

How Purity Balls and Purity Culture Pervert Girlhood

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American Evangelical Christianity purports that females should actively avoid the appearance, thought, or expression of sexuality from childhood. The encouragement and implementation of these beliefs are known as the purity movement. Interestingly, even though the "goal" of the purity movement is to avoid living sexually, it often ends up sexualizing things that otherwise would not have been, especially considering the subjects of the movement are most often children. While the idea of sexual abstinence is encouraged for all members of this faith, the Church often hyperfocuses this effort on its youth. This is where purity balls are a helpful tool for having conversations around this movement. Purity balls are an event where the ideologies of purity, sexuality, and patriarchy converge in an overt and easily observable way. Evangelical Christianity sexualizes childhood when it pushes purity culture; purity balls and purity culture exemplify patriarchal dominance and the manipulation of moral narratives, which further victimizes female children. The definition of sexualization, according to Salem Press Encyclopedia, is "the attribution of sexual characteristics to a person or an object... sexualization is distinct from normal sexuality in that it... applies sexuality to individuals inappropriately, as in the case of children" (Ruth, 2020). Therefore, to prove something is sexualized, four things must be argued: some actor sexualized another person or group, this assignment of sexual characteristics is not inherent within this person or group, these characteristics are sexual, and this process of sexualization has a negative impact. To prove this, this paper will first show how the misrepresentation of purity culture goals makes the movement less about personal choices and more its leaders teaching its followers to be submissive. Next, this paper will examine the patterns of male dominance and how they are inappropriate in relation to children's "sexuality." With the understanding that purity culture is forced upon children and steeped in gendered politics, it will then be possible to examine how this movement sexualizes children. Finally, this

paper will contemplate the dehumanizing impact this sexualization has on girls and young women.

Before this paper can argue that the purity movement and purity balls sexualize children, it is essential to understand the Christian Evangelism and purity culture. Salem Press Encyclopedia identifies four tenets of evangelism: "conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism" (Caffrey, 2019). Purity culture has to do with the tenants of activism and biblicism. Activism conveys the evangelical goal of spreading Christianity and implementing Christian practices within one's life. In the purity movement, this means living a sexually pure life and encouraging others to do so as well. Biblicism is the evangelical belief that the Bible is the terminal moral authority from which activist goals are gleaned (Caffrey, 2019). In the purity movement, evangelicals believe that certain parts of the Bible convey God's will to live sexually pure lives.

To define what "purity" means to evangelical Christians for her book, *Making Chastity Sexy*, Christine Gardner interviewed several children active within the purity movement and asked them how they conceptualize purity (2011). The result defined purity as a lifestyle that protects the "theological view" that people's bodies are related to God, and to honor this, one must "respect" others and their own "self-worth" (Gardner, 2011). Many children preferred the phrase "purity" over "abstinence" because the latter lends itself to abstaining from sexual intercourse and, therefore, gives permission for other sexual behaviors (Gardner, 2011). Purity is a more restrictive term and emphasizes abstaining from *all* sexual acts that can be corrosive towards the ideal of respect (Gardner, 2011). Finally, it is important to understand the characteristics of a purity ball. A purity ball is an event for young Evangelical Christian girls to publicly dedicate their commitment to the purity movement (Gish, 2016). Purity balls have many

rituals, including dawning purity jewelry, wearing formal dresses or mock wedding dresses, engaging in liturgical dance, and reciting pledges (Gish, 2016). A purity ball is a concentrated expression of the purity movement and illuminates important aspects in a clear way.

