

After the Wedding Night: The Confluence of Masculinity and Purity in Married Life

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**Abstract**

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Purity is congruent with cultural understandings of femininity, but incongruent with normative definitions of masculinity. Using longitudinal qualitative data, this study analyzes interviews with men who have taken pledges of abstinence pre and post marriage, to better understand the ways in which masculinity is asserted within discourses of purity. Building off of Wilkins' concept of *collective performances of temptation* and Luker's theoretical framing of the "sexual conservative" I argue that repercussions from collective performances of temptation carry over into married life; sex is thought of as something that needs to be controlled both pre and post marriage. Second, because of these repercussions, marriage needs to be re-conceptualized as a "verb"; marriage is not a static event for sexual liberals *or* sexual conservatives. The current study highlights the ways in which married life is affected by a pledge of abstinence and contributes to the theoretical framing of masculinities as fluid.

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**Introduction:**

The florescent blue light of the cross can be seen from the highway. Tract homes appear in the eerie blue glow, porches oriented to face the mega-church. Aidan waits for me at the door, his hands stuffed in his pockets as he shifts his weight from foot to foot. He reaches out a sweaty palm and ushers me into the house. “It’s been a while,” he says, pointing me to the leather couch in the sparse living room. Aside from the wedding albums displayed in the entryway, and his wife sitting at the kitchen table, the house hasn’t changed much in four years. “That’s Rebecca,” he says, lifting his head in the direction of his new wife. She doesn’t look up at me but acknowledges my presence with a shrug.

“Congratulations on the wedding,” I say, trying to smile at Rebecca before returning to Aidan, “So, this is married life.”

“This is married life,” he says.

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The abstinence movement<sup>1</sup> calls for abstinence from sexual activity until marriage, linking this call for abstinence to Evangelical Christian morality, heterosexual marriage, and sexual purity (Calterone-Williams 2011). While many advocate for access to comprehensive sex education in schools—those that Luker calls “sexual liberals” — the Christian Right has fueled an abstinence movement that has been highly successful in bringing strict standards of purity and behavior to the sex education debate. Luker refers to the main proprietors of the abstinence movement as “sexual conservatives”<sup>2</sup> (2006). Children of sexual conservatives often “pledge” abstinence until marriage, encouraged by

national groups such as True Love Waits or the Silver Ring Thing, who provide pledge cards, purity rings, and various other products to participants (Bearman & Bruckner 2001). Purity Balls—father/daughter dances in which the daughter is presented with a purity ring after vowing abstinence until marriage to her father— also present an opportunity to take these pledges. Research on the abstinence movement has often focused on pledges of virginity (Bearman & Bruckner 2001; Bersamin et al 2004; Bruckner & Bearman 2005; Martino et al 2008; Rosenbaum 2005; Rosenbaum 2009), placing emphasis on sexual behavior outcomes of teenagers who take pledges in these highly ritualized, flashy settings. Research finds that, within these large-scale pledge settings, an abstinence pledge delays sexual debut by only 18 months, and often times encourages other types of sexual behavior (Bruckner & Bearman 2005). Research also indicates that teenagers who pledge abstinence are less likely to take measures to protect themselves from both STIs and pregnancy (Bearman & Bruckner 2001; Bearman & Bruckner 2005; Rosenbaum 2006). For many sexual conservatives, an abstinence pledge occurs in a more informal manner, and in a smaller group. Research indicates, in fact, that informal pledges taken in small groups are the most effective (Bearman & Bruckner 2001; Bersamin et al 2004). To date, no one has investigated these small group pledges, nor the reasons behind their “success.”

Relying on interviews that span a four-year period with a small men’s group at an evangelical church, this study seeks to add to the literature in three ways. Most importantly, this study relies on interviews with *men* in the abstinence movement. The abstinence movement, broadly speaking, urges both men and women to pledge virginity until marriage, teaching that purity, as defined by abstinence from sexual activity until

marriage, transcends gendered boundaries. However, because cultural understandings of masculinity are incongruent with purity (Carpenter 2005; Jones 2007), a movement built on a discourse of purity is a theoretically interesting place to understand the fluidities of masculinity. How do men who pledge abstinence pair this commitment with understandings of their masculinity? How are these pledges maintained in a society in which definitions of hegemonic masculinity are incongruent with ideals of purity (Carpenter 2005; Jones 2007)?

Wilkins (2008) posits that men who pledge abstinence are able to reassert their masculinity through *collective performances of temptation*; men link their resistance to pre-marital sexual activity to alternative masculine qualities of self-control and commitment. My research uncovers two key mechanisms for these *collective performances of temptation*; men rely upon both small groups and accountability partners in order to reinforce their masculinity and maintain their pledges of abstinence. The analysis of these mechanisms of control allows us to better understand the effectiveness of small-scale, small-group, informal pledging.

Finally, I will argue that repercussions from these *collective performances of temptation* carry over into married life; sex remains a “beastly”<sup>3</sup> temptation—something that constantly tempts and lures, and must be controlled—post-marriage for these men. Because of this, I will challenge Luker (2006) and argue that for these “sexual conservatives” marriage is not a “noun”; rather, marriage should be thought of as a verb—an active and ongoing process of negotiation—for both sexual liberals and sexual conservatives. Marriage becomes something that is at the forefront of these men’s lives as they attempt to negotiate their identities as both faithful men and tempted beings. This

study moves away from the focus on teenagers in the abstinence movement, as the age range of those pledging abstinence extends far beyond teenage years in a church setting.

My research represents the first longitudinal qualitative analysis of men who pledge abstinence until marriage, and seeks to contribute to the literature in three ways: First, this study gleans insight into the ways in which masculinities are asserted and maintained within the abstinence movement. Secondly, this data provides a better understanding of the experiences of those who pledge abstinence in small groups. Thirdly, this is the first study to look at the ways in which a pledge of abstinence carries over into married life.

## **Background of Study:**

### *Masculinities*

Historically, scholars have framed masculinity in terms of a dyadic assumption of gender roles. Parsons and Bales famously applied a functionalist perspective to these roles, portraying not only rigid understandings of masculinity and femininity, but arguing that society is dependent upon the enactment of these specific and strict roles (Parsons & Bales 1955). Fueled by the women's rights movement, feminist scholars began to address the inherent and unequal power dynamics associated with gender roles. For example, Connell argues that role theory is not a social theory at all. By moving structural power to the level of a biological category of sex, the social is ultimately ignored (1987). The deterministic framework of roles makes very broad assumptions as to what is normal, specifically in terms of categorical understandings of sex, gender, and family structure. As a result, role theory has little explanatory power when it comes to the high frequencies of behaviors the theory categorizes as deviant (examples include extramarital affairs, homosexuality, or anyone who does not proscribe to a gender identity that "matches" their biological sex) (Parsons & Bales 1955). Connell reminds us that what is normative is not necessarily standard (1987), and today, sociologists of masculinity understand masculinity not as one set of behaviors, characteristics or enactments, but rather acknowledge a multitude of masculinities present in the social world.

R.W. Connell theorized these multiple masculinities, outlining four major models of masculinity. Connell situates masculinities within a hierarchical, and thus unequal, social world, and therefore presents them as models that scholars should understand as both "fluid and conflictual" (Pascoe 2007: 8). *Hegemonic masculinity* rests at the top of

the social hierarchy, embodied by men who enact the culturally normative ideals of male behavior. *Subordinated masculinity* is experienced by men who are oppressed by the standards of hegemonic masculinity, whereas *complicit masculinity* describes men who benefit from the standards of hegemonic masculinity, but do not act in the position of a hegemonically masculine man. Finally, *marginalized* masculinity is experienced by men who experience some power due to their gender identity, but simultaneously experience marginalization due to race/ethnicity or class status (Connell 1995).

