our personal identities” (2006: 2). Considering that a major tenet of evangelical Protestantism is the constant striving to live a godly life and the assertion that it is the “individual’s ability to ‘choose God’ and thereby take control of his or her spiritual destiny” (Balmer in Hendershot 2004: 2), the

agency involved in choosing abstinence from an expected activity—in this case, sexual activity—is consistent with an evangelical Protestant lifestyle. The agency involved in faithfully choosing to follow Christ is paralleled by the evangelical Protestant’s agency in persistently choosing abstinence. Even in frameworks where abstinence appears to be at least partially mandated—for example, within religion—abstainers “overwhelmingly use the language of choice” (Mullaney 2006: 69), pointing to the importance of *choosing* abstinence in the creation of one’s identity.

Although the choice to remain sexually abstinent lies with the abstainer, other people—both those who abstain and those who do not—play an important role in identity creation and the way in which abstinence is performed. On a broad scale, participating in evangelical Protestantism takes the form of contingent abstinence—that is, abstinence as a prerequisite for acceptance as a full member of the religion. However, unlike some other Christian denominations which mandate premarital abstinence without exception, evangelical Protestantism typically offers principles and encourages congregants to remain abstinent. As one research participant stated, “Jesus expects you to [stay pure], but it’s your own choice whether you do or not. It’s not like if you don’t act pure... then we’re going to kick you out of the church! It’s accepting for who you are, but Jesus doesn’t want you to be like that” (Interview 2012: Rachel). At the same time as premarital abstinence is contingent, abstinence resources encourage the reader to find a partner in abstinence, whether that be a romantic partner (Gresh 1999: 100), a friend (1999: 49-50), or a family member (1999: 116-122), an example of what Mullaney deems conjoint abstinence (2006: 98).

In both contingent and conjoint abstinence, being held accountable by others can make performing abstinence easier while also—in a finding reminiscent of Foucault’s theory of bodily discipline—making abstainers feel as though they must adhere to a “more rigid definition” (Mullaney 2006: 153) of abstinence. These other individuals do not need to be physically present for this effect to occur; rather, once the abstinent evangelical Protestant internalizes the expected behaviour of “the generalized other” (Mead 1934: 175), he or she learns how “to regulate and modify [his or her] behavior” (Mullaney 2006: 167).

Even those who do not abstain play a role in legitimizing and regulating abstinence. When, in response to learning of an individual’s choice to abstain, a person initiates “further conversation or [demands] further explanation of the abstinence,” the abstainer is required to discuss the legitimacy of their abstinence. Reactions to abstinence may vary, “from total acceptance to extreme hostility.” Positive or unmarked reactions actually weaken “the importance of not-doing by causing it to fade into the background” (Mullaney 2006: 159). Conversely, negative reactions serve to remind the abstainer of why they choose to abstain. Through the defense of their abstinence, they inform their audience and remind themselves of the reasons behind and the benefits of their choice.

Abstinence typically requires a coherent system. This idea is derived from the conception of purity and impurity posited by Douglas, whereby impurity represents “matter out of place” (Douglas 2002: 44). When an object appears somewhere that it does not belong, it is designated as ‘dirt’ or impure. In the realm of abstinence, this conception of matter out of place translates to the struggle abstainers face in order “to

keep their identities in order by avoiding behaviors, substances, and associations that would threaten the perceived validity of their abstinence” (Mullaney 2006: 79). However, what is constituted as consistent or inconsistent behaviour is not prescribed, which can lead to ‘grey areas’ of abstinence. This urge to keep a coherent system can be seen in the change of narratives by abstainers when they partake in activities that are inconsistent with their constructed identity. In their analysis of the effectiveness of pledging in remaining sexually abstinent, Brückner and Bearman report that, of the 20% that reported making an abstinence pledge in one period of data collection—or wave—only 7% of respondents gave consistent answers. The remainder “reported a pledge in one wave but said they had not taken a pledge in a later wave” (2005: 272). Considering that 61% of participants had sex after pledging, these “inconsistent pledgers” (Brückner and Bearman 2005: 272) may have changed their narrative—from stating that they made a pledge to remain abstinent until marriage to never having pledged—in order to maintain a coherent system.

People choose to enact their abstinence in different ways. Mullaney uses the terms “fire walking” and “fence building” (2006: 16) to differentiate between the two strategies used by abstainers. Abstainers who fire walk “willfully play with ‘fire’ in order to test their commitment to not-doing, reaffirm their abstinence, and see how they fare in the face of temptation” (2006:16). Those who fence build, on the other hand, not only avoid temptation but erect “a protective ‘fence’ around one’s abstinence as an extra insurance policy that one will not violate one’s abstinence” (2006: 16). Fence building is more common among “waiters” (Mullaney 2006: 84)—those who have been abstinent but plan on exiting the abstinent lifestyle at a later date—and therefore will be discussed

in more detail here. It is important to note, however, that fire walking and fence building are ideal types and one's abstinence strategy may change over time for a variety of reasons, both internal and external to the individual (Mullaney 2006: 146-149, 155).

In the context of sexual purity, especially in evangelical Protestant resources and among the participants in this research, fence building is a far more common conception of how abstinence should be performed. Those who believe in fence building not only “avoid the act on which their abstinence is based, they also refrain from engaging in acts tangentially connected to such behaviors” (Mullaney 2006: 131). This means that not only is sexual intercourse avoided, but acts that *could* lead to sexual intercourse—for example, kissing or being alone with a romantic partner—are deemed too risky. There is also a fear that by doing something once, it will inevitably lead to doing something many times: “Outlining the negative consequences of premarital sex, [Lisa] repeatedly (and, I think, unknowingly) slips into the association of having sex one time and being ‘promiscuous.’ Sarah, who is still a virgin, echoes Lisa’s assumption that one instance of premarital sex translates into multiple partners and sexual encounters” (2006: 136). In Gresh’s pro-abstinence resource, she details nine steps to physical intimacy that starts with “Looking at a guy and making eye contact,” and ends with “Sexual intercourse” (1999: 90). She encourages girls to, “Draw a firm black line right above the step where you will stop any type of physical contact” and urges them to be very conservative where they draw that line; then to “take time to prayerfully consider [whether God would] be pleased to see you doing the particular physical activity directly below that firm black line,” and suggests “the option of drawing a line at a lower level of physical activity for before you are engaged” (Gresh 1999: 91). She goes on to state that for

many, “holding hands is too far” (Gresh 1999: 91). In fence building, not only do females need to protect themselves, they need to protect males from fire walking due to their ‘uncontrollable’ sex drives. To do otherwise is to tempt a male to sin (Hendershot 2004: 101-102).

1.10. Conclusion

While studies of sexuality and abstinence have been derided as frivolous (Greslé-Favier 2009: xi), I hope I have demonstrated the way sexual abstinence is inextricably tied to evangelical Protestantism, both historically and today, in the way sexual purity acts as a vehicle for gender and power relations. Additionally, I have attempted to indicate the importance of media and abstinence on identity formation in adolescents within the evangelical Protestant church. In the following chapter I detail the methodology used in data collection for my research.

Chapter 2: Methods

2.1. Urban Anthropology

The study of urban communities is a relatively recent development for the field of anthropology. Anthropology has primarily concerned itself with small-scale, non-Western societies, and it is only in recent decades that the discipline has expanded its scope to include urban communities. This expansion of the anthropological field was prompted by the realization that peasants—who were the focus of study during the 1950s and 1960s (Foster and Kemper 2010: 9)—were rapidly becoming more urban. For many years, studies of urban life were the domain of sociology, starting with the Chicago School in the 1920s. The Chicago School focused on “‘community studies’—in urban environments” (Robben and Sluka 2012: 13) and advocated for the use of participant-observation in the tradition of Malinowski, paving the way for future anthropological work in urban settings. Urban anthropologists explore the relationships of urbanites and the ways of life of urbanites through traditional qualitative anthropological first-hand field research rather than the analysis of statistical information prominent in sociology (Foster and Kemper 2010: 11).

There were several reasons why I chose an urban location for my research: first, it was essential for participants to have easy and, in some cases, anonymous access to media since my goal was to examine the ways in which youth negotiated the messages received from popular media and from their church. In some suburban and rural areas of Canada, fast internet access, inexpensive television service, and multiple options for radio are still unavailable; in contrast, urban areas have multiple media providers and a far wider range of radio options for the consumer. In addition, urban areas have more

public infrastructure available to allow for the anonymous access to media—for example, public libraries. Secondly, in rural environments there are fewer options for youth to remove themselves from the church environment or the dominant belief system. Although Robert P. Swierenga writes about the influence of the church on rural life in America, the impact of the church in rural communities in Canada is similar (Good and Willoughby 2007: 392, 405, 406). Thus, he states, “The reach of rural churches was remarkable...Not to be part of it meant to cut one-self off from family and community” (Swierenga 1997: 417, 420). Additionally, he asserts that, “the importance of the rural church has grown over time, rather than diminish[ed]” (1997: 418). In urban environments, increased education and economic opportunities, as well as a larger population, means that it is easier to forge relationships outside of family and church if the individual chooses to do so. Lastly, my research is focused on the ties between religion and the secular world and the ways in which participants negotiate, manipulate, and take advantage of their living in two worlds. In the urban situation, there are more opportunities for contact with the secular world and, therefore, the potential for more nuanced and frequent interaction between the two spheres of existence.

