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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE CHURCH AND THE BODY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN WOMEN'S STUDIES AND GENDER STUDIES

BY

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CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST 2016

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

When I was young, I loved church. I got excited to go to church every week, because to me, church meant seeing friends and people I loved, listening to great music, and hearing someone talk about things that I found to be very important. The experience of church was one that was very special to me, and the message of the church was one I thought I believed in. Sermons in my church were given on loving God and loving other people, being kind to each other, forgiving each other, and things like that. Church was about community and faith, and my young mind could not see any problems with it.

However, as I grew older, I began to notice some of the harsh things that church people were saying about other people, and the many types of people that were not welcome in church. I looked around me and realized that so many of those around me were similar to each other, fitting into the same mold. All of these bodies fit into the idea of what Christian bodies are “supposed” to be. There was an alarming lack of diversity in sexuality, identity, presentation, and even ethnicity. LGBTQ¹ bodies and sexual bodies especially need not apply.

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer

My faith was shaken when I learned that the love and acceptance of Christ did not necessarily follow from the followers of Christ. This is of course natural, as humans are fallible creatures. Yet the church as a whole tends to continually propagate shame-filled and negative messages when it comes to the body. These messages are ones that often hurt people, and make people feel unwelcome in church contexts. When I go to a church service now, I crave the experience I had when I was young, but I never quite reach it. It is too obvious to me as I look around how many people are no longer welcome here, and how many people are not offered this experience I so treasured as a young person. The community that I cherished was only open to certain types of people, people who fit the mold of a “proper” Christian person, and I no longer fit the mold.

I learned at some point along my journey that I was not the only person who felt like this. In fact, I spoke with several people who felt filled with shame and hurt because they did not fit the mold that they felt that church people wanted them to fit. It is important to me to share my own story, but this is more than just my story. Many people have similar stories, and a few of them have been gracious enough to share theirs with me.

Purpose

As I mentioned above, part of the purpose of this project will be to share the stories of those who have heard negative messages about their bodies. It is also intended to consider new ways to think about bodies and explore

possibilities for more positive bodily messages. In the next chapter, I will discuss the stories of four marginalized people, because change starts from the perspective of the marginalized. In chapter three, I will discuss my own story, as no research occurs in a vacuum, and my own experiences have shaped this thesis greatly. Chapter four will take up where these messages come from, including popular Christian literature and churches themselves. In chapter five, I explore the reasons why these negative messages are a problem, including their ineffectuality, their harmfulness, and how they are not from Scripture. Chapter six explains different and more positive ways to think about bodies, considering theological ideas that are different from the more traditional modes found in chapter four. Finally, I will conclude with some thoughts as to where this research leaves us and what we ought to take away from it.

Research Process

A note about the research process, before delving into the stories that were shared with me. This research is valuable to me precisely because it is personal. This piece will take seriously the idea of *situated knowledge*. In “Feminist Approaches to Research as a Process,” Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, Patricia Leavy, and Michelle L. Yaiser discuss the concept of situated knowledge. This idea is in opposition to the notion of positivism, which suggests that objectivity without bias is possible. Situated knowledge is the idea that all knowledge comes from a certain context, and no researcher can fully remove themselves from their biases. In order to come closer to objectivity, then, the

researcher must be up front about the context of their background and their reasons for asking certain questions. In my case, growing up in the church and having a body, particularly a woman's body, makes this a very personal research question for me.

This same article discusses feminist standpoint theory. The idea here is that rather than embracing one universal truth, each person has their own standpoint and truth. By beginning from the experiences of marginalized persons, "standpoint theory not only critically examines the marginalized groups as done in the past, but also critically examines the lives of the dominant groups."² The perspective of the dominant is often seen as being one-dimensional. By beginning research from the perspective of the oppressed and marginalized, other dimensions are added. There is a unique perspective on the hierarchies and systems of domination that the dominant groups cannot see. In the Christian context, historically those in power have been white heterosexual men. This thesis intends to examine the experiences of women and LGBT persons in particular, as they are marginalized in churches. One of the most important aspects of standpoint theory, however, is to focus not only on differences between gender when it comes to marginalization. Doing justice to various intersectional groups of people is difficult, but it comes from listening to these

² Nagy Hesse-Biber, Sharlene, Patricia Leavy, and Michelle L. Yaiser. "Feminist Approaches to Research as a Process." *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research*. Ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Michelle L. Yaiser. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 15-16.

standpoints of those involved in the groups. Rather than speaking for the oppressed, it is important to listen to *their experience* and allow them to speak for themselves. Those who have shared their stories with me have a history of being in the more marginalized groups in church discourse.

This piece is situated from a very specific context. The stories found here are examples of some of the problems found in churches, but this is certainly not a representative sample. Some churches absolutely offer broader, richer, and more helpful messages surrounding bodies. The issues highlighted herein are also certainly not all of the issues. My research will focus primarily on issues of sexual bodies and LGBTQ bodies and does not deal very much with racial and ethnic diversity, ableism, ageism, and several other bodily problems that many churches have. These are crucial issues, but far too intricate to tackle in one project.

This research is intended to be illustrative rather than representative. Certainly not every person has had the same experience as my four interviewees have. However, the very fact that these people have had experiences like this is cause for some retrospection. In my experience and the experience of others, the messages the church often gives about bodies, especially sexual bodies, is one that is full of shame and condemnation rather than love and acceptance. The purpose of this project is to try to come to terms with the hurt these messages have incurred and to reach a place where we can all better reflect that love of God, and find ways to talk about our bodies and sexuality in a more fruitful and

positive way. I will begin in the following chapter with the stories of my interviewees.

CHAPTER TWO

STORIES

In order to better hear the stories of those who have been marginalized, I spent some time engaging in oral interviews with people who have experience in Christian contexts. These four women shared their stories with me, explaining the messages that they have heard about their bodies in their church contexts. Please note that names and some identifying information have been changed in order to protect the identities of my participants.

Sam

Sam is a queer¹ person who has a fraught history with the church. She² grew up in an evangelical church context and left the church in college because she could no longer handle the messages she had received surrounding herself and her body. She is now back involved in a church context that is more uplifting and affirming for her, but she still struggles with the church. Sam shared her story with me. Growing up, Sam was taught that bodies weren't really the focus of

¹ Queer is an identity in LGBTQ communities that is sometimes used as an umbrella term to denote being gay or lesbian. Queer is a term that is also sometimes used when someone does not fall into a typical category of gender or sexual norms.

² Sam identifies as gender-queer or gender-fluid. She does not specifically identify as a man or a woman, but because most of her social experience has been as a girl or a woman, I will be using feminine pronouns for the sake of clarity.

church at all. In fact, the “disembodied inhuman,” as she puts it, was kind of the ideal. Sex and sexuality were rarely talked about, if ever, and her young life was filled more with questions than answers about how to properly be in her body. She was never really given information on how she was supposed to act, only on how not to act. Many of the lessons she learned surrounding her body were taught through tacit messages. If someone were to bring up the topic of bodies or sexuality, it was simply something that was not discussed, because that’s not what good Christians in her context discussed.

The few explicit messages Sam received about her body were shaming messages, surrounding her burgeoning sexuality:

A lot of the explicit messages I remember getting, or at least a lot of the conversations where it was like, “no don’t do that,” were with my foster mom. She was pretty sure that my sister and I were both queer, which we were, I think there were often explicit messages like, “just reassure me you’re not gay,” or “make sure that people aren’t thinking this about you,” or just “name five boys you like.” So I think a lot of what I remember ... was “make sure you’re not gay, ok?” and everything else was fine.

Rather than being given a place to learn and grow and explore her sexuality, Sam was led to believe at a very young age that there was something wrong with her. Attending a Christian school, she didn’t feel involved in the conversation, because her teachers and leaders didn’t address her body:

I went to a Christian school and there was a weird relationship where I feel like I didn’t tune into a lot of the explicit talks we were given about sexuality and gender, although there weren’t many, because I didn’t fit a lot of the gender norms. I feel like I was just like “I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” but then I do explicitly remember being praised multiple times by people who taught there for being sort of the model of what it was to be a good Christian woman because I wasn’t interested in

boys. No one mentioned that being interested in the alternative was probably not the saintly option.

In the church she grew up in, Sam didn't hear any messages around sex and bodies, because her church was more interested in abstract theology. There wasn't any specific instruction on how to live life as a good Christian, but there was a "general sense that whatever culture is doing, we're not." While culture was beginning to gradually open up to the LGBT communities, Sam's church, school, and family were doing the opposite. In many different ways, the message she was hearing was that she was not supposed to be gay, which led to a feeling of alienation with her body. Eventually she decided to ignore her body entirely:

I didn't have words for any of my bodily categories until well into college, because it wasn't talked about. Gay people were bad people that were over there. It was relatively unthinkable in my mind that I would fit into that category, cause I didn't really understand who I was, and then I think I had a sense too of the threat of violence. ... I had a sense in high school that 'ok, I'm different,' but it definitely wasn't something that I dared to talk about because I think there was an overarching sense of 'no, If I say this this is going to be bad, like I will be punished, this is not welcome here, I will be asked to leave this community if this is true.' So it was like I just didn't have a body after that, which was like 'eh, ok,' and I think that that was like by and large encouraged, too, like that made me really respectable and very trustworthy because I didn't have a body. And also made me really popular with my peers, because I could be a daredevil after that.

After she determined to deny her identity and her body, she began to use her body in ways that were almost dangerous. Rather than keeping herself safe and healthy, she no longer cared about what happened to her body, so she could take steps that others would not, and she put herself in situations where her physical well-being was at risk. She mentions that if she had more self-

awareness, she wouldn't have been so reckless with her body. When she did not have positive ways to process her identity and sexuality, she decided to reject the messages she was receiving. She left the church at 18.

The truly amazing part about Sam's story, however, is that she did come back to the church and she has been able to find acceptance. Even though a lot of people still respond negatively to her queer identity, there are people in her life that have given her the chance to embrace who she is. Her church performed a liturgy for her coming out that made her feel welcome and accepted. A lesbian couple in her community calls themselves the "queer parents of the church," in a place where she has come to belong. These are things that have helped her to unlearn the messages of her childhood and tolerate the messages she still hears.

Unfortunately, the problem is still there. Sam runs into people that make negative statements about LGBT folks with some regularity. She is learning to be in respectful conversation with people she disagrees with despite the negativity that is still sometimes thrust upon her. She still hears hurtful things too often.

