

**The Paradox of Purity:**

**A Deeper Look into the Historical Foundation of Theology on Women, Purity  
Culture Literature, and the Current Harm of Purity Culture on Humanity.**

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By

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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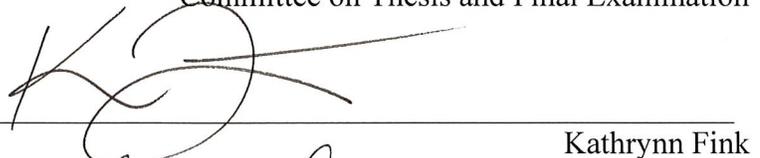
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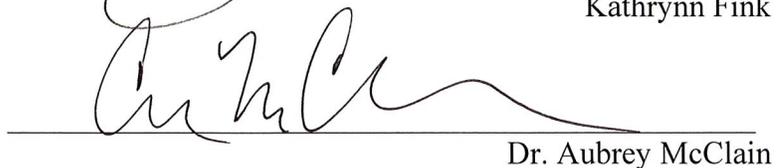
BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This thesis provides criticism of the current rhetoric of purity culture American Christian women engage with. It intends to first take the time to look through past influences on Christian theological thoughts on women by Christianity's founding fathers. By combing through history this portion will help show how traditional theology has stemmed from many sexist concepts. Further, the literature review will then continue to expand these concepts through explaining purity culture and benevolent sexism. This section seeks to show that purity culture has harmful effects for both men and women in society. All of this is to help base understanding on the study proposed and conducted in this thesis regarding purity culture. Overall, this thesis will show that purity culture standards are drawn from sexist beliefs about women, hurt men and women on a personal level, and prevent true gender equality.

Women's first interactions with theology is with literature derived from texts written by men, and commentaries on the Bible by men. Goldstein argues that this is a limited view due to a perspective that is by nature focused on men's experiences, desires, personal struggles, and societal influences. Particularly, when it comes to characterization of women it is hard to separate the clear misogyny, and patriarchal lens that early church fathers had. This has led to an entrenched shaping of rhetoric written by men based on men's experiences that has determined what religion teaches women. Therefore, the historical foundation of theology that has been built upon by religions still functioning today must be acknowledged. For this reason, discussing the theological ideas about women's place in the world is important. Theologians such as Augustine read the Bible and delivered writing such as this, "...woman was given to man, woman who was of

small intelligence and who perhaps still lives more in accordance with the promptings of the inferior flesh than by superior reason. Is this why the apostle Paul does not attribute the image of God to her?" (Lenker, 1904). While Augustine may have died in 430 A.D he left a legacy of theological writings that have influenced Catholicism, and early church fathers following in his footsteps. While he was a man of his time, sexism still functions in society and many of his ideas are still relevant. In the second section of historical foundations the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Augustine.

The third section, the literature review, will look at specific literature on purity culture and benevolent sexism. Few women in western Christianity escape being touched by elements of the patriarchy in their religious upbringing. One form this manifests in is purity culture. Purity culture is defined as systems that highlight high value in virginity, and abstinence practices for women (Pikel, 2018). This movement peaked in the 1980's through the early 2000's and was based on traditionalist texts, and a reaction to the changing societal environment brought on by the 1960's. Established by Glick and Fiske, benevolent sexism is a system of beliefs that stem from sexist views of women that are not based in hostile outright hate women (Yi, n.d.). Rather, benevolent sexism views women as weaker, and more emotional creatures in need of protection. This allows for sexist actions to be justified from a place of good heart, and can also create environments that easily forgive hostile sexist actions (Yi, n.d.). It functions in many aspects of society and often goes unchallenged because its goal is aimed at helping women stay safe and protected, despite the motivation coming from false sexist ideas.

According to research by Biola University environments that appear threatening to a particular group tends to increase authoritarianism or a clinging to the past way of

doing things within that group's sets of beliefs (Orme, Hall, Anderson & McMartin, 2017). With rapid change in sexual normative, equality for women, and perceived threats to fundamentalist ideals in family values evangelical churches really pushed the purity culture movement in response. In fact, high levels of literal biblical interpretation, and religiosity have been connected to higher levels of benevolent sexism (Orme, Hall, Anderson, & McMartin, 2017). This correlation leaves room to explore the basis of purity culture and Christianity. On face value purity culture serves to protect tradition, but by default actually continues sexist practices, and dangerous environments for women.

The practices of purity culture are promoted with a greater emphasis towards women specifically, and as a result create several different issues. These can include vague teachings about sex and assault, higher rates of sexually transmitted disease and unplanned pregnancies in abstinence only taught states, and female identity issues with sexuality (Crouse-Dick, 2019). Many churches will argue that purity culture stems from a place of love, and protection for young women (Paul, 2014). However, it blatantly applies at a high level of emphasis to women. This implicitly suggests that their sole value as women is their sexual purity saved for marriage (Paul, 2014). Further, it increases the concept of benevolent sexism, which views women as special creatures in need of protection from men, and women who do not hold to the standards of purity as justifiably discardable (Mikołajczak & Janina Pietrzak, 2014). Teaching members of a certain religion about purity values, modesty, or respect for one's body is not the issue at hand. Rather, it is the unequal standards of stressing sexual purity more for women along with the harmful tactics of implementing these standards.

Rhetoric has great power. Growing women deserve to learn about their sexuality without the strong sense of shame behind sexual actions. Outside of ancient theology and secular patriarchy there is an element of fear contributing to the harm of purity culture. For fear of losing members to sexual rhetoric that is not their own, the tactics used to enforce the culture involves speaking to children from a young age about purity, and continuously tying shame with actions that don't align with the desired behaviors (Crouse-Dick, 2019). This is not only damaging to children who have not yet developed their own identity, but it teaches shame and connects negative connotations with sex. Developing as a healthy sexual human being has many other aspects outside of virginity and marriage alone, and purity culture can deny this.

The harmful rhetoric of purity culture has been captured in modern books and famous analogies. The most famous of these books is *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris. He claimed that by not dating at all, and focusing on complete mental and physical abstinence until marriage that relationships would be successful (Harris, 2017). While Harris's intentions were of a young motivated Christian man of 21, his book had results he could not have predicted. Years later he reported still receiving messages from women whose religious leaders used his words to condemn them (Harris, 2017). Interestingly, he would grow up to denounce his original messages in IKDG and create a documentary of the people who had been harmed by his own book (Harris, 2017). His documentary focused on both men and women who had experienced harm in purity culture. This showed that these effects do not just harm women. Men are thrown into environments that do not teach responsibility for one's sexual desires and actions, and even excuse despicable ones. Men are not the focus of purity culture. While there are

purity rings, and participation does not exclude men, it is not geared towards men. Rather ballroom dances, or purity style signing ceremonies with fathers are the normative structure. This does not mean they do not experience the effects of purity culture. Men are left with their own characterizations that are implied with not being included in these activities. One meaning is that purity is not of the same priority for men as it is for women. Two is that their actions are not necessarily entirely under their own control, because women possess sexual qualities of temptation or seduction (Paul, 2014). This manifests itself in Christians often siding with victims only in assault cases where the victim was adhering to religious purity ideals (Mikołajczak & Janina Pietrzak, 2014). These places a lower degree of responsibility on men to be held accountable because women are still seen as possessing the ability to control men's sexual actions (Paul, 2014). Lastly, there is an imbalance of power in relationship dynamics because women are in many senses lesser by being more sensitive, and emotional creatures that need protection in Christian theology (Pikel, 2018).

There is a great benefit to recognizing the current rhetoric in Christian theology regarding women as harmful. Part of this is due to churches failing to take the time to reanalyze purity culture and how it affects women. Religions are not immune to secular society, and it is ironic that the actions promoted by purity culture are intended in part to separate Christians from the secular culture. In reality, they are participating in the same sexist ideology the secular world falls prey to. Women as equal human beings to men deserve to experience religion without the hindrance of purity culture the way it functions today. Christianity as a whole needs to evolve the way it handles gender equality. Joshua Harris spoke at his TedTalk in 2017 about his evolution towards rejecting much of what

he previously wrote. Interestingly, he noted, "...Probably the thing that I regret the most is that there was a lot of fear inside of me that I transferred into my writing, and fear is never a good motive: fear of messing up, fear of getting your heart broken, fear of hurting somebody else, fear of sex. (Sigh) Yeah. Why did it take me so long to see these problems? You know, I think it was because I was so afraid of being wrong" (Harris, 2017). Religious theology can achieve gender equality eventually with conscious efforts, but it will not occur without recognizing the sexist historical traditions in the church, and researching the current negative effects of purity culture happening today. The continuation of sexist rhetoric, and its manifestation in how purity culture is presented and taught needs to be recognized as harmful and altered in order for this to be achieved.