Despite the urban fieldsite, one can observe parallels between the population studied in my research and the small-scale societies traditionally favoured by anthropologists. Praise Church and its congregants exist in an ostensibly secular world, where discussions of one’s religious beliefs outside of church—except in particular contexts, such as Christian schools—are frowned upon, if not actively discouraged. Praise congregants are simultaneously separated from the rest of their community by

their unique religious beliefs⁷, yet also participate in broader Canadian society in the same way that a small-scale society is often separate—yet involved—in a more global culture. Rather than being bounded through geography, which is often the case for small-scale societies, Praise congregants are bound by the very institution that sets them apart: the church.

2.2. Studying a Religious Group

How does one study God, or, more specifically, one's belief in God? As a non-Christian, this was an anticipated frustration that faced me entering the data collection portion of my thesis. It was important to remember that it was unimportant whether or not the supernatural—in this case God or Jesus—actually exists: it was not my aim to prove or disprove His existence. Rather, I aimed to examine how people's belief in God affected them. Additionally, it was essential to realize that for many Christians the instructions elucidated in the Bible regarding behaviour often were enough to justify their behaviour and way of life: no additional rationale was required. In order to examine the effect of religion on believers without grappling with the existence or non-existence of this abstract supernatural being, I used the Thomas Theorem. First posited in 1928 by sociologists Thomas and Thomas in reference to child development, the Thomas Theorem is particularly useful for studying religious belief. It states that, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572). According to this theory, if an evangelical Protestant believes in the

⁷ According to the town's 2011 census, over 79% of residents identified as Christian, but less than 3% identified themselves as members of the Evangelical Missionary Church.

existence of God, whether that god exists or not is irrelevant. That belief will affect the Christian's identity, behaviour, and beliefs about other things in their daily life.

2.3. Communicating Status and Aims

Prior to traveling to the fieldsite, I contacted Praise Evangelical Missionary Church to request permission to conduct research with the community. In my introductory contact, I made it clear that I was a graduate student who planned on researching the "effect of religion and popular culture on Christian youth's conceptions of purity and how purity affects the identities of youth, especially girls" (Personal correspondence 2012: 22 March). After the pastor confirmed they were open to helping me with my research, I contacted the youth leaders and reaffirmed my aims with them. Finally on 3 May 2012, I attended a parent's meeting at the church, where I met some of the youth leaders and a small number of parents.

It was at the parent's meeting that I was asked most of the questions about my research: an important question asked what types of questions I would be asking the youth participants. At this point, I was able to discuss the procedure for being a participant, what being a participant entailed, and who would have access to the information provided by participants. The youth leaders helped mitigate some of the tensions that could have arisen over the sensitive subject matter of my research, pointing out that, while the topic of youth sexuality is considered taboo, youth are learning and hearing about sex "everywhere" and my data collection period could provide opportunities to talk to youth about what exactly sexuality should look like in a religious context (Fieldnotes 2012: 3 May).

The youth leaders' support during my introduction to youth group participants was also essential. These introductions, first to the group as a whole at the beginning of my first youth group and then to small groups of youth, indicated to the youth that the church supported my being there and that I could be trusted. Without these introductions, it is unlikely my work could have moved forward.

2.4. Participant Observation

For my research, I required methods that would allow me to be flexible and sensitive to the unique challenges of studying an underage urban population: I chose participant-observation as my primary collection method for this reason. Participant-observation is extremely flexible, allowing the researcher to work anywhere and at any time. It also fit well with studying a religious organization: people are encouraged to take notes during services, and being ready to write down any thoughts or feelings was not out of place. Participant-observation also served me well in the “acceptable incompetent” role (Lofland 1971 as cited in Hammersley and Atkinson 2009: 79) I occupied: as I have some knowledge of Protestant religious services, I was able to comfortably follow Sunday services without marking myself as an outsider, but my limited religious knowledge also allowed me to notice things a Christian may take for granted and ask any number of questions. This allowed me to note things that participants would not otherwise have mentioned to me, such as a certain behaviour or phrase, which could then start a longer discussion about their faith.

In addition to being a flexible method of data-collection, participant-observation does not typically affect participant behaviour in the way that other research can. One

concern of the youth leaders was that they did not want youth participants to feel like “lab rats” (Personal correspondence 2012: 13 April). Because participant-observation requires only minor changes in participant behaviour in order to yield accurate results, it is ideal for making participants feel comfortable and at ease. Since participant-observation is similar to how children learn about their own culture, after the initial ‘settling-in’ period, participant-observation was an unscripted way of learning about my participants and their beliefs.

Of course, my presence must be taken into account during the data collection period. How people react in front of an audience, whether a single researcher or an entire youth group, has an effect on the data collected (Hammersley and Atkinson 2009: 102). As I discuss below, my personal characteristics, particularly my sex, affected who I could observe. My religious beliefs, to a lesser degree, likely had some effect regarding who was willing to speak to me and what was said. Praise Church has a very strong focus on evangelism, and while my initial honesty regarding my lack of religiosity may have helped gain the trust of youth leaders, it may have also affected the types of responses I received: specifically, I wonder if any participants played down or completely avoided discussing aspects of Christianity they disagreed with in order to present the religion as a whole in a positive light in order to convert me. Additionally, within the youth group, there could be a vested interest on the part of the youth participants in following the crowd: to disagree with something that was discussed could potentially invite ridicule or shaming.

The ability to jot notes in the religious setting did not always extend to life outside of church. Conversations about sexuality, child-rearing, and relationships in

participant's everyday lives were rarely discussed within church on an individual level; rather, Praise Church existed to talk about these topics on a more theoretical level. The way these topics were conceived in the real world occasionally differed from the beliefs within the official framework of the church, and it was less acceptable to take notes when meeting casually with a participant than to note what the pastor stated on Sunday. Due to the distinct public/private divide prevalent in modern Western society, I began to question when I was 'allowed' to take notes. When a participant and I met for a casual cup of coffee, did the participant feel as though he or she was 'off the record' or was he or she comfortable allowing their more unguarded musings to be used in my work? My anthropological training said that, since I was living among this group, any of their statements could be used in my research. However, I did not want to damage my relationship with the participants.

Despite the difficulties inherent in urban anthropology, over a period of two months in 2012 and one week in 2013, I compiled numerous pages of notes, which I then typed up in a single word-processing document of 27 pages. By amalgamating these notes, I was able to examine any themes that emerged over days or weeks, as well as refer back to earlier thoughts and discussions I had with participants.

I divided my observations into the somewhat arbitrary categories of formal and informal. Whereas informal observations were derived from the periods of observation that occurred outside of church settings, such as meeting for coffee, going grocery shopping, or post-church lunches, formal observation took place in overtly religious, clear 'work' environments, such as worship services, youth group, and events held by or in Praise Church. I attended two worship services each Sunday for two months, a

‘traditional’ service at 0900h and a ‘contemporary’ service at 1100h. I attended both in order to note any differences between the services as well as to ensure I took accurate notes.

Additionally, the youth group, which typically involved between 70 and 90 youth and which I attended each week, was held one night a week for approximately two and a half hours. This entailed a pre-worship period of helping the youth leaders set-up chairs, as well as some discussion with youth, and praying with the leaders. Youth group started with group worship, which typically included four to six songs performed by a small band which everyone sang along to, and a 30 to 45 minute group discussion, which often included testimonials of God’s work in youth or youth leaders’ lives. For the last hour, the large group would break into twelve smaller groups according to grade level and sex. I spent most of my time with the grade eight and grade eleven girls, as they seemed to be the most open to my presence. I did not spend any time with the boys’ groups as the environment at Praise Church did not encourage mingling between the sexes during small worship. Because I was not granted any honorary- or pseudo-male status,⁸ I felt my presence would be disruptive should I join any boys’ group: as Hendershot notes, “a key premise of the all-male [youth] group is that [it] is a safe place to talk about [things such as] sex, since no women are present” (Hendershot 2004: 99). After youth group, some participants—typically those who drove and any of their siblings—would stay for thirty minutes to an hour afterward, talking and making plans to meet with other participants during the week. This is when the most interaction between the sexes would occur.

⁸ Here I use the term ‘honorary male’ to indicate situations in which a female researcher is given access to predominantly or thoroughly male spheres and the term ‘pseudo-male’ to indicate situations when a female researcher is viewed as neither male nor female by the society (Tedlock 1995: 275).