While Connell's work is used as the foundational model for much of the work that is done on masculinity today, scholars often ignore the fluid intentions of Connell's outline, instead using it as a typology that only reifies rigid, categorical understandings of masculinity (Pascoe 2007). Further, in understanding masculinity as something boys and men do, scholars reinforce biological ties to masculinity that myself and many scholars find problematic. As Pascoe states, "In the end, masculinity is framed as a social category based on an assumed biological difference that in itself is constituted by the very social category it purports to underlie" (2007:9). Many scholars of masculinity (Cromwell 1999; Dozier 2005; Halberstam 1998; Pascoe 2007; Rubin 2003) call for the removal of masculinity as understood only within the context of the male body. Instead, masculinity is something that can be enacted regardless of gender identity, occupying a powerful yet fluid position in the social world. With these goals in mind, it is with cautious and stated limitations that I use Connell's models of masculinity to inform my research. In interviewing only men, I cannot fully escape the connotation that the data I present is something that people with male bodies "do". However, one could also argue that it is through the study of what male bodies "do" that we can better understand the reasons

why masculinities are situated in male bodies, and why these male bodies are proscribed to very rigid and socially defined understandings of the gendered self. Therefore, my research is conducted under the assumption of masculinities as fluid, but presents the fluidities of masculinity within the confines of the male body. In highlighting the reasons for this association between gender and sex category (West & Zimmerman 1987) we can think more critically about moving away from this association in the future.

As Connell summarizes, one of the main difficulties with current research on masculinities is that “our descriptions of masculinities tend to be static. Even when the descriptions are formulated in ways that emphasize fluidity, as post-structuralist research often does, we do not usually see the process that has produced the fluidity out of an organizational history” (2008:244). In using longitudinal work, I will show how the enacted masculinities of the same group of men change over the course of a four year period, and more specifically, how they change once these men become married, sexually active adults. Second, to address Connell’s emphasis on the changing processes of masculinity in the context of an organization history, I now turn to the intersection of masculinity and institutions to show the ways in which my work will add to this subfield.

### *Masculinities & Institutions: Reinforcing hegemony?*

Masculinities do not exist of their own accord; they are enacted and reproduced in the social world through institutions. As Wicks states, “a man's sense of himself and his relationship to others is partly a function of the status and power that accompany a particular identity, but equally importantly a function of the ongoing social relations that

reproduce notions of gender identity” (2002:309). Further, in more recent work, Connell states, “understanding institutions is vital for understanding masculinities” (2008:237).

Many scholars have addressed the intersections of masculinities and institutions. A school, a bank, or a police station are all examples of institutions. There is a great deal of work on masculinity within organizational life, especially since the Women’s Liberation movement brought a challenge for equal opportunity to the workplace in the 1970s (Connell 2008). Broadly, research in this area successfully documents how masculinities are embedded in organizational life, and also highlights the ways in which masculinities are produced differently, depending on the organizational context. Working with a group of men at an evangelical church, my work will add to our current understandings of masculinities and religious organizational life. Scholars have studied masculinities in great detail in both the Promise Keepers and Quiverfull movements (Bartkowski 2000; Bartkowski 2004; Gelfer 2008; Thompson & Remmes 2002;), but there is little work on masculinities and abstinence as a facet of religious organizational life (Erzen 2006; Wilkins 2008). If we research the ways in mainstream evangelical religious organizations regulate both masculinities and sexuality, we can better understand the *conflation* of these religious notions of gender identity and sexuality. If we know more about religious organizations’ expectations for men (who are always presumed to be male-bodied in the church setting), than we can use this information to expand these expectations going forward, both in terms of an expansion of available gendered enactments, but also an expansion of masculinities outside of the male body.

*Virginity Pledges in a Gendered Context: Hegemony & Purity*

Diversity among those who pledge abstinence exists along gendered lines; virginity pledgers are more likely to be female (Bersamin et al 2004; Jones 2007). This is not surprising, as virginity and chastity have different meanings for men and women, and chastity is usually considered a woman's virtue. Virginity at marriage is more highly prized for women than men, and oftentimes, for young men, there is pressure to be sexually active before marriage. Carpenter (2005) adds that, "All early Christians were encouraged to embrace sexual abstinence. Both genders were thought to experience sexual desire, but abstinence was understood in gender-specific ways. The term "virgin" customarily referred to women, whereas "chastity" was the favored expression for men, implying that sexual purity and abstinence were innate in women, but had to be cultivated in men" (2005:19). Although many researchers claim that the double-standard regarding sexuality between genders has disappeared, it is still true that sexual activity outside of marriage and romantic relationships in general are more socially acceptable for men than women (Jones 2007).

It is especially important to look at gender within the abstinence movement because of the ways in which sexuality relate to masculinity: within our society, hegemonically masculine men are considered to be highly sexual beings—and highly sexual beings who exert a certain amount of control over women, who are seen as less sexual beings. In her ethnographic study of masculinity and sexuality in high school, Pascoe (2007) finds that "heterosexual innuendos, sexual bravado, and sexual one-upmanship permeated these primarily male spaces" (2007:85). The culture of sexualized discourse and interaction is what Pascoe calls compulsive heterosexuality, building off of

Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, and 'is not about desire for sexual pleasure, per se, or just about desire to be "one of the guys;"' (2007:86-87), rather, it is a way in which young men symbolically display their power over women in an effort to reinforce their masculinity (Fine 1987; Pascoe 2007; Renold 2007; Rich 1980; Thorne 1993).

When men renounce sexual activity until marriage, do their displays of power shift? In her qualitative study of students at a Christian University, Wilkins argues that abstinence creates a particular "identity task" for men. Men must explain their abstinence in a way that is culturally credible, given the fundamentally unmasculine nature of their decision. Wilkins argues that in emphasizing that abstinence is a *choice*, men are able to maintain their authority and credibility as normatively, or hegemonically, masculine. Further, in the absence of what Wilkins calls "heterosexual success"—what I read to be her version of an enactment of hegemonically masculine standards—men prove their manhood through *collective performances of temptation*. As Wilkins states, "Instead of talking about scoring, Unity Christian men talk about how hard it is to manage temptation" (2008:129). Men are not redefining masculinity, but rather finding different ways to assert normative understandings of masculinity. Findings in the current study are consistent with Wilkins' (2008) and will add to this work in two important ways: 1) by uncovering the key mechanisms through which these *collective performances of temptation* are enacted and reasserted, and 2) by investigating the ways in which *collective performances of temptation* carry over into married life.

### *Virginity Pledges in a Married Context?*

As Irvine summarizes, there has been a growing trend towards exploration of marital sexuality within the evangelical church. According to Irvine, in the early 1970s, the evangelical church began to shift from an all-restrictive, repressive conversation of sexual activity to one of satisfaction. As Irvine states, “evangelicals began to celebrate sex, but only divinely approved sex” (2002:83). The evangelical church believes that sexual satisfaction is achievable for both men and women, but that this satisfaction should only be experienced within the confines of marriage (Irvine 2002; Wilkins 2008). This marital satisfaction rests on the presumption that both partners are virgins until marriage. Carpenter theorizes four types of virginity loss, two of which apply to those pledging virginity in a religious context: virginity is seen as both a *gift* (in this case, to the spouse) and an *act of worship*, a general signaling of their religious commitment. Wilkins found that participants framed their virginity as a *gift* for their future spouse; viewing sex as something both intensely intimate and emotional, those pledging are able to frame waiting for sexual activity as a positive decision (2008). Luker adds that “the conservatives [sexual conservatives] are involved in strategies and worldviews that play up the value of sexuality, and by arguing that this mysterious, sacred force can be enjoyed only in marriage, they boost the stock of marriage as well” (2006:103). As Wilkins concludes, “[participants] portray themselves as saying yes to greater marital intimacy, rather than as saying no to present desire” (2008:144). Carpenter highlights this point, finding that evangelicals believe that even before meeting a spouse, you are cheating on them if you are physically active with someone else (2005: 188). Finally, Luker adds that sexual conservatives believe that waiting to have sex until marriage also

allows them to learn skills and values that will enhance their future marriage (2006:102).