Sam's story is far from over, and I know that she will continue to grow and learn and flourish in her body. So many people do not want her to feel comfortable as herself, but she has found a way. It is still so heartbreaking, though, that Sam and so many people like her have been made to feel like there is something wrong with them simply because they do not fit into the mold of the proper Christian. Bodies are made in all different types, and God created us this way. Why are so many Christians so unwilling to welcome all bodies? Bodies that

do not fit the mold of proper Christian actions, identities, and expressions are seen as problematic. The church does not seem to have room for these bodies.

Nicole

Nicole's story is certainly not the same as Sam's, but in a lot of ways there are many similarities. Nicole heard many messages about bodies, specifically sexual bodies, that were analogous to the messages Sam heard. Nicole also left the church for a period, before returning later in life. She too had difficulties with some of the messages that she heard, and she too found an affirming community that reminded her why she "wanted to be a Christian in the first place." Nicole shared her story with me.

When she was young, Nicole felt uncomfortable in her body because of the messages she received. While her parents were supportive of her in many ways, her church and Christian school made her feel ashamed about her body. Because she was tall, modesty was more difficult, and she didn't feel like she was successful as a proper Christian girl, which led to a lot of discomfort, even into adulthood:

I remember in pretty much any church context, whether it was like youth group or going to a private Christian school and doing chapel they would separate out the boys and girls and I remember being like inundated with the modesty thing and that it's like up to me to keep these boys from behaving like boys or whatever. ... and then feeling bad about myself because I was tall and finding clothes that were modest is next to impossible. I never wore skirts because I was going to send them [boys] to hell if I did. ... That was the focus of a lot of education time when I was growing up was policing what I was wearing, so like until the last couple of years I felt uncomfortable like with my bra strap showing ... I've gotten to the point where I'm not ashamed of my body and the way that it looks and

the way that it might be seen, but it took a really long time and I wish that it hadn't.

While she was concerned about modesty, Nicole also began to deal with issues surrounding her developing body. Because sexuality was a thing that was rarely directly discussed, she felt like she had to keep her concerns to herself and suppress her feelings as much as possible:

I discovered masturbation at a very young age ... and then it was my weird creepy like didn't-need-to-be-a-secret, but like freaked-me-out thing for so long because there were just these casual things, and it was kind of understood that "well women don't deal with that because they're not particularly sexual creatures," and I'm like well ... "that's a thing I do, and does that make me deviant and creepy?", and it put this weird wall between me and God because it felt like when I did that everything was horrible and bad and awful and I was a terrible person and I didn't have anyone I could talk to about it ...

She began to be afraid about growing up and getting her period and becoming a "real woman." The pressure put on women to act and look a certain way scared her, and she didn't want to have any part in that. In addition to the direct messages she heard from school and church, Nicole read Christian romance novels, which enforced the ideal of the perfect Christian girl and the perfect Christian life. She was also encouraged to read *Captivating* by John and Stasi Eldridge,³ as well as other books that enforced this idea. Since the messages were so widespread, she was definitely convinced by them, but Nicole never felt

³ *Captivating* as described on the back cover: "The message of *Captivating* is this: Your heart matters more than anything else in all creation. The desires you had as a little girl and the longings you still feel as a woman—they are telling you of the life God created you to live. He offers to come now as the Hero of your story, to rescue your heart and release you to live as a fully alive and feminine woman. A woman who is truly captivating."

like she lived up to those ideals, even though she wished that she could:

I remember having to read *Captivating* at one point ... and you're like a princess that needs to be rescued, and here's why. Ugh. ... I actually just found my copy of *Captivating* recently, and I don't know why I kept it but I found it and there's all this stuff underlined and all this stuff written in the margins and I look back on that person and I don't recognize her ... The people that have had any sort of leadership roles like the role models, the girls on worship team are always like the thin, really well dressed girls ... I always kind of felt shlumpy, in all sorts of that word and almost like that kept me from being part of the church in a way. ... I wasn't an appealing mate or something and so like maybe if I'm not pretty enough I won't find a husband and if I don't find a husband I'm not really a good Christian cause I'm not really worth anything on my own.

Although her parents were egalitarian, and not interested in typical gender norms, Christian culture led Nicole to believe that there were certain things she was expected to do and ways she was expected to act:

[From my parents] I never got messages of "well girls do this and boys do this," but I for sure got that message from Christian culture at large, and I've spent a lot of time kind of unlearning those things and like I wonder why I didn't take my parents' word for more things. ... They did not put all that weight on me, but somebody else did.

One of the few things Nicole disagrees with her parents about is the place of LGBT people in the church. As she came to realize she's "not entirely straight," as she puts it, Nicole also came to realize that she believed that being gay is not a problem, and it does not affect one's place in the church. This realization for Nicole was also a difficult one, considering the messages that she has heard surrounding LGBT bodies in her church context:

And I think I mean that one for sure is just hammered home all the time like "boys and girls are ok, anything other than that is weird and icky and bad and here's why, and let's spend lots of time doing that" instead of like "how do we love each other."

Nicole has felt frustrated because of these messages, not only because they have made living in her body more difficult, but also because she does not see them as being well argued:

... A lot of the old messages were hammered home with just a very surface level reading of the scripture that was really frustrating ... There is a context that needs to be discussed here, are we actually translating this correctly, like when I read the Bible there are definitely still passages that worry me or frustrate me and I want to understand why they're there, but so much of it depends on context. ... I think that it comes out of a place of just fear like, "If I admit that there might be more than one way to interpret this, then my whole foundation comes crumbling down and I don't know who I am because my foundation is a mess." ...

Although Nicole has rejected many of the messages about her body that she grew up hearing, she is still invested in the church. She spent some time outside of the church, and she believes that media and the secular world have been more helpful in dealing with issues than the church was as she grew up. She "felt more loved and accepted [working at a gay cafe] than I ever did at church, which is really sad, but it's also great." She no longer believes that she needs to go to church all the time, but she does spend time cultivating her faith:

I'm less inclined to think that my faith relies on regular church attendance, although I do notice that I feel better when I'm in a community of Christians periodically, though it *highly* depends on the community of Christians that we're talking about.

Similar to Sam, Nicole has found a way to learn to accept herself and her body. She still hears negative messages from some Christian contexts, but she can navigate them more easily and reject the messages that she finds to be unhelpful.

Olivia

In contrast to Sam and Nicole, Olivia never spent time away from the church. Despite struggling desperately to accept herself, both as a person in general and as a transwoman⁴ in particular, and despite the negative messages she has heard and still hears, the church is very important to her, and she is even in the process of seeking ordination. Because she has been in the church all her life and attended Christian schools including college and seminary, Olivia has done a lot of theological study in her life. Olivia shared her story with me.

As she grew up, Olivia was taught that the focus of church and Christianity was getting to heaven. The spirit was seen as much more important than the body, to the point of the body being a problem:

I don't know that anybody ever went out and said the body is bad, you know, but everything around sex was evil, modesty was important, everybody's gotta cover up, everybody's gotta dress nice ... it was very much this message of the world doesn't matter then hence your body doesn't matter, and just worry about going to heaven - that's the only thing that matters. ... You don't want to be comfortable in your body, you're supposed to not feel comfortable, you're supposed to suffer while on earth, and it's supposed to be the cross you're going to bear. ... I think that so many churches struggle to not be hyper-spiritualized at the expense of the body.

Rather than learning ways to flourish in her body, Olivia was taught to focus on her spirit, hearing messages that her body was unimportant and even an

⁴ Transgender refers to someone whose gender identity does not match the sex they were born with. A transman identifies as a man, and a transwoman identifies as a woman. The terms *transgender*, *transwoman*, and the abbreviation *trans* will be used, as Nicole used the term to identify herself. However, it should be noted that *trans* should not be used to identify someone unless they use it to identify themselves.

impediment to spiritual life. Both within her Christian school and the books they were reading, the messages were more specific, centering around things like modesty and purity:

A lot of it would've been things that I was reading, but it would've been stuff that church leaders were recommending. At least when I was in high school, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*⁵ was the big book that was going around, and encouraged to read all these other books about purity and modesty. At least at the school, there was this huge priority placed on how important it was for girls to be modest ... I would definitely say that was from the teachers, from the leaders, from the special speakers they brought in, from the books they would recommend about dating and things like that, it was very solidly coming from the authority at the school, to enforce certain understandings ...

Olivia didn't have specific language during high school for her transgender identity. She definitely knew there was a "problem," but she saw it as a problem with herself. Although things are better for her now than when she was young, Olivia still hears very negative messages about her identity:

I would say that trans wasn't even remotely, trans was so far off the radar. My main thought when I was in high school was "if being gay is this evil, how much more evil am I probably?" ... Even now, I don't know that I always feel that I'm welcome in the church that I'm at, even though it's an open and affirming church. I often feel like I'm more of a curiosity than someone that's valued as part of the congregation. ... Even today I don't feel comfortable in my skin just because of all the negative, it's so internalized, all the hate, I then do it to myself. I think that's both having seen being a woman denigrated so much, you know growing up with the dress codes and the modesty talks and that kind of stuff, that I internalized that, and then also internalized the transphobia too that it's hard to feel like there's really any positive messages.

⁵ *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, by Joshua Harris, as described on the back cover: "Dating. Isn't there a better way? *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* suggests there is. Reorder your romantic life in the light of God's Word and find more fulfillment than a date could ever give—a life of sincere love, true purity, and purposeful singleness."

Since attending a Christian college and seminary, Olivia has grown to better understand herself and her identity. Although she still hears a lot of negativity about being trans from church teachings and church people, studying theology and Scripture on her own has been a big help in coming to believe positive things about her body. Olivia's theology of the body is centered in the incarnation:

Any of the positivity I've gotten in terms of how I can understand myself as a trans Christian like has been because of my own study not because of anything I've heard from a church. ... I would hesitate to say that they're not a very dualistic body-spirit in Paul and in other parts of the Bible, and especially with the influence from Greek thought,⁶ and even if it might not actually say it directly in the Bible itself, it is such a feature of how Christianity's always understood the bible, because of the influence of Greek philosophy on early Christianity. ... You would think that with the early Christians dealing with the gnostics who were saying that the world was evil and the spirit is good you would think that they would've reacted a little bit better, but it just seemed like in the long run the train of thought really influenced the church and how we've always understood and read the Bible. ... I would hesitate to say that you can't read the stuff in other ways, but at the same time it's hard not to read Paul and think about how down he is on the body. When I think about what I would see as a better Christian theology of the body would be that Christ redeems everything, including the body, and that if the incarnation is essential part of Christian teaching, that would mean that God chose to become human. So to me that sends a pretty solid message about the body, that you know if God was willing to take human form, then the body can't be that bad.

Although Olivia still hears a lot of negative messages, she has found a place to belong in some ways, and transitioning⁷ has been helpful in becoming who she truly is and valuing herself for that identity:

Transitioning was a big step for hating myself a little bit less. I think that

⁶ In a later section, I will discuss how Greek thought influenced early Christianity and the roots of these body-shaming messages.