In addition to Sunday services and weekly youth group meetings, there were two Friday night events for fellowship during the data collection period. The first event was a Christian rap concert organized by another youth group at a local Pentecostal church, which five youths and one youth leader attended. This event, while not a traditional church service, included a significant amount of worship, in contrast to the Friday night event hosted by the Praise youth group which was attended only by youth from Praise and focused on fellowship. Additionally, the year-end barbeque, held in a park just outside of town, was focused on fellowship rather than worship.

I was also allowed to attend the grade twelves' graduation celebration, held at Praise Church, which included a short sermon, some worship songs, a dinner, and toasts to the parents and youth leaders. This was a unique opportunity to observe the messages given to young adults preparing for adult responsibilities and, in some cases, leaving the community for post-secondary education.

2.5. Interviews

The second method I used extensively was semi-directive interviews. Interviews—semi-directive interviews in particular—are another classic anthropological method of gaining knowledge^{9,10}. Unlike techniques such as surveys, semi-directive interviews strike a balance between what the researcher requires for their research and what the participant deems important, and can lead the researcher toward topics that previously had not been considered (Hammersley and Atkinson 2009: 101). It is a flexible method that allows for a relationship between the researcher and the researched

⁹ See Appendix A for examples of a youth interview script.

¹⁰ See Appendix B for an example of a youth leader interview script.

and takes into account the two sides of the project. Additionally, while focus groups likely would have yielded interesting conversations about the research, interviews were useful because they were one-on-one. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, the anonymity and relative privacy of an interview was essential to reduce the tendency of participants to censor themselves.

Due to policies regarding interactions between minors and adults that were understandably implemented by Praise Church, no interview with youth was completely confidential. Any adult who meets with a minor is required to do so in public areas where others have the ability to see both the minor and adult. Therefore all interviews with youth took place either in public locations or in family homes in areas where others could enter at any time, although family members were in another area of the home at the time of the interview. When an interview was conducted in a public location, I endeavoured to find a location to conduct the interview that would be within view of others but outside of hearing range in order to give participants some degree of confidentiality. An interview conducted in Praise Church, for example, took place on a quiet afternoon in an area where the participant and I would be able to see anyone who approached. When we were approached by two other members of the youth group, we were able to pause the interview until the person was out of earshot.

2.6. Limitations

One issue affecting data collection was the amount of time spent in the field. While I feel I developed a strong rapport with a number of participants, more time spent in the field would have been better in order to increase the number of participants

enrolled in the study. One problem is that youth group is cancelled for July and August each year, so it would have been difficult to collect data even if I had stayed for longer than two months. Additionally, many participants did not realise how quickly the data collection period would pass, and I therefore did not receive any consent forms back from parents until the end of the first month. Youth leaders indicated this was a common problem in the youth group: either youth would forget to give the forms—or in the case of the youth group, permission slips—to parents, parents would forget to sign the forms, or youth would forget to bring back the signed forms. Once I began to receive forms back, a second problem arose: trying to find time to meet. Trying to set up interview appointments with participants was difficult: youth participants were still in school and many were studying for year-end exams, making time a valuable resource. Adult participants had jobs during the day and activities in the evening, making it difficult to meet with them. For this reason, I kept my interviews short. Interviews with youth participants lasted approximately half an hour, and interviews with adults lasted between an hour to an hour and a half.

While there were some difficulties in conducting the research with youth over a relatively short period of time, the response to my research was very good. Parents and youth leaders were more open to the research topic than I had anticipated, which was a welcome surprise and made soliciting for interviews significantly easier than I had expected. Within the social sciences, there is an assumption that the ethnographic study of sex and sexuality will be fraught with difficulties, “practical, methodological and ethical” (Tuzin 1995: 264). I, however, did not find this to be the case. People in the Praise community were open to discussing their feelings about sexuality, perhaps

because they are accustomed to articulating their beliefs about abstinence and their religious beliefs more generally.

2.7. Participants

I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to interview nine people involved in some way with the youth group. I obtained interviews from four current youth participants: a male and a female in junior high school, and a male and a female in senior high school. They were all unmarried and three were not in a romantic relationship. Two participants were homeschooled and one was attending Christian school, while one attended public school. One additional participant submitted a personal reflection, as they felt more comfortable writing about their thoughts on sexual purity. As well, two former youth participants—those who were connected to the youth group but were no longer in the youth group due to their age—who were both female and married, were interviewed in order to gain a retrospective view of church teachings on sexual purity to youth. Finally, I conducted three interviews with youth leaders, because they provide a direct message to youth about purity. These consisted of two males, one married and one unmarried, and one unmarried female. In all, I feel the data encompassed a diverse and reasonably accurate representation of youth group participants, both youth and adult.

After completing the interview, I transcribed the information within one week into a password-protected word processing document on a password-protected computer and then deleted the audio file. All identifying characteristics—for example, names of people or towns—were changed or removed during the transcription process. The

personal reflection is stored in a locked box along with all informed consent and assent forms.

2.8. Conclusion

The urban environment played a critical role in this study, providing participants with increased access to mainstream media and more opportunities for contact with the secular world. During two months of data collection, numerous pages of notes were collected. Flexible methods—participant-observation and semi-directive interviews—were used to reduce participant behaviour misrepresentation. In all, nine participants were enrolled in the study, representing relatively equal numbers of males and females and of youth participants and those who were outside of—although connected—to the youth group.

Chapter 3: Results

3.1. Introduction

I collected data for analysis through participant-observation and interviews with nine individuals, including youth participants, former youth participants, and youth leaders at Praise Evangelical Missionary Church. This chapter will begin with a discussion of how my personal attributes, particularly my lack of religious identity, my sexual status, and my identity as a female, affected my access to participants. Additionally, I will explain what I expected to find as I started this research as well as describe the actual results of the research.

3.2. Gaining Access

Entering the field, I was nervous about how tolerant the community would be to my presence. I had contacted the pastor and youth leaders to ask their permission to conduct research at Praise Church, but that did not guarantee that they would be willing to grant me access to their lives. I was, however, pleasantly surprised by the response of the church, particularly of the youth leaders. Not only did they seem receptive to my being at Praise but upon learning that I do not consider myself Christian, they seemed interested in my status as a non-religious person who studies Christianity and they expressly requested that I share my religious beliefs—or lack thereof—with the youth group. My lack of religious belief was discovered at my first meeting with the youth leaders at a parent's meeting for the youth group. After explaining my research aims, one of the parents at the meeting asked me what my religious beliefs were, to which I responded that I had been baptized in the United Church but did not consider myself

religious and that I did not have any current religious affiliations (Fieldnotes 2012: 3 May): this started a discussion about how people come to be Christian in varying ways. At my second meeting with the youth leaders, they encouraged me to “be myself” (2012: 7 May) and asked if I would be comfortable discussing my “religious background” (2012: 7 May) during my introduction to the youth. This was, to some extent, to further their own ends: they thought that youth, seeing a non-Christian studying their religion, would come to regard Christianity as interesting and ‘cool’, as opposed to ‘boring’ or ‘old-fashioned’: they stated that it “could be really good for the kids and [would] let them know that Christianity is interesting enough to actually warrant research” (2012: 7 May).

Allowing me to conduct research at Praise Church may have also been related to the Evangelical Missionary Church’s call to evangelize. As stated earlier, it is imperative for evangelical Protestants to try and convert non-Christians, for a number of reasons. First, having found Jesus and experienced what they believe is His love and presence in their lives, many of the Christians that I met long to have others have the same experience. Not only would this mean more people experiencing the transformative nature of Christ’s love, but it also dictates with whom one spends their eternal life. If someone is not a Christian—and in some cases, not a specific kind of Christian—they risk eternal life in Hell (Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada 2014: “What We Believe: About Humanity”; NRSV John 3:3, 3:15, 14:6; Fieldnotes 2013: 5 May). Converting friends and family to Christianity means that you will spend eternity together, rather than apart. Contrary to what colleagues and friends believed as I began this research, being open about my religious status helped me gain access. By

opening their lives to me, it gave the community an opportunity to convert me by “seed planting” (Fieldnotes 2013: 5 May; Hendershot 2004: 61) and show me the transformation Jesus had made in their lives through “lifestyle evangelism”—a type of evangelism that allows people to share their faith through their everyday lives (White 2012: 248). As an example of the importance of evangelism, at the end of the research period two people asked me whether my religious views had changed during my time at Praise (Fieldnotes 2012: 28 June, 29 June).