## **Chapter 2: Historical Foundations of Purity Culture**

As previously discussed, rhetorical use of biblical verses, and commentaries by Christianity's founding fathers have been used to reinforce and even mold purity culture. The founding father's scholarly works on women have been cemented into the theological world, and have only been continued in different forms by the new church . However, in truly understanding the impact of their works it is important to look to the secular philosophers they modeled, and the societal impact this world had on them. While these men may not be on the minds of pastors or leaders in Western Christian churches today, their rhetoric has been a huge contributor to purity culture.

Plato and Aristotle had a huge influence on early Christianity. Aristotle gave scientific reasoning to back the claims that women were inferior beings physically, spiritually, and mentally (Wood, 2017). He focused on stressing procreation, servility, and categorizing women with slaves (Wood, 2017). The concepts concerning women's identity being consumed by motherhood, and procreation were not created by the early founding fathers, or the current mainstream religions but were rooted deeply in Greek society and culture (Wood, 2017). Aristotle felt that women did not possess the same rational ability to think and reason that men had (Reuther, 2014). The rhetoric of Aristotle was carried into legitimacy in Christianity by influencing their rhetoric and helping to heavily gender their interpretations of theology (Reuther, 2014). Written word is powerful, and continues on for generations. Aristotle is still renowned today for great scientific strides, so it makes sense that future generations would hold his opinion on gender ideology in great esteem.

While Aristotle's ideas held women at a very low place, his teacher, Plato, spoke in a more confusing manner. On one hand he clearly saw women as inferior, citing men as the original souls with stronger capabilities, while women were only weaker men acting out the irrational characteristics of humanity (Wood, 2017). However, he also argued that women were capable of doing everything that men could do, albeit on a smaller scale (Wood, 2017). This may have been due to his belief that participation from men and women were necessary to uphold a quality republic, but he didn't take gender inequality as far out as his student. Aristotle truly believed women were defective, and their only positive skills were obedience (Wood, 2017). Women were incapable of participating in state, religion, or any matters outside of the home in his opinion, and his ideas carried over into Christianity (Wood, 2017). Through his logic men's value in characteristics such as courage were measured in their ability to dominate or subordinate the women in their lives (Sultana, 2011). Further, the consequences of consuming this rhetoric would be reflected in the opinions and rhetoric produced by the early church founders Augustine, and Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas's opinions on women were confusing in that they placed women in unequal positions, but also praised women for their duties and concluded that their position in life, while below men, was just as important to the overall scheme of Christianity. Aquinas used Scripture to base his claims. Genesis he felt contained important information about women's nature due to Eve being created for Adam as a partner. As he understood it, being the secondary creation naturally implied inferiority (Uffenheimer-Lippens, 2016). This would be witnessed in everyday life for Aquinas as well. The secular world was equally influenced by the inferiority of women, and most

women were homemakers and not educated in the same way men were (Wood, 2017). In creating a belief system where women were below men, society's structures reflected this by making it a visible reality, despite being false. Aristolian biology also influenced Aquinas as he saw science confirming women's secondary position (George, 1999). Biology at the time saw the sperm and therefore the man as the one doing the work of reproduction, and that women were simply passive creatures letting this act be done to them (George, 1999). Thus, the scientific and biblical teachings could confirm Thomas's thought processes.

Aquinas was, however, able to acknowledge that not all women are the same. Not all women were filled with the same vices, just as some men were more morally inclined than others. However, this did not mean that women achieved the love of God in an equal way to men. Aquinas strongly believed that God loved creatures on a scale according to rationality, and that by this logic in general God loved men more than women (Uffenheimer-Lippens, 2016). Today this idea would be considered false, and that God loves all of humanity equally. Regardless, Aquinas's rhetoric would go on to influence many justifications for maintaining low status of women and minorities on the basis of lower rationality capabilities.

Augustine inherited Greek ideas when he began reading the Bible and commenting on it. Therefore, while he had his own thoughts, there were many derived from a lens of men and women already developed by his own society, culture, and rhetoric of Aristotle and Plato. His writing on women is substantially smaller compared to the totality of his works, but it becomes clear that his writing stemmed from classical concepts (Bonner, 1997). In fact, compared to Christianity during his time that advocated

for women to be sort of a lesser partner to men, he furthered this idea to demoting women to a servant or slave position in relationships (Bonner, 1997). Women's only redeemable purpose was giving birth to children in Augustine's worldview (Bonner, 1997). Part of his ideas were influenced by the Greeks, but still based on his biblical interpretations. In reading the book of Paul he became fixated on the separation of people from God. He blamed women completely for the fall, and preventing this closure between man and God achieved by the crucifixion (Wood, 2017). This is problematic because this view allowed him to expand more blame onto women than men, and thus create a very unequal gender ideology.

Augustine continued out his thought process on women, and their place in the world. Here lies an important distinction between men and women that would last even into today. Men and women were equal in relationship to God. This means that women and men can both achieve a relationship or pursue religion in their own understanding to God. However, women and men according to Augustine were not equal in relationship to each other (Bonner, 1997). This rhetoric creates women who are more sinful by nature and therefore ordered to be subservient to men to serve out their life purpose.

Martin Luther divided the Catholic Church to start Protestantism, and diverted from some of the ideas previously discussed. The relationship between men and women had continued to model an Augustinian thought with the dominant master to servant roles playing out. Luther would turn the church on its head, by classifying marriage and family to be of equal importance to the priests and leaders. He would elevate the family to show that the love and shared love between husbands, wives, and their children was living out Christ's mission. This concept-oriented mission in religion in a new light that had not

previously existed on such a wide scale. Rhetorically, one of his biggest contributions to women was (intentionally or not) acknowledging that the total exclusion of women in ministry was not based in divine truth, but societal reasons (Mattox, 2003). This was accomplished by his writing that promoted acceptance of women speaking in ministry when needed.

Luther was a man of duality caught between tradition and progressive gender equality. The most notable point to this is the shift he had in looking at Eve's characterization (and the implications of it) before and after experiencing marriage. Before marriage his critique of Eve followed traditionalist thought almost completely (Mattox, 2003). He was heavily influenced by Augustine and believed that creation of woman from man's rib, as well as taking her name from man's pointed towards inferiority. Eve was weak willed, irrational, and he went so far as to say that she should have deferred to her husband Adam when the snake attempted to seduce her (Mattox, 2003). This would have even deeper implications for women who were "good" being those who turned to their husbands for decision making, and wisdom over themselves. Further, he applied all of the faults of Eve onto all women, rather than all of humanity (Mattox, 2003). Lastly, there was a clear subjugation of preaching in the home and church to man instead of equally to humanity (Mattox, 2003).

Six children later, and over ten years later, recognized Eve as equal to Adam not only in sin, but in partnership for ruling the world. Instead of inferior he cited her as consisting of the same mind and soul as Adam. This may seem revolutionary, but he was still held down by the factions of traditional thought. While women may be equal to men in mind and soul their equality for Luther did not translate into any real areas of life. His

writing was contradictory because on one hand he held Eve up as a hero, but with the same hand condemned all women to the same lives of submission (Mattox, 2003). When it came to actual reality he endorsed for women lives that were obedient in every aspect of home, church, and civil life. This contradiction of recognizing women's worth, but failing to create a lived reality for what this worth should imply would continue on.

John Calvin, another key figure in the reformation, contributed to the religious rhetoric on women. His theology was even more convoluted than Luther's. He believed that women were unequivocally equal to men. Men and women were equally responsible for the fall, and equal in the world in contributing to sin today (Potter, 1986). This was some progress considering most past theology had blamed Eve above Adam. He considered that the calling to God's salvation overtook any human placed separations and that there should be no distinctions (between people) when it came to theology (Potter, 1986). These ideas logically lead towards the concept of gender equality between men and women.