⁷ In the transgender community, transitioning refers to moving towards permanently expressing one's gender in terms of one's personal identity rather than birth sex.

kind of relates to what I was saying earlier and being trans and saying I want to be comfortable with my own skin is a very radical act, so for me to say that I want to transition, that's a huge thing, and that's been a major step. Still many steps left to take, but it's definitely been helpful. It's coming up on a year since I transitioned at church, and where I'm at mentally this year versus where I was at mentally last year. I mean it's definitely not been easy, but it's been I would say that I mentally am in a better place than I was in last year. I don't know that I would say I'm anywhere near 100%, I would at least say I'm at like 50%, so the 50% is better than 0. So it's been a challenging year, but I think about how I felt last December, and I definitely feel like I'm in a better place than then. The messages Olivia has received about her body have been overwhelmingly negative. Being transgender and taking the radical act of transitioning is something that a lot of Christians find appalling. However, the reality is that her transition has brought a lot of peace to her life, and if she had continued to deny her God-given identity, she would not have been able to come to this place of peace. A lot of church messages would suggest that Olivia deny her identity as a woman, but this would be so harmful. Like Sam and Nicole, when Olivia found space to really embrace herself and learn to be comfortable in her body, she began to flourish.

Mindy

Mindy heard a lot of similar messages as she grew up in church. She left her very conservative denomination to pursue her own spiritual relationship. She has children who are still involved in the church, and she struggles to help them maintain positive ideas about their bodies while they hear many of the messages she grew up hearing. Mindy shared her story with me.

Mindy grew up in a very conservative denomination, and was given a lot of

rules surrounding her body, in order to maintain purity:

For me, it was very much about maintaining the pure holy temple in honor of God, so no smoking, no drinking, no explicit or sexual types of dancing, those kinds of things. Not to mention, sex is completely off the table until you're married. ... There was a lot of guilt connected to that so if you did this it was automatically a sin, you had to repent, you know that kind of thing. The typical stories regarding masturbation and that it's unhealthy for you, it's sinful, those kinds of things. ...

In her church context, those who were welcome were people who fit into the heteronormative⁸ ideal of a Christian person:

Based on what's seen and often talked about in terms of what's ok, are ones that mainstream society accepts. So ones that meet the binary, stereotypical, traditional views. So, cisgender,⁹ if it's a woman, she's more feminine, if it's a male, he's more masculine. There's none of this "wishy, washy, in between." ... Queerness is not acceptable, it's a "deviation from what God intends." ... The stereotypical, you know girls are supposed to have this specific body type and guys are supposed to have this specific body type, and if you don't fit that, or if you're a guy and you're not super sporty, that says something about you that's not super positive. ... In the church at least in my experience it's super heteronormative, super your typical binary of masculine versus feminine. There's not really space for that in between.

Bodies were policed in Mindy's church context. She was taught that she needed to act and look a certain way in order to fit into the ideals of proper Christian womanhood, so she did:

Because of that super conservative background, and being a middle child I was a people pleaser, and I was supposed to be like the perfect child, I did everything I was supposed to do. ... In junior high, I had family members tell me that I was overweight, and it was important for guys to like me and they wouldn't like me if I was overweight, so between my 8th and 9th grade year, I dropped 40 pounds. It was that "you've got to fit this

⁸ Heteronormativity is the term used to describe heterosexual norms that govern social and church views of "proper" life, marriage, relationships, and more.

⁹ Cisgender refers to people whose gender identity correlates with their birth sex.

certain mold.” And so that’s what I did and in doing that part of that also built in this whole thing that it was my job to get men’s approval of how I look. Which has perpetuated the whole heteronormative thing. So I would dress the way I thought I was supposed to dress to get guys’ attention and to do all of that. Which now I totally don’t care.

In Mindy’s denomination, quoting scripture and being able to memorize scripture were highly emphasized. The messages that she heard all came from scripture, but only certain scriptural messages were touted:

[There was a lot of] Proof-texting the Bible: “We’re gonna pick out certain verses and say this is where we’re staking our claim on this, even if we ignore all the other verses around it.” ... so because Paul makes comments about people who sleep with men the way that they sleep with women ... that’s defined in one way and there’s no other way around it. However, there are plenty of other verses that they’ll look for other ways around it cause it doesn’t fit what they want it to fit. ... [It was like] “This is how we feel, so let’s go search the bible to prove that’s the way it’s supposed to be, because that’s what we’re comfortable with.”

Although Mindy learned to read scripture in this legalistic manner, she also learned from her grandmother that it was not their place to judge people for their choices. Her grandmother was also an example for her of someone who did not quite fit the mold:

My grandmother always taught me I could be and do whatever I wanted to. ... Which is where I get a lot of my feminist background from in an indirect kind of way. ... I will never forget my grandmother teaching me the lesson that ... there was a girl who had gotten pregnant, and my grandmother was like “that’s between her and God. We don’t get to make the decision of right or wrong, that’s between her and God.”

As an adult, Mindy left her church denomination and began her own study and spiritual walk. Realizing that these messages were ones she no longer believed, she decided to change the way she viewed things as well as the way she read

the Bible:

Now it's very different. I can see the much bigger picture, and I can see that there's so much more context, and the Bible was written at a time where the social context was very, very, very different and there's so much we don't know, and so it's hard for me to read it now and see it in any of the same light that I was taught initially. ...Where I began to branch off and do my own study and figure things out on my own and to kind of completely break free of that. Once I started to do that and realized how many holes there were in the messages I was taught, and that it was basically based on fear. Fear of the unknown, the need to control people, the more I was able to break free of that and say, "Ok, everything I've been taught about that is not necessarily something I can get behind." ... So now my relationship with God and how I use my body in service to God is a very interpersonal relationship that is mine alone, and I don't try to put that on somebody else, just like I don't want anyone else to put their belief system on me. ...I felt like I had to do this to be worthy. I tried my hardest to fit in those norms ... I still hear those voices, because it doesn't just go away because you decide you're going to shift your perspective. But it's much easier for me to recognize them and to shift my perspective than it was when I was [young].

Although Mindy is no longer a part of her youth's denomination, her children are.

One of her struggles now involves trying to combat the same guilt that she felt

when she was young in her children:

[My kids] and I had conversations this weekend because they're going through a purity unit or whatever in their bible class at school. It's all about saving yourself until marriage and not letting anyone defile you, that kind of thing. ... We had this long conversation about how it's their body, they get to make those decisions ... They're only going to get abstinence instruction in school, so I see it as my job to do the true sex-ed part. ... They all want to do abstinence only, which completely in my mind and from my own personal upbringing, doesn't prepare you for anything. ...We did talk about masturbation, which was a very interesting conversation, because they're super embarrassed about it, and trying to help them understand it's totally normal. But that's not the message that they're getting. And I don't even think they talk about it in church. I'm pretty sure they don't talk about it at school. ... The whole idea of sex is treated in such a negative light. ... they have a very difficult time talking about it ... really it's a very taboo subject, even though it shouldn't be.

While Mindy has come to a place of peace in her faith and her body, her kids still hear the messages that she heard growing up. From Mindy's childhood to now, there are these negative messages surrounding bodies. Mindy no longer associates with any specific Christian denomination, but she still maintains her faith, and a more positive image of herself and her body:

Now my view of God and my religious connection is much more broad. I definitely don't ascribe to the super conservative belief systems that I grew up with, but I don't really have a specific protestant denomination that I adhere to. I love some of the traditions that I find in lots of different churches. ... For me it's really more about relationship with one another and walking through life with one another versus following a strict set of rules which is what ... I saw people saying was the way to get to Heaven. ... "If you follow the rules and get all your little boxes checked, you're good to go."

It took leaving the church to regain a more positive view of herself, and her faith is a more personal and uplifting one without the messages she grew up with. The messages still affect Mindy through her kids, but she is doing her best to help them gain a more positive view of themselves earlier on. Like Sam, Nicole, and Olivia, life for Mindy has been better without these messages hanging over her.

All of these stories are different, but there is a running theme of bodies being seen as problematic. Nicole's burgeoning sexuality was a problem. Sam's queerness was a problem. Olivia's gender identity was a problem. Mindy's weight was a problem. All of these women tried at one point to fit in. They did not want to be a problem. As they grew older, they came to realize that they were not the ones with the problem. The problem is that they were told that there was

something wrong with them, and they were filled with shame and guilt as a result.

There is nothing wrong with bodies, yet the church continues to promote these messages. The following chapter will discuss my own story in the context of my body.

CHAPTER THREE

MY STORY

There is no level upon which this is purely academic for me. As I mentioned in the introduction, there is a knowledge with this research that is a situated knowledge. The context of this piece comes from a personal place, as I grew up as a woman with a body in the church. I have felt this same shame and guilt because of these same messages. This is in some ways the culmination and in some ways the starting point of the process of becoming true to myself and true to what I believe the world is. This is my story.

I grew up in a very conservative Christian community. As far as I knew growing up, it was every young girl's goal to go to college, work for a couple of years, then get married to a nice man with a nice job and have nice babies. I lived what is colloquially termed a "sheltered life" in many ways. I never tried a cigarette. I was very sensitive to the plight of my "brothers" in Christ, so I never wore anything midriff baring or too form fitting. I never swore. The only alcohol that passed my lips was Communion wine. I was unfamiliar with MTV and vh1. I had no concept of homosexuality until I was in high school. It would be safe to say that my entire life was heterosexist, heteronormative, and homophobic, until I went to college.

When I was young, I loved feminine trappings, but I very much acted like a

"tomboy." I rode a pink and purple bike and played with Barbies, but I dressed in overalls and backward caps and spoke my mind. I grew into a pre-teen and began to reject the "pinkness" of my childhood. I rejected all femininity and was derided for it by many of my peers (those who weren't gender bending like I was). As a teenager I was a "punk" as so many were in the early 2000s. I wore Tripp pants and spiked belts, I listened to music and dyed my hair. Gradually I began to weave femininity back into my wardrobe and my general aesthetic. I began to decide that I didn't care how people saw me, that I just wanted to be myself. I had so wholeheartedly rejected what it seemed to mean to be a girl on the outside while buying into all of myths of girlhood on the inside.

I spent much of my young life doing the things I believed I was supposed to do. I read my Bible, and I prayed. I tried to be kind to my siblings. I hardly ever fell asleep in church. But most importantly (or so I thought), I was *pure*. However, eventually I realized what a considerable struggle purity truly was.