Despite my worries to the contrary, my sexual status as an unmarried person in a long-term heterosexual relationship did not impede my research. In fact, my sexual status was not asked about or discussed at any length at the beginning of the research period. Considering that I was in my mid-twenties and not religious, I assume that the community assumed I was sexually active, either in the past or currently. Later, as my marital status was revealed through casual conversation, I never felt that my sexual status was judged or looked down upon. Rather, I think that any concerns with my ‘sinfulness’ in engaging in premarital intercourse were subsumed by concerns about my status as an ‘unsaved’ person.

In addition, being female likely helped me gain access to this community. Praise Church holds very traditional beliefs about gender, and it is believed that women have a decreased interest in sex as compared to men. Therefore, my interest in sexual purity and sexuality in general was (rightfully) conceived as an academic, rather than a personal—and potentially inappropriate—interest, in contrast to what they may have expected from a male researcher. Additionally, while I spent no time with the male small groups during youth group, I was able to interview two male youth participants

and two male youth leaders. A male researcher probably would have had more difficulty gaining access to female youth participants, and more stringent policies would have been implemented for interviewing female youth.

3.3. Expected Findings

Following Bearman and Brückner's research (2001; 2005) on sexually transmitted infection (STI) acquisition rates among adolescents as well as research conducted by New Strategist Publications on American sexual behavior (2006), I expected that youth would take messages about sexual purity from popular media and the church and synthesize these ideas to create a unique 'blended' identity regarding their sexuality. According to Brückner and Bearman, the number of pledgers—those who report taking a pledge to remain a virgin until marriage—who experienced sexual debut increased as the pledgers aged, with 25% of consistent pledgers reaching sexual debut by age seventeen and 50% of consistent pledgers experiencing sexual debut by age nineteen (Brückner and Bearman 2005: 275). New Strategist Publications found that the average age of sexual debut of women who identify as either Fundamentalist Protestant or Other Protestant was 16.9 years old (2006: 5). I therefore expected somewhat looser beliefs about the importance of sexual purity as well as increased sexual activity as the participant's age increased.

Additionally, I expected to find a focus on vaginal intercourse within the purity message at Praise Church. This is mainly due to the correlation of virginity with an intact hymen (Blank 2007: 55). I also expected to find little to no discussion of oral or anal sex by church or youth leaders, which would allow youth to conceive of non-

vaginal intercourse as a way to preserve one's virginity. This expectation is supported by Brückner and Bearman's research which indicates that incidences of participating in oral and/or anal intercourse without ever having engaged in vaginal intercourse are higher among pledgers than non-pledgers. As Brückner and Bearman state:

Amongst those who have only oral sex and/or anal sex, pledgers are over-represented. Overall, about 3% of respondents reported oral sex with one or more partners but no vaginal sex. Although just over 2% of nonpledgers fall into this group, 13% of consistent pledgers and 5% of inconsistent pledgers do (2005: 276).

In addition, referencing an unpublished article by Asia Friedman, Jamie L. Mullaney notes that, "What distinguishes those acts that count as sex from those that do not... is whether one can get pregnant from the behavior. Consequently, penis-vagina sex remains 'real' sex, and oral sex, anal sex, and a variety of other acts become 'not a big deal' and part of the realm of 'abstinence'" (2006: 154).

3.4. Findings

I expected to find significant blending between popular media messages and messages from the church by youth participants, with older participants starting to experiment with sex through oral or anal sex and modify their definitions of sexual purity. Instead, there was a much stronger rejection of popular media messages than anticipated: in fact, no participant pushed against the purity message presented by the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada (EMCC) and Praise Church. There were three main reasons given by participants: the first and most prominent reason for staying sexually pure was a fear of acquiring an STI. All of the participants who addressed the benefits of staying pure indicated this was a reason to remain a virgin. This fear may be

in part due to unrealistic beliefs about failure rates of condoms, particularly as presented by non-mainstream education systems such as homeschooling and Christian-based education (Doan and Calterone Williams 2008: 117). While homeschooling curriculums can vary significantly, it is unlikely that comprehensive sexual education is taught to Christian students outside of the mainstream education system. Indeed, it is entirely possible that Canadian Christian schools and Christian homeschooling parents are using programs developed in the United States to create their own sexual education curricula. Under the American abstinence-only curriculum, “abstinence-only lessons portray STIs as a likely result of sex” (2008: 116) and some programs “make dubious and scientifically inaccurate claims about the ineffectiveness of condoms for preventing pregnancy and transmission of STIs, particularly HIV” (2008: 13).

The second most common reason cited for staying sexually pure was that to stay pure was to follow the will of God. Since the Bible states that people should abstain from sex before marriage, and the EMCC believe the Bible to be the literal and infallible word of God, then to do otherwise would be tantamount to defying God. While participants were quick to note that this defiance would not cost one membership in the church or the immediate wrath of God, they also believe that the best way to experience a sexual relationship is within the boundaries of marriage, and premarital sexual relations would sully the relationship between spouses. As one participant stated, “God set up a plan for the best sexual experience to be between one man and one woman when you are 100% committed, so our cultural translation is marriage. The Bible teaches that that is the best and most fulfilling [sexual relationship] and it’s just the best

experience, the best way that any sexual encounter can happen” (Interview 2012: Jordan).

Finally, several participants discussed the fact that staying sexually pure before marriage meant that comparisons of lovers to a future spouse were eliminated. Participants who believed this to be a benefit of remaining pure often mentioned how ‘cool’ it would be to present one’s virginity to their spouse on their wedding night and to learn about sexual intercourse with their spouse. As Katie stated:

If I have had multiple partners, and then I get married, I don’t want to be constantly comparing, for starters, because my first boyfriend, he did things this way. It’s like, I don’t want to even think about that!...Something like [one’s first sexual experience] is so intimate and so deep and that type of connection...to be able to fully give that to one person is just an amazing and beautiful gift (Interview 2012: Katie).

This idea is also deeply tied to Praise’s beliefs about gender norms. Because women are conceived of as deeply emotional, it is believed that being sexually intimate with a person and having that relationship end after giving something so personal can have a lasting psychological impact on the woman. Pro-purity resources often make reference to the effect that pre-marital sex can have on a woman. *Why Wait: What You Need To Know About the Teen Sexuality Crisis* (1987), a book written by and for Christians, states that “Part of what God wants to protect us from by limiting sex to marriage is the devastating emotional consequences that premarital sex can bring. Those effects may be immediate or they may not show up for some time” (McDowell and Day 1987: 258). A common idea within evangelical Protestantism is that by remaining sexually pure, women in particular are able to give their “entire heart” to their future spouse; conversely, each time a woman dates or is sexually intimate, she gives part of her heart away (Cutting Edge 2008: 13:43-14:00).

While no participants pushed against the purity message, usually for the reasons stated above, youth participants did have experience with popular media. Nevertheless, their experience of popular media is very conscientious and intentional. Bruce stated that while he sometimes listened to and enjoyed Christian music, he preferred secular music. He was, however, very aware of the messages in the music he enjoyed, arguably more so than many adults:

It (secular music) doesn't always have good messages but it's just always the music I've liked. I do like listening to Christian music and stuff, but I think there isn't anything wrong with listening to other things and watching other things as long as you don't base your theology on that. If you base your life around what the words of some song are saying, and it's not a good song, then you shouldn't be listening to it (Interview 2012: Bruce).

Rachel, another youth participant, also occasionally listened to secular music. However, Rachel used a stronger “fence building” (Mullaney 2006: 130) strategy when dealing with secular media as compared to Bruce. When asked about the messages she received from media about how she was expected to behave or what she was expected to believe in, she responded that secular media promoted a “party all night, wear skimpy clothes, sleep with guys” attitude, and she therefore “[chose] not to listen to that stuff,” preferring to listen to Christian music (Interview 2012: Rachel).

One strategy that many participants discussed with me was the need to set strict boundaries or behaviour guides in order to remain sexually pure. This boundary tended to be similar between participants, with many indicating that they felt it was dangerous to go any further than a kiss before marriage (Interview 2012: Bruce; Jared; Jordan; Rachel), although one of the former youth participants set a stricter boundary, indicating that she did not kiss her spouse until they were engaged (2012: Emily). All of the participants noted, either directly or indirectly, that boundaries should be a number of

steps removed from intercourse. This is another aspect of fence building, whereby “those who fence build not only avoid an act itself; they simultaneously erect an extra protective layer around their abstinence that ensures its safety” (Mullaney 2006: 131). This fence building technique, whereby even kissing and cuddling are dangerous activities that could lead to a breach in sexual purity, would suggest that the use of non-vaginal sex to ‘preserve virginity’, as reported by Brückner and Bearman (2001: 276), were not strategies used by participants in this research. Put differently, if a person deems kissing too risky, it seems unlikely that oral or anal sex would be considered appropriate behaviour before marriage. Considering this fence building strategy, I did not deem it appropriate to explicitly discuss whether alternative forms of intercourse were used to preserve virginity before marriage.