In practice, and theology John Calvin continually contradicted true equality, however. Just as Augustine presented women equal to men in relation to God, they were still not equal in relation to each other. He continuously blamed women more for the state of sin in the present living world, and that their inclinations towards physical sin and disobedience to men was the cause (Potter, 1986). Interestingly, Calvin would not have thought of himself as oppressive to women. To Calvin the natural pre-fall order was a dominant male headed relationship with obedience from the woman. Eve disrupted this order, and by showing the natural gender hierarchy he was helping to restore what should have existed from the beginning of the world (Potter, 1986).

Calvin and Luther both changed the system of oppression for women in a negative way. While women were still oppressed under the theology before, they brought forth a theology that on its surface recognized women, and to a certain extent equality. In reality, while its elevated marriage it also strengthened the ability for men to mistreat women with justification. Their literature assumed qualities of women to be weak, seductive, pleasure-hungry, disobedient, and irrational. Further, they were still lesser than men. For these reasons these characteristics established by the founding fathers were in many ways functioning as benevolent sexism in society. While it may not be something that was analyzed at the time there is definitely a similarity in their theology and structures of benevolent sexism. The founding fathers held women's characteristics as justification for sexist actions done in the name of helping women. They were not rooted in deep hatred, however, and intended to help women fulfill their roles as Christians and protect men from sexual sins.

Religion is blamed at times, but it is hard to pinpoint whether Christianity developed direct sexist ideas, or absorbed indirectly the secular traditional gender and sex ideas of history (Mikołajczak and Pietrzak, 2014). There is a combination of factors, both stemming from religion and secular sources, that have created gender inequality. What is important is that people have recognized that all of these factors share man made qualities. They are constructs that have been created by people and do not point towards innate qualities of women. Women today are recognized as equal to men in mental capabilities and are not innately dumber, more emotional, or weaker mentally.

Aristotle, Plato, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Augustine, and every man who has written on the theology of women has constructed their rhetoric while also existing in a

patriarchal society. Notably, during the Reformation the educational gap between men and women grew astronomically (Wiesner, 1987). This is important because the beliefs of religious leaders at the time became slowly more reflected in society as men became more visibly “smarter” than women. They have in part, contributed to the system they belonged to, continued these traditions in the church, and brought into being a false reality of men being more rational than women. Some of these men have presented gender equality in theological rhetoric, but the patriarchal interpretation of these concepts prevents any semblance of equality. One thing that did not occur during heavy periods of change and culture movements, such as the Reformation, was an analysis of how women felt about the culture they were experiencing. Historically, women during the Reformation experienced a new culture of sorts as religion changed and different rhetoric of pamphlets, sermons, and papers were read or addressed to them (Wiesner, 1987). Only now in this modern era are historians beginning to try and look at the history of the Reformation’s culture through new eyes of letters and writings by women who experienced this time period (Wiesner, 1987). With purity culture there is a new opportunity to analyze women who have experienced it, and understand its effects without the difficulty of obtaining anthropological evidence and writing as with the Reformation.

The founding fathers are not necessarily the direct inspiration of the modern purity culture movement; however, their theology has greatly influenced Christianity and must be understood to view the full vision of purity culture. This is due to the concepts in their writing that developed men as heads of families and protectors, and central virginity and procreation being the main source of worth or value for women.

### Chapter 3: Literature Review

Seemingly antiquated concepts from the above historical foundation are still flowing through new movements in current culture. The idea that women are pure beings whose worth and value stems from their ability to bear children, and be sexually pure/pleasing to their husbands is still staples in Christianity. These concepts have translated into the purity culture that emerged in America around the 1980's and has become consistently prevalent in Christian churches. It constitutes a movement of beliefs (varying sets) that prioritizes femininity, and virginity as the key value of women (Pikel, 2018). It was created initially to protect women from the sexual corruption of the secular world (Paul, 2014). These values can include saving sex for marriage, strict or specific dating rules, and desiring "purity" emotionally and physically.

Social purity for women has always been a common idea in American Christianity. In the late 19th century there was a wave of movement towards purity culture (Tyson, n.d.). It was heavily promoted by women, as well as men. Women desired it, and the focus of the culture was to protect women and men from moral corruptions. This included keeping women virgin and pure until marriage, banning or limiting prostitution, abortions, or contraception, and keeping women modest to prevent men committing immoral acts (Tyson, n.d.). Purity and worth were heavily equated. At the start of the movement of social purity it was something heavily accepted by Christians, and the secular world. Creating these limitations were intended to make society a safer place for women, and uphold gender normative roles in traditional society (Tyson, n.d.). It was a way of being, and maintaining a moral society.

With huge social changes taking place during the 20th century the secular world began to move further from social purity. Questions about gender equality, race,

feminism, LGBTQ rights, and social class began to spark new movements. The 1960's began a tumultuous upheaval of traditional values being the only option, and prompted new opportunities for social change in all areas (Crain, 2020). Social purity was not playing the same role it used to. Reactionarily, conservatives whose traditional values were threatened by the secular world began to cling harder onto ways to distinguish themselves from the mainstream culture. It was not just Christians, but people who had long standing racist, and sexist beliefs who were slowly feeling pushed aside. Purity culture began to re-emerge in the late 1980's, but this time in Christian religions (not all of society) and it became stronger than ever (Crain, 2020). It was a way to separate Christians from the secular society, and maintain a sense of morality in a changing world. To be clear saving sex for marriage, or chastity has always been an aspect of many Christian religions in some form. Purity culture is distinct in that it is aimed primarily at youth, and uses distinct tactics to enforce its ideology. Purity culture functions as a series of beliefs that are aimed towards sexual purity through abstinence, and highlighting a life of modesty in all of one's actions (Crain, 2020). Visible signs of purity culture can include purity rings, dances or events to pledge purity, parental signings pledging virginity, discouraging dating, pledges of virginity to God and limited sex education in youth (Crouse-Dick, 2019). These are things that may be included in purity culture, but not all of these aspects have to be involved. To expand, a purity ring is a ring worn by an individual to pledge one's virginity as saved until marriage (Barrio, 2010). Sometimes, couples will get promise rings together to pledge saving their virginity for each other, but these are not to be confused with purity rings (Barrio, 2010). Dances can include a father and daughter dressing up for a big group church event where the father will sign a paper

pledging to protect his daughter's virginity. These symbols, while physical items, are still rhetorical devices to express purity culture to the world. Overt rhetoric can include hearing analogies for losing one's sexual purity as the flower that's picked over and over, a stained piece of clothing going through the washer too many times, or a piece of paper being crumpled over and over (Pikel, 2018). There are numerous analogies that may exist. This culture can also be different, as it often can vary between churches in specific beliefs.

In the 1990's the movement picked up steam through conventions, and conferences for varying religions. The Southern Baptist Convention, for example, often hired speakers to talk about the importance of sexual purity and promote virginity pledges (Paul, 2014). Interestingly, the government also promoted aspects of this movement through the administration of President Bush during his terms (Barrio, 2010). Abstinence organizations received federal funding through grants, used to sell and promote purity rings. In fact, The Silver Ring Thing, a ministry movement, located in Pennsylvania received over 1 million dollars (Barrio, 2010). This movement was promoted by Christians, and supported by the Bush administration as an attempt to maintain sexual morality for youth in America.

Purity culture is intended by its promoters to prevent men and women from engaging in sinful sexual behavior, and create a separation between how Christians live their lives comparatively to secular people. It is important to note that it stems, particularly, from a place of good intentions. Regardless of what specific Christian religion there is an aspect that what is being taught is for the benefit of the individual, and the church as a whole. The reason for this is because sex before marriage is treated as a

cardinal immorality, and something that can damage one's entire worth, and further one's quality of life (Pikel, 2018). Particularly, as the theology of the Christian founding fathers often states, women are emotional creatures who are prone to sexual sin, and must be protected from this state (Wood, 2017). If one believes this, then it makes sense the following beliefs, and tactics regarding purity culture exist. Further, it makes sense why people would see being able to justify these practices as good, and necessary for people to be Christian.

The first issue purity culture presents are harm to sex education for young adults. This manifests in lack of sexual education, fear or shame around sex, and creating the correlation of life worth and virginity. Lack of information about sex leads to confusion for individuals that do go against what they are taught. Specific protections against pregnancy or STDs are not always discussed, in preference for teaching only abstinence. While the argument can be presented that knowledge of these means are not necessary because abstinence is the perfect method of protection against these results, there is still always the chance that young adults still choose to participate in sexual activity despite being taught these values. Further, it starts to tie unplanned pregnancy, STD's, and sexual activity before marriage to the worth of a person. These concepts should be presented in a way that does not shame young adults and provides avenues for understanding that worth as a person is not taken away if they end up pregnant before marriage or contract an STD.