Along with most others in my church community, I was deeply involved in the ideas of *True Love Waits* and abstinence pledges. I made a commitment when I was young to save sex and all manner of sexuality for marriage. I wore a ring on my left ring finger to signify that I believed that true love could wait. I happily wrote letters to my "Future Husband," talking about how many children we would have and how we would enjoy sex together when it came to that. I wore clothing that was not too tight, too short, or too low-cut in order to make sure my guy friends would not be tempted by my body. And then I began to

experience real, intense sexual urges. I masturbated for the first time and felt deep shame. I could not speak with anyone about my burgeoning sexuality because I thought there was something dirty about me that I needed to hide. So I read *Every Young Woman's Battle*.- The book discusses how to grow as a sexually pure young woman, and the reasons for saving sex and avoiding masturbation. I agreed wholeheartedly with everything the book said and attempted to follow its instructions. I failed. I still experienced urges I could not explain. I wrote more letters to my "Future Husband," apologizing for failing him. And I kept quiet. I struggled deeply with my sexual awakening, but I spoke about it to no one for fear that I would be condemned. If only I could just make myself stop, I thought, I could be pure again. It took quite some time for me to take steps away from this shame. And I was not the only one experiencing all of this confusion and fear. As I grew older and began to evaluate these messages, I finally began to feel comfortable talking about sex with others. It was in these conversations that I realized how widespread this anxiety was for those like me. Our bodies were temples, and we were supposed to honor God with them. Yet the messages I and many others received were messages that caused us to hate and be afraid of our bodies. Why are Christians so afraid of the body?

As I grew into myself I began to reject the myths of girlhood that I had bought into, as well as the shame I felt about my body. I began to be aware of the ways that we talked about bodies in church, and to question those ways.

I am a feminist because I want girls to hear when they're young that they

can be anything. I was lucky enough to be told that. I was also told that I needed to wear a dress to church and sit quietly at my grandparents' dinner table, but those were simple things. I could do that. I was encouraged to excel in academics (and I did) and to pursue challenges (and I did). I am so grateful to family and my friends for encouraging me to achieve.

I am an LGBT ally because in college my eyes were opened to new ways of being. For the first time, I heard someone question if Christians had it all wrong this whole time. I started to have conversations with friends about the intersections of religion and homosexuality. I started to question the long-ingrained assumptions I had always believed, and I started to believe that what I had been told my entire life was wrong. And for the first time, I had intimate friendships with lesbian women and gay men. A friend once told me that she had slept with a woman, expecting me to condemn her. The shame that she felt filled me with shame, because she thought I would be ready to send her to hell for expressing intimacy with another human being.

I am sexually active because for 20 years I suppressed my sexuality with a death grip, and it filled me with deep shame. Sex was not evil, but it was certainly a taboo subject, and something that was considered possible only inside of marriage. It was only once I began to have conversations with others about sex and open up my views that the shame began to lessen. The first time I heard a sermon suggesting that premarital sex may not be such a terrible thing after all, I felt some deeply held hurt break free. It was as though God whispered to me, "You don't have to be ashamed." When I said no to shame for the first time and

accepted my body as it is, I felt so much more fulfilled, and my faith life flourished when I finally realized I was not on the road to condemnation.

Through all of these experiences, I have realized that the messages I've heard about my body and about so many different bodies may not be true. People have said that these messages come from scripture, but they are only one possible interpretation. I believe in scripture, but not in the same way I did when I was young. I believe in God, but not in the same way that I did when I was young. As my story and the stories of Sam, Nicole, Olivia, and Mindy illustrate, a lot of the messages that the church gives people about their bodies are messages that can hurt people. A later chapter will offer some alternative messages. There is a place in the Bible for bodies. Is there room in the church? The following chapter will consider where some of these messages come from, delving into Christian literature and church statements.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MESSAGES

The stories we have discussed are just stories of a few people. While these people have experienced these negative messages, that does not necessarily mean that these messages are widespread. However, in this section I intend to discuss some of these messages from the sources themselves. Both in Christian church documents and in popular Christian literature, these messages are indeed widespread. The books mentioned by the women I interviewed are just a part of the overwhelming Christian literature that touts the themes I have been considering, but since they have personally affected these women, they will be my starting point. These books are also best-sellers and highly influential in conservative Christian circles.¹

I Kissed Dating Goodbye

In 1997, Joshua Harris wrote *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. The premise of the book is that young Christians ought to avoid typical dating because it leads to temptations of all sorts, most particularly sexual temptation. He considers with dismay stories of many who lost their virginity before marriage, giving in to this

¹ See the book descriptions on popular websites.

pervasive temptation. Much of what he says rings true for those who believe that premarital sex is sinful. Even beyond this, he discusses the importance of building relationships on mutual respect and care rather than focusing on physical aspects. These are certainly positive motivations. However, much of what he says hinges on this argument, and is shaming for those who disagree with it:

Focusing on the physical is plainly sinful. God demands sexual purity. And he [sic] does this for our own good. Physical involvement can distort two people's perspective of each other and lead to unwise choices. God also knows we'll carry the memories of our past physical involvement into marriage. He doesn't want us to live with guilt and regret.²

It is the case that God doesn't want us to live with guilt and regret. However, so much of this guilt and regret comes not from actions of physical intimacy themselves but from the messages both young people and adults have heard throughout much of their lives. This book, like so many others, simply perpetuates this idea that bodies are a problem unless they act one specific way, conforming to heteronormative ideals. The only way to overcome the problem of bodies seems to be to deny the reality of different types of bodies. I will discuss more in depth in the following chapter how these beliefs about bodies are not scriptural. Here, my point is to shed light on how these messages further the guilt and shame that they are ostensibly trying to erase. In my own story, I was only able to overcome my shame when I learned that God did not need shame from

² Harris, Joshua. *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1997. 37.

me. My actions were not the problem, it was the messages that were the problem.

The popular website *Patheos* is dedicated to “hosting the conversation on faith.”³ Home to blogs and columns from several religious perspectives on topics and issues, it also hosts conversations about sexuality, including critiques of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, and *Every Young Woman’s Battle*, which I will be discussing next. Libby Anne is a blogger on the site, and she discusses her experience of reading Harris’ book and others penned by him. She describes how reading Harris distorted her views of sexuality and that his raising of the purity bar made her young self be ever striving for a perfect purity that no one can truly reach.⁴

The ideas perpetuated in *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* are ones that promote an inherently heteronormative structure, and one that, as Anne pointed out, is difficult for anyone to truly follow. For example, Harris suggests that God’s plan for every young person’s life *probably* involves marriage, and how typical dating can be a barrier to that.

Wasting too much time trying each other out as boyfriend and girlfriend can actually distract two people from the more important task of preparing to be good spouses. God has a perfect plan for your life. More than likely, that plan includes marriage, and if so, somewhere in this world God has the perfect person for you.⁵

³ Patheos Labs. *Patheos*. N.p., n.d.

⁴ Anne, Libby. "What I Learned from Joshua Harris." *Patheos*. N.p., 25 Oct. 2012.

⁵ Harris 77.

Yet, we know with certainty that every person is unique, and while there may be a plan for each person's life, it does not necessarily entail falling into heteronormative bonds. Further on, Harris discusses the motivations behind striving for purity.

... Impurity isn't something we step into suddenly. It happens when we lose our focus on God. Often in dating relationships, impurity starts long before the moments of passion in back seats. Instead it begins in our hearts, in our motivations and attitudes. ... Sin begins in our minds and hearts.⁶

With this statement, I fully agree. The motivations behind our actions have so much to do with whether our actions are responsible and respectful or not. Yet, Harris suggests that "moments of passion in back seats" may be the problem, which is only brought on by negative motivations and attitudes. My suggestion would be that those back seat moments are not the problem at all, and that what is necessary when it comes to making decisions about sexuality is responsibility rather than many specific purity rules. I will discuss further the theology about responsible Christian sexual ethics in Chapter 6.

As Libby Anne Suggests, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, and books like it are perpetuating shame in Christian culture. They are suggesting to young people that they need to constantly evaluate their actions and make sure they are not falling into impure thoughts or deeds. Trying so hard to reach the purity bar where Harris has set it is so difficult. As Anne says, she was "afraid to have so

⁶ 90-91.

much as a *crush* on a boy.”⁷ Because purity is such a slippery slope according to Harris, it is next to impossible to not fall into one trap or another of compromising one’s purity. *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* has not helped young people, but rather led them to believe there will always be a problem with their bodies.

Every Young Woman’s Battle

In 2004, Shannon Ethridge and Stephen Arterburn wrote *Every Young Woman’s Battle: Guarding Your Mind, Heart, and Body in a Sex-Saturated World*. Ethridge and Arterburn discuss ways to avoid falling into the trap of sexuality before marriage. The goals found in their book are positive ones:

[This book] will show you how you can maneuver through the minefield of youth without losing the battle for sexual and emotional integrity. If you can avoid the land mines and be victorious in battle, you will be more likely to enter your adult years with confidence and purpose. Your life will be free of desperation, and you will make great choices for your future.⁸

This sounds perfect. Every young person wants to be told that they will be confident and purposeful, making great choices for their future. However, is it realistic that this can happen simply by avoiding sexuality? Granted, this is not the only argument of the book, and it absolutely discusses many ways to maintain sexual and emotional health. However, what is problematic is that there are no options given for those who want to live full lives in their bodies. Reading it as a young person, I was filled with shame, knowing that I did not fully live up to

⁷ Anne, Libby. "What I Learned from Joshua Harris." *Patheos*. N.p., 25 Oct. 2012.