The goal of purity culture, while portrayed to children as respecting and protecting the self, is obedience. While speaking to a group of evangelicals, Pamela Stenzel, a prominent purity ball and purity culture proponent, says while talking to a group of parents, "Does it work? You know what? Doesn't matter. Cause guess what? My job is not to keep teenagers from having sex... Our job should be to tell kids the truth! People of God can I beg you to commit yourself to truth, not what works...because at the end of the day, I'm not answering to you, I'm answering to God," (Stenzel, 2007). This means evangelical leaders intentionally manipulate the outward justification narrative (i.e., sexual purity is in the self's best interest) to increase the probability of the desired outcome. The desired outcome of this movement and event is children curtailing aspects of their own naturally inclined behaviors in the name of adhering to Christian morality and biblicism. The most basic of the implications of purity culture is that children learn compliance. Secondary to that, children must also comply with their parent's desires because they are the administrators of God's will. Third, there is the encouragement to comply with this standard from the child's church, because they are also administrators of God's desire. Stenzel even mentions how it is "our" duty to ensure children participate and accept purity culture. Given that Stenzel's audience was parents of children, and Stenzel herself is a Church authority, it is safe to assume she is referring to these actors. These three separate actors each add their own ethos for a child to consider. God communicates with the child through biblical text. Parents have conversations with and rules for their children. Churches have services and sermons, like the one previously quoted. These actions pressure children to participate in purity culture. For the

child to decide they first, are not interested in purity for themselves, and second, will not comply with the standards of purity, they must deny all of these actors. This is by design. This pastor's active recognition that the purity movement is not about stopping children from engaging in sex and only wants them to "[answer] to God" is plain evidence that this movement is a mechanism to mold children's will into one that will be obedient and subservient to authority. In the broader conversation about sexualizing children, this means that outside parties are pressuring children to conform to their paternal desires. That is, something is being forced upon these children, and it is not the case that children themselves are choosing this lifestyle.

The type of control purity balls and culture exerts on the children is patriarchal and inappropriate. In Robert Noonan's Book *The Three Weavers*, Noonan provides a guide for fathers detailing how to make their daughters act sexually pure and prepare for purity balls. After introducing the titular poem and preceding a set of exercise questions, Noonan directly addresses his readers with the following passage.

"Since you have chosen to go through this book with your daughter, you obviously have a desire to train her in this area. As a father, you have the privilege and responsibility of not just telling your daughter what God's law forbids, but of teaching what His heart was in giving these commands. When your daughter understands her Heavenly Father's intention, she can obey with understanding, not because she should or must, but because she understands that it is for her own good that these standards were set in place" (Noonan, 2004).

Noonan is right when he states that purchasers of his guide "obviously have a desire to train [their daughter] in this area." The phrase "train" elicits ideas of patriarchal control. It affirms this paper's previous inference that children do not freely elect to follow this lifestyle but

are instead doing so out of instruction. Noonan identifies the authority of this teaching does not come from God, the Bible, or the Church, but the father's unique identity as a man when he says, "As a father, you have the privilege and responsibility of not just telling your daughter what God's law forbids." Parental status is a necessary condition for the role of being a daughter's "trainer" but not sufficient. It is the introduction of the parent's maleness that makes the identity sufficient for this role. This makes Noonan's following discussion about daughters "[obeying]" commands open to gendered scrutiny. It is not merely an issue of wanting to exert control over a young girl's actions and thoughts, but it is also an issue of male dominance. The gendered implications make the sexualization of children all the more disturbing. Fathers having a strong interest and will to manipulate the sexual lives of their young daughters borders on sexual misconduct. Fathers talking to daughters about what they ought and ought not to do with their sexuality during their "training" brings the father closer to the daughter's sexuality than is appropriate. Given that purity culture is something forced onto children for patriarchal reasons, it is now appropriate to discuss its implications.