There are also safety issues within marriage, and an idolization of marriage as perfection innately. Purity culture preaches that sex is only acceptable within marriage. Marriage is promoted as the ultimate goal, and it is the gate that allows for sex to be considered a positive and a beneficial element to marriage. Due to the high status that is

placed on marriage there is not an emphasis on education regarding sexual abuse within marriage. Women raised in purity culture are at times unable to understand signs of an unhealthy relationship, or sexual abuse occurring within marriage. In fact, it is not considered that sexual abuse within marriage is happening, because women are not taught how to think about what real, healthy sex looks like. Conversations about sex are often not explicit, and are focused on abstinence only. Purity is the focus, rather than teaching specifics about what healthy sex looks like, and what consent looks like. Even within marriage, consent is something that should exist, and sex should be something a couple has conversations about. Women and men raised in purity culture are not always prepared for this or they are not informed about their own body's sexuality. For example, women specifically are framed as desperate for love, and affection. That what they desire is not sex, but emotional connections. This can create confusion for young adult women who are experiencing sexual desires during puberty (and after), and can put them through cycles of shame or doubting one's self worth. Purity culture participates in an erasure of sexual desires that women do possess, and fails to provide adequate information about sex within marriage.

Lastly, purity culture establishes inequality in nature between men and women in the way it is taught and presented. Women's nature is presented as higher moral creatures whose value stems from virginity and sexually pure actions. Augustine had contended that procreation was the highest achievement of women, and therefore being pure was of the utmost importance. Purity culture is directed more towards women than men, and the physical ceremonies or symbols that can be involved are often only for girls to participate in. Items such as purity rings, pledges, or ceremonies are symbolic ways for women to

participate from a young age in visibly looking at their sexuality as their best attribute in need of protection. Decorated ceremonies with a girl's father's pledging to protect their daughter's purity give a physical manifestation of reinforcing virginity for women to be one of their highest qualities. Valuing sexual purity in religion is not an issue- but the inequality established in identity between men and women's sexual purity is clear. Boys participating in purity ceremonies with their mother's pledging to protect their purity are unheard of. This is due to men being involved in putting their authority over women's actions, and not the other way around (Pikel, 2018). It is necessary for a man to pledge for his wife, and daughter's purity and sexual behaviors (Pikel, 2018). Men's natures are presented as strong, commanding, protective, and intelligent. Further, their sexual actions are not held to the same standard. Often, men who participate in sex outside of marriage are presented as the tempted or the weaker sex that is at the mercy of the modesty of women. This continues to happen because men's identities are not heavily tied to their sexual actions, and purity is not a top priority. In fact, characterizations from historical theology which continued to paint women's flaws as manipulation, and misuse of their sexuality, shift blame for men's sexual actions back onto women. If men sin, or commit sexual actions before marriage it is often blamed on the woman rather than the man. There is an aspect of women needing to protect their purity out of necessity because it is their way to help men, and protect them from their own unavoidable sin.

In the secular world, the term benevolent sexism has been coined to describe sexism that occurs when sexist beliefs still set the norm for men and women's behavior, but the justification behind it is not seen as negative (Mikolajczak, 2014). This distinction of sexism into two categories of hostile and benevolent was started by two researchers in

the late 1990's, Glick and Fiske (Yi, n.d.). It established that there are of course clear sexist actions, such as hiring a man because one thinks women are stupid and bad at work. Actions that clearly discriminate against women, and are motivated by hostile feelings towards women would be called hostile sexism (Maltby, Hall, Anderson & Edwards, 2010). Benevolent sexism was a term developed to describe sexism that is harder to recognize due to its motivation, and actions lacking hostility. Rather, the justification for these sexist actions or systems appears to be good or benevolent (Yi, n.d.). For example, the idea that women have to be superior morally pure creatures is a concept that functions in benevolent sexism. This idea seems to place women in this higher status, and women who adhere to it are deserving of respect due to upholding these ideals. However, women who do not are not seen as worthy, and therefore mistreatment of these women could possibly be justified (Yi, n.d.). This can be seen in women who do not adhere to this standard being treated poorly and this treatment being justified (Pikel, 2018). Manifestation of this type of sexism could be believing victims of sexual assaults only if the victim adhered to morally righteous behavior (Mikołajczak, 2014). In practice this cements in historically traditional gender roles as positive qualities. Further, it rewards women who help promote the idea that women have a special responsibility to purity (Orme, Anderson & McMartin, 2017). It rewards men who believe women are more emotional and weak creatures who need love, protection, and livelihoods from men (Orme, Anderson & McMartin, 2017). The destructive cycle of benevolent sexism results from its self-justifying tendency (Yi, n.d.). Women succeed in systems that promote benevolent sexist ideals by sticking to the characteristics and actions required of them. Thus, women can also participate in shaming other women for

not adhering to certain behaviors. Further, the benefits of these behaviors help legitimize sexist ideas (Yi, n.d.). It does contain some differences compared to the outright sexism of theologies of the founding fathers. For example, Aristotle saw women as inferior in all ways to men (Reuther, 2014). However, in benevolent sexism women are seen as inferior in every way except morality. Women are seen as superior moral creatures who must maintain high purity standards in order to protect their worth (Orme, Anderson & McMartin, 2017). Therefore, it is very hard to always understand and illustrate benevolent sexism happening in society because it is reinforced by all genders, and does not present any face value harm like in hostile sexism (Yi, n.d.).

This type of benevolent sexism is seen often in Christian societies who believe in scriptural literalism (Orme et al., 2017). In fact, in populations of college aged Christian men, comparatively to women, were at an increased likelihood to support benevolent sexism and protective paternalism (Orme et al., 2017). Overall, men were again more likely to endorse these ideals in Christian orthodoxy more than women in the same orthodoxy (Orme et al., 2017). Interestingly, there is a strong correlation to benevolent sexism, but not to hostile sexism (Maltby et al., 2010). There have been numerous research studies done to connect benevolent sexism with conservative ideologies, but conservative does not necessarily mean Christian. Of particular interest is a study published by Biola University researchers that was done in order to show a connection between Christian beliefs and benevolent sexism. The researchers collected data on 337 students at Evangelical colleges who endorsed their own Christianity or religious faith. Each student was given a packet with scaled questions that helped to assess benevolent sexism, and Christian beliefs. This was done using questions that aligned with The

Christian Orthodoxy Scale, and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Maltby et al., 2010). The results confirmed the researchers hypothesis that benevolent sexism and core Christian beliefs were connected specifically for men (Maltby et al., 2010). They found that, “as men’s sexist views increased, their agreement with core tenets of Christianity increased” while for women this was simply not the case (Maltby et al., 2010, p. 620). For women this connection did not exist, there was not a strong correlation between religiosity and benevolent sexism. This is a significant finding because men are often the leaders of their churches. Recognizing this correlation might help to develop self-awareness and a push from Christians within to reflect on purity culture. It also establishes that benevolent sexism could be a way to show that purity culture is harmful by illustrating the connection it has to core Christian beliefs (concepts that are contained within purity culture).