As Dave, an “eloquent father and a national proselytizer for abstinence-only education”

said to Luker,

What abstinence is doing is, it’s building that maturity and that responsibility over time. Trust. Allowing you to pursue your career plans without any of these serious interruptions... You’re not missing out on anything. You have something to look forward to, within the context of marriage. Imagine if someone’s willing to make a lifelong commitment to you before the physical has entered the picture. That relationship’s gotta mean something. That’s gotta mean something. (2006:103)

Pledges of abstinence are couched in a rhetoric of marriage, and a promise that refraining from sexual activity will be worth the wait.

What happens once these individuals get married? Luker provides us with the only theoretical framework from which to hypothesize. Luker argues that for sexual conservatives, marriage is a noun. As Luker summarizes:

For sexual liberals, ‘marriage’ is a verb, while for conservatives it is a noun, and liberals at some level intuit this and are concerned about it. That is, sexual conservatives (at least in the ideal) marry once, and once married they are (again in the ideal) forever in the state of marriage. For sexual liberals, in contrast, being married is not only a verb but an active one. For them, a good marriage requires work and discipline, communication and honesty, and it’s a process that’s pretty much ongoing (2006: 105).

Because pledges of abstinence are framed not only as a present commitment, but also understood as a future commitment to a spouse and a high-quality marriage, marriage itself becomes a static event<sup>4</sup>. For those who pledge abstinence, marriage is the end goal—the reward for oftentimes many years of purity. In framing marriage as a reward, and a reward that is promised to be one of both intense emotional and sexual satisfaction, marriage is not thought of as an active process. It is here, broadly, that this study seeks to add to our understandings of the abstinence movement.

I will begin with a detailed overview of my methods, contributing to the emerging literature on longitudinal qualitative work (see Dimitriadis 2003; MacLeod 2005; Weis

2004). The findings section begins with data from 2008, and focuses on the ways in which participants conceptualize sex, and secondly, how these definitions of sex lead to the need for control mechanisms for sexual activity. These control mechanisms--small groups and accountability partners--are also discussed in detail. This section also provides support for Wilkin's concept of *collective performances of temptation*; men who pledge abstinence reassert hegemonic understandings of masculinity through alternative discourses of temptation, and as my research contributes, do so through these small groups and accountability partners. I then analyze data collected in 2011-2012, and provide insight into the ways in which the above definitions of sex, mechanisms for control, and collective performances of temptation manifest in married life. The study concludes with a discussion of the findings and provides suggestions for future research.

## Methods

In 2008, I began participant observation at an evangelical mega church, The Message of Truth<sup>5</sup>, in the Southwest. Boasting attendance of over 14,000 individuals every Sunday, and about 2,000 college-students and twenty-somethings every Friday night at The Gathering, the special needs of the parish are met in much smaller spaces outside of the church. These special interest groups focus on a variety of topics, from “adult worship dance” to “reaching out and loving Chinese students in our city” to “The River”—a small group of men supporting each other in their decisions to remain abstinent until marriage.

Initially hoping to talk to congregants about purity balls, and to better understand if there is an equivalent ceremony for young men, I decided to attend Message of Truth on a Friday evening, where I attended The Gathering. Almost every car in the parking lot boasted a “Gathering” bumper sticker—this is a place where college students and young adults are happy to be. Crowds of well-dressed worshippers gathered around vats of Starbucks coffee and bowls of M & Ms. Tables full of information for newcomers and brochures for upcoming mission trips lined the walls in front of the smiling faces of the “greeters.” I was overwhelmed by the organized chaos of it all—the rapid ingestion of caffeine, the meeting and greeting, and the general excitement surrounding the service to come. The service seemed like a rock concert—over an hour of singing and dancing with a live rock band, followed by a sermon on “the Man in the Middle”—Jesus Christ. At the conclusion of the evening’s events, I took a pamphlet describing the various small groups associated with The Gathering community<sup>6</sup>. One group sounded of particular interest, The River—a group of men who helped each other along the “path of their walks with

God”. The pamphlet listed a Facebook group URL, and I contacted the administrator of the group through the social networking site. He responded immediately, stating that he and the rest of the group are indeed abstaining from sexual intercourse until marriage, and are supporting each other in doing so. He invited me to their meeting the following week.

The River is a small group within The Gathering that is dedicated to “applying biblical principles of love and respect into every portion of our lives as men of God.” This group is an example of the small group formations very common to the modern evangelical church (Erzen 2006; Miller 1997). The group meets once a week, when they enjoy pizza and conversation about “difficult and hard hitting topics.”<sup>7</sup> Over the course of two months, I was able to conduct three in-depth focus groups with this group of men, each of which lasted for three hours. These focus groups were an informal, relaxed way for these men to tell me of their pledge experiences, and due to the open nature of the discussions, we were able to cover a variety of topics that provide a better understanding of their positions in a country where the culture surrounding sex and sexuality makes for a heated debate. I also conducted semi-structured individual interviews with 8 members of The River. When necessary, I e-mailed members of the group with follow-up and clarifying questions after focus group sessions.

I also used Facebook to search for other potential interviewees in Colorado. I searched for both True Love Waits<sup>8</sup> and Young Life<sup>9</sup> groups in Colorado and contacted the male members of their group. This yielded an additional 7 interviews, which were conducted through e-mail, instant messenger, and Skype. Although conducted in a variety of formats, interviews remained consistent regarding the questions asked, and were used

to better understand the backgrounds of the young men, specifically regarding religiosity, family life, their reasons for pledging abstinence, their struggles with these pledges, and their futures.

All 15 young men that I spoke with identify as Caucasian, and ranged in age from 19-25. They were all pursuing higher education or had already attended a 2 or 4 year undergraduate program. They all reported happily married parents, and 14 out of 15 have at least one sibling. These young men reported a variety of job experiences, from deli servers to biology lab assistants to interns at large, religiously-based political organizations. They enjoy a variety of activities, including, but not limited to: playing the guitar, outdoor activities and sports, hanging out with friends, video games, and going to the movies.

Fast-forward to the summer of 2011. All but one of the men<sup>10</sup> initially interviewed in 2008 have gotten both engaged and married<sup>11</sup>. Over the past year, I have been in the process of reconnecting with the initial interviewees. Three of the most active participants in The River sent me friendship requests at the conclusion of our time together in 2008. While I accepted these requests, the resulting internet friendships have been entirely one-sided; they are “blocked” from seeing any of my internet activity as a way to maintain a researcher/participant repertoire. However, because of these friendships, I was able to re-connect with the former leader of The River, and employed snowball sampling to get back in touch with the other 14 original participants. I conducted one focus group with three of the most active members of The River at the beginning of the data collection process, unaware that the group had entirely dissolved. After a lengthy and, at times, clearly awkward group conversation with these three men, I

transitioned solely to individual interviews. I conducted individual interviews with all but one original members of The River. In total, this research builds off of 4 focus groups and 40 individual interviews (29 original interviews (15 original interviews in 2008 and 14 original interviews in 2011/2012) and 11 follow-up interviews, as deemed necessary by clarification required). This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the author's university.

