



MAKING CHASTITY SEXY

THE RHETORIC OF EVANGELICAL ABSTINENCE CAMPAIGNS

CHRISTINE J. GARDNER

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Abstinence Campaigns*

Christine J. Gardner



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*To my parents,
Dave and Becky LeShana,
with love*

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Abstinence, AIDS, and Evangelicals

An Introduction

The walls pulsated with the rhythmic thump-thump-thump of a song from the popular recording artist Usher. Strobe lights flashed across three large screens on the stage. Green lasers probed the darkness, and fake fog felt its way across the floor as eight hundred hormonal teenagers poured into the room. Nothing says rock concert quite like lasers and fake fog, except that this was a sexual abstinence event hosted by Silver Ring Thing in the chapel of an east coast Christian college. “Sanctified, Not Skank-tified,” according to one girl’s T-shirt.

My research on the rhetoric of the evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns had brought me to the event, and I was feeling, frankly, a bit disoriented. My own adolescent sex education was a hazy memory, but I’m sure the gist of it was “don’t do it.” I think I would have remembered if green lasers had been involved.

Josh, the twentysomething national program director for Silver Ring Thing, was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt, carrying a cordless microphone, and pacing the stage.¹ “I’m here to talk about how great sex can be,” he said, as the crowd hooted and cheered its agreement. Then Josh led the teens in an unusual abstinence cheer: “Sex is great!” The audience repeated the cheer three times, each time gaining in intensity: “Sex is great!” Where were the tearful testimonies of sweaty Saturday nights, I wondered? “Sex is great!” Not even a gross-out slide show of sexually transmitted diseases? On the last cheer Josh followed with a clincher: “Sex is great . . . and it *is* great, in the context of marriage.”

Josh, who had been married for four and a half years, held out his left hand as a camera captured a close-up of his wedding ring, which was projected on the screens with the words “License to Practice.” A strain from the “Hallelujah Chorus” played over the speakers.

Chastity is getting a makeover. Surrounded by a sex-saturated society, millions of young people are pledging to remain virgins until their wedding night. But how, exactly, are evangelical Christians convincing young people to say no when society says yes?

The strobe lights and sex talk of the Silver Ring Thing event were my introduction to the contemporary evangelical sexual abstinence movement. For the next five years I would travel around the country, as well as across the Atlantic Ocean, attending abstinence events and talking with young people and evangelical leaders alike about abstinence. That nearly half of all American teens have had sex is no surprise.² I wanted to know how and why some teens were bucking the status quo and waiting to have sex.

Sexual abstinence has become a significant—and controversial—worldwide public issue in recent years, most notably through the passage of federal legislation that requires sexual abstinence education in U.S. public schools. The controversy centers on what is, and is not, being taught. Comprehensive sex education programs teach that abstinence and contraception use are both viable options for teenagers. “Abstinence-plus” programs talk about contraception use but promote abstinence as the best choice for teenagers. Abstinence-only programs (also called “abstinence-until-marriage” programs by advocates) emphasize that abstinence is the only 100 percent effective way to eliminate the possibility of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; contraception use is discussed in terms of its ineffectiveness or it is not discussed at all.³ Despite controversy, abstinence education has received support from the highest levels: during his tenure in office President George W. Bush was a staunch advocate for government support of abstinence education both in the United States and in African countries.⁴ The times may be changing, however: President Barack Obama slashed all funding for abstinence-only programs from his 2010 federal budget.⁵

Since the passage of the Welfare Reform Act in 1996, which in part aims to help reduce teen pregnancy, more than \$1.5 billion in federal funding has supported abstinence-only education in the United States. Abstinence advocates point to drops in teen pregnancy and abortion rates as indications of program effectiveness. U.S. teen pregnancy rates

dropped 34 percent between 1991 and 2005. Teen abortion rates dropped 39 percent between 1990 and 1999. But a 2009 report from the Centers for Disease Control suggests that the tide may be turning: The birthrate for teenagers aged fifteen to nineteen jumped 3 percent in 2006.⁶ Comprehensive sex education advocates are quick to blame the spike in pregnancies on more than a decade of government-sponsored abstinence education programs. Abstinence proponents argue that this trend supports the need for increased funding for abstinence programs, since a majority of schools teach comprehensive sex education and receive four times the funding that abstinence programs do.⁷