Purity culture has had a negative connotation in the secular world. The current literature is concerned with the blatant sexism, and misogyny that is the lived reality of how the purity culture movement beliefs police women. It is concerned with the harm that appears to manifest itself in enforcing purity culture beliefs through shame, lack of sex education, and aiming messages heavily at young girls (Pikel, 2018). There is concern over implicit sexist statements about women that are harmful and could have the capability to result in confusion of sexual actions in adolescents, shame or mental stress regarding sex, lack of ability to recognize sexual abuse, and misinformation about sex and consent. Amanda Paul did research on the negative effects of purity culture through an undergraduate thesis, but her work was an examination of rhetoric compared to statistics of the general American public. For example, she used studies to show that

abstinence only education was harming students understanding of sex. Students had varying ideas of what sex was with most only believing that penetrating vaginal intercourse was true sex. Her research, while helpful, includes students that were of different backgrounds and could not be held to only Christians. It found harm in abstinence only education, but was less specifically geared towards purity culture of Christians. The statistics she used are arguably hard to pinpoint to showing that it was purity culture but rather effects of abstinence only education in States. An additional study by researchers at Biola University looked into the relationship between power, sexism and Biblical interpretation. They found that Traditionalism was the biggest factor in predicting how people interpreted the Bible. They were also concerned with showing that men and women in religion have differing scales of benevolent sexism. They found that men had higher rates of benevolent sexism and that most women had low rates despite being both religious. These findings were helpful in looking at correlations within purity culture. However, the study was concerned more heavily with research regarding right wing authoritarianism, social dominance, and the connections these may have with literal biblical interpretation. Another study by researchers in Poland, Małgorzata Mikołajczak and Janina Pietrzak, was interested in the connection between benevolent sexism and religion. They sought to confirm other studies they had read connecting a direct link with these two beliefs. They had participants from Poland take their study questions for them to produce into data. They found their hypothesis confirmed that institutions like the Catholic church did in fact have a connection with benevolent sexist beliefs in both men and women. This study was interesting, but was heavily involved in Polish Catholic culture. They did have some participants that were not Catholic, or a

different Christian religion. This was not an issue for them as they were researching the heavily ingrained Catholic culture which exists in Poland. Lastly, there have been many dissertations on the role of rhetoric in purity culture. Ashley Pikel of South Dakota State University submitted a particularly interesting dissertation on the role of purity culture rhetoric. She heavily read through Joshua Harris's book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and studied the responses of participants who had been directly harmed by his work. She used data that had been collected by Joshua Harris himself after he had renounced his previous beliefs, but took his data and efficiently organized it into writing that could make claims about purity culture's harm on both men and women. All of the above work has helped to frame negative effects of purity culture and benevolent sexism, but none have sought to see if there are any positives to this culture and how current youth feel about purity culture. Pikel does this more than the other studies, but her work stems from accounts that cite harm directly from Joshua Harris's book and many of the accounts are severe cases of trauma. The negative results seem clear, but if Christians do not feel that it is there will never be real systemic change within Christian organizations.

The secular world doesn't need to analyze the culture of Christianity and sexual teachings because they will not be participating in this culture, or continuing the traditions in Christian religions. What has not been done in a greater sense is a deeper analysis of purity culture by Christians themselves and for themselves. Purity culture has been a way to separate Christians from the secular in a visible way in living out abstinence, practicing sex only in marriage, and holding teenager to different standards than the secular world. There have not been Christian led studies aimed to explore how purity culture is truly functioning from the eyes of those who stay in the church and

continue living as Christians. My proposed study stems from the desire to understand if this perceived harm from purity culture is currently occurring, and if current Christian adults are recognizing it in their lives.

This study is attempting to get Christian adults to share their experience, or lack of experience with purity culture and its effects it has had on them. Further, it is research into whether or not there is a truly different lived experience of purity culture for males and females. To many in secular circles, it seems obvious, but maybe other people haven't examined it, at least in religious circles. For example, purity culture appears to function as a form of sexism. However, Christians do not appear to think these beliefs are sexist or are hurting anybody. This is evident in purity culture still persisting, and being promoted as a good thing for Christian youth. It is apparent churches are very afraid of being wrong, which is why they don't want to contradict rhetoric they've held onto for a long time. This study is unique because it is examining the hypothesis that there is a true inequality in how men and women experience purity culture. Similarly, to other works of study it is also trying to show that the methods of teaching purity and enforcing it within purity culture are harmful.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

10 participants partook in this study of purity culture. Greenville University students were recruited by word of mouth, and then upon contact of interest were sent the details of the survey. All participants were over the age of 18, and included five men and five women. Participants were kept anonymous and were required to have been raised in a Christian religion. The religions for the five men were as follows; Protestant, Southern Baptist, Protestant, Catholic, and Christian. Four of the five females listed their religion as simply Christian, and one listed hers specifically as Assembly of God.

In order to collect the data used in this study a survey was created. A google form that would allow the survey taker to be comfortable and in privacy was chosen. The list of questions was developed to ask several questions in different ways to gain insight in how current young adult Christians feel about their interactions, or lack of interaction with purity culture. Outside of the recruitment statement for confirming confidentiality and the survey takers age as 18 or older, there were a total of 18 questions. 16 of these questions were ranked on scales of 1-5, with one being “Not at all taught this” and 5 being “Totally taught this”. There were two multiple choice questions with the options given: Never, Occasionally, Sometimes, Often, and Always. These multiple choice answers correlate to the scaled options of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 and were converted to this in averaging the data. Never was a 1 and Always was a 5. Of these 16, 9 of them were repeated without the scale, but instead included short answer boxes to expand on the scaled answer. The questions are listed below in order:

1. Are you Male or Female? (Prefer not to say was an option)
2. What religion did you grow up believing in/or experiencing?

3. The story Adam and Eve includes the fall, in which Eve eats the forbidden fruit and eventually the couple is banned from the Garden of Eden. This is often cited as the beginning of mankind in the world. To what extent were you raised to believe (by family, church members, or friends) that women experience painful childbirth, and suffering in life because of Eve's role in the fall?
4. To what extent were you taught by family, church members, or friends that men alone are intended to be leaders in religious churches?
5. To what extent were you raised to believe men and women are equal in the eyes of God by family, church members, or friends?
6. To what extent (by family, church, or friends) were you taught that men and women can complete the same exact roles within the church, home life, and world?
7. To what extent were you taught that men and women have distinct differences that do not allow them to serve in the same roles?
8. To what extent were you taught that women are by nature intended to be mothers and homemakers?
9. To what extent were you taught that men by nature are intended to be the head of the family, and protector of the family?
10. As defined purity culture is a series of beliefs that highlights emphasis on sexual purity. To what extent do you believe you experienced purity culture? \*Scaled answer, and short answer provided.

11. Have you ever participated in a virginity pledging, owning a purity ring, parent-daughter dance geared towards modesty or purity, or any other types of purity aimed events? \*Scaled answer, and short answer provided.
12. Were you ever felt shamed by a family member, or church member, for actions perceived as damaging to your sexuality (even if the actions were not sexual in nature)? \*Scaled answer, and short answer provided.
13. To what extent do you believe members of the gender opposite yours are treated equally in your religion or church? \*Scaled answer, and short answer provided.
14. To what extent do you believe members of the gender opposite yours are held to the same purity standards as members of your gender within the religion you were raised? \*Scaled answer, and short answer provided.
15. To what extent were you taught by family/friends or church that men are the dominant members of a romantic relationship? \*Scaled answer, and short answer provided.
16. To what extent do you have any stories about any negative or traumatic experiences regarding shame and sexuality in the church? \*Scaled answer, and short answer provided.
17. To what extent do you believe purity culture has been beneficial to you? \*Scaled answer, and short answer provided.
18. To what extent do you think purity culture has been harmful to you? \*Scaled answer, and short answer provided.

After the results were collected they were compiled each question was looked at and put into data. Answers were grouped into male and female categories, as well as

overall answer averages. A table was created that tallied individual male and female scaled answers. An additional two tables were created for the averages of all male scaled answers along with the averages of all female scaled answers. The responses for the short answers were listed out individually. The avenues chosen for the data were picked after reflecting on the hypothesis. Results were being looked at to find displays of the differences between men and women experiencing purity culture and show the harm or lack of harm of the tactics purity culture uses. For this reason, the short answers were instrumental to find more details from participants regarding their personal experiences in purity culture. The scaled answers allowed for multiple questions to be asked in different ways to find data that might be hard to quantify if they had been asked in only a short answer question. Using a small scale of 1-5 allowed for participants to quantify their answers without being overwhelmed by a larger scale of numbers. Averaging answers allowed for bigger trends to be seen between the male and female answers.

## Chapter 5: Results

In response to, “As defined purity culture is a series of beliefs that highlights emphasis on sexual purity. To what extent do you believe you experienced purity culture?” the average scaled male answer was a 3.8. The average female answer was a 4.4. The men participating in the survey did not feel they had experienced purity culture on the same level that women had scaled their answers, however their scaled answers still fell relatively close to the female average. When it came to asking to what extent did they think that purity culture had harmed them the average male answer was a 2.6 and the average female answer was a 3.2. The reverse of this question asked to what extent did they believe purity culture had benefited them 3.6 was the male average compared to the female average of 3. Looking at the average scaled female responses purity culture was reported as causing more harm than benefit. For males it was the opposite with more benefit being reported than harm. This was one result that the hypothesis was hoping the data would reflect; a difference between the perceived harm and benefit of purity culture for men and women.