## Findings

### *2008: Pre-Marriage—“Beastly” Struggles, Accountability Partners, Assertions of Masculinity, and Big Promises*

Heterosexuality, and more specifically, assertions of heterosexuality, are central to masculinity (Connell 2005; Pascoe 2007). Carpenter states that, “sexual activity and virginity loss have rarely been seen as carrying dire consequences for heterosexual men” (2005:6). Rather, sexual activity, and assertions of sexual activity, are positively associated with hegemonic performances of masculinity; it is a way in which young men symbolically display their power over women in an effort to reinforce their masculinity (Fine 1987; Pascoe 2007; Renold 2007; Rich 1980; Thorne 1993). Because of this popular definition of masculinity, the young men interviewed for this thesis represent an overlooked community. For these young men, virginity loss carries dire consequences and significant meaning. Building off the concept of “collective performances of temptation”, the analysis below will highlight the ways in which masculinities are asserted in light of these fundamentally unmasculine decisions. I will then argue that repercussions from these *collective performances of temptation*—namely the understanding of sex as “beastly” —carry into married life.

During my first focus group with The River, I asked the group members to describe what it was like to take their "pledge." The group struggled to come up with a response, and it was quickly apparent that these young men do not view their acts of abstinence in a formal manner—for them, it was and is not about a ceremonial commitment or a single defining moment; rather, it is a personal promise that is deeply engrained in their lives. In order to cope with their alternate lifestyle choices, these young

men have created loosely bound communities, such as The River. In this sense, those researching virginity pledges as *the* abstinence movement miss a wide portion of that movement—men who informally participate in these abstinence communities. These small networks allow these young men to exist in a safe space of open discourse and support, and through this alternate discourse, they are able to justify and affirm their definitions of what it means to be a man. For these men, sexual activity does not reaffirm their masculinity in the way that mainstream culture and society tells us that it should. Rather, it is the absence of sexual activity that helps define them as individuals and as a group.

These young men feel as though the absence of sexuality is necessary because of the ways in which they conceptualize sex. For this group, male sexuality is dangerous and out of control. These young men mirror the concerns of sexual conservatives—adults who stress the importance of boundaries when it comes to all matters of sex and sexuality (Luker 2006). However, to add to Luker’s discussion of sexual conservatives, it appears that these boundaries are highly gendered—these men feel as though they cannot control their sexuality, and further, they feel as though this is not true for women. The creation of small groups, such as The River, act as small communities that help to control the sexuality of these young men. Specifically, the use of pornography, masturbation, and same sex desire will be addressed below as factors of sexuality that must be controlled. The definition of sex is central to how these men conceptualize abstinence, and the meaning surrounding virginity carries over into all aspects of their lives.

### *What Is Sex?*

For young men who have taken abstinence pledges, sex is something that is not easily defined. It is good and evil, wonderful and awful. These sentiments reflect a larger shift in evangelical culture in which Irvine finds that “evangelicals began to celebrate sex, but only divinely approved sex” (82).

For young men who have joined The River, sex is something to be celebrated. Aidan<sup>12</sup>, for example, believes that sex is something “wonderful and great” that is about “honor and respect.” It is a “beautiful gift,” but this gift is from God, and is meant for the marriage bed. To keep it there, sex is also something that requires boundaries.

These boundaries help to diminish the evil side of sex. These same men who celebrate sex also acknowledge its darker sides. For Jason, another member of the group, sex is something that can cause “hurt, torments, guilt and pain.” It is a beast—a temptation that can cause issues with salvation and morality if it is not controlled. The River, in effect, is a mechanism for maintaining control. It is a safe space in which a group of young men can discuss issues of sex and sexuality in hopes of dealing with their struggles and temptations.

For these young men, the Christian world does not tackle issues of sex and sexuality in an open and effective manner. In a sense, these young men and the Christian church itself reflect larger social battles about sex and sexuality: “As a society, we are caught somewhere between understanding sex as sacred and thinking it profane” (Regnerus 2007:4). For the church, the act of sex is sacred. The Message of Truth provides sermons on issues of sex and sexuality once a year to the members of The Gathering. The series, often three or four weeks long, divides the members of The

Gathering by gender, providing each group with different sermons related, specifically, to issues that the church believes are unique to the gender of the group. In this sense, the church is contributing to a reification and remystification of gender difference rather than a demystification of these “differences.”

These sermons talk about pornography, masturbation, same-sex desire, and extra-marital affairs, and the gendered messages of these sermons are strong and clear. Jacob, one of the most popular Friday night pastors, said the following during the series on sex and sexuality:

Men and women are different. Our culture likes to tell us that everyone is the same...The roles, and what you do are different, but the significance and value before God is the same. We are different. Guys are thermoses and women are goblets. They both have wonderful functions. That’s why I can talk to you like this tonight [bangs on the table and eludes to his aggressive nature and tone] and you guys are just fine [laughs]. But if I talked to girls like that they’d all walk out of here crying [everyone laughs].

The definitions of sex that these men espouse are not generated individually or within the group; rather, the ways in which they talk about sex and sexuality, and the very gendered language they use, are clear reflections of the larger church’s stances on these issues.

However, the once-yearly sermons delivered by the church on sex are not enough. In order to maintain the sacredness of sex, these young men also need to frequently discuss and understand the “profane.” The River is a place in which these young men are able to discuss the profane aspects of sex and sexuality: the use of pornography, masturbation, and same-sex desire. In discussing these “profane” struggles in an open and safe arena, these young men aim to preserve the sacred aspects of sex and sexuality: their virginity and spousal sexual intercourse.

*Pornography—The “wink wink, nudge nudge sin”*

The members of The River believe that the use of pornography is prevalent within the Christian community. While many Christian authors discuss the issue, such as the book *Every Young Man’s Battle: Strategies for Victory in the Real World of Sexual Temptation* by Stephen Aterburn, Fred Stoeker, and Mike Yorkey—which 13 out of 15 initially interviewed have read—the men interviewed find that it is a serious problem that is not adequately discussed. While these men believe that the problem is not growing as quickly within the church as in “secular society,” many of them open up to struggles with pornography use. As a group, these young men describe pornography as something “destructive” and “bad for individual or mutual use.” Anything from “two clicks away” on a computer to a “J.C. Penny’s catalogue,” pornography fits a wide ranging definition and thus they are constantly risking succumbing to it. Rather than understanding pornography as something that reflects human sexuality, these young men view it as something that takes away from human sexuality—or the sacred aspects of human sexuality, at least.

*Masturbation—The “Touchy Subject”*

These men’s discussion of masturbation reflect conflicts in the larger Christian culture, as illustrated by Regnerus, who summarizes contemporary evangelical views on masturbation as follows: 1) masturbation to orgasm may not be sinful in itself, but lust is; 2) since lust almost always accompanies masturbation, almost all masturbation is sin; 3) repressing masturbation may be worse than tolerating it, according to some; 4)

masturbation can become compulsive, which is always problematic; 5) ultimately, solo sex is not God's intention for human sexual expression (2007:115).