Internationally, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), first announced in 2003, provided \$15 billion over five years to fight HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean. In July 2008 PEPFAR funding for HIV/AIDS more than doubled, to \$39 billion for an additional five years. Abstinence education remains a central part of PEPFAR, although the reappropriation legislation stipulates only "balanced funding" of prevention activities instead of the former mandate that sent one-third of AIDS monies to abstinence efforts. In Africa, abstinence is the first step in the "ABC" (abstinence, be faithful, use a condom) approach to stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS. In Uganda, for example, some credit abstinence with playing a significant role in reducing the spread of HIV.⁸ Prevalence rates sharply declined between 1990 and 2007 in Uganda, from about 15 percent to about 5 percent.⁹ Condom use became a contributing factor only in the mid-1990s, after rates had already begun to decline.¹⁰ Incidence of premarital sex declined during the 1990s, with a two-year delay in the onset of sexual activity among fifteen- to twenty-four-year-old Ugandans by 1997.¹¹ With evidence of the effectiveness of abstinence at reducing HIV transmission, abstinence supporters are boldly promoting the practice in other sub-Saharan African countries.

At the center of the promotion of sexual abstinence in both the United States and African countries are evangelical Christians. While the debate continues to rage about sex education in U.S. public schools, U.S. evangelicals have created an abstinence movement outside the public school structure that encourages young people to pledge their commitment to wait to have sex until marriage. For evangelicals, sexual abstinence is about more than just sex; it has political, as well as moral and religious, implications. Sexual abstinence is positioned, in part, as a solution to the problem of abortion. Evangelicals, who are largely

prolife, have failed in their attempts to overturn the legalization of abortion.¹² Sexual abstinence education, along with other reproduction-related issues, such as banning late-term (or “partial-birth”) abortion and mandating the use of ultrasound technology, is a strategy to reduce teenage pregnancies and the need for abortions.¹³ Evangelicals’ involvement in the AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa represents a growing concern for issues of social justice—poverty, gender inequality, environmental degradation, as well as HIV/AIDS—that expand the prolife agenda beyond opposition to abortion. In sub-Saharan Africa the debate is about condom use versus behavior change as part of AIDS prevention. An undercurrent throughout the evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns, whether in the United States or in sub-Saharan Africa, is an impulse toward evangelism: implicit in the campaigns is the belief that committing to delay sex until marriage makes the most sense if one makes a religious commitment to follow Jesus Christ and his teachings.¹⁴ The campaigns acknowledge that, without a new life in Christ, a life of abstinence is more difficult to follow.

Evangelicals have been criticized by comprehensive sex education supporters on precisely this point—that the abstinence campaigns are more about religious and moral indoctrination than results-based sex education. Do the pledge programs keep teenagers from having sex outside marriage? Yes and no. Or, as one of the lead researchers on a study of abstinence programs puts it, “The truth is that pledges seem to delay sex for some kids some of the time.”¹⁵ According to the frequently cited National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns have been moderately effective. The study credits the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical denomination in the United States, with launching the contemporary sexual abstinence movement. The nationally representative study draws on data collected from surveys of more than 90,000 junior high and high school students attending 141 schools, in-home interviews with more than 20,000 youth (and nearly 15,000 additional follow-up interviews), along with parent interviews and school administrator surveys. The study, cited by abstinence supporters and detractors alike, concludes that teens who pledge abstinence are “much less likely” to have sexual intercourse than nonpledgers. The impact of the pledge on delaying sexual debut is “substantial and robust,” however the abstinence pledge delays sexual debut among fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds by only eighteen months (which is a third longer than those who do not make a pledge). Also, those who pledge are less likely to use contraception

when they have their first sexual experience.¹⁶ A 2009 study published in *Pediatrics* uses the same data to compare pledgers and nonpledgers who share similar characteristics such as church attendance and religiosity. After five years the pledgers were just as likely to have had sex as nonpledgers.¹⁷

Not all the studies show the ineffectiveness of abstinence education, however. A 2008 study by the Rand Corporation published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* determined that virginity pledges are helping young people wait to have sex. In a nationally representative survey of young people aged twelve to seventeen conducted in three waves over three years, researchers compared pledgers and nonpledgers who shared similar characteristics such as religiosity. They found that 42 percent of those who did not make a pledge had sex within three years, whereas only 34 percent of pledgers reported having had sex during the same period.¹⁸