Additionally, the average answer for both men and women was a 4 regarding the question, “The story Adam and Eve includes the fall, in which Eve eats the forbidden fruit and eventually the couple is banned from the Garden of Eden. This is often cited as the beginning of mankind in the world. To what extent were you raised to believe (by family, church members, or friends) that women experience painful childbirth, and suffering in life because of Eve’s role in the fall?”. This question yielded expected results that there are still some remnants of sexist theology of the founding fathers of the church in modern Christian teachings.

When it came to specific marks of participation in purity culture such as father daughter dances or purity rings the average scaled male answer was only a 1.6, while the average female answer was a 1.8. This was a relatively small amount of both men and women, and did not reflect the expected results of having a significant number of women who had experienced these types of physical purity culture events or items. However, women still experienced these marks of purity culture at a higher rate than the men respondents.

In response to “To what extent were you raised to believe men and women are equal in the eyes of God by family, church members, or friends?” the male average was 4.8 and the female average was 4.

One main prediction for the results of the survey was that they would present inequality between men and women through ideas that were taught about men and women’s roles. By asking certain questions multiple ways, it was hoped it would highlight a paradox between perceived gender equality in the church, or personal recognition of gender equality, and the lived reality within Christianity. In the fifth question asking directly to what extent the surveyist was raised or taught that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, the responses were almost all the same in high affirmatives. The average male answer was a 4.8, while the average female answer was a 4. This is important, because it shows that these Christian adults are being raised in some sense to believe in gender equality in the eyes of God. As the survey continued, however, when it came to further questioning about gender roles within the church it became clear that the lived reality of the teaching of gender equality was nuanced. The immediate next two questions asked “To what extent (by family, church, or friends) were you taught that

men and women can complete the same exact roles within the church, home life, and world?” and “To what extent were you taught that men and women have distinct differences that do not allow them to serve in the same roles?”. The average for male response to both of these questions was a 4. The average female answer was a 2.6 and to the second question a 3.8. Therefore, the majority of males were being taught or raised to affirm equality between men and women while also being taught that women could not complete the same roles in the church, home, and world as men. In addition, they were also being taught that the distinct differences between men and women did not allow for them to participate in the same roles. For females they cited being taught equality in the eyes of God. In addition, their responses to the two questions above showed they were being taught to a lesser extent what the males cited. Their averages for the first question was a 2.6 showing that they were not being taught as much that they couldn't complete the same roles as men in life, church, or the world. Their answers for the second question was a 3.8 showing that they were being taught that there are distinct differences between men and women that do not allow them to participate in the same roles.

The short answer questions yielded numerous results. The most notable for each of the nine short answer questions asked included the following.

1. Thoughts that were instilled in me: You would be dirty if you were not pure and everyone would know that you weren't pure. Your husband would be disappointed that you were not pure. One of the best gifts you would give to your husband is your “flower” Your chance at eternal salvation was ruined if you did not follow the rules and stay pure.

-Female 5.

2. I never have. -Male 3.
3. My parents always assumed that I would get raped if I wore anything immodest, so I wasn't allowed to wear anything revealing. When I did, it was made fun of and shamed (not for religious reasons). I have always been weary of men because of it. -Female 7.
4. I've had both women & men pastors but you can tell the difference in the reception by crowd. -Male 5.
5. As a male, I have had far far far fewer people preaching at me or breathing down my neck about what I wear, how I act, and what I do with my body. Females absolutely take the brunt of the blow of purity culture within the church. -Male 2.
6. My mom definitely believes that wives should submit to their husbands unless it is strictly against God's Word and she also lives this out. -Female 4.
7. There have been a few men here and there that made me feel uncomfortable with advances, only to have it covered up by religious explanations. I've experienced multiple pastors having affairs and partaking in child pornography. -Female 7.
8. As stated before, I never experienced toxic "purity culture", so for me it has actually been helpful in the sense that I know of a community of people that are going through the same fights as me and aiming for the same goal, honoring God. A "support system", if you may. -Male 3.

9. It makes you feel that a mistake or having premarital sex is an end all thing and you feel bad about it or feel gross and tainted but that shouldn't be the case. -Female 6.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

The results did not show as huge of a difference between how male and female respondents felt they experienced purity culture as was expected. Males average was only a 3.8 compared to females 4.4. This data still showed gender inequality between men and women experiencing purity culture. Women also experienced purity culture in a different way than the male respondents revealed in the short answer questions.

The harmful tactics used to enforce purity culture were clear by individual short answer responses. Women without a doubt did experience shame and fear mongering tactics in the results. This shame was sometimes a direct experience for the woman, or something she had seen in a different woman in her life. Female 5 noted from her personal experience, “Your chance at eternal salvation was ruined if you did not follow the rules and stay pure.” She also noted in a later question, “For a while I really struggled with the idea that if you weren’t pure then you ruined your chance at heaven and eternity with God. This scared me for all the people that were not sure and knew what the Bible said.” This respondent was worried about ruining her chance at salvation and connected it with sexual purity. Another female respondent said, “I never felt like I could talk about sexual trauma or relationships because I felt as though I would have been judged for making mistakes. I had to learn on my own what was toxic and healthy, but I feel like if I had someone to talk to about these things I wouldn't have taken so long to figure it out”. Here was more evidence of harm that purity culture can cause through not providing avenues to talk healthily about sex. She cites having to learn these lessons on her own.

Men in general had few negative experiences with purity culture. A few men even had positive experiences with purity culture, as providing a shared group of people they

could work on purity with together. Men even recognized that their experience might not be the same, one man going so far as to say directly “As a male, I have had far far far fewer people preaching at me or breathing down my neck about what I wear, how I act, and what I do with my body. Females absolutely take the brunt of the blow of purity culture within the church.” Male 3’s response was, “I believe I experienced the healthy side of "Purity Culture"; it was never oppressive”, while another cited purity culture as “helpful in the sense that I know of a community of people that are going through the same fights as me and aiming for the same goal, honoring God. A "support system", if you may”. These answers suggest that purity culture is being experienced in a more helpful, communal way for men. One possibility is that men are not feeling such harsh feelings towards purity culture because for them it might be an avenue to work on sexual sins with other men. This is a question that this study did not intend to answer, but perhaps could be helpful in looking to modify purity culture. It definitely shows that men are not experiencing shame or fear mongering regarding sexual purity in the same way.

This acknowledgment by both the men and women is interesting, because it also illustrates that young adults in Christianity are not unaware of gender inequality or differences experienced in their religion. Rather, they are very conscious of the differences when asked to reflect on these questions. The male respondents seemed aware that women were not sharing the same experiences in purity culture.

There was not a lot of experience with purity dances, rings, or events by male or female respondents. One of the few respondents (Female 5) who listed a longer short answer regarding purity events stated: “My parents did the silver ring thing with my older sibling which is a large youth event pledging to stay pure until marriage and they

received a purity ring. This did not work with my sibling and they did not do it with me or my other siblings.” The lack of responses on these types of symbols of purity culture was not an expected result and may need reframing. It could be a fault of some of the questions failing to cover all the specifics of purity events or markers. However, it could also be that young adults are not experiencing purity culture in the same way it existed in the height of the movement in the 1990’s. The data still reflected that purity culture markers were experienced by the female respondents at a slightly higher rate than the males.

There could be a correlation between benevolent sexism and purity culture in some of the short answers. Most of the females in the study still adhered to desiring to save their virginity for marriage or citing a belief in some aspects of purity culture. Female 4 said “I think being taught to wait until marriage has been good for me because I really do believe that that is what should be done (for more reasons than just religious reasons) but I also had to deal with redirecting my thoughts on purity due to a lot of shame I experienced”. Despite some shame experienced the participant still felt a positive pull towards the teachings. Female 6 stated, “I still respect purity culture but I don’t follow the teachings I’ve been taught”. On the opposite side this participant did not hold on to the teachings but maintained a respect for the culture. Believing that purity culture is still ultimately being done for the benefit of the individual is a hallmark of benevolent sexism.