⁸ Ethridge, Shannon, and Stephen Arterburn. *Every Young Woman's Battle: Guarding Your Mind, Heart, and Body in a Sex-Saturated World*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2004. 12.

the standards found within. Yet, what young person could? The book contains a list of ways that the “private battle” for sexual integrity is waged.⁹ The list seems to be unending with ways that someone could stumble in their purity. There are so very many ways to fail with your body. Even outside of sexuality, the book discusses being an image-bearer of God:

We thought about inserting a graph or chart in this chapter to show minimum and maximum weights for young women, but decided against it. Why? Because we don’t want to perpetuate the myth that your beauty

-
- ⁹ 1. Do you watch television shows or movies with sexual jokes or graphic sex scenes?
 2. Does the music you listen to talk blatantly of sexual desires outside of marriage?(cntd)
 3. Do you ever act overly friendly or seductively to get a guy’s attention?
 4. Do thoughts of having or keeping a boyfriend consume your mind to the point that you find it difficult to concentrate on anything else for any length of time?
 5. Are you looking for or entertaining the idea of a serious romantic relationship even though it will be several years before you are ready to get married?
 6. Do you habitually masturbate to pleasure yourself sexually or as a means of resisting sexual involvement with others?
 7. Do you consider oral sex or other sexual activities okay because they’re not vaginal sex and you can’t get pregnant from them?
 8. Do you feel that your virginity has been stolen from you?
 9. Do you feel as if you are “damaged goods” that a “respectable guy” wouldn’t want?
 10. Do you believe it is ever okay for a couple to live together even though they are not married?
 11. Do you believe it is ever okay for a couple to have sex before marriage?
 12. Have you ever lied to your parents about where you were going or whom you were with because you knew they wouldn’t approve if you told the truth?
 13. Would you lie to your parents in order to go out with a particular guy you liked a lot if you knew you could get away with it?
 14. Have you ever made out with a guy just because it seemed like the thing to do?
 15. Are you anxious to get out from under the control of your parents and gain your freedom to pursue any relationship you want?
 16. Do you go into web sites or chat rooms that you know your parents would not approve of?
 17. Have you ever given your phone number or physical address to a stranger you were flirting with over the internet without your parents’ knowledge?
 18. Have you set rules or guidelines for your behavior or your relationships that you’ve already broken?
 19. Do you hide certain things, such as steamy love letters, magazines, or videos?
 20. Do you envision that getting married someday will be the answer to all of your problems and relieve you of your sexual and emotional temptations? (12-14).

comes from a particular number on your bathroom scale. Yet, even though true beauty cannot be measured by outward appearances, looking good on the outside is relatively important because you represent God. The secret to looking and feeling your personal best is eating healthy foods and exercising your body. As you simply eat the right foods in the right amounts and exercise to enhance or maintain your metabolism and muscle strength, your body will settle into a weight that is absolutely perfect for you.¹⁰

According to this book, if you are overweight or underweight, lazy, sexually active, a flirt, someone who masturbates, or much more, you are doing something wrong. Although this book claims to want to help young women, in reality it *is* perpetuating ideas that there is only one right way to belong in your body.

On *Patheos*, Jenny Moe discusses how Christians talk about lust in “Everything Under the Umbrella of Lust.” She specifically considers the section in *Every Young Woman’s Battle* that deals with masturbation. The authors suggest that masturbation is wrong because “when you marry, if your husband isn’t able to please you in the exact same way, this could make your marital sex life very frustrating and disappointing.”¹¹ As Moe points out, this sexist reasoning simply continues the idea that women’s sexuality needs to be contained. Moe points out that books like these and a lot of church discourse use Scripture (out of context) in order to make rules for sexuality that are “designed for failure.”¹²

¹⁰ 57.

¹¹ 48.

¹² Moe, Jenny. "Everything Under the Umbrella of Lust." *Patheos*. N.p., 17 Mar. 2016.

As Moe points out, one of the concerns in *Every Young Woman's Battle* has to do with masturbation, without taking into account the healthy sexual aspects of masturbation.¹³ The assumption on the part of the authors of the book is that masturbation is wrong because it could tarnish your sex life with your future husband. This is a problem because it reinforces heteronormative ideals, like *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, but also because it is simply untrue. Masturbation can have health benefits, and it can definitely improve one's sex life. Knowing what is pleasurable for your body can help you and your partner find delight in each other. When you are able to have healthy communication and mutual respect, your sex life will be far more positive than the one touted in this book. *Every Young Woman's Battle* is reinforcing patriarchal relationships. "Most husbands find pleasure and satisfaction in bringing their wives to orgasm," it says, but you could "rob your future husband of this pleasure" if you learn what your body likes and try to communicate that to him.¹⁴ The authors are suggesting that in a marriage relationship, a woman should not communicate her desires to her husband but she should accept and appreciate whatever he wants. This is plainly unequal, and it does not celebrate the body and sexual delight a woman can bring into a mutual sexual relationship. I will explore further the ideas of mutuality and respect in a later chapter.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Ethridge and Arterburn 48.

Captivating

Captivating was written in 2005 by John and Stasi Eldredge. Its primary discussion is about learning what it means to be feminine in a God-honoring way. In fact, there is quite a bit to like in the book, simply in that it discusses many of the longings people feel that they try to meet in shallow ways and show other ways to meet these longings. However, the primary problem with this book is in its extreme binary thinking. According to the authors, men are supposed to act in a very specific masculine way and women are supposed to act in a very specific feminine way.

The point of *Captivating* is to find ways to become a full person in a positive way, living a full life. This is a wonderful reason to write a book. However, John and Stasi Eldredge write this book in a way that describes only one true way to be masculine or feminine.

We think you'll find that every woman in her heart of hearts longs for three things: to be romanced, to play an irreplaceable role in a great adventure, and to unveil beauty. That's what makes a woman come alive. ... There are three core desires in the heart of every man as well ... But they are uniquely masculine. For starters, every man wants a battle to fight ... Men also long for adventure. ... Finally, every man longs for a beauty to rescue.¹⁵

These desires are desires that are found in the hearts of people in general. It is not only a feminine desire to be loved or to find beauty in the world, just like it is not only masculine to want to offer their strength on the behalf of others.

¹⁵ Eldredge, John, and Stasi Eldredge. *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005. 8, 17-18.

Captivating discusses ways to live out these desires in positive ways, but it does not allow for differing desires. Vulnerability is not masculine, and the strength of women is not given weight. Like the previous books, this one also contributes to shame and guilt while attempting to fix them. A woman who does not fit into these desires, one who is assertive or intentionally single, or sexually active and in charge of her body, cannot find a place in this book. A man who is sensitive and vulnerable, allowing others to lead cannot find a place in this book. What does this say to young people who do not fit into the proper mold? This book perpetuates the message: there is something wrong with you.

In "What (Not All) Women Want: The Finicky Femininity of *Captivating* by John and Stasi Eldredge," Agnieszka Tennant discusses this. The title alone explains her primary thesis, which is that *Captivating* seems to require a type of femininity that many women do not fall into. As Tennant puts it, the femininity that the Eldredges are talking about is shallow, "ignoring the wondrous complexity that God breathed into them."¹⁶ Unfortunately, Tennant's ideas of femininity are still shallow, not allowing for the multiplicity of variations in femininity and masculinity.

This is an issue with a lot of Christian discourse. As in *Captivating*, so much of what young people hear is that femininity and masculinity are very specific worlds, and to cross the boundaries between them is unheard of. This book is

¹⁶ Tennant, Agnieszka. "What (Not All) Women Want: The Finicky Femininity of *Captivating* by John and Stasi Eldredge." *Christianity Today* 1 Aug. 2006: 60.

filled with statements that entail the vast difference in “proper” gender roles. “The desire to be romanced lies deep in the heart of every woman.”¹⁷ “The essence of a man is strength.”¹⁸ “The nurturing of a life is a high and holy calling. And as a woman, it is yours.”¹⁹ Yet, in reality, femininity and masculinity are socially constructed. What we think of as being feminine and masculine is socially, geographically, and historically located, and these ideas are constantly changing depending on context. There is no one way to act feminine or one way to act masculine, yet *Captivating* and much of church discourse tells us that there is.²⁰ In fact, you do not need to be a woman to act in feminine ways, or a man to act in masculine ways.²¹ These ideas are stereotypes brought about by culture, not Scripture. Yet, they are ideas that are pervasive in Christian culture.

Church Documents

In 1995, Mary McClintock Fulkerson wrote an article discussing Church Documents on Sexuality. At this time, the documents were seen as being progressive and even liberal in some ways. The Episcopal, United Methodist,

¹⁷ Eldredge 127.

¹⁸ 128.

¹⁹ 177.

²⁰ See Michael Kimmel’s “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity.” for more about the social construction of masculinity.

²¹ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Gosh Boy George, You Must be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!” for more on this.

Evangelical Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations all released new documents opening up new ways to think about sexuality. However, these “progressive” documents were still quite conservative and constricting.²²

Currently, some church denominations are indeed doing work to open up discussion when it comes to bodily issues, such as homosexuality, transgender rights, premarital sex, and more. However, a simple search of popular mainline churches shows that the belief systems held are still primarily that of sexuality belonging only in the context of heterosexual marriage. Despite growing up reading books like those discussed above, each of the people I interviewed has found a place to belong. Yet, that is a supremely difficult task. Imagine a young person who is trans or gay trying to find a church home and looking on the internet for somewhere they might feel comfortable. Yet so many churches and other groups affirm these same messages that the books have been teaching. A google search of Chicago churches offered several churches that had very little to say about sexuality, which is not surprising. The majority of those that address the subject do so by reinforcing the heteronormative lifestyle, stating that sexuality belongs only in a heterosexual marriage.²³ Those institutions that have

²² Fulkerson, Mary McClintock. "Church Documents on Human Sexuality and the Authority of Scripture." *Interpretation* 49.1 (1995): 48.

²³ See: <http://newhopecmbc.org/nd-sexuality/> , <http://www.moodychurch.org/get-to-know-us/what-we-believe/> , <http://www.wheaton.edu/About-Wheaton/Community-Covenant> , https://go.efca.org/sites/default/files/resources/docs/2013/05/a_church_statement_on_human_sexuality_3.pdf , <https://cmda.org/resources/publication/human-sexuality-ethics-statement>, <http://www.cmalliance.org/about/beliefs/perspectives/human-sexuality>

specific statements that do not allow for space outside of heteronormativity include Wheaton College, The Christian Medical and Dental Association, and several churches and denominations, including the Christian and Missionary Alliance, which is a non-denominational group of over 2000 churches. These messages are difficult to get away from. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) has perhaps the only sexuality statement that offers broad viewpoints of in depth issues in a way that can be read positively for LGBT persons. Yet it still affirms the primacy of heterosexual marriage, and it does not consider transgender issues.²⁴ Church discourse may slowly be getting better when it comes to addressing issues of importance to marginalized people, but the strongest messages that come through are still those that imply (or state outright) that only one kind of body is acceptable. Sexual bodies and LGBT bodies do not fit into that proper, acceptable mold.

Concluding Thoughts

It is not our imagination. The messages that come from churches themselves, but most especially from Christian literature, perpetuate themes of body-negativity, sexuality shaming and heteronormativity. It can be so difficult for marginalized people to find their way in the world in the first place. It is heartbreaking that church discourse makes it even more difficult for women, for LGBTQ individuals, for those who are overweight, and so many more to live lives

²⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust. N.p., 19 Aug. 2009.

without shame. These messages are hurtful, and they make life even more difficult for those who already are struggling to find their way.