For these men, masturbation and pornography are related. Pornography helps men, who Aidan calls "visual animals," with masturbation. While, much like pornography, masturbation is not discussed enough within the setting of the church, when discussed, there does seem to be more disagreement on the subject. Some leaders within The Gathering think it is okay to masturbate before marriage. For Aidan, masturbation before marriage is fine, with certain boundaries in place: "Simply pleasuring yourself without porn is fine, as long as you're not always relying on it or scheduling time around it." Masturbation, like other "beastly" aspects of male sexuality, needs to remain in control for these young men. For Chase, a soft-spoken, determined 23 year old, masturbation before marriage is not a good thing, and "can be very dangerous within marriage as well." Chase worries that masturbation could substitute sex with his wife, and as both marriage and the act of sex within marriage are sacred, anything that could hinder that act remains "beastly" and evil. Chase plans to talk with a pastor or go to a marriage counselor to talk about the subject once he is engaged.

For Jason, masturbation is heavily related to lust, which is also a dangerous thing that must be avoided. However, the topic is not that simple. Lust is something that these young men consider very dangerous. These young men believe that even lusting after their girlfriends is inappropriate. Because they are not yet married to their girlfriends, they share concern at the possibility of confusing lust with love. However, Jason believes that one can "masturbate not just because of lust—you can do it to deal with stress, to help you fall asleep—to give you that high just before you go to bed." Clearly, the issue

of masturbation is a debated subject among males who have taken abstinence pledges. These questions and disagreements make the discussion surrounding masturbation all the more important for these men. In discussing masturbation, sexually abstinent men are able to work with others to define their boundaries in hopes of maintaining their pledges.

*Homosexuality—Hate the Sin, Not the Sinner*

Much like pornography and masturbation, the men involved with The River view homosexuality, not as a legitimate desire or lifestyle, but as a form of temptation on par with pornography and masturbation that can affect any man. For Aidan, homosexuality is a choice that can be introduced by others: “Sin isn’t necessarily you by yourself. Sin can be caused and introduced into your life by others suggesting it to you. Eventually you have to make the choice yourself and act out on it.” Aidan implicitly counters the dominant model of inborn sexual identities, in part because he has experienced same sex desire. Aidan experienced homosexual thoughts and feelings, but was “fortunate enough to have God hit me over the head with a spiritual 2x4.” It is interesting that a group of men—and the institutions to which they belong—can be categorized as fairly homophobic, yet have such open discussions regarding same sex desires. This is further indication that these small groups provide an arena in which these young men can go against the normative definitions and enactments of masculinity—and assumptions about evangelicals as well.

Though the men in The River believe that homosexuality is wrong, they emphasize the difference between the person and the sin. They espouse the importance of accepting homosexuals “for who they are” before telling them that what they are doing is

“wrong” in an effort to “change” them. Jason is an advocate for a local group that helps with the reintegration of “former gays” into the church and greater society. Aidan agrees with Jason, and adds that:

You don't become a Christian because you are clean, it's because you need to be clean. Same thing with homosexuals. I think homosexuals can redeem themselves. I think homosexuals can become Christians. I think homosexuals, crazily enough, can become straight. I think they can go on to live—and I've seen it—healthy productive lives in a nuclear family situation, marrying, having kids, all that, and live normal, straight lives. And I don't think that's a rejection of who they think they are. I think who they think they are—they've been lied to for so long, by people around them, by society in general.

Homosexuality is a threat to the type of lifestyle that these men view as normal—it is a choice and identity that can be changed. Much like the use of pornography and masturbation, it is a threat to God's intended role of sex within our lives. These young men marshal a variety of nonscientific studies and experiences to justify their views (Erzen 2006). Jason, for instance, believes that “95% of gay men were molested as children,” and that “most lesbians do not have a strong father or father-figure in their lives.”

In addition to seeing homosexuality as both a legacy of emotional and physical damage and as a form of temptation on par with pornography and masturbation, these young men see homosexuality as a threat to family and marriage. Aidan gets frustrated that homosexuals will “walk up to you and say ‘Hi, I'm Gay.’” As a young man who forms his life around the sacred nature of marriage, homosexuality is nothing but a “beastly” threat to this union upon which Aidan and the other young men place such high value (Luker 2006).

What, then, is sex? For men who have taken abstinence pledges, sex is both good and evil, and as a result, an act that requires boundaries to ensure that sex maintains its meaning and purpose: as a wonderful gift from God. These boundaries are especially

important for young men, as young women are not understood to be sexual outside of a married relationship. These men, in their discussions at The River, actively enforce boundaries regarding masturbation, the use of pornography, and homosexuality. Their discussions help them to reinforce and maintain their values regarding sex and sexuality. In an effort to continue their pledge of abstinence, these young men have found effective ways to both separate and maintain the separation of the “beastly” and sacred sides of sex. With a better understanding of the all-encompassing definitions of sex for these young men, it is clear why they choose to remain abstinent until marriage. Before we move to a discussion of the ways in which these boundaries and pledges are maintained, it is important to reinforce the very gendered perceptions of these struggles.

### *Female Sexuality*

As we have discussed, these young men openly discuss their struggles with the “beastly” sides of sex and sexuality: pornography, masturbation, and homosexuality. However, their views of female sexuality indicate that these “beastly” struggles are a men’s problem, and a men’s problem only. Evangelical culture within the United States, as a whole, views women and men’s sexuality quite differently. TV Evangelist James Robison, author of *Sex is Not Love*, discusses women’s important role in controlling and taming the sexual desires of her male counterpart (Rose 2005:9). The River’s members echo this view of women as less sexual beings. When describing a former girlfriend who was sexually active, Jason, a recently-engaged 23 year old, attributes her sexual activity to the confusion of sex with love. Aidan, the outspoken and energetic 25 year old who founded The River, adds that, “In my experience, women typically want to use sex and

intercourse as a means of deepening the emotional ties to their male counterparts. I've heard girls tell me that the reason why they've had sex was to 'feel loved.'" For Mike, a 21 year old college student and member of both The River and True Love Waits, the difference lies in biology: "...Girls are more courteous and responsible as far as what goes on with their own bodies. For guys, it can be hard [to maintain an abstinence pledge] because of hormone levels." Finally, these young men do not believe that women similarly struggle with issues of pornography and masturbation. Evangelicals and these men in particular do not see women as visual animals—those that would be easily tempted by what they see or encounter in daily life. Rather, women need protection from these aspects of out of control male sexuality. For instance, Aidan will not tell his sisters about his struggles with pornography use, as he feels that he needs to "protect them" from this knowledge. Thus, while both young men and young women take abstinence pledges, these young men feel that, as men, they deal with unique struggles. Because of these struggles—the "beastly" sides of sex and sexuality—these men find it all the more necessary to talk openly with other young men in settings like The River.

### *Collective Performances of Temptation: Accountability Partners & Small Groups*

To maintain the sacred, these young men must confront the "beastly" aspects of sexuality. To do so, these young men require accountability partners. As the analysis below demonstrates, both accountability partners and small groups appear to be the key mechanisms through which *collective performances of temptation* exist and operate, providing depth to Wilkin's initial outline of the concept.

The River, as both a small group and a mechanism for maintaining control, is not unique to my field site. Rather, mega churches rely on small groups in order to facilitate feelings of membership, communication and belonging. The River is a space in which these young men openly discuss and debate the “beastly”, as defined by struggles with pornography, masturbation and same-sex desire. It is not enough for a church leader to say “wait until marriage”; rather, this decision is consistently discussed, maintained, and sanctioned within the small-group setting (Djupe & Gilbert 2009; Hechter 1987). Further, these small-group settings provide the starting ground for intricate networks of accountability.