Throughout this study there were many limitations. Clearly, the size of the survey is not large enough to be claimed indicative of all young adult Christians, or any wide evidence that purity culture is completely harmful to individuals. In fact, hopefully, this

type of survey and analysis could be brought to a bigger scale to reflect on gender equality currently in the church. It also is limited in the sense that intersectionality plays a huge role in all issues, and this was not taken into consideration during the study. Races of the surveyists were not recorded, and sexuality was not considered. Written short answer questions in a survey also faced limitations. Not everyone answered each question. Further, the ones who did answer did not always give incredibly clear answers. Perhaps using a face to face interview form could help clarify some answers in a future study. For example, in response to the question asking to what extent one believes members of the gender opposite are treated equally in one's religion or church, one response included, "both women & men pastors but you can tell the difference in the reception by crowd". This is an insightful response, but without further clarification one cannot simply assume the respondent intended to say men are received better than women. Having the ability to ask follow up questions, or clarify a short answer question could be helpful.

Despite these limitations, however, there was still much to be said about the small scaled survey and the results it contained. Through surveying both men and women it did show a clear difference in the lived experiences of purity culture between the genders. There was only 1 male who had severe negative experiences with the Church and wrote down "excommunication" as one of the results he experienced with purity culture. Without further prodding, there was not a lot of detail in his answers. For this reason, it was hard to understand what area of purity culture may have brought him shame, or these traumatic experiences. It was of extreme concern, however, as this individual even cited purity culture actions taken by his Church as contributing in part to a suicidal attempt.

Without further questioning it is hard to know what aspects contributed to this. Still, it is a testament to the harm some individuals have experienced and connected to purity culture.

Overall, while the data was limited it did help to affirm on a small scale the two hypotheses. Women and men did have distinct different experiences of purity culture, and there were conflicts between Christianity teachings of gender equality and the reality of how these Church teachings are lived out in purity culture. Another small detail that was not heavily discussed because it is not the focus of this thesis should be noted. Many evangelicals have straight out said that they cannot embrace an ideology that places men and women as truly equal because by acknowledging this it calls into question verses that are taken literally to justify not only gender equality but also sections that are used to condemn homosexuality (Ingersoll, 2003). The fear is that if true gender equality is established they will have to find a new way to establish an argument against homosexuality. Without making statements about the church and homosexuality, it is a frail idea and shows how little women's rights may mean to certain church leaders over condemning homosexuality. Women's rights should be of the forefront of importance, and if there is a concern over biblical verses becoming at risk of being understood in a new light then frankly the church needs to have a better thought out biblically based argument against homosexuality. Improve one's evidence, rather than disregard women's rights (Ingersoll, 2003)

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study is important for both Christians and the secular people of varying beliefs in America. It is important for Christians who believe in gender equality, because they are the ones who will shape the future in the church for men and women. Additionally, members of the secular world should care because Christianity is so heavily intersected with American politics, and government. There is a huge amount of influence that Christianity still holds, despite narratives that they don't.

We cannot mistake a deviation from the past, as automatically in assimilation into the secular (Ingersoll). Recognizing truth, does not make religion or God wrong. It makes people wrong. Holding onto this in order to have some visible difference from others does not make sense, there are other healthy ways to show one's faith. Sexism is not it. Recognizing truth helps women. Changing what Christian gender ideology will look like in the future will take time, but it starts with evaluating the lived experiences of actual Christians in purity culture. What this means in the real world will take time and institutional change, but recognition of it is still a deep change from the often-blatant disregard this topic still has to overcome.

The process will be slow, and painful. There is a chance for gender equality, and a culture that helps women instead of putting them down. For now, institutions of religion appear to refuse to admit that some of their rhetoric is deeply harmful. I would like to believe that Christian religions who cling to the harmful aspects of purity culture are desperately scared of admitting that they are wrong. Joshua Harris says, "The great news about learning to admit that you got something wrong is that you don't have to be so afraid of being wrong, which means you can move toward people that see the world

differently than you and not be so terrified that they might change your mind.” (Harris, 2017). On an institutional scale if religious leaders can admit that the rhetoric pushed on young women that is obsessed with their sexuality, and unhealthily connected to systems of gender inequality they can start to move in the right direction. Perhaps Christianity can grow and expand for the better. The very intelligent answers of the survey takers show a glimpse of acknowledgement, and reflection on the harm of purity culture, along with the hopeful recognition that it isn't right. An acknowledgement that it needs to change to not just teaching or raising young adults to believe men and women are equal in the eyes of God, but actually treating each other as genuine equals.

## Appendices

As defined purity culture is a series of beliefs that highlights emphasis on sexual purity.

To what extent do you believe you experienced purity culture? Please list any experiences or examples.

1. I felt like I experienced this when I went to college because I had more time to self reflect MALE 4
2. I was always told that sex before marriage was okay and not wrong, but then punished for it if I had sex (home life). In church, I was taught that it was wrong to have sex before marriage and that it was the safest option. FEMALE 3
3. I believe I experienced the healthy side of "Purity Culture"; it was never oppressive. MALE 3
4. I was given a purity ring and talked to multiple times about sexual immorality and why it was wrong and why abstinence is key. FEMALE 2
5. Thoughts that were instilled in me: You would be dirty if you were not pure and everyone would know that you weren't pure. Your husband would be disappointed that you were not pure. One of the best gifts you would give to your husband is your "flower" Your chance at eternal salvation was ruined if you did not follow the rules and stay pure. FEMALE 5
6. raised to believe that you shouldn't do anything other than kiss before marriage - sexuality was/is not discussed in my home at all FEMALE 1
7. I grew up in a youth group at my church (which I was heavily involved in). Our youth pastor had one sexual partner in high school before he was married to a different woman who is now his wife. He regretted the decision he made, and

encouraged us strongly to not make the same mistake because we "give up a part of ourselves" when we have sex with someone who we do not stay with. MALE 2

8. Kind of considered innocent and pure because i am a virgin, even though i sin just like everyone else, you know? FEMALE 4
9. Church status deduction threats MALE 5

Have you ever participated in a virginity pledging, owning a purity ring, parent-daughter dance geared towards modesty or purity, or any other types of purity aimed events?

Please give any experiences or examples.

1. I had a purity ring once and attended church events talking about purity in high school FEMALE 3
2. I never have. MALE 3
3. I've had a purity ring FEMALE 2
4. My parents did the silver ring thing with my older sibling which is a large youth event pledging to stay pure until marriage and they received a purity ring. This did not work with my sibling and they did not do it with me or my other siblings. FEMALE 5
5. I have not, but all of my older siblings have FEMALE 1
6. Purity events MALE 5

Were you ever shamed by a family member, or church member for actions perceived as damaging to your sexuality (even if the actions were not sexual in nature)? Please give any examples or experiences (if comfortable).

1. My parents always assumed that I would get raped if I wore anything immodest, so I wasn't allowed to wear anything revealing. When I did, it was made fun of

and shamed (not for religious reasons). I have always been weary of men because of it FEMALE 3

2. I never have been. MALE 3
3. I got in trouble a lot for liking boys at a young age and was seen as promiscuous even tho I was young and didn't know better. FEMALE 2
4. I have now decided to commit to purity until marriage, but in a past relationship I did not necessarily do this. However, no one in my family really knew because I knew I would be in a lot of trouble with my parents FEMALE 1
5. Not by my family, but around church. I was addicted to pornography and masturbation for the better part of 8 years (age 11-19), and became pretty open about it once I got into high school. I was always encouraged to get an accountability partner (which was a poor, lazy, and failed attempt at helping my to knock the habit). I was always treated with grace initially, but no one in my church was genuinely equipped to help me through my addiction. Not until coming to GU was I able to overcome my struggle. MALE 2
6. Constantly being reprimanded because of past experiences MALE 5

To what extent do you believe members of the gender opposite yours are treated equally in your religion or church? Please give experiences or examples here.

1. In my current church, it absolutely is equal, but we believe that men and women have specific duties, not necessarily jobs or gendered tasks (men must lead the family, but both men and women can be spiritual leaders with equal paying jobs). I have never felt discriminated against at my current church because of age or gender, but I have at other churches (female worship leader). FEMALE 3

2. In my experience, women are treated equally, with the exception of leadership matters. MALE 3
3. You don't see a whole lot of women pastors or leaders and when you do they seem to be second guessed. FEMALE 2
4. Two of my three pastors while attending my church have been female. I did not know about the inequality in the church until I was older and experienced other churches. I have not experienced the inequality until coming to college and being told what I can and cannot do within the church. I was offered a position in a church but did not take it due to the churches beliefs that women should not hold certain positions. FEMALE 5
5. women are not treated equally in the church and that's a huge problem and also damaging to the body of Christ FEMALE 1
6. In the Southern Baptist Church I grew up in, women were not affirmed as leaders in any role other than small group leader, worship leader, or children's "coordinator." Women could not be elders, and most of the wives (of husbands) in my church took the role of being the primary caretaker of the house and the kids while the husband would be the bread-winner. For most of the households in my home church, the man was the head of the house. This is widely reflected within American Christianity, but was not the case within my household. MALE 2
7. I've had both women & men pastors but you can tell the difference in the reception by crowd MALE 5

To what extent do you believe members of the gender opposite yours are held to the same purity standards as members of your gender within the religion you were raised? Please give any examples or experiences here.