One participant was particularly aware of the need for boundaries, mentioning it many times, and he/she cautioned that emotional boundaries were as, if not more, necessary than just physical boundaries. This participant had engaged in premarital sex with their partner and stated that, since they had not dated previous to meeting their partner, he/she had not set clear boundaries for him/herself: he/she had been unprepared for the emotional temptations to continue to experience physical intimacy (Interview 2012).

3.5. Conclusion

While I expected youth participants to blend the messages presented to them by popular media and Praise Church due to the existing research, participants instead seemed to accept the purity message of the EMCC with very little accommodation to

media sources. Reasons for accepting the purity message varied but typically included a fear of STI acquisition, a call to follow the will of God, or a wish to avoid any sexual comparisons to a future spouse. Where participation with secular media existed, it was very conscientious and existed peripherally to church viewpoints and beliefs. In the following chapter I will discuss how Praise Church presents the purity message to make it appealing to youth and how the outside environment contributed to the strong belief in purity with Praise Church.

Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I examine why all of the participants accepted the purity message presented by Praise Church instead of synthesizing the messages about purity from popular media as well as the church, as was expected prior to the beginning of the data collection period. Features from within the church play a major role in promoting the purity message as a legitimate sexual option for youth, but outside circumstances also have an impact on how youth conceive of their sexuality and identity. From within Praise Church, the two primary features that promote abstinence to youth are the traditional gender roles emphasized within the church and the way dating as a Christian is conceived and presented by Praise Church. Outside of the church community, the urban environment in which the Praise community exists also plays a role in making abstinence a legitimate option for youth.

4.2. Gender Ideals and Women as Sexual Gatekeepers

One way that Praise Church, and evangelical Protestantism generally, set up youth to accept the purity message is through their belief in and promotion of traditional gender norms and the creation of women as sexual gatekeepers. Traditional gender norms presuppose that one's sex—male or female—determines one's behaviour and personality. In this way, male-bodied persons should embody masculine traits such as strength, aggression, and competitiveness. By contrast, female-bodied persons should behave in traditionally feminine ways, represented by submissiveness, innocence, and

emotional sensitivity. These feminine traits in particular are used when arguing that women can be ‘damaged’ by premarital sexuality. As discussed previously, women are believed to be more emotional than men, and this supposed delicate emotionality is used to warn women of the danger of getting sexually involved with someone outside of marriage. Katie, one of the youth leaders, stated

For a girl, even kissing a guy, you can never get that back, you know? And for a girl, that’s such an emotional thing and it’s all based on emotions, we are emotional beings, oh my goodness! But you can never get that back. And it takes a long, long time to deal with those things and deal with those emotions, and it’s so hard (Interview 2012: Katie).

The traditional gender norms promoted by Praise Church perpetrate unequal gender relations on a larger scale. This is not, however, something unique to Praise Church; both the Bible and the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada (EMCC) provide a basis for the idea that the man should be the head of the household. Ephesians 5:21-24 states:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands (New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)).

Considering the fact that a tenet of evangelical Protestantism is the literal interpretation of the Bible, this passage provides strong support to an evangelical Protestant for the man to be the head of the household. The EMCC uses the above passage, as well as a similar passage in Colossians 3:18-20, to cement their belief in male headship in their articles of faith (EMCC 2014: “What We Believe: Marriage, Singleness, and Human Sexuality”).

These beliefs about traditional gender norms have an influence on the futures of both sexes. The first sermon I attended at Praise Church illustrated the supposed differences between men and women in terms of their expected behaviour and life goals. This sermon confirmed the idea that the man should be the head of the house and support the family both physically and financially. During the sermon I noted that the pastor declared, “Men need to take responsibility for loved ones and family. With authority comes responsibility; one should not, however, be a boss or dictator. ... Love protects, provides, and serves” (Fieldnotes 2012: 6 May). In contrast, women are expected to be a helpmate to her husband, supporting and respecting him (2012: 6 May). Perhaps most striking is the idea that “men run on respect and women on love” (2012: 6 May). This concept establishes the idea that the man’s sphere is in public while the woman belongs in the home. Since women supposedly ‘run’ on love, then to be out in the world working would be fundamentally unsatisfying for them, and vice versa.

With women delegated to the home, and expected to be submissive to their husbands, it is interesting that women are positioned as sexual gatekeepers. This role places them in the discordant position of having to actively defend their purity despite being expected to be submissive to men’s needs. It may be that being given this responsibility provides a sense of power to women who do not have power in other areas of their lives; however, it is more likely that the same traditional gender beliefs that delineate what is masculine and feminine also present women as less physically oriented and therefore less interested in sex. If females are less sexual, then they are more able to control their sexual urges than males: because women are considered more “‘moral’ and self-controlled than men, [they are] deemed indispensable in helping men

achieve self-control and maintain moral order” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 5). A sermon posted online from Praise Church in April 2012 reiterates these beliefs. Men are imbued with sexual agency and fulfill an active sexual role, while women are created for men’s sexual pleasure: “God created males with a sex drive and when you’re young and virile it just surges through your veins. He created you women as sexual beings, for men to be attracted to you, that’s all part of His design” (Fieldnotes 2012: 22 April). Women must then be, on the one hand, sexually passive and yet become active protectors of their virginity.

Women have a vested interest in remaining sexually pure, because traditional gender roles state that women are inherently less sexual. According to these gender roles, if a woman has physical sexual urges, then she must be unnatural. Positioning women as sexual gatekeepers may in fact act as a self-fulfilling prophecy: women are taught that they should not be interested in the physical aspect of sex, and through this socialization they begin to deny their desire and interest in sex. Doan and Calterone Williams make note of the lack of female pleasure associated with sex by their interview participants when they state that, “the dominant cultural understanding of young women’s sexuality either ignores female pleasure or defines it as abnormal” (2008: 146). For adolescent girls, who long to be considered ‘normal’ by peers, to appear otherwise—in the case of evangelical Protestants, by engaging in sexual activity—can be a major challenge both mentally and socially (2008: 146). Bartky’s feminist analysis of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* focuses on the way women create “docile bodies” (Foucault 1979: 139) through practices that shape women’s size, movement, and “ornamentation” (Bartky 1988: 64). This is largely done through anonymous and

institutionally unbounded power as well as self-policing (Bartky 1988: 75, 79, 80). Evangelical Protestant girls have a similar experience in regard to their sexuality. Girls exist in “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1979: 201). This power encourages girls to preserve their virginity, lest they be regarded as overly sexual and end up being branded a ‘slut’. This idea is promoted by Tim and Beverly LaHaye, active members in America’s evangelical Protestant community: “Girls are to be taught that they should date respectable boys and avoid promiscuity or public displays of affection to protect their reputation” (LaHaye and LaHaye in Greslé-Favier 2009: 32).

A major goal as a sexual gatekeeper is ensuring a man is not tempted to lust. If a man *is* tempted by a woman and acts on this lust, he is not necessarily held responsible for his actions (Fieldnotes 2012: 5 June). As White states, “Where boys are enjoined to directly struggle with their desire, girls learn practices for self-presentation and strategies for avoiding male advance” (2012: 247). Females are encouraged to prevent lust primarily by wearing modest clothes. Pure Fashion, a Christian-based program that encourages modest behaviour and dress in adolescents (Pure Fashion website 2014: “The Pure Fashion Mission”) provides guidelines for modest dressing. These guidelines encourage form-fitting but not tight clothing, with backs and shoulders covered, skirts that are no shorter than “four slender fingers above the knee,” and undergarments that are invisible at all times (2014: “Modesty Guidelines”). Dannah Gresh warns her readers that “The fashion world today screams sex for the poor guys out there who struggle to live a lifestyle of purity. Since clothes don’t affect girls and women in the same way [*sic*], we continue to wear the latest trends” (1999: 84). Rachel seemed particularly in

tune to the way that clothing can affect male behaviour. First, she mentioned during youth group an article she read in a Christian youth magazine about the ways that a girl can inadvertently tempt Christian males. Second, she stated in her interview, in response to a question about how she thought others felt about her status as a virgin, “Some people you assume [are a virgin], some people you don’t. It also depends on the person, right? Like, you can tell a lot about a person by the way they portray themselves” (Interview 2012: Rachel). She clearly sees some connection between how a person dresses or behaves and their sexual status as virgin or non-virgin. Personal expression and the power to choose how one presents herself is denied to an evangelical Protestant girl by instilling in her the fear of losing her reputation or tempting a Christian man to sin.

Willey uses Bourdieu’s concept of ‘capital’—economic, cultural, and social—to explain the way that abstinence is profitable for those who conform to the purity ideal. For adolescents, and females in particular, remaining pure can be translated to a form of ‘erotic’ capital: capital that is, in short, “what social agents consider ‘sexy’” (Willey 2010: 67). Within the evangelical Protestant community, abstinence is highly valued and this erotic capital can be exchanged for other forms of capital to increase one’s status within the church. Speaking specifically about the importance of erotic capital to women, Willey states that abstinence:

becomes a key component of a woman’s religious and erotic habitus and thus contributes to her religious and erotic worth. One’s status as a pure woman reflects that person’s moral value. At the same time, this pure status is central in attracting a long-term mate. In other words, the concept of “purity” is what legitimates the conversion of religious capital into erotic capital and vice versa (2010: 72).