So what accounts for the differences between the studies, and what does it tell us about the effectiveness of abstinence pledges? Age may make a difference. Abstinence pledges seem to be more effective among younger teens. The *Journal of Adolescent Health* study, which found the pledges to be effective, looks at a younger population, the youngest of whom were twelve years old when they made an abstinence pledge and the oldest of whom were twenty at the end of the three-year study. The *Pediatrics* study, in contrast, considered pledgers as young as sixteen and followed them for five years until they were twenty or older. By the time the pledgers reach the age of twenty-one, they are just as likely to have had sex as those who did not pledge abstinence. As the Rand Corporation researcher Steven Martino points out, abstinence pledges may not last until marriage, but perhaps they are better understood as influencing adolescence, the developmental stage before adulthood. Even with a limited period of effectiveness, the abstinence pledge could still have “significant health benefits,” he reported.¹⁹

These large quantitative studies provide a broad overview of the state of abstinence pledges (along with inconsistent and inconclusive results when compared with each other), but in general they do not go far beyond the statistics to the stories of individuals who are pledging abstinence. If most teens eventually have sex, why do they bother committing to abstinence in the first place? Quantitative studies tend to reduce the complexities of sexual behavior to black-and-white categories of “abstinent” or “sexually active,” ignoring the range of sexual activity that may be acceptable even to abstinent teens. My goal here

is to provide a “thick description” of *how* virginity pledge events such as those in the evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns are persuading young people to wait to have sex and how young people are negotiating their sexuality while remaining abstinent.²⁰ This is a study of rhetoric, the words and symbols used to construct our understanding of reality. I examine the rhetoric used in the abstinence events as well as the rhetoric used by abstinent young people to describe their pledges. For my U.S. case studies I turn to the oldest of the contemporary evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns, True Love Waits, and consider two of the more recent campaigns, Silver Ring Thing and Pure Freedom. The three campaigns represent a diversity of approaches in abstinence persuasion.

STADIUMS, STROBE LIGHTS, AND TEA PARTIES: THREE ABSTINENCE CASE STUDIES

True Love Waits

True Love Waits is widely credited with launching the contemporary evangelical sexual abstinence movement. It is perhaps most known for its stadium-filled rallies and public displays of signed abstinence pledge cards.

A ministry of LifeWay, the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, True Love Waits was begun in 1993 by Jimmy Hester, senior director of student ministry publishing for LifeWay, and Richard Ross, professor of student ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The idea grew out of a Christian sex education project on which Hester and Ross worked together at LifeWay in Nashville in 1987. Ross, who at the time was also working as a youth pastor at Tulip Grove Baptist Church in Hermitage, Tennessee, came up with the name True Love Waits during a brainstorming session for an abstinence campaign in 1992. The following year fifty-three youths at his church took the first abstinence pledges.

Ross asked the pledgers if they would share their abstinence commitment with the thousand Southern Baptist youth ministers who would be in Nashville a few months later for a conference he was organizing. Ross later recounted the emotional power of the testimony of a teenage boy and girl who were dating: “And then [in] one of the most important sentences in the history of True Love Waits, this guy and girl said, ‘And we think there are teenagers in every one of your youth groups who are ready to do the very same thing.’ The youth ministers jumped up.

Somebody looked at their watch, for ten minutes the youth ministers wept and cheered at the same time. They were clapping and crying together. It was such a moving moment.” The youth ministers returned to their churches and told their youth groups, and, with the help of broad media attention, the True Love Waits campaign grew.

A typical True Love Waits abstinence event is like a large church youth rally. Events feature guest speakers and evangelists, testimonials from young people who have pledged abstinence, and miniconcerts from contemporary Christian recording artists. The events culminate with an appeal to the attendees to commit to sexual abstinence, demonstrated by the signing of the True Love Waits abstinence pledge card: “Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship.” Although True Love Waits seems to have slowed its promotion of large sports arena events in recent years, it continues to offer resources—including a curriculum, devotional guides, clip art, jewelry, and a script for an abstinence commitment service—on its Web site for entrepreneurial churches and youth leaders to plan their own events.

