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SHOULD WE CONTINUE TO USE THE TERM *SEXUAL PURITY*?

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Virginity has been treasured and valued in many ancient and modern cultures. In some countries, doctors will provide “virginity tests” before a wedding to ensure that a female family member retains physical evidence that she has never engaged in sex (no such test exists for males). Failure to provide adequate evidence of virginity justifies the annulment of the marriage as well as the heaping of public shame and humiliation on the family of the “tainted” bride.

Recently, a news story reminded me of this sad tradition. During her wedding ceremony, Maryland bride Brelyn Bowman offered a gift to her proud father in front of 3,500 guests. The gift was entitled a “Certificate of Purity,” and was presented as a symbol that she had remained sexually pure prior to her wedding day. She also had the certificate signed by her doctor confirming that her hymen was intact as physical evidence of her purity.¹ Brelyn voluntarily submitted herself to the same test that many women around the world are forced into in order proudly and demonstrably to reveal a virginal state before marriage.

From Sexual Abstinence to Sexual Purity. Few brides go as far as Brelyn, but her story is an extreme example of teachings on sexual purity that have influenced the church for the past generation. To be clear, God’s gift of sexual intimacy is designed to be enjoyed and experienced within the bounds of a covenant marriage. This standard requires sexual abstinence prior to marriage as well as sexual fidelity within marriage. This truth is important to proclaim, but we live in a world that continuously sends a very different message to our youth. The message that many teens hear is that their peers are all

engaging in awesome, consequence-free sex. Approximately two decades ago, many Christians saw the challenges in our more permissive culture and attempted a new strategy to reach our youth with the truth. Instead of focusing on sexual abstinence, there was an attempt to be more positive in the message. Sex was presented not as a negative act that needed to be avoided before marriage but as an amazing experience if you wait until after marriage. The focus on abstinence was then redirected to a more positive term: sexual purity.²

Most teachings on sexual purity involve making a pledge to keep one's heart and mind pure by avoiding sexual activity prior to marriage. This pledge is often done publicly and is frequently symbolized by a "purity ring" or some other symbol of one's premarital commitment to his or her future spouse. One of the goals of the movement is to create a counterculture of sexually pure teens that would counteract the hypersexualized world by providing a positive pressure to remain pure.

Problems with the Image of Purity. Despite the laudable goals and motivation of this movement, there are a number of concerns regarding the message that is communicated by the term *sexual purity*. If a substance is pure, it takes very little of a contaminant to defile it, and it is very difficult (if not impossible) to return it to its pure state. The illustrations frequently used to demonstrate the concept of sexual purity to young audiences communicate this very graphically. Girls who have lost their virginity have been described as a piece of tape that loses its stickiness, a piece of chewing gum that's been chewed, a cardboard heart sawed into pieces, and a bruised and partially eaten apple.³ Regardless of intention, the message communicated is that your worth and value are determined by your actions. This message can affect an individual profoundly. Psychologist Paul Rosen describes this as a core disgust reaction—once an object is seen as impure, no amount of purification is adequate to convince us of its purity.⁴

Many purity educators mention forgiveness, even to the point that you can be a "born-again" virgin and regain your sexual purity. However, the message that is communicated is antithetical to the message of Jesus Christ. The biblical truth is that human beings are intrinsically valuable based on the image of our Creator. We are valuable enough that Christ died for us despite our failings and sin. Using dirty, defiled, and unclean objects to describe our worth is precisely what Jesus does not do. Note also that there is no gradation to this example; you are in either a pure or impure state with no in between.

There is also a concern about those who have "lost" their purity through no fault of their own. Victims of sexual assault are more prevalent than we may know; studies

show that as many as one in four women and one in six men will be sexually abused in their lifetime. Victims of abuse frequently struggle with feelings of shame, guilt, and unworthiness and their healing can take years of hard work. The message that premarital sexual activity makes us unclean exacerbates their shame and delays their healing. The tragic story of Elizabeth Smart is an example. She was abducted at the age of fourteen and was rescued nine months later. Speaking during a forum on human trafficking, she recalled, "I thought, 'Oh, my gosh, I'm that chewed up piece of gum, nobody re-chews a piece of gum, you throw it away.' And that's how easy it is to feel like you no longer have worth, you no longer have value."⁵ She cites these thoughts as one reason why she did not seek to escape.