For evangelical Protestant youth, especially females, becoming impure through real or perceived sexual indiscretions has serious consequences for one's ability to gain cultural and social capital. In turn, this inability to collect capital translates to potential difficulty in finding a spouse, excluding the individual from church-sanctioned intimacy and full group membership.

The idea of women acting as sexual gatekeepers is directly connected to beliefs about gender in evangelical Christianity. Since women are supposedly more in control of their sexuality, they are given the responsibility of protecting their purity, often through modest dress. Safeguarding their virginity gives girls some sense of control over their lives, despite having little control over their futures, in accordance with the traditional gender norms that place women in the private sphere. However, any sexual transgression, especially for females, may have serious consequences for the transgressor, making sexual purity particularly important for female adolescents in evangelical Protestantism.

4.3. Dating as an Evangelical Protestant

Dating as an evangelical Protestant is focused on two main ideas: first, that God will provide you with the perfect mate at the 'right' time in your life; and second, that one's most important relationship should be with God. The idea that God will provide Christians with their perfect partner is similar to the concept of soulmates. This concept is potentially one of the reasons that divorce is considered "a great tragedy" which can lead to "discipline" from the church for the "offenders" (EMCC website 2014: "What We Believe: Divorce"). If one is divorcing his or her soulmate, then he or she has

allowed secular beliefs about what marriage and love should be to destroy a covenant with God.

The idea that God will send Christians their perfect mate can be found in Christian literature, as well as in interviews with participants and in youth group discussion. In Christian resources, it is often implied that God will provide a spouse: since He affects all aspects of the Christian's life, then logically He would be instrumental in bringing the perfect marriage partner into one's life. Dannah Gresh states in her guide to living purely that, "God [brought] a man into my life who was everything I dreamed of... One day you will probably find the special [man] that God has created just for you" (1999: 69-70). A testimonial explaining the importance of abstaining from sex before marriage confirms this belief: "God gave me the most wonderful man in the world to be my husband. I had asked for Prince Charming and the Lord gave me *much more* than that" (emphasis in original, McDowell and Day 1987: 305).

Those involved with the youth group at Praise Church also believed in the concept of a God-given soulmate. Emily, one of the former youth participants, discussed the role God played in bringing her spouse into her life. Describing her decision not to date until she was ready for marriage, she made a vow stating, "God I'm not going to date anyone until You have the person you want me to marry" (Interview 2012: Emily). Further, in explaining her decision to me, she stated:

I prayed that God would prepare me to be who He needed me to be for my husband and that He would just let me know when I would have that person ready for me. Just saying like, if God is all-powerful and all-knowing, He knows me, way better than I ever could, so just saying, "God, if you could make that choice, you can make that choice better than I can, 'cause you know better" (2012: Emily).

She reaffirmed this idea—that God would provide the ideal spouse—multiple times throughout the interview. Finally, this idea was conveyed on at least one occasion to the youth group. During a ‘large group’ presentation on 22 May 2012, one of the youth leaders discussed dating in a Christian context and reminded the youth that God provides one with a partner when the time is right: one should “give [their] heart to God so He can give it to the right person at the right time” (Fieldnotes 2012: 22 May).

The concept of a God-given soulmate rationalizes the idea that premarital intercourse cheapens the sex that occurs in the marriage relationship. Put simply, if God is going to provide you with the perfect partner, with whom you will have mind-blowing, intimate sex, why bother with mediocre intercourse with someone who is not right for you before marriage? This rationalization works in two ways: first, it is believed that one forms a bond with every person that one has intercourse with, meaning you cannot give all of yourself to your spouse if you have had previous sexual relations with another. This is particularly true for females, since sex for them is allegedly a more emotional act. This bond connects one with the other individual indefinitely and is tantamount to giving part of oneself away. A sermon given at Praise Church acknowledged the bond that exists with every person one has been sexually intimate with and suggests a prayer to break the “soul ties” that occur when one has sex outside of the marriage covenant:

I break every unholy soul tie between me and this person. I sever these unholy soul ties in the name of Jesus. I release any fragment of that person’s soul from me and command it to go back to him or her and I command any fragment of my soul in that person to return to me that I may be totally whole. Thank you Father that these soul ties may be severed in Jesus’ name (Fieldnotes 2012: 22 April).

These ties prevent a strong marriage. If your soulmate has been chosen for you by God, why would people give parts of themselves away to a person they are not meant to have a relationship with?

The second way that premarital intercourse cheapens future intercourse with one's spouse is through comparisons of one's spouse with past lovers. This was a reason many participants gave in support of remaining sexually pure before marriage and is additionally discussed in the pro-abstinence literature (Gresh 1999: 139). In the secular sphere, it is often believed that sex before marriage ensures that you and your partner are sexually compatible. Conversely, the participants who cited sexual ignorance as a reason to remain abstinent before marriage indicated that being able to learn about sex with one's spouse was superior to experimentation outside of marriage. As Taylor stated:

Since I was in a relationship with [spouse's name] and [we] got married, it gives you nothing to compare yourself to and gives you nothing to compare someone else to. So when you're trying to figure out what love is, when you're going to move into a sexual relationship with somebody, you're not worrying about what that person actually thinks of you. ... I think when you, at least for me, it was like, it was such a cool thing that [spouse] and I were figuring it out together. ... And if you're being compared to other people, like even one other person or two other or three other or whatever, for me at least, that would play in my mind a lot (Interview 2012: Taylor).

The idea that premarital sex will cheapen sex with one's spouse is an exercise in delayed gratification—a common theme in Christianity. In the same way that giving up some earthly things and behaving in a Christian manner will lead to an eternal, glorious life after death, delaying sexual intercourse until after marriage with one's God-given spouse will lead to the most ideal sexual experience and a stronger marriage overall.

The final way that Praise Church encouraged youth to remain sexually pure before marriage was by presenting one's relationship with God as a dating relationship.

It is generally accepted in North America that adolescence is a period where dating is appropriate behaviour. However, Praise Church encourages adolescents to focus on God rather than on a dating relationship; until a person is mature in their relationship with God, then they should not be pursuing other intimate relationships. Youth are asked to give up a dating relationship in order to grow in their faith. By doing this, youth come to accept comfort from a supernatural force rather than gaining that comfort solely from romantic relationships. In turn, youth may have a decreased need to have a sexual relationship in order to fulfill an emotional need. On 22 May 2012, during the presentation to the youth group regarding dating, a youth leader asked the youth, “Where do you find your significance? A big piece of it should come from Christ, and a relationship with Christ should come before any other relationship” (Fieldnotes 2012: 22 May).

This idea was not only articulated during the youth group. During the Sunday sermon on 24 June 2012, the pastor reminded the congregation that people’s relationship with God should be the most important relationship in their lives. She mentioned that one “[needed] to be ‘head over heels’ in love with God” and one “should want to talk to God more than anyone else” (Fieldnotes 2012: 24 June). Both of these phrases mirror a relationship with a romantic partner. By focusing on the importance of God in one’s life, Praise Church decreases the dependence of youth on romantic—and potentially sexual—relationships and also reminds youth of the central role God and godliness should play in their lives.

Worship songs, in particular, encourage a dating relationship with God. Worship songs are not used exclusively during Sunday services or during youth group: they are

also listened to throughout the week as entertainment. During the data collection period, I noted the similarities in rhetoric between the worship songs and secular love songs. In particular, I noted the way that worship songs position worldly love as flawed. Take, for example, a line from the song “One Thing Remains” by the band Jesus Culture: “Your love never fails, it never gives up, it never runs out on me. On and on and on and on it goes, for it overwhelms and satisfies my soul. And I never, ever have to be afraid” (2008: 1:00-1:48). Youth inundated with messages like this—that love from another person will be flawed and unsatisfying—means that a relationship with God could be perceived as both safer and more satisfying than one with another human.