1. Men and women are both able to control themselves when it comes to purity. It is harder of a task for men likely, but that does not mean that the standard for them should be lowered just because of their biology. Men are just as capable as women and we can't diminish what a man can do just because of an excuse like "men think about sex more." FEMALE 3
2. 0.
3. I was raised to believe (by family and christian community around me) that both men and women have the same responsibility regarding sexual purity before God. MALE 3
4. In my religion we practice the same purity standards. For example abstinence was taught to boys and girls. FEMALE 2
5. I think that it has been put into my mind as a female that one of the biggest things I can provide my future husband is that I have remained pure until we have been married. It has always been you want to be pure for your husband. And you need to wait for him. But I have not really experienced the you need to be pure for your wife. Just a she is waiting for you. Also in the Bible there are many examples of a virgin with going to be with a man that already has many other wife's. FEMALE 5

6. I think the church tries to hold men to the same standard as women, but women are definitely shamed way more for not practicing sexual purity than men are  
FEMALE 1
7. As a male, I have had far far far fewer people preaching at me or breathing down my neck about what I wear, how I act, and what I do with my body. Females absolutely take the brunt of the blow of purity culture within the church. MALE 2
8. Girls get passes MALE 5

To what extent were you taught by family/friends or church that men are the dominant members of a romantic relationship? Please give any experiences or examples here.

1. I was taught them men should chase the girl FEMALE 3
2. Grandparents believed this to be true. Most likely due to generational misconceptions. MALE 3
3. My grandma is always telling my sister she's gonna have to submit to her husband but by sister I'd extremely head strong and says no. FEMALE 2
4. I think the head of the household has been something that has always been taught. However despite my parents believing that abs saying that dad is the head, I feel my mom in most things (not the big ones) is dominate in their relationship. Due to my mom and my partners mom both having mothers that are dominant in the relationship, my relationship is not dominants by men. FEMALE 5
5. my mom definitely believes that wives should submit to their husbands unless it is strictly against God's Word and she also lives this out. FEMALE 1
6. This wasn't always explicitly stated in the church, but it was definitely an implicit theology. In my household, however, my parents had an incredibly egalitarian (as

opposed to complementary) relationship, where my mother actually has always been more highly educated and had a higher income than my father. They also make decisions together, and my father is not "the head of the house." MALE 2

7. "Men are men and they have to lead & protect" MALE 5

To what extent do you have any stories about any negative or traumatic experiences regarding shame and sexuality in the church? Please give any examples or experiences here.

1. There have been a few men here and there that made me feel uncomfortable with advances, only to have it covered up by religious explanations. I've experienced multiple pastors having affairs and partaking in child pornography. FEMALE 3
2. No negative experiences regarding shame and sexuality in the church. MALE 3
3. Some people aren't allied to attend certain services because of being shamed for sexuality. FEMALE 2
4. I have not felt shamed. FEMALE 5
5. I don't think I have any stories FEMALE 1
6. I got excommunicated MALE 5

To what extent do you believe purity culture has been beneficial to you?

1. Nothing that they tried to teach was learned until I experienced it. Shaming people for having sexual interests is the least helpful way to attack the problem. Providing an open and safe community for people to talk about it and help each other build safe relationships as they experience trials would be entirely more beneficial FEMALE 3

2. As stated before, I never experienced toxic "purity culture", so for me it has actually been helpful in the sense that I know of a community of people that are going through the same fights as me and aiming for the same goal, honoring God. A "support system", if you may. MALE 3
3. I still respect purity culture but I don't follow the teachings I've been taught. FEMALE 2
4. I didn't really think about what others thought for the majority of my life and so the culture I would say did not effect me very much. However getting into college I have put way more thought into why we believe what we believe and we're some of these ideas originated. There are many of these ideas that I agree with but some misconceptions that I had to correct upon doing research. FEMALE 5
5. I think being taught to wait until marriage has been good for me because I really do believe that that is what should be done (for more reasons than just religious reasons) but I also had to deal with redirecting my thoughts on purity due to a lot of shame I experienced FEMALE 1
6. I agree with the intent of purity culture, but I think that it's become something that is more harmful than helpful within the Church. If Jesus were with us today, I think he would agree that we ought to abstain from sexual activity until marriage, and even then we should keep it exclusive. However, we have taken that understanding and extrapolated it into something far from the gospel; something far from grace. So for me, a male individual who has chosen to devote his life to Christ and has reasoned that it is best for me to wait until marriage for sex, I think that the most beneficial part for me has been hearing from others who want to

hear me and know my heart first, as well as wrestling through the decision for myself alongside Jesus. MALE 2

7. in some senses it has, because it is important to protect yourself and keep yourself holy in every aspect, not just with your body FEMALE 4
8. Slightly caused a suicidal episode in response to the churches response of my actions MALE 5

To what extent do you think purity culture has been harmful to you?

1. I never felt like I could talk about sexual trauma or relationships because I felt as though I would have been judged for making mistakes. I had to learn on my own what was toxic and healthy, but I feel like if I had someone to talk to about these things I wouldn't have taken so long to figure it out FEMALE 3
2. Not at all. MALE 3
3. It makes you feel that a mistake or having premarital sex is an end all thing and you feel bad about it or feel gross and tainted but that shouldn't be the case FEMALE 2
4. For a while I really struggled with the idea that if you weren't pure then you ruined your chance at heaven and eternity with God. This scared me for all the people that were not sure and knew what the Bible said. Something harmful or something to be aware of is that since we are supposed to be saving our self's for marriage that we don't make the marriage about having sex. I think that many times people get married so that they are able to unshamefully have sex. Or when a couple gets married one or both parties doesn't want sex or is scared or I

prepared because their whole life it has been something to hate and avoid.

FEMALE 5

5. I was in a really toxic relationship at one point and felt obligated to compromise my purity for the sake of the relationship, and after the relationship was over I really struggled to stop feeling ashamed of myself because of what purity culture had taught me. However, I have come to learn that purity is spiritual rather than physical, so because I have chosen to remain pure until marriage after that relationship, I am pure despite having not been sexually pure before. I have been made pure in Christ. FEMALE 1
6. Again, as a male who is a virgin, I haven't personally felt the negative effects of purity culture. MALE 2
7. However it is still important to note that there should not be such emphasis on purity with regards to sexuality when there isn't a similar push for other sins. we should not be discouraged from this one while others are thought of as not so bad. really i think we should just focus on trying to be holy like Christ is holy, and not for specific reasons like shame FEMALE 4
8. The church brought me more grief than help MALE 5

## Tables

Male	4	3.2	4.8	4	4	3.2	3.8	3.8	1.6	2.4	3.4	3.6	3.4	2.4	3.6	2.6
Female	4	3.4	4	2.6	3.8	4	4.6	4.4	1.8	3	3.6	3	3.8	3.4	3	3.2

M 1	5	4	5	2	5	5	5	3	1	1	5	4	1	1	4	2
M 2	3	4	4	4	2	1	1	3	1	3	2	1	3	1	4	1
M 3	5	2	5	4	5	3	5	5	1	1	3	5	4	1	5	1
M 4	4	4	5	5	5	4	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
M 5	3	2	5	5	3	3	5	5	2	3	3	4	5	5	1	5
F 1	5	4	4	2	4	4	4	5	1	2	2	4	4	3	4	3
F 2	3	3	5	4	2	4	5	5	3	4	2	2	4	4	3	4
F 3	3	3	2	2	5	4	4	3	2	3	4	5	4	5	1	3
F 4	4	4	5	2	4	4	5	4	2	3	4	5	4	5	1	3
F 5	5	3	4	3	4	4	5	5	1	3	5	2	4	1	3	2

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