The Promises of Purity and Unrealistic Expectations of Marriage. There also can be an unintended message from these teachings that brings challenges to future Christian marriages. Sexual purity curricula often teach that one of the many positive benefits for being abstinent is a wonderful life of sexual intimacy once you are married. Saving your sexual purity as a gift to your spouse on your wedding day all but ensures a more satisfying marriage. This can be problematic for two reasons. First, there is no guarantee that remaining sexually abstinent will result in a problem-free life of sexual intimacy within marriage. Learning vulnerability and intimacy within a marriage takes time and hard work. The assurance of instant sexual fulfillment reduces God's great gift of marital sexual intimacy into a mere payoff for abstaining from bad behavior. Disillusionment regarding the challenges of marriage both inside and outside of the bedroom is common in the early years of marriage. Premarital programs should strive to strengthen the intimate lives of future marriages and prepare them for the real-world challenges they will face.

Second, although sex is presented as a positive good after the honeymoon, many couples have a challenge in "flipping the switch" from viewing sex as a defiling act to one that is honoring to God. Some of the purity pledges include the promise to "stay sexually pure until marriage." What happens then? Sex may now be viewed by some as a sort of "allowable impurity" that God tolerates. Using the aforementioned analogy, engaging in sex still makes you a piece of used bubblegum, but one that only your spouse gets to chew. Some individuals even show symptoms similar to victims of sexual abuse when beginning their marriages.⁶ We need to tell a better and more truthful story about sex.

Emotional Abstinence? There is also a concern regarding an extrapolation of the purity concept from sexual purity to emotional purity. Teachings on emotional purity center

on protecting your heart by not giving it away to anyone until you are ready to marry. By allowing yourself to become attached to another, purity teachings claim you lose a portion of your heart that you can never get back. The goal is to avoid becoming emotionally vulnerable with anyone except for the person you will soon marry, and thus protect yourself from dire emotional consequences even if you stay physically abstinent.

However, emotional vulnerability is necessary for many human relationships and a precursor for biblical love. The fear of opening yourself up to possible hurt from someone that you care about deeply is not necessarily a moral good. Do we permanently give a piece of our heart every time we are hurt by someone we love? Should we be encouraging emotional abstinence? Many of our important human relationships, even those involving friends and family, carry the risk of emotional pain. The fear of vulnerability and connection is not a characteristic of a virtuous person.

It has been approximately one generation since the modern sexual purity movement made inroads in our churches, and it may be time for a reevaluation. In short, I believe we need to reexamine the messages that we are sending to our young singles. In a world where hook-up culture abounds and casual sex is promoted as the norm, I understand the temptation and fear about the dangers of premarital sexuality. Nevertheless, we cannot allow that fear to distort the theology of sex and consequently the lifesaving message of the gospel. Current teachings on sexual purity can act as a form of relationship prosperity gospel: keep your heart and body pure, and God will reward you with a fantastic emotionally, spiritually, and sexually fulfilling marriage. If it were only that easy.

Purity is a goal that we strive for but will never reach with our behavior or thoughts. It is only the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ that makes us pure. We need to continue to teach about the importance of lifelong sexual integrity, including abstinence before marriage and complete fidelity during marriage. However, we also need to better communicate the grace and forgiveness offered to us by Jesus Christ for those who fail to reach the standard, which is all of us. My fear is that we may be raising a generation of virginal youth that fail to understand the true message of the gospel. I believe we can do better. —*Richard J. Poupard*

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NOTES

- 1 Megan McDonough, "On Love: Brelyn Freeman and Timothy Bowman Jr.," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2015.
- 2 A more thorough discussion can be found in Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2011).
- 3 Sara Galo, "How Not to Talk about Purity," *Relevant Magazine*, April 28, 2014.
- 4 Richard Allan Beck, *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Morality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).
- 5 Andrea Whatcott, "Elizabeth Smart Speaks at Human Trafficking Forum, Emphasizes Teaching Children That They Matter," *DeseretNews.com*, May 7, 2013.
- 6 More information and personal stories can be found at <http://tinaschermersellers.com/2015/03/24/how-the-purity-movement-causes-symptoms-of-sexual-abuse/>.