A distinctive feature of the True Love Waits campaign is its emphasis on dramatic displays of vast numbers of pledge cards representing the groundswell of teenage commitments. The first national display of signed pledge cards occurred on the National Mall in 2004, with 210,000 cards and twenty-five thousand youth in attendance. In 1996 supporters stacked 340,000 signed pledge cards from the floor to the roof of the Georgia Dome in Atlanta. In 1999 more than fifteen hundred youth carried 100,000 signed pledge cards in a prayer walk across the Golden Gate Bridge. On Valentine’s Day 2002, 82,411 youth signed pledge cards on the True Love Waits Web site. At the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, the group displayed 460,000 signed pledge cards from twenty countries. Although the organization partners with more than ninety “cooperating ministries” and does not keep strict records on partners’ activities, the group estimates more than 2.5 million young people have signed abstinence commitments since the inception of True Love Waits.²¹

While True Love Waits is focused on the United States, it also has a presence in sub-Saharan Africa, most notably, Uganda, where First Lady Janet Museveni credits the group with helping to reduce that country’s HIV transmission rates.²² In 2007 True Love Waits announced a \$950,000 expansion of its abstinence programs in sub-Saharan Africa

to include Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, and Zambia.²³

Silver Ring Thing

Like True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing uses popular music to attract teens, but the venues are smaller, holding a few hundred youth compared with the thousands who attend True Love Waits rallies. The form and content of teen vernacular are a defining part of the Silver Ring Thing program. According to the group's Web site, "By featuring awesome lighting and video systems, hilarious skits, concert sound systems, high-energy music, TV's, computers, and a faith-based abstinence message, students become interested in the message being offered to them about their sex lives." Silver Ring Thing events have been described as part rave, part *Saturday Night Live*, and part Saturday night revival.²⁴

Attendees typically pay about ten dollars for admission and another twenty dollars for a ring, a Silver Ring Thing Sexual Abstinence Study Bible, and follow-up materials.²⁵ Behind the scenes and on stage, the events are run mostly by older teens and young adults, most of whom first learned about Silver Ring Thing by attending an event and making a pledge. The campaign estimates that more than 450,000 young people have heard the message of abstinence and more than 150,000 young people have made pledges through Silver Ring Thing events since 1995.²⁶

Denny Pattyn and his wife, Amy, created Silver Ring Thing in 1996 in response to their belief that the incidence of teen pregnancy was increasing.²⁷ The Pattyns moved the program from Arizona to Pennsylvania in 2000, in part to expand the program to the national level. Silver Ring Thing has been affiliated with the John Guest Evangelistic Team, a ministry organization located at the evangelical Christ Church at Grove Farm near Pittsburgh.²⁸ The group expanded its reach internationally with Silver Ring Thing events in the United Kingdom in 2004 and South Africa in 2005.

Of the three U.S.-focused groups included in this study, Silver Ring Thing is the only evangelical abstinence organization to have received federal funds for its abstinence education. The group received more than \$1 million in government money between 2003 and 2006. As a consequence of accepting the funds, the organization attempted to separate its religious and secular messages. At Silver Ring Thing events, before an intermission during which attendees would collect their rings,

audience members were told that they could return to the main event location for an explicitly Christian call to abstinence or go to a nearby alternative site to continue abstinence instruction without religious overtones. Additionally, Silver Ring Thing offered a religion-free abstinence program for public school assemblies, and this program served as a promotion for the weekend club-style event. In May 2005 the American Civil Liberties Union claimed that Silver Ring Thing had not gone far enough in separating its abstinence education from its Christian evangelism. In a lawsuit filed in federal court against the Department of Health and Human Services, the ACLU asserted that Silver Ring Thing was using “taxpayer dollars to promote religious content, instruction and indoctrination.” In a 2006 settlement the government agreed to stop funding Silver Ring Thing in its current form.²⁹ Now supported solely by private funds, the group has eliminated the religion-free venue option, leading all attendees through a pledge of abstinence combined with an evangelistic altar call.³⁰

Pure Freedom

Pure Freedom was founded in 1996 by Dannah Gresh, a former marketing consultant and corporate trainer, out of a desire to teach young girls how to live a life of sexual purity. Gresh confessed to her husband after five years of marriage that she had had premarital sex with a boyfriend as a teenager. The weight of the guilt of years of silence, and the accompanying forgiveness and relief she found when she confessed her sin, prompted Gresh to start a ministry for teenage girls to teach them how to live pure lives.³¹ Within weeks of telling her husband, Gresh was leading her first retreat for a dozen teenage girls at her church. According to the group’s Web site, the stated mission of the organization is to “equip men and women of all ages to live a vibrant life of purity, to experience healing from past impurity if it exists in their lives and to experience a vibrant passionate marriage which portrays the love Christ has for his Bride the church.” Gresh sees her ministry as an improvement on the True Love Waits message: in a 2005 interview she told a reporter, “Bob [Gresh] and I started it eight years ago because, while we love what True Love Waits does to increase abstinence awareness, we felt kids needed some practical skills to avoid the pain of sexual sin.”³²