Accountability partners were a recurrent theme throughout my discussions with these young men. Aidan feels that “an accountability partner is key to surviving a world that is just berating you with all these negative messages.” In essence, accountability partners are close friends that “you can be completely honest with.” Accountability partners hold an individual to their promise of abstinence until marriage. These young men have accountability partners for things like pornography, masturbation, and sexual activity with girlfriends or fiancées. These young men each have a couple different accountability partners, because they believe that it does not work for a “pair to try to hold each other accountable. You need different partners for different things—this helps avoid guys comparing notes.” Aidan has a couple different accountability partners. Specifically regarding the use of pornography, Aidan’s accountability partner receives a report from Aidan’s laptop every week with a detailed history of every web site Aidan has visited. This ensures that, if Aidan slips, he will have a friend to hold him to his goal of abstinence until marriage. Aidan’s fiancée also receives a copy of the weekly report,

but they are directly archived in her e-mail account as a ritual of trust—she does not look at the weekly reports. While this is a symbolic act of trust, this may also further indicate the views these young men hold towards women as less sexual beings. Aidan presumes his fiancée would not have the desire to look at such reports, nor be tempted by their content.

Accountability partners are used to ensure the separation of the sacred and the “beastly”, and to maintain these boundaries in moments of weakness. In controlling these “beastly” temptations, and dealing with the situation immediately if a temptation does occur, these young men are able to hold to their promises of abstinence. Further, and perhaps more importantly, the presence of accountability partners indicates the *need* for accountability partners. Small groups, or what Aidan calls a “casual accountability partner” are not enough. Rather, these men form intricate patterns of accountability within and outside of the group, highlighting their constant temptations and thus, their need for control as highly sexual, masculine men. These young men are able to prove their manhood by “linking their resistance to alternative masculine qualities of self control and commitment” (Wilkins 2008:124). This rhetoric of control and hyper-temptation comes through in Aidan’s explanation of the intricate network of accountability:

I think that people who try to hold each other accountable, I think that’s a bad idea. I think if you want to do something like that, instead of having it be a pair, have it be three people, each of them relying upon the other, but never back and forth. And that way, when guys are together, they don’t start comparing notes.

Aidan draws on a culturally normative depiction of masculinity: men sitting around, comparing their various sexual conquests. However, for the men of The River, the conquest lay in their ability to refrain—they conquer the “beastly”, rather than engaging

in sexual activity. While this would be a potential opportunity for varying discourses on gender, Aidan and the others still operate within a very conservative understanding of the “roles” of men and women. Chase adds to the explanation of accountability partners with the following: “One of the mistakes I made is I thought well, I’ll be accountable to my girlfriend. I’ll tell her the things that I’ve done in the past, and that doesn’t help. It needs to be someone you know and trust in the same sex.” Aidan interjects: “Yeah, it’s a very dangerous thing, especially for couples who are dating or engaged, I would not ever ask my fiancée to be my soul accountability partner. It HAS to be somebody of the same sex as you are, and uh, is in a different life status than you. And I think that is key.”

Accountability partners are not only a way in which these men can display and reinforce their discourse of temptation; layers of temptation exist within accountability partner relationships as well. In reinforcing the strict same-sex component of the pairing, these men hint at the possibility of “slipping” if they are talking openly about issues of sex and sexuality with their girlfriends/fiancées. In this sense, we can think of accountability partners and small groups as both the mechanisms for *collective processes of temptation*, and the mechanisms for which these *collective processes of temptation* are encouraged and even heightened.

### *Denying the “Beastly”, Promised the Sacred*

These elaborate structures of control, and more broadly the maintenance of a promise of abstinence, seem like a tremendous amount of work for these young men. The power of socialization within the religious community is an easy argument and answer to this unusual commitment. However, we must look at the promises being made to these

young men to understand their reasons for abstaining. These men believe that sex is both sacred and “beastly”, and it is through the control and suppression of the “beastly” that they are guaranteed the sacred. However, it is important to note the relationship between marriage and sex in the definition of “sacred” sex and sexuality: these men are taught that preserving sex until marriage ensures both the enjoyment of positive sexual activity within marriage, but also the successful formation of a *family*. Wilkins finds that men engage in a “family values rhetoric” (2008) that allows them to not only frame their choice of abstinence in alternative masculine characteristics, but also in terms of their eventual “role” as a strong family man. Interestingly, I found that these men engage in a very negative family values rhetoric; pre-marital sex is a *threat* to a healthy marriage and family life.<sup>13</sup> As Michael states,

Aside from any religious perspective, I want to share sex with only the love of my life; when I am with her I don't want any other girl to pop into my head that I had slept with. I want to only think of her and how much I love her. I feel you give a part of yourself away every time you have sex... It ties in with my beliefs that when you have sex with someone you are married to that person. So when you have sex with multiple people you are an adulterer and you are stealing a precious gift from whoever their spouse is going to be. I don't think I have every made a "formal" pledge, but I have made one to my future wife, and myself, and God.<sup>14</sup>

Aidan and Chase “cite” “secular” studies in their argument that “the proof is in the numbers...numbers don't lie.” Aidan adds that:

[Cites numerous statistics on increasing divorce rates for those who have sex pre-marriage.] I think right there, gee, you want to stay married, you want to have a successful relationship where you're celebrating your golden anniversary? Don't have sex. As hard as that sounds, you know, I think 50 years of being with the same person is definitely better than, you know, 15 minutes with somebody else. And somebody else and somebody else...studies have also shown that people who remain pure before marriage find their sex lives to be generally more enjoyable between each other, and remain monogamous to each other typically find more enjoyment out of their sex lives. They also generally have more sex than people who were active before marriage. All the stats are out there, I'm sure you could find them...

While this family values rhetoric differs from previous work (Wilkins 2008), its implications do not change: abstaining from sexual activity pre-marriage is the way to

ensure a good sex life and a strong family post-marriage. Many studies document the sexual practices of married adults (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983; Fisher et al 2010; Herbenick et al 2010; Schnarch 2009; Schwartz 1994; Trudel et al 2010), but scholars do not look at the implications for pledging virginity in married life. Do these young men reap the benefits of their commitments? Is marriage, indeed, a successful union in which they can enjoy their sacred “gift from god?”

*2012: Satan’s New Angles, Loss of Support, and the Presence of Women*

In the late summer of 2011, I reconnected with the original members of The River. Much like we had done in the past, we all agreed to meet at Aidan’s home to talk. I thought a focus group would be a good starting point for insight into their married lives. From there, I planned to structure my individual interviews accordingly.

When I entered the room, I was greeted by the three core members of the group. After a few minutes of casual catch-up, it was clear that I had made a mistake in assuming they still communicated. After asking them about The River, the following interaction occurred:

Peter: I have no desire to ask my guy friends “how’s your sex life?” I just have no desire to ask that. And I feel like I would be (pause) overstepping my bounds if I did.

Aidan: [snaps back]. Well you would be.

Peter: Because I want to respect their wives too, right?

Aidan: Yeah.

These men, who four years prior, had engaged in a very open discourse about sex and sexuality, now find it both highly inappropriate and awkward to engage in these conversations. Further, there is a new, gendered component to these conversations, as

men are no longer talking about themselves when discussing sex. Rather, they are now talking about themselves *and* their wives. The above dialogue became much less surprising after conducting individual interviews with these men. As we will see, because of the ways in which these men both discussed and understood sex pre-marriage, they now engage in a very rigid and often isolating debates about sexuality now. These findings have implications for the promises of marriage and sex they were ensured four years prior.