In the introduction, I mentioned how much I loved the community of a church when I was young. A church can be a place where someone can make friends, grow their faith, learn new things, and belong. Yet for marginalized people, this has become very difficult. Finding a church that does not condemn premarital sex or same-sex marriage is not a simple thing, and finding one where you feel comfortable is even more difficult. The books that are recommended, the sermons that are taught, and the messages that are whispered all can fill people with shame if they do not quite fit into the proper mold of the Christian body. We want to find a place to belong, but we are bombarded with messages that tell us that we do *not* fit. In the next chapter, I will explicate the idea of how these messages harm people, and discuss their basis in Scripture.

CHAPTER FIVE

NEGATIVE MESSAGES

These messages are very problematic. Not only are they harmful to those who hear and receive them, but they are contrary to scriptural teaching. These messages also promote a culture of secrecy surrounding bodies and sexual activity.

Harmful Messages

It is clear that the discourse surrounding bodies in churches is harmful toward people, especially marginalized people. In the stories of Sam, Nicole, Olivia, and Mindy, as well as in my story, there are several instances of shame being perpetuated through messages such as the ones described in their stories and in the previous chapter discussing Christian literature. Olivia's story is perhaps the most striking example of this. In her young life, believing that gay people were evil because of the messages she had heard, she questioned her own identity, believing that she must be "even more evil." She had no words at the time for her transgender identity, but she was made to believe that she was wrong in her body, even evil. This is not an isolated event, but it is so disheartening. So many marginalized people, not just those found in this piece, have been made to feel that they have something wrong with them. This does

not promote a healthy well-being.

44

In addition to this, although some of these messages are overtly hurtful, many of them are more insidious and subtle, falling under the umbrella of microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as follows:

It is the constant and continuing everyday reality of slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral, and decent family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students, teachers, clerks, waiters and waitresses, employers, health care professionals, and educators. The power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator, who is unaware that he or she has engaged in a behavior that threatens and demeans the recipient of such a communication.¹

The books discussed in the previous chapter provide the most clear examples of microaggressions, in that they are well-meaning while still subtly shaming their readers, or in some cases overtly shaming them. The question comes up, of course, whether microaggressions are truly that problematic, but as Sue explains, they certainly can be:

Critics have accused researchers of exaggerating the detrimental impact of microaggressions by making a “mountain out of a molehill” ... Microaggressions are constant and continuing experiences of marginalized groups in our society; they assail the self-esteem of subjective well-being and worthiness, produce physical health problems, shorten life expectancy, and deny minority populations equal access and opportunity in education, employment, and health care ... Any one microaggression alone may be minimally impactful, but when they occur continuously throughout a lifespan, their cumulative nature can have major detrimental consequences.²

¹ Sue, Derald Wing. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010. xv.

² 6-7.

Many of the messages we have been looking at can be considered microaggressions when they happen in one instance. Often the person who is saying something shaming or hurtful may not even realize it. However, microaggressions are simply the symptom of a much wider problem, which is a system of belief that promotes negative messages. As I discussed in the previous chapter, it is difficult for a marginalized person to get away from these messages, and Christian culture continues promoting the harmful, shameful, negativity found in them. If this were a simple issue of one or two church leaders or peers making negative statements about bodies, it would be problematic but not nearly so insidious. Rather, the vast majority of church discourse and Christian culture is filled with negativity. People like Olivia and Sam are told over and over that they do not belong because their bodies are different from what people expect. People like Nicole and Mindy are told over and over that they should be ashamed because they have dared to explore their bodies. If we take these messages individually, they can be seen as microaggressions, but when we look at the broader picture, there is an entire culture that is shaming and harming people whose bodies do not quite fit the mold.

Culture of Secrecy

In dominant Christian culture, premarital sex is extremely taboo. LGBTQ identities are seen as shameful, and are often hidden. When the teachings that we promote in the messages adolescents hear surrounding their bodies have to do with shame and condemnation, they are made to feel like they cannot talk to

anyone about what they are dealing with. For example, Nicole talks about the deep shame she felt about masturbation when she was young. She believed it was wrong due to the whispers about sex in her church context, so she did not have anyone to talk to about healthy modes of sexuality. The messages that Sam and Nicole heard did not make them change their identities and actions, but they did make them feel shame about them, so they hid or denied them as much as they could while they were young. These messages promote a culture of secrecy. Sexual activity still happens in church contexts. LGBT people still exist. Bodies are still bodies. Yet we don't talk about these things, because we are filled with shame about them, and we don't learn healthy ways to exist in our bodies.

This culture of secrecy draws obvious parallels with sex education. Comprehensive sex education is clearly more effective than abstinence-only programs in promoting safe sex practices. Abstinence-only programs are ineffective in reducing sexual initiation in teens, as well as teen pregnancy.³ However, many still promote and require abstinence-only sex education despite its ineffectiveness. Conservative parents and teachers and other leaders believe that teaching comprehensive sex education will lead to greater control of the sexual activity of young people. However, that claim is not true, and we are

³ See "Does Abstinence-Only Education Put Adolescents at Risk?" by Jane Epstein, "Abstinence-Only Programs Under Fire" by Tracy Hampton, and "Abstinence-Only and Comprehensive Sex Education and the Initiation of Sexual Activity and Teen Pregnancy" by Pamela K. Kohler, Lisa E. Manhart, and William E. Lafferty.

harming youth by making them ill prepared for their lives. Comprehensive sex education allows students to make reasonable judgments and choices, since they have all the information to do so.

In the same way, church discourse is not helping young people when it comes to making positive choices with their bodies and sexuality. Church discourse seems to expect that if they keep promoting only one type of body, the body that fits into the proper mold and acts in the proper ways, only one type of body will exist. This is simply not the case. For the purposes of this project alone, there are four people who have bodies that do not fall in line with the type of body that is supposed to exist. This culture of secrecy does not stop these bodies from existing, but it pushes them into the shadows. None of my interviewees felt comfortable talking with authority figures about their burgeoning sexualities or identities because they were made to believe that their bodies were shameful. So they hid in secret with their worries about being trans or sexually active, and it took much longer than it should have for them to learn to be comfortable with their bodies.

If church discourse were more positive, this culture of secrecy would not be nearly so much of a problem. When people with bodies that are “different” are made to feel comfortable and safe, they can ask for help and begin to learn and grow and make reasonable choices about their bodies. Unfortunately, in so many cases, young people especially are made to feel uncomfortable and ashamed, so they do not learn positive things about their bodies until much later in life. This

culture of secrecy is hurting and alienating people.

Unscriptural Messages

Not only can these messages lead to psychological problems, but they are also not scripturally sound. Sexuality, particularly in relation to women and their bodies, has been seen very negatively for millennia. Some, including many people in the Christian church, see this negativity towards bodies and sexuality as a result of Biblical teachings. These messages are believed to come from Scripture in general and Jesus in particular. However, this is simply not the case. Jesus was perhaps one of the first prominent teachers to hold a positive, humanity-affirming view of women. In the early centuries of Christianity, the words of Jesus and his followers were twisted to mirror the negative cultural attitudes of the time.

After the death of Christ, the first century of the early Christian church maintained a positive view of women, the body, and sexuality. In accounts of the gospels and the early church in the Bible, women were actually given their own names, rather than being referred to in reference to other men.⁴ Women participated in church leadership as well. A positive view of marital sexuality persisted. It is especially interesting to note the positive place of women in the early church when considering the negative place of women in society in general. Women were not less than human. In comparison to the cultural attitudes of the

⁴ Saunders, Ross. *Outrageous Women, Outrageous God: Women in the First Two Generations of Christianity*. Australia: E. J. Dwyer, 1996. 21.

time, women had a far better place in society in the early church era.⁵

It is after the first one or two centuries of the early church that things began to change. According to Saunders, early church fathers such as Ignatius and Clement were so entrenched in Mediterranean society that they interpreted scripture in such a way as to denigrate both the position of women and the position of sex and the body. Women were considered again the “source of sexual sin,” and exhorted to maintain a staunch morality in order to avoid the shame of society. In fact, if men were to engage in sexual sin, it was typified as the fault of the woman. In this way, Ignatius and Clement portrayed women as sexual temptresses.⁶

According to William Phipps, the destruction of Jerusalem and the killings and martyrdoms of early church leaders such as Paul led to an upheaval in church teachings. Much of the church leadership was gone, and the center of the church in the Holy City was gone. This led to a geographical expansion of the church, but a moral and credal one as well. The church was no longer focused on the roots of ancient Judaism. The standards of church life were now coming more from the outlook of culture than from earlier Christian thought. This is most clear when it comes to the church cooption of the idea of Greek Dualism, which

⁵ 121.

⁶ 162.

elevates the soul and thought, and demeans the body.⁷ This dualism was perhaps the main reason for the denigration of the body in early Christian thought. Sex was unworthy of the intelligence manifested in men. Women, the bearers of sex, were also unworthy of men.

Jerome and Augustine were very prominent church leaders in their day, and they were major players in the influence of Christian thought. Each of these church fathers spoke often and very negatively about sex. Augustine in particular saw it as problematic and acceptable only for procreation. In reading Augustine, it is interesting to note that he was not himself a virgin. Though celibate at the time of the majority of his writings, he had been sexually promiscuous in his past. He expressed deep shame about his encounters, and this is a likely reason for his intense distaste for the act itself. Augustine viewed his youth negatively, so his beliefs were skewed negatively. In addition to this, he perceived women to be the purveyors of sex and sensuality, as it was with women that the sex act was performed. Women, of course, were not as rational as men, and they were more likely to give in to their baser urges. This led him to attempt to avoid women and teach his followers to do the same. As influential as these early church thinkers were, these negative views became the norm through the Middle Ages and beyond.⁸ For these authoritative figures, celibacy was clearly the ideal situation.

⁷ Phipps, William E. *Was Jesus Married?: The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970. 121-122.

⁸ 169-175.

However, celibacy was simply not a realistic teaching for everyone. Sex, then, was the tool of procreation. It was to be used sparingly and reluctantly, only to propagate further generations of Christians.

This is where the basis of body-negativity, sexuality shaming, and heteronormativity came into play. Rather than the teachings of Jesus, rather than scripture, church history and tradition is founded on cultural attitudes that were patriarchal, misogynistic, and body-hating. Compare for example the words of Clement with teachings from Scripture:

But if one withdraw the veil of the temple, I mean the head-dress, the dye, the clothes, the gold, the paint, the cosmetics,-- that is, the web consisting of them, the veil, with the view of finding Within the true beauty, he will be disgusted, I know well. For he will not find the image of God dwelling within, as is meet; but instead of it a fornicator and adulteress has occupied the shrine of the soul. And the true beast will thus be detected-- an ape smeared with white paint. And that deceitful serpent, devouring the understanding part of man through vanity, has the soul as its hole, filling all with deadly poisons; and injecting his own venom of deception, this pander of a dragon has changed women into harlots.⁹

Whereas Clement's words are highly negative towards women, particularly women who "embellish" themselves, Jesus welcomed women to his table and into his group of followers. There are some Biblical passages that appear to be negative towards homosexual practice, premarital sex, and other issues that I have been discussing, but these passages remain open to much interpretation. It is crucial to read these texts within the context of their historical background. I will discuss this contextual reading as well as more positive theological views of the

⁹ "The Instructor Book III." *Early Christian Writings*. Ed. Kirby Peter. N.p., n.d.

body in the next chapter. However, what is crucial here to understand is that the shame filled messages that pervade church teachings do not find their basis in Scripture, despite widespread beliefs to the contrary.