Purity culture sexualizes childhood, even though it claims to lessen sexual behavior. In Kate Ott's book *Sex + Faith: Talking With Your Children from Birth to Adolescence*, Ott begins the book saying, "The fact is, as a parent, you are a sexuality educator, even if you have not said anything about 'sex.' Your kids are learning by example from how you... show intimacy (or not) through touch, such as hugs, kisses, and play with your children" (Ott, 2016). Evangelical Christians begin thinking about their children's sexual potential from birth. Actions that have nothing to do with sex, sexuality, or sexual expression, like playtime between an infant and the parent, are encouraged to be thought of under that framework, epitomizing sexualization. Nothing about playing with a toddler begs to be thought of sexually. If a parent is playing with

their child and connects how their innocent playtime can influence the child's future intimate life, that is sexualization. It introduces the burden of considering sexuality before the child even can conceptualize sexuality or feel even an inkling of sexual desire. In part two of her book "Ages and Stages," Ott provides instructions about how to begin introducing elements of purity culture and concepts of sexuality in the following increments of age: 0-5, 6-10, 11-13, 14-18 (2016).

This pattern of sexualization begins at the birth of their children. Newborn babies are not sexual beings. This pattern of injecting sexual narratives continues throughout the child's entire life into adulthood.

This sexualization of girlhood leads to life-long dehumanization. The Abstinence Clearinghouse purity ball pledge reads, "With confidence in His power to strengthen me, I make a promise this day, to God, to you [the father], to myself, and to my future husband, and my future children to remain abstinent until the day I give myself as a wedding gift to my husband." (Purity Ball Planner). I see two parts to this pledge. The language of who the girl is making the pledge for, God, her father, future husband, and future children, seems like the first significant area to analyze. The motivations for abstaining from sexual activity is inextricably linked to patriarchal figures like God, the father, and the future husband. These first two would be significant, influential figures while growing up. What is more interesting, however, is the continuation of these monitors of sexual activity into adult life. Of course, God and fathers will most likely still be significant in adult life. However, the introduction of new monitors like the "future husband" and "future children" shows how purity culture in its ideal form means to continue in all stages of life. To have some part of a woman's autonomy owned by a man (the heterosexism in this assertion is a problem within itself given it is entirely possible and valid that many participants will go on to or already identify with the LGBT+ community when taking this

pledge) she has not yet even met is degrading. Purity culture denies the complete self-ownership of a girl or woman's autonomy. It is already an offense to an individual's personhood to steal portions of this autonomy and dole it out to the Church and fathers, but it is an entirely new level of degradation to reserve a piece for a figure who is not already in the female child's life.

Envisioning the female-self as a "gift" is the second significant area within this pledge. Gift giving is a function that requires three arguments. It requires that one say someone (the first argument) gave something (the second argument) to someone (the third argument). This presupposes that the first argument has ownership of the gift and, therefore, the authority to give the gift. In this case, the ownership of the virginity is most obviously the woman's, but in the context of the previous figures who have "trained" her in this area, it seems that the giver also includes the Christian God, the Church, and the father (who will presumably, "give" the daughter away at her wedding). It also assumes that the second argument is an object. However, in this case, the "gift" is the fruit of lifelong sexual purity, and virginity, which was forcibly curated by patriarchal figures. Owning someone's virginity and sexual purity is dehumanizing because it is within a person's rights to own their own decisions and sexuality in its entirety. The third argument presents the final moral implication. The future husband will receive her sexual purity. This seems a similar issue to the first argument. It is not ethically desirable for an entity other than the woman to have ownership of sexual prerogatives because it is dehumanizing. To argue something is sexualized takes many steps. First, it is important to recognize that sexualization is not done reflexively. It must be one unique entity completing the action to another unique entity. In the case of purity culture, it is the external actors of the evangelical Christian God, Church, and fathers that sexualize young girls. It is also important to recognize what motivates this sexualization. The paper shows how the desire for power, obedience, and the

continuation of patriarchal values are all motivating factors for the purity movement. It is not enough to singularly say, "x sexualized y." These actions have ethical implications that last a lifetime. In this case, it is the life-long dehumanization of women via continued control of their sexuality. It is unlikely that this specific pocket of society and one specific impact are exhaustive of every instance of this pattern. Understanding this, it becomes crucial to consider what other areas of life a desire for control of female sexuality leads to dehumanization.

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