4.4. Role of the Urban Environment

Praise Church utilized a number of methods in order to present premarital abstinence as a legitimate option for youth group members; however, the overwhelming commitment to remaining sexually pure among participants in my research appeared to have an environmental component as well. Bearman and Brückner’s study on virginity pledges and first intercourse drew a connection between those who ‘pledge’—make a written vow to abstain from premarital intercourse—and delayed intercourse. They noted, however, that the number of pledgers in the community is often crucial to how successful the pledge will be. I posit that any vow to abstain from sexual intercourse—not only those that are written, but also vows that are implied or verbal—can be effective in delaying sexual debut; therefore, the number of *vow-takers*—not only formal pledge-takers—is crucial to the success in delaying intercourse. As Bearman and Brückner state, “pledging delays intercourse only in contexts where there are some, but

not too many, pledgers. Too few, and too many, pledgers in the adolescent world can negate the pledge effect” (Bearman and Brückner 2001: 862). Choosing to abstain from intercourse is related to one’s identity, in this case as a Christian. As with many identity movements, the identity in question is only meaningful if it is a minority identity: “once the pledge becomes normative, it ceases to have an effect” (Bearman and Brückner 2001: 891). While Bearman and Brückner analyse the effect of population on pledgers within schools, I would expect to see the same effect within my research population. Although many youth members at Praise Church believe in remaining sexually pure before marriage, they live in an outwardly secular urban center. The same easy and anonymous access to popular media that grants them the freedom to choose to be sexually active also allows their vow to remain abstinent to flourish.

4.5. Conclusion

The overwhelmingly homogenous response by participants in favour of remaining sexually pure is related to a number of factors, both from within the church and from the unique environment in which Praise Church exists. First, the traditional gender roles that establish women as sexual gatekeepers are reinforced in order to convince women that remaining abstinent before marriage is for their benefit, both emotionally and sexually. Second, beliefs about soulmates, marriage, and dating as a Christian convince youth that remaining abstinent until marriage promotes strong marriage bonds and leads to a fulfilling sex life. Lastly, the urban location of Praise Church allows the abstinence vow to act as a minority identity. All three factors contributed to the unified response from participants regarding the purity message.

Chapter 5: Future Work

5.1. Introduction

A significant amount of research has been conducted regarding abstinence. However, most of the currently available research has focused on the United States, and, in particular, on America's abstinence-only educational policies enacted through Title V in 1996, which provided significant government funding for abstinence-only sexual education. It is my opinion that more research needs to be conducted examining evangelical Protestants in Canada: in particular, how evangelical Protestants conceive of sexuality and how that understanding affects their identity and their involvement with the secular world. This identity and the way that evangelical Protestants interact with the world could affect the ability of Christian and non-Christian youth to access sexual education resources, information about how to prevent STIs, information about sexual assault, and access to and information about birth control. This section will discuss this study's limitations, as well as provide suggestions for future research concerning Canadian evangelical Protestantism, especially research on sexuality and identity.

5.2. Participants

One limitation to my research was a participation bias. One issue was independently—and separately—introduced by two youth leaders who were interviewed: youth who are deemed “higher-risk” to engage in premarital intercourse tend to drop out of youth group around the age of fifteen: “Girls [in junior high school who] were drinking, smoking, having sex...they've just kind of faded away from the youth group” (Interview 2012: Katie). This is often associated with new commitments,

such as a heavier workload in high school, a part-time job, or increased independence to choose whether to attend church and youth group (Interview 2012: Brad). Ammerman found that “many youth drop out of church when they are old enough to say ‘no’ to their parents,” although they often switch to more liberal denominations, rather than leave religion entirely (Ammerman 1987: 186). It can then be assumed that many of the youth attending Praise Church’s youth group who were between the ages of sixteen and eighteen have strong connections to the youth group, Praise Church, and the Christian belief system more generally since, despite these new commitments and increased independence, they continue to attend youth group. Considering half of my youth participants were in this age range, this strong commitment to the belief system elucidated at Praise Church probably biased my sample.

One solution that may have helped alleviate some of this bias would have been to focus more attention on youth participants between the ages of thirteen and fifteen; however, in this age category there generally tends to be less pressure, from both secular media and non-Christian peers, to be sexually active than there is for those in the older age group. Engaging in sexual intercourse is less common, and therefore one’s status as sexually abstinent is a less salient marker in regard to identity. Jamie Mullaney states, regarding abstinence from certain foods, “Even during times when abstinence is thought to signal one’s worth or goodness, abstaining simply does not exist as an option among those who cannot take the existence of a given resource for granted. ... To speak of a severely impoverished person who can barely meet his or her basic needs of food and shelter as an abstainer...is not only inaccurate but irresponsible” (Mullaney 2006: 174, 175). Elaborating on this idea, if sexual intercourse is not possible for an individual—

biologically or socially—it would be inaccurate to describe that person as sexually abstinent. In short, while interviewing more youth participants between the ages of thirteen and fifteen would appear to alleviate the bias toward highly committed high school-aged participants, results would likely have been similar to what was discovered with the current data, due to one's sexual activity status being a relatively minor identity marker for this age group.

A more important sampling bias was likely the role of conviction. Those with neutral or apathetic feelings toward sexual purity prescriptions were less likely to go through the trouble of getting the consent form signed by their parents and then signing the assent form in order to participate. On the other hand, those with strong convictions about either the positive or negative aspects of sexual purity would be motivated to go through the steps in order to discuss it with a researcher. Those who disagreed specifically with the purity message presented by Praise Church may have felt uncomfortable discussing their alternative view in case it reflected badly on their faith more generally. Unfortunately, there is nothing that can be done to alleviate this sampling bias. Choosing to participate in an ethnographic study is a personal choice and potential participants should not feel pressured to participate. Not only would pressuring a potential participant be unethical, it could also lead to inaccurate data being collected. The person under pressure would be more likely either to lie or give inaccurate 'non-responses,' for example by giving noncommittal responses or intentionally misunderstanding the questions being asked.

Lastly, I had decreased access to male youth participants due to my being female. The strong gender division during Praise Church's youth group meant that my

presence in the all-male small groups would have been disruptive and I was never invited to join these groups, despite knowing some of the male group leaders. While this did affect my ability to experience what was taught to and expressed by males during youth group, I interviewed an equal number of male and female youth participants and was able to gain insight into the male perspective on sexual purity and its effect on identity. One solution to alleviate the disparity in male- and female-gendered observational data would be to work with a male colleague or research aid.

5.3. Time

I spent two months collecting data, from 3 May 2012 to 30 June 2012, as well as one week in May 2013. Although a relatively short period of time, it was not difficult to integrate myself into the lives of those attending Praise Church. One reason was that I did not need to learn a new language. Another was that I appeared to be of a similar ethnicity and socioeconomic status to those who attended Praise Church. Lastly, the Protestant service is not completely foreign to me: I had attended a few church services when I was in high school and therefore did not need to learn many of the common rituals or practices associated with Protestantism.

Although it was relatively quick and easy for me to integrate myself into the community, all studies benefit from extended time in the field. I would have preferred to spend a full year—or more—in the community in order to learn more about what is taught in youth group and whether the information taught was cycled through each year in different formats. Ideally, a study such as this would benefit from following a group of youth from grade seven through to grade twelve, in order to build particularly deep

relationships and gain a high level of trust. Additionally, if one followed a group over such a long period of time, it would be possible to document changing opinions, which is not always possible after the fact. As Brückner and Bearman indicate, inconsistent pledgers made up 13% of the 15,170 individuals who participated in the third wave of data collection (Brückner and Bearman 2005: 272). Inconsistent pledgers are those who reported taking a pledge to remain abstinent in wave 1 but in either wave 2 or 3 said they had never taken an abstinence pledge; in essence, denying, to others and perhaps to themselves, their previous belief in the importance of remaining sexually abstinent before marriage. By following a group of youth over many years, any changing opinions about the importance of sexual purity would become evident, rather than participant's beliefs appearing static.

5.4. Future Areas of Inquiry

One future area of inquiry would be to examine the way that young adults—as opposed to adolescents—deal with abstinence before marriage. Although marriage does tend to occur slightly earlier in life for evangelical Protestants (Brückner and Bearman 2005: 275; Interview 2012: Emily; Willey 2010: 48), many go on to start post-secondary degrees, waiting until their early- to mid-twenties to marry. Although many of the evangelical Protestants I met at Praise planned to attend or had attended post-secondary school either near the church—meaning they remained close to their support group—or at a bible college, others planned to attend secular institutions away from their family and church. Considering the increased sexual pressures of most secular post-secondary campuses, examining the way that evangelical Protestants attending post-secondary

institutions approach premarital sex, whether their opinions on abstinence changed, and, if they continue to accept and follow the purity message, how they remain abstinent, would all be lines of inquiry for future study.

Additionally, further research could be conducted examining how evangelical Protestants react to and reconstitute their identity following marriage. Mullaney notes the way that “waiters” (2006: 87)—in this case, those who have never engaged in sexual activity but conceive of that abstinence as temporary—have a strong investment in their identity as abstainers. Because waiters rely on “narratives that are unilinear...and discontinuous in some way,” (2006: 152) they must also rely on reframing to provide a coherent narrative (2006: 153). This theory is backed up by the data: Jordan points to the difficulty faced after marriage by those within the Evangelical Missionary church when he/she stated, “the ability of a person to get married and go from ‘we hold hands and maybe kiss’ to ‘we’re having sex! One hundred percent tomorrow,’ [long pause] it’s difficult” (Interview 2012: Jordan).