CHAPTER SIX

ALTERNATIVE MESSAGES

Although the dominant themes in church discourse surrounding bodies seem to be negative, this is certainly not the only way of looking at things. In this chapter, I will trace some alternative considerations of bodies. Church discourse seems to promote messages that say that sex is taboo, and something that needs to be saved for marriage. These messages say that bodies need to fit a certain mold, particularly a mold that is heterosexual and cisgender. They seem to promote a feeling that bodies are not as important as theology and spirituality. The following are several theologians who have attempted to find new and more positive ways to look at the ideas I am discussing.

Beverly Wildung Harrison, 1985

I intend to begin my analysis with the work of Beverly Wildung Harrison, as she is regarded as the “mother of Christian feminist ethics.” Harrison spent her career discussing social ethics from a feminist and Christian perspective, especially aspects concerning procreative choice and sexuality. Harrison died in 2012, leaving behind an international legacy.¹

In *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, Harrison and

¹ Union Theological Seminary. *Beverly Harrison's Passing*. Union Theological Seminary, 1978. (see Harrison's obituary for more information about her life and works)

Carol Robb collaborated to put together a group of essays related to Christian ethics on a wide range of topics concerning women and feminism. My focus here will be on the chapters concerning sexuality. In her essay titled "Sexuality and Social Policy," Harrison explains why it is crucial to rethink the sexual ethic that was pervasive in church discourse at the time. Although *Making the Connections* was published in 1985, over 30 years ago, her arguments are still relevant to our current discussion.

Harrison views both new attitudes and knowledge about sexuality and women's move to become recognized as full persons as reason for moving toward a new ethic of sexuality. "The religious dictum that the only moral expression of sexuality is that which is at least open to the possibility of procreation has been a source of many women's inability to achieve a self-defining role in relation to their bodies."² Women are in danger of social and sexual inequity and social and sexual violence. Sexual norms and the messages in church discourse about them are a reflection of social power dynamics that benefit men over women. It is these power dynamics that lead to negative sexualities, according to Harrison, and it is giving sexuality its proper place that will make a positive change.

Positive affirmation of our sensuality leads to the understanding that when we abuse our sexuality it is not because we have been too free or too permissive or too spontaneous. Rather, it is because our capacity for intimacy and sensual communication has been twisted and distorted by manipulative and nonmutual patterns of relationship. If we cannot tolerate

² Wildung Harrison, Beverly. *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*. Ed. Carol S. Robb. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985. 87.

mutually respectful and mutually enhancing erotic communication, if we prefer relational patterns of conquest or subservience, sadism or masochism, or if we are stuck in compulsive, inappropriate, and repetitive patterns of action, it is because we have failed to find the positive power of our own being as sexual persons. If this is so, no repudiation of sexuality, as such, will deliver us. Rather, what we need is a deepened and more holistic sense of ourselves that will enable us to grow sexually, to celebrate, and to respect our own sexuality and that of others.³

Ripe for a new Christian sexual ethic, Harrison's essay, "Misogyny and Homophobia: The Unexplored Connections," attempts to find just that. Harrison points out the historical tradition in church discourse and ethics to denigrate bodies, and explains how this leads to both misogyny and homophobia. The dualism between body and mind leads to attitudes that are highly negative towards sexuality, and only allows for sexuality in regulated ways that "seem safe and conventionally channeled," i.e., inside of heterosexual marriage, and preferably for procreation.⁴ Historically, women have been viewed as more sensual than men, and more sexually dangerous. Homosexual men have been seen historically as effeminate, and while this is clearly not the case, it is a stereotype that continues, both in 1985 at the time of Harrison's publication of *Making the Connections*, and in the present day. Thus, by taking on a "feminine" role, homosexual men are viewed in similar ways to women.⁵ In order to allow women and LGBT persons to attain a full, embodied personhood, one that does

³ 134.

⁴ 136.

⁵ 140.

justice to the lived experiences of all people, a radically different sexual ethic is necessary. According to Harrison, it is necessary to tear down ethics built on controlling power dynamics and patriarchy in order to have an adequate sexual ethic.

A holistic approach to sexuality, free of the body/mind dualism that sustains patriarchy, will yield a rather simple ethic, one foundationally grounded in mutual respect. The giving and receiving of touch, the sharing of erotic pleasure, is a powerful bonding with another. Sexual communication, at its best, mutually enhances self-respect and valuation of the other. The moral norm for sexual communication in a feminist ethic is radical mutuality — the simultaneous acknowledgement of vulnerability to and need of another, the recognition of one's own power to give and receive pleasure and to call forth another's power of relation and to express one's own.⁶

Relationships that are grounded in inequality and power, then, are inappropriate in this type of sexual ethic. Engaging in embodied, mutual, respectful sexuality is vastly different from patriarchal norms, and the traditional Christian ethic of sexuality.

Harrison's feminist Christian sexual ethic allows for sexual relationships outside of heterosexual marriage, but it is perhaps a more difficult ethic to follow than those many Christians have grown up with. Rather than the challenging but simple rules of "waiting until marriage," this ethic requires critical analysis and thought, and legitimate engagement with scriptural ideas of mutuality and respect. Although Harrison's book was published over 30 years ago, her ideas are still seen as radical in church discourse today. Women and LGBT persons

⁶ 149-150.

are still denigrated, bodies are still secondary, and sexuality is still highly repressed. Harrison saw need for a change in 1985, and we still need a change today.

Anne Bathurst Gilson, 1995

Anne Bathurst Gilson has written two books concerning feminist and theological ethics, concerning issues of family and sexuality. My focus here will be *Eros Breaking Free*, which discusses the rigid culture of control in church discourse surrounding bodies and sexuality, and suggests a new way to think about eros. Gilson spends much of her work examining how theologians and churches talk about (or do not talk about) sexuality, explaining well how the church works to control sexuality, which leads to several problems. I will focus, however, on her attempt to move discussions of sexuality from conversations of control toward conversations of mutuality and justice.

Discourse surrounding sexuality has led to control, violence, and injustices for quite some time. This was a problem in 1995 when Gilson published *Eros Breaking Free*, and it is a problem today. Church discourse makes people feel ashamed in their bodies, it promotes heteronormativity above all, and it does not provide a place for those who do not fit into the proper model of a body. Gilson posits a new way of thinking about eros that “celebrates the sexual, the bodily, the earthy.” It is “rooted in body-experience and seeks the integration of body and spirit, human and divine.” It promotes love for self and others, and it “requires a commitment to the well-being of all people and, in that sense is

liberative.” This eros is a work of humans and God together, and it promotes mutuality and justice to overcome the issues found in so much of human sexuality.⁷ Eros, as Gilson imagines it, is about listening to the stories of ourselves and of others and thinking about our sexual lives in a way that is positive and no longer constrained by the rigid authorities that have held people down for so long. In considering a new way of thinking about sexuality, she offers several ways to begin:

1. *Let us dare to be suspicious.* Ask heretical questions. Claim our authority to question that which has always been. Let us question the relevance of Christian doctrine to our lives. Question unjust church policies. Let us dare to be brash about it. Ask how our sexualities have been influenced and controlled by malestream⁸ theology and church policies. Let us ask why those policies define “wholeness” as existing only within lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual marriage. ...
2. *Let us dare to speak honestly of the particularities of our lives and loves.* ... Let us dare to value the differences between us and embrace those differences. ...
3. *Let us dare to know ourselves.* ... Let us come to know our own bodies, learn from them, and listen to them. Let us dare to search out ways to integrate our bodies, minds and spirits. ...
4. *Let us dare to love ourselves.* ... Let us come to know that we deserve love. Let us dare to take ourselves seriously. ...
5. *Let us dare to combine love of ourselves with love of our neighbors.* ... Let us dare to share the news that eros enhances the mutual well-being of ourselves and our neighbors. ...
6. *Let us dare to re-connect, to be intimate, to transform fear.* Let us dare to find the connections between our oppression(s) and others’ oppression(s). ... Let us dare to desire and be desired.
7. *Let us dare to stop being good, to stop being nice.* Good and nice do

⁷ Bathurst Gilson, Anne. *Eros Breaking Free: Interpreting Sexual Theo-Ethics*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995. 110.

⁸ Gilson defines *malestream* as “a feminist term used to denote how patriarchal viewpoints have constituted the cultural/social mainstream. Patriarchal viewpoints are those that exclude the perspectives of those who are not white, male, heterosexual, and upper middle class (7).”

not suffice when confronting the limits of church policies. ... Let us dare to be sex-positive in sex-negative environments. Let us dare to take seriously our own moral agency, demanding inclusion and change, directly challenging the limits of church policy. ...⁹

Rather than allowing heteronormativity and patriarchy to dictate cultural and religious norms, it is important to listen to the experiences of all people. The experiences of Sam, Nicole, Olivia, Mindy, and so many others have been taken for granted for too long. As Gilson points out, the problems that come from the church discourse about bodies will not stop until we begin to take seriously the stories of these women, and so many others whose stories have not been heard.

Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir, 1998

Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir has made an academic career in Europe, where she is a faculty member of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Iceland. She has published several articles on topics concerning feminist theology, and continues to teach today. Her doctoral dissertation started her prolific career, and will be my focal point in this discussion. *Violence, Power, and Justice* was published in 1998, and it discusses power relations in intimate relationships, and how the social construction of sexuality is linked to domestic violence, particularly man-on-woman domestic violence. Bóasdóttir explores intimate relationships, and the violence that is propagated in them because of the way that we conceive of sexuality and gender, particularly in Christian thought. Perhaps the most important insight in her work is her chapter on what is

⁹ 139-140.

necessary for an adequate ethic of sexuality. She discusses the importance of paying attention to patriarchal social norms in order to lessen these power differentials in relationships. An adequate Christian sexual ethic, according to Bóasdóttir, requires four criteria: 1) Experience — the ethic must take into account the experiences of people, including both men and women, with an understanding that the experiences of all people are very different. Because violence is such a prevalent problem in intimate relationships, this criterion includes paying particular attention to women's safety in relationships.¹⁰ 2) Equality — this criterion states that an adequate ethic must take into account the differential relations of power between men and women that are structural as well as personal. The ethic must put forward alternatives that specifically address this structural inequality.¹¹ 3) Tradition — the tradition criterion entails an understanding of Biblical ideas about sexual ethics as well as Christian traditional ideas. However, it also critiques the sexist foundations of some of these traditions and “rejects use of the Bible as a tool for oppression of women.”¹² 4) Integration — The final criterion requires that the ethic must involve “empirical and theoretical fields and their contributions of knowledge about human beings

¹⁰ Bóasdóttir, Sólveig Anna. *Violence, Power, and Justice: A Feminist Contribution to Christian Sexual Ethics*. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1998. 98.