### *Where is the Sacred?*

While sex is framed as “sacred”, “wonderful” and a “gift from god” post-marriage, these married men still think of sex in its “beastly” terms. In focusing solely on the goal of abstinence until marriage, conversations on healthy sexuality *within* marriage were never part of the discussion for these young men. As Seth admits,

Before you get married, the biggest thing you struggle with, usually, is pre-marital sex, but once you are married, you can't be tempted by that anymore, so you get attacked by completely different things...like pornography or having sex outside of marriage. And that was kind of striking to me...Essentially Satan has to find a new angle to attack on, and I was like oh, hadn't really thought about that.<sup>15</sup>

Aidan adds that, “It's a myth that I think is kind of perpetuated by the lack of communication, is that once you get married, suddenly all those desires are fulfilled in your spouse. It's not true. Guys are so visually driven. The desire for porn, especially if you struggled with that in the past, is still there. It doesn't go away once the ring slips on!”

These men are socialized to talk about sex in terms of control, and with a strong focus on its “beastly” elements. The “beastly” elements of sex do not disappear with the

transition to married life. Rather, they still exist, and still tempt, but these men no longer have the support to talk through these issues.

*Loss of Support: Keeping it in the Dark?*

As Peter describes it, the church teaches these young men to keep struggles of sex and sexuality “in the light” pre-marriage. With membership in The River and the intricate network of accountability partners, these young men create the space in which they can be open about their struggles. However, as Peter reiterates, the church teaches that “once you are married, everything should be kept behind closed doors”. Upon transition to marriage, it is normal, and culturally assumed that couples become each other’s support, regardless of the issue at hand. In that sense, the church’s expectation that spouses should talk to each other, instead of their community, about issues of sexuality, is not that unusual. Their inability to communicate is also structural; because of a man’s presumed role as provider, small groups for married men (although not related to sexual issues) are scheduled as early as 5:00 am, to allow time for small group, worship, and breakfast before the work day. Further, given that marriage is framed in such a sacred and positive light, men should not need support groups to deal with issues of sexuality within marriage; this is, rather, the reward they have all been waiting for. However, because these young men have been socialized to think of sex as “beastly”, and to speak of it as “beastly”, I argue that this transition to marriage is not seamless, nor a static event (Luker 2006).

While accountability partners and small group support is entirely abandoned at transition to marriage, one cannot assume that this also means that conversations on sex

and sexuality come to a halt. Many of the men interviewed post-marriage all recollect their pre-marital counseling as a wonderful time in which church leaders provided them with an appropriate model, and subsequent encouragement, of ways in which to engage in healthy conversations about sexuality. For these men, this was the first, and only time, that they recall church leadership providing an example of conversations on sex within married life. As Seth recalls, “Before it’s like, if you’re not gonna be engaged you don’t need to be talking about it really, so you get engaged and the counselor is like, hey, you guys NEED to be talking about this stuff, and it’s like okay, we can go have these conversations.” However, these conversations are abandoned shortly after the engagement period.

Aidan: We may have teased the topic individually as a couple before but it was really in counseling with a formal set-up that you can talk about this, you’re allowed to discuss this, you’re supposed to talk about it, but then it seems to just...

Seth: It goes away again.

Why do these conversations disappear? One would think that a group of men so open and engaged in conversations around sex and sexuality pre-marriage would be able to continue these conversations post marriage. The answer is not simply that the church teaches them to do otherwise. Rather, what unfolded in my interviews was a series of conversations regarding complicated interplay between masculinities, understandings of femininity, their wives understandings of the transition to marriage, and both a reverent and critical approach to the church’s teachings.

### *From Healthy to “Awkward” and “Weird”*

Conversations and debates on masturbation, same-sex desire, and pornography addictions once filled the Wednesday evenings for these young men. Now, the thought

of talking to each other about their sexual practices and desires are unthinkable. When I initially asked these men if they were discussing their sex lives post marriage, the following exchange occurred:

Aidan: I guess, you know, you hear locker room talk, not that I find myself in many locker rooms, but I can't think of really any opportunity that I would have with my quote on quote guy friends, to have those conversations, and frankly, it is none of their business, and I don't want to know about theirs either. And most of the friends that we run with are other couples, so unless all of us are sitting around sipping coffee, talking about sex—

Seth: That would be SO awkward!

Aidan: I don't think it would happen, maybe only in a situation like this [referring to the interview]

Peter: It's definitely not a social lubricator

Aidan: No, no, it's not something you just casually talk about

Seth: At least in our circles

Aidan: Maybe a swinger circle! [everyone laughs]

In framing sex as a gift for the marriage bed, it is unthinkable for these young men to discuss sexual activity anywhere outside of their married relationships. Positive conversations around sex do not occur—and these men assume that positive conversations regarding sexual practices would only occur in what they think of as promiscuous, risqué scenarios (such as a swinger party).

Seth says that the only situation in which he would *even think* of bringing up sex with one of his male friends is if “you see their marriage is in trouble and it's obvious that it is sex-related. Like if one of them is binge eating or doing some other stupid stuff.” Further, Seth adds that these conversations would be a one-time occurrence, “and then it would never be talked about again. You would never broach that again.”

Both the awkwardness and infrequent nature of these potential conversations is framed in relation to their wives. Their *collective performances of temptation* have

changed to individual proclamations of protection for their wives. For example, when talking, very vaguely, as a small group about their current struggles with “beastly” elements of sex, Peter says, with a sigh, “certainly there wouldn’t be any groups where couples sit down and talk about it.”

Seth: Never, ever.

Peter: Because if you’re struggling with something you wouldn’t even tell your spouse.

Aidan: Yeah, it’s a gender thing for one, but you know, it’s not only a gender thing, but now you’re—it’s hard enough to open up in front of the guys, “I’m struggling with porn” but now you’ve got their spouses’ judging eyes staring back at you and you can hear their thoughts, it’s like they’re screaming “you dirty creep!”

Author: But the guys wouldn’t scream that, it is just women?

Aidan: Yeah, at least from men’s perspective, that is what I would be most fearful of, if I sat down in a mixed group, and had to admit to something like that, I would fear judgment from the women more than I would fear judgment from the men.

Author: Why’s that?

Aidan: (pause). I think in the Christian world, and maybe the secular world—I don’t really know their perspective on pornography—just to pick on pornography a little bit—but in the Christian world, from the men’s perspective, the women are so *vehemently* anti-pornography, um, that you know, instantly, this judgment would be cast against you, so I think it would be the fear of judgment in a group setting more than anything else. And you know, the social embarrassment too, because now you’ve opened up to both people.

Seth: Absolutely. And I mean anything you admit to, you are saying “my wife isn’t enough to entertain me visually or sexually.”

Aidan: So you are actually admitting to several failings.

Given these men’s understandings of female sexuality as non-existent pre-marriage, it is not surprising that post-marriage, they believe women take a strong, judgmental stance against any sexual transgressions. Much like the abstinence movement and historical understandings of female sexuality suggest, appropriate representations of femininity align with purity: purity from sexual activity until marriage, and in this instance, purity of mind when it comes to any and all forms of sexual activity enacted outside of the married dyad. As married men, the former members of The River now have a job to both provide and

protect for their wives. This form of protection includes the purity of the mind; discussions of sexuality are out of the question. Finally, these discussions are no longer appropriate because of the ways in which these married men assert their masculinity. Pre-marriage, masculinity and heterosexuality were discussed, asserted and maintained through discourses of temptation. However, their sense of masculinity now relates directly to their wives. These men have been promised a sacred, sexually active marriage. Their wives, as Aidan says, have a job of entertaining them “both visually and sexually.” If these men are not finding satisfaction in their sexual lives, as evident through continued struggles with the “beastly”, these men are not only admitting to sexual transgressions, but to failures in their goals as hegemonically masculine, Christian men.