This idea is not only found among evangelical Protestants. Avishai, in her examination of Orthodox Jewish sexual narratives quotes a participant as saying:

Within a few moments, everything we have always [been] taught—that all we see in the movies, in commercials, and in the world is immoral, sinful, forbidden, and don’t get close to it—suddenly changes ... penetration becomes sanctified, chaste, a *mitzvah*. This requires a switchover in our way of thinking (2012: 282).

This issue of adjust one’s identity after marriage is clearly not restricted to evangelical Protestants, but is relevant to many groups who condemn premarital sexual intercourse. Examining what effect becoming sexually active has on the identity of someone who plans to wait until marriage before experiencing sex, and how they deal with that

changing identity, is an angle that a researcher could take in examining concepts of purity and identity formation.

A third area of inquiry that invites further research is whether the purity movement has tangible benefits, especially for female participants. Many, especially within the feminist movement, have decried the purity movement (Doan and Calterone Williams 2008; Fields 2004; Valenti 2009) as problematic, stating, for example, that the purity movement “fails to provide young people with the skills and support they need to lead a healthy sexual life” (Fields and Tolman in Greslé-Favier 2009: xx). Only rarely is the potentially positive side examined by scholars. It is important to note several benefits for evangelical Protestant adolescents that may arise from the purity movement, including: using sexual abstinence as a means for enacting self-control; providing adolescents with “a reassuring sense of stability and order” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 244); and empowering adolescents, especially females.

Remaining abstinent can be beneficial for evangelical Protestant adolescents as it provides them with a strategy for enacting self-control over their life. For adolescents who are bombarded with choices and may be under significant pressure to make choices about their future, sexual abstinence provides them with a way to control one aspect of their life by eliminating their choices: rather than grapple with the pressures of dating and sex, they remove those options until they feel they are ready for marriage (Interview 2012: Bruce). As Mullaney states, “abstinence is a low-cost, high-control identity option in a world of an unprecedented and sometimes overwhelming degree of choice” (Mullaney 2006: 15).

Hendershot notes that remaining sexually abstinent for religious purposes can be particularly affirmative for adolescents and a “potent symbol of their commitment to God” (2004: 88). Their abstinence affirms the importance of their religious beliefs and integrates them into their religious tradition, which in turn, provides a “rule book (the Bible)” (Hendershot 2004: 102), a sense of community, and a sense of stability and order:

Given the tortuous isolation and feelings of helplessness and despair that many teenagers endure, it is not difficult to see why an ordered belief system and a community of fellow believers would be appealing. The evangelical belief system, which to outsiders may seem to be all rules and prohibition, offers structure, stability, and community to youth (2004: 102-103).

This community represents an important aspect of an adolescent social support system and relationships with like-minded peers hold the potential to nurture healthy development and achievement.

Finally, the purity movement could be empowering for youth, particularly females. It is generally accepted that female adolescents are being subjected to increased messaging focused on being sexy and attractive, specifically in a heterosexual context: “In a highly sexualised culture, which defines unreal beauty standards as the norm and promotes consumption as the core of one’s identity. [*sic*] teenagers, and particularly girls, are manipulated to boost sales” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 245). This sexualization may have negative effects for “cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs” (Zurbriggen et al. 2007: 2) and may lead female youth “to look for reassurance in sexual activity and [weaken] their ability to make responsible and healthy choices for themselves” (Greslé-Favier 2009: 246). The purity movement may reduce some of the pressure on girls to appear ‘sexy’ or obsess over romantic

relationships by telling developing girls that sexuality is not necessary to the construction of their identity.

The potential positive aspects of the purity movement deserves further attention by scholars; in particular, the way that remaining abstinent may allow adolescents to enact a degree of self-control, provide adolescents with a sense of stability and order, and empower girls needs to be examined. Considering the current research tends to condemn the purity movement, it would be beneficial to discover in what contexts remaining abstinent is beneficial, either for individual self-worth or for public health purposes.

5.5. Conclusion

Any future research focused on how youth identity is created and maintained in religious communities, especially surrounding beliefs about sexuality, must consider a number of factors. First, there may be a participation bias in conducting the research. Those who have strong convictions about the infallibility of their beliefs and whose beliefs are in line with the dominant ideology are more likely to participate than those who have neutral or negative feelings about the topics being researched. An extended data collection period to gain trust, integrate the researcher as an objective observer, and capture any change in opinion on the part of participants would lead to stronger data. Working as a research team, with both a male and female researcher, would also be beneficial due to the strong division between the sexes within youth group. In addition, research on identity creation and maintenance, particularly for evangelical Protestants regarding sexual purity, is incomplete. In this regard, research should continue in several

directions, including exploring how or whether unmarried young adults maintain their identity as it relates to concepts of sexual purity, what marriage means for the identity of the abstainer, and examining any benefits of the purity movement.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

What began as an exploration of rumours and a magazine article resulted in the current research project. Very few sources discuss the role of the purity movement in Canada, probably due to Canada's less vocal religious population (Malloy 2009: 352-354) and the comprehensive sexual education system available in Canadian schools. However, that does not mean that the concept of sexual purity is non-existent or unimportant in Canada. I have demonstrated that the effect of the concept of purity on evangelical Protestant adolescent's identity formation and maintenance is significant. Rather than blending the messages they receive from popular media and their church in order to justify experimenting with their sexuality before marriage, the participants rejected the messages in popular media in favour of a pro-abstinence "fence building" (Mullaney 2006: 16) strategy to remain sexually pure outside of marriage. This was promoted by Praise Evangelical Missionary Church through their conception of gender relations and what it means to date in a church environment, as well as through Praise Church's existence in a secular urban centre.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to scholarship in religion, gender studies, and identity studies, as well as in public health. If, for example, evangelical Protestant youth disregard the information currently provided by mainstream media on STI prevention, sexual assault, and birth control, what is the best way for educators in the public health sector to reach this part of the population in order to give them information about their health? Furthermore, while I feel it is irresponsible to say that this information is irrelevant for evangelical Protestant youth, if evangelical Protestants

are not engaging in any type of premarital sexual intercourse, is reaching this demographic as important as once was thought? Finally, this research could be a starting point for future research examining the prevalence of abstainers in Canada, the role of abstinence in the identity formation and maintenance of young adults, the way identity is reconstituted by evangelical Protestants after marriage, as well as what potential benefits are derived by adolescents who adhere to the purity movement.

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Appendix A:

Youth Interview Script (Template)

Remind participant that they can stop the interview at any time

1. Personal history
 - a. Family
 - b. Religious
 - c. Relationships
 - d. Occupational (School)

2. Messages received
 - a. Do you think 1) The Church 2) media 3) friends 4) family expects you to believe in certain things or act a certain way?
 - i. What messages do you receive?
 - ii. From whom do you get these messages?
 - iii. Do you agree or disagree with these messages?
 1. Why or why not?
 - iv. Do you feel you receive any conflicting messages?
 - b. **Please don't feel obligated to answer this question:** What kinds of things count as sex?
 - i. In society?
 - ii. In the church?
 - iii. Personally?

3. Identity
 - a. Do you feel you belong to a group (ie. at school or at church)?
If yes:
 - i. What group(s)?
 - ii. Why?
 - iii. Do you like or dislike your affiliation with the group?
 - iv. How do you think that group is viewed in society?
 - b. **Please don't feel obligated to answer this question:** Are you comfortable with your status as a virgin or non-virgin?
 - i. Do you think people know about your status?
 1. How do you think other people feel about it?
 - ii. Does this affect your identity?
 1. How?
 - c. What do you think is the best term for someone who chooses not to have sex before marriage?
 - i. Why?
 - d. Do you feel you are part of a purity movement?
 - i. Why or why not?

Appendix B:

Youth Leader Interview Script (Template)

Interview Script

Remind participant that they can stop the interview at any time

1. Personal history
 - a. Family
 - b. Religious
 - c. Relationships
 - d. Occupational (School)
2. Messages received
 - a. What do you think the purpose of youth group is?
 - b. Do you feel pressure to impart a specific message to youth group members?
 - c. What do you think the hardest part of being a young person today is?
3. Identity
 - a. Do you think the adolescents who attend youth group feel they belong to a community?
If yes:
 - i. Why?
 - ii. What are some of the benefits or problems with belonging to this group?
 - iii. How do you think that group is viewed in society?
 - b. **Please don't feel obligated to answer this question:** Do you think there is a lot of pressure for youth to either have or not have sex?
 - i. Where do you think this pressure comes from?
 - ii. Do you think it's healthy?
 - c. What do you think is the best term for someone who chooses not to have sex before marriage?
 - i. Why?
 - d. How would you define the term "purity"?
 - e. Do you feel you are part of a purity movement?
 - i. Why or why not?