Pure Freedom primarily focuses on teenage girls through overnight slumber-party-style purity retreats or its one-day Mother/Daughter

Summits held at churches. Both events feature the “Truth or Bare Fashion Show,” in which event participants model modest teenage fashions, and a tea party, after which participants are allowed to keep the china teacups. The daughters’ retreat is intended to encourage participants to “embrace God’s plan for modesty and purity, through interactive teaching and object based lessons.” The goal of the mother-daughter event is “to provide a forum for mothers to pursue an open line of communication with their teenaged daughters especially in the area of sexuality.” Dannah Gresh’s husband, Bob, also leads a retreat for teenage boys, which the organization’s Web site describes as “a radical, high contact event which includes sports-themed teaching.” Topics covered for the boys include “masturbation, pornography, mental virginity, responsibility to protect a girl’s emotions and envisioning a godly wife.” In contrast, girls cover such topics as “self-esteem, modesty, emotional healing, refusal skills and envisioning a godly husband.”³³

Dannah Gresh and her supporting facilitators lead more than fifty Pure Freedom events across the country each year. According to the organization’s Web site, more than twenty thousand churches worldwide have used Pure Freedom’s curriculum to hold a purity retreat. One of the newest events for Pure Freedom is the “Secret Keeper Girl Tour” for girls aged eight to twelve and their mothers. The upbeat two-hour events blend worship with teaching and stories about modesty, self-esteem, and body image. The “Yada! Yada! Youth Event” is a larger coed retreat featuring the entire Pure Freedom teaching team, including its own worship band. In the summer of 2004 the Gresh family traveled to Zambia at the invitation of the director of a crisis pregnancy center there to train a group to teach abstinence education to a thousand students in local public schools. Gresh has since written an abstinence curriculum for the government schools of Zambia, reaching more than seventy-five thousand students.³⁴

Sex Is Great

My study of True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing, and Pure Freedom began in 2004, and I conducted the bulk of my field research in 2004–2005 and 2008–2009. I focused my analysis on the rhetoric of producers and receivers of the campaigns, both the organizational leaders who were crafting the arguments for abstinence and the young people at whom the arguments were aimed.³⁵ In total, I conducted sixty-five in-depth, open-ended interviews with evangelical leaders, staff members,

abstinence educators, and young people who have attended abstinence events.³⁶ I conducted most interviews in person at a location of the respondent's choosing, including churches, offices, college campuses, high schools, coffee shops, and sports arenas. I also traveled to ten abstinence events hosted by the three organizations in eight U.S. cities (or, in some cases, their greater metropolitan areas): Boston; Chicago; Dallas; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Nashville; and Pittsburgh.³⁷ I analyzed sexual abstinence curricula, books, leaders' kits, Web sites, press releases, news articles, CDs, DVDs, pledge declarations, and purity rings in order to understand the abstinence message.³⁸ My research also took me to sub-Saharan Africa, where I traveled to Kenya and Rwanda to interview staff members of World Relief, the international relief and development arm of the National Association of Evangelicals. I conducted group interviews with members of four church-based abstinence youth clubs organized by World Relief in Kigali, Rwanda. In addition to my formal research, numerous casual discussions—both in and out of class—about abstinence and sexuality with evangelical students at Wheaton College in Illinois, where I serve as a faculty member, undoubtedly have informed my analysis.³⁹

While sociological in nature, this is a study in rhetoric: How do the words, symbols, and visual images used by the evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns construct the movement?⁴⁰ What, and how, does abstinence mean?⁴¹ Not just what does abstinence mean in a definitional sense, but how does the word function to construct meaning for the individuals who use it?⁴² Does the way that evangelical young people talk about abstinence match the arguments of the campaigns? In other words, do the arguments for abstinence resonate with young people? If so, how?⁴³ Are there occasions when the arguments for abstinence are not persuasive to young people? And what happens when the same abstinence arguments are exported from the United States to a different cultural context such as sub-Saharan Africa? What is the significance of these constructions of abstinence for evangelicalism as a whole? To answer these questions, I conducted a qualitative, rhetorical analysis of my interview data and participant-observation field notes, focusing on key words, visual images, narrative structures, repetitive themes, tropes, and metaphors.⁴⁴

This book follows two main narratives. The first is the narrative of the contemporary evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns—how and why they were started, how the leaders of the campaigns are persuading

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