¹¹ 99.

¹² 99.

and their relationships.”¹³ The discussion of sexual ethics must involve attention to groups outside of mainstream Christian discourse and do justice to the knowledges contributed by gay/lesbian groups, as well as the power relations mentioned previously.

Bóasdóttir concludes her work with a short summary of what is important in intimate sexual relationships, pointing out that the Christian sexual ethic of saving sex for marriage is not always the best standard. There is nothing about a heterosexual marriage that is intrinsically moral or better than a same-sex marriage or unmarried couple, as the problems with intimate relationships can exist in any relationship. Rather, her suggestion is that one standard should apply to all sexual relationships, regardless of the specific type of relationship.¹⁴ Two qualities that should exist in all intimate relationships, are as follows: “First, that these relationships are relatively equal in power so that genuine consent to, for example, sexual interaction is possible. Second, that the persons in these relationships take responsibility for their sexuality and are committed to share sexual pleasure and intimacy with each other.”¹⁵ The question, then, according to the author, is not whether the couple is married or engaged or even in a long term relationship, but whether they are equal, and whether they are responsible.

Like Beverly Wildung Harrison and Anne Bathurst Gilson before her,

¹³ 100.

¹⁴ 190.

¹⁵ 191.

Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir spends much of her work discussing the inequality involved in current norms of sexual discourse. They each posit the importance of mutuality and overcoming power dynamics that hurt those who are in marginalized positions in culture. The sexual ethic these women propose is not one of control or of shame, but one of respect and joy. They suggest several new ways of thinking and talking about sexuality and bodies, and we are long overdue for a change.

What About Scripture?

For some readers, it may seem like a glaring oversight that the theologians I have chosen to represent a more positive Christian sexual ethic do not discuss scripture in depth, if at all. James Nelson, David H. Jensen, and Adrian Thatcher are all theologians who have considered issues of gender and sexuality in depth. In their various pieces, they all discuss the place of Scripture in sexual ethics, and conclude that passages that have been used to talk about sexuality are ambiguous, inconsistent, or simply not discussing human sexuality as we know it today.¹⁶ For the sake of brevity, I will consider in depth only the views of Adrian Thatcher, whose work in sexual theology has been prolific. *Liberating Sex* explains well the primary reason why Scripture cannot be used literally in this area, and offers suggestions for how to use Scripture, as well as considering

¹⁶ Jensen, David H. *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desire, and Sexuality in Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. 19-20; Nelson, James B. *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978. 157; and Thatcher, Adrian. *Liberating Sex: A Christian Sexual Theology*. London: SPCK, 1993. 23.

what a new sexual ethic might look like. The former will be my focus here.

Thatcher discusses four case studies of Scripture passages that have historically been used as contemporary guidelines for sexuality. He explains that in every case, there are social, cultural contexts to be dealt with in order to truly understand the passage. In each case, the passage cannot be used to discuss contemporary sexuality, because when reading in context, it is evident that the context created a meaning altogether different than contemporary context.¹⁷ As we saw in the preceding chapter, many of the biblical views of sexuality came from the cultural context of the time. It is no wonder that the patriarchal context of biblical writings would lead to patriarchal teachings from those who take these writings literally! As Thatcher points out, taking these passages literally leads to the denigration of bodies, the subordination of women, homophobia, and so many more problems. As I mentioned previously, the background of Scripture is highly negative towards women, and taking Scriptural passages literally can in many cases lead to misogyny, like Paul's discussions of women submitting to their husbands.

According to Thatcher, a sexual theology ought to be biblical, but more than that, it should be Christ-centered. Because of the patriarchal context of Scripture, Christ ought to be the lens through which biblical writings are evaluated.¹⁸

What is required is a full, Christian sexual theology, as opposed to a mere

¹⁷ Thatcher 15-21.

¹⁸ 24.

biblical one, where that Love which God is and which is spread abroad in Christ is both our norm and gift. This will give us a point of reference in making ethical judgements, and a framework for interpreting biblical material.¹⁹

Scripture cannot be used as a rule-book for bodies and sexuality. It is ambiguous, inconsistent, and most of all, it does not speak about sexuality in ways that are understandable to contemporary society. Yet, for so many, Scripture is used to shame and condemn. As Mindy discusses, church leaders will use “proof texts” to explain why a controlling, patriarchal view of bodies should be accepted. As Sam points out, Scripture is used in this area not to uplift people but to tell them how *not* to act.

Contemporary human experience of bodies is so very different from the cultural context of biblical writings, but it is these anachronistic texts that are given weight in church discourse. The actual lived experience of marginalized people is ignored, and the love of Christ which ought to be first does not seem to extend to those who do not fit. Though each of the theologians discussed in this chapter published their works quite some time ago, these are still very prevalent issues today. Church discourse does not promote a healthy view of the body. Sexuality, especially the sexuality of women, is tightly controlled. LGBT persons are not given full access to embodied life. The body is not as important as the spirit. The church is hurting its people with such forms of oppression.

¹⁹ 22.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

As I conclude, it is important to say a few words about the things I am saying, as well as the things I am not saying. My point through all of this, as I mentioned in the introduction, is not to castigate church people. My intention is not to hurt and reprimand those who have perpetuated the messages surrounding the body, because I do understand that most of these people are doing what they believe is right. The authors of books and leaders of *True Love Waits* movements, and Christian school teachers, and preachers and parents and peers are all trying to follow scripture and do the right thing. There are absolutely those who spew hatefulness at those who use their bodies in a way that does not fit the mold, but that hatefulness does not come from everyone. The majority of people who pass along these messages do not realize the hurt the messages have caused. My intention is to point out that despite the prevalence of negative messages, there is another way.

In the last several years, there has been a groundswell of support in evangelical church movements for the idea that hell may not be a literal place. Perhaps the most well-known leader and supporter of this idea is Rob Bell, who

wrote a popular book on the subject titled *Love Wins*.¹ The main idea in the book is that the purpose of Christianity, the purpose of having a relationship with God, is not to get into Heaven. The purpose is to find fulfillment in a life that is in relationship with God, and to be excited about this life and bring others into it:

Jesus invites us into *that* relationship, the one at the center of the universe. He insists that he's one with God, that we can be one with him, and that life is a generous, abundant reality. ...

Life has never been about just "getting in." It's about thriving in God's good world. It's stillness, peace, and that feeling of your soul being at rest, while at the same time it's about asking things, learning things, creating things, and sharing it all with others who are finding the same kind of joy in the same good world.

Jesus calls disciples to keep entering into this shared life of peace and joy as it transforms our hearts, until it's the most natural way to live that we can imagine. Until it's second nature. Until we naturally embody and practice the kind of attitudes and actions that will go on in the age to come.²

Whether or not one agrees with Bell's specific ideas about heaven and hell, it is surely the case that many Christians, too many, reduce faith to a series of rules that determine one's chances in the afterlife. The point of Christianity is simply not to follow the right rules and act in the perfect way in order to get to heaven. The point of Christianity is love: "Jesus answered: "You must love the Most High God with all your heart, all your soul and with all your mind.' That is

¹ Bell, Rob. *Love Wins*. New York: Harper One, 2011.

² 178-179.

the greatest and first commandment.”³

This is not to say that scripture and Christian teaching should not guide the way that we live. In fact, I would say this manner of thinking makes scripture even more important. Following a list of rules is simple. The challenge of a Christian life comes with finding ways to live the most fulfilled, Christ-like life possible. If “Jesus calls his disciples to keep entering into this shared life of peace and joy as it transforms our hearts,” how do we do this? There is not one simple answer.

Life is full of moral and ethical quandaries, and while scripture provides a general narrative and can point us in the right direction, the previous chapters illustrated that there is almost always more than one way to view the Bible and certain passages. The Bible cannot be used as the answer key to all of life’s questions. We are called to wrestle with these moral and ethical issues, and to come to our own conclusions.

There are as many answers in scripture as there are people who read it, because everyone comes at this questions with their own experiences and backgrounds. It is ok for people to have different views and to live their lives differently, because what leads to a “shared life of peace and joy” will not be the same for every person. My fulfillment is different from yours, just as my body is different from yours. God has room for you, just as there is room for me, and for

³ The Inclusive Bible. Ed. Priests for Equality. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007, Matt. 22: 37-39.

Sam, Nicole, Olivia and Mindy.

Not all those reading this will be convinced by this way of thinking. It is certainly a more radical view than a lot of Christian teaching. However, even if your view of what it means to be a Christian differs from mine, there is one thing that remains the same. Salvation is based upon a belief in God, and everything else is secondary. The things I have been discussing in this piece are simply not issues of salvation. There is grace, and the grace of God absolutely covers differences in opinion when it comes to bodies and sexuality.

So here it is, the other way that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Those who are in places of authority in the church are very often moral and ethical leaders. It is certainly their place to guide others when it comes to moral and ethical issues. Exploring these issues with each other is crucial to learning what a fulfilling life can be. However, so many times these leaders have put forth one overwhelming message. This message is that there is only one right way to have a body. LGBTQ bodies, sexual bodies, overweight bodies, disabled bodies, and so many more are not given a place in these messages. These messages should not be given as an absolute. Wrestle with scripture and consider different possibilities, certainly. But Christian leaders, parents, and peers need to remember that their conclusions may not be the conclusions everyone comes to. There are many possibilities in scripture, and touting these messages as “the only answer” can be hurtful to those who do not fit into this only answer. Scripture is full of different possible interpretations, and as I discussed previously, there

are many interpretations that promote more positive views of the body. My interviewees do not fit into the “only answer” that has been promoted in church messages. They do not fit the mold of “proper” bodies. Yet, they have found fulfillment, that peace and joy that Bell discusses, through their faith lives. They have found that there is another way.

In so much of church discourse, we have been ignoring the cries of the marginalized peoples whose bodies have been denigrated. It is time to listen to these cries. There is not only one type of body or one type of sexuality or one type of belief. For the sake of Sam, Nicole, Olivia, Mindy, and so many others, for my sake, allow for the possibility of more than one way.

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