#### *Wives as Accountability Partners?*

Many times throughout the interview process, these men referred to their wives as their new accountability partners. However, these men espouse a very different definition of accountability partner post-marriage; accountability partners no longer provide a safe space for confession or discussion. Instead, they provide a threatening reminder of their understandings of proper forms of masculinity and femininity.

Seth says that “I never want to have to tell Angela something. So it’s like okay, I should not be doing this, and if I’m in a situation where it’s like, okay, I need to walk away from this. There is a part of me that’s like, I *want* to do this, because I am selfish, but it’s like, no, it’s not worth having her cry and ask me why.”

Peter told me that:

Fortunately I think having a wife acts as its own accountability. Not so much necessarily because you’re going to openly talk about the things you struggle with—hypothetically, if I look at porn and then tell my wife, she would be DEVESTATED. I mean that would *wreck* her. I mean

completely. She would feel so much abandonment, and she would feel so empty inside, and I don't think—I mean it's one thing to sin against God, but to sin against someone you love so much, and to see the consequences in such a tangible way, I think that would drive her to depression, you know.

When asked if they thought women in the “secular” world would react differently to such news, there was unanimous agreement. Seth and Peter attribute the difference to fear of loss. For these men, the sanctity of their highly-religious marriage differs greatly from those in the secular world. Those who are presumed sexually active before marriage clearly fall to “bestly” elements of sexuality; an admission of porn viewing would be just another notch in the belt of sin. For these men, however, such an admission is tied, again, to feelings of failure, rigid understandings of femininity, and also to fear of loss. If they are not able to uphold their duties as righteous men, why should their wives, who are presumed to abhor any and all sexual transgressions, turn to them as their leader? This is what Jackson meant when he described the importance of his “masculine, God-fearing attitude” to me at the conclusion of his interview.

If these men are not talking to their friends or their wives about sexual issues, a logical inquiry turns to the women: are these women talking to each other within the church community about issues of sex and sexuality? While I tried to get interviews with the wives of this group of men, I was denied. To me, this immediately signaled the presence of a network; I found it unlikely that they would all refuse conversations with me if they were not talking to each other about these interviews.

When I asked the men about their wives, and whether or not they thought they were discussing issues of sex and sexuality, two themes emerged. Firstly, Peter brought up a time, during the engagement period, in which his fiancé emailed him while he was on a mission in Afghanistan, frightened that he may have a large penis. She was

concerned about the possibility of pain during sex. A few of the other men brought up possibilities of their wives talking with other women if the other women “didn’t have stable figures in their lives to tell them what they needed to do [as a married woman]”. Marriage and fear were the two justifications these men provided for the potential conversations their wives would have about sex. Because of their definitions of female sexuality, conversations about sex and sexuality are not thought of in positive terms, or in terms outside of the marriage bed.

I had one interaction with Aidan’s wife, Rebecca, during my many trips to his house. I was under the impression that she had agreed to a couple’s interview. When I arrived, she was in the kitchen—the first time she had come downstairs during my time there. While I was hopeful that her physical presence meant a chance to talk, she sat next to us for the two hour discussion, ear phones in and typing away at her computer. I tried multiple times to bring her into the conversation. She refused to talk, and I didn’t push it. When I asked Aidan if he thought his wife, and women in the church, spoke of issues of sex and sexuality, he said the following:

Aidan: I would be kind of shocked if they were. Um, I think that it stems from the culture that the church has created. Even amongst themselves—and I could be wrong, I could be totally blown away by this, but I think the answer is, no, they don’t. Unless there is a HUGE problem, and then I think there is a conversation that happens. I am thinking back to overhearing conversations of my parents, my mom would come back from her women’s bible study, and she would say “oh, so-in-so is having marital problems” and that kind of thing, I think just the general stuff was talked about, not the specifics.”

Jason provides a similar summary when asked if he thinks his wife discusses sex and sexuality with her friends: “Our sex life is off limits and she knows this.”

When I left the home of Aidan and Rebecca that evening, distressed at my lack of communication with Rebecca, I was surprised to return home to an email from Aidan, stating the following:

My wife wants me to correct something I said. She said that women, both secular and Christian discuss sex “all the time...in fact its [sic] something that is discussed more than any other topic.” I stand corrected. She also noted that Christian women tend to discuss only with their trusted peers or leaders, never in mixed company.

Of course it is clear that these men have a very narrow understanding of female sexuality. If Aidan thinks of Christian women as, he says, “prudish”, he won’t think of them as sitting around and talking about sex. His misconception of women’s conversation topics aside, what is most telling from this interaction is the fact that Rebecca sat next to Aidan while he spoke at length about the reasons why Christian women don’t talk about sex, and didn’t correct him once in front of me. Rather, she “kept in the dark”, upholding the rules of a married couple within the church, and waited until the mixed company left to correct him. Rebecca’s actions remind her husband of the transition he has made. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) state,

women are central in many of the processes constructing masculinities—as mothers; as schoolmates; as girlfriends, sexual partners, and wives; as workers in the gender division of labor; and so forth. The concept of emphasized femininity focused on compliance to patriarchy, and this is still highly relevant in contemporary mass culture (2005: 848)

As wives, these women are given a seemingly impossible dual role to uphold: as both “visual and sexual” entertainers for these men, and also as their silent accountability partners. These women are understood to be the providers of sexual activity while also upholding very rigid bounds of this sexual activity. These men do not seem to recognize this contradicting duality, perhaps due to the ways in which these men view women’s sexuality as something virtually absent of lust and desire outside of a married relationship. Connell and Messerschmidt touch on the idea of women as actors in shaping masculinities, but it appears that, within this religious context, more work is needed to understand the ways in which women, as enforces of certain ideals of masculinity, navigate this seemingly difficult and contradictory responsibility.

### *Transitions from Sex-Negativity to Sex-Positivity?*

Whenever I asked about current conversations about sexuality, whether they be with friends or a spouse, it was always assumed that I was talking about the “beastly” elements of sexuality. Because these young men were so involved in small groups and networks of accountability to discuss these “beastly” aspects of human sexuality, what many refer to “sex-positive” (Palmer 2004) conversations about sex are not thought of as an option for these men. They have never engaged in such conversations before, and do not have the tools to do so now. While the church promises sex as a wonderful gift within the marriage bed, there is little indication as to what this “wonderful gift” is supposed to entail. As Aidan exclaimed, “I would stand up and cheer figuratively if our pastor got up there and said hey, I am going to spend the next month talking about sex.”

Seth adds that,

There is no example being set once you’re married... You have to figure it out yourself and there is no example to look at and say, hey, this guy over here, who is definitely respected, who has some authority to talk about it, is doing it this way, let’s do that. It’s, hey, what do we think works, and if it doesn’t work, we’re completely out of luck.

These men are left alone to navigate sexuality in married life. Instead of engaging in conversations with their partners or literature on self- help<sup>16</sup>, they fall back on the model they know: temptation and accountability. However, as outlined above, there are no longer outlets in place for this temptation.

Aidan: If it [sex] is discussed publically it’s because something went wrong. Either the moral failings of the leadership... watching porn... spouses cheating, those are all very negative things, but those are all you hear about discussed in the Christian world post-marriage. It’s not like I can casually come home and say, hey, I just thought about this today... It’s going to be a very serious conversation.

Peter adds that “you have to be really intentional about it [conversations about sex]

because, conversations don’t just occur about sex, conversations occur about, how was

your day at work, you know, what do you want for dinner tonight, you know, and everything in between.” Much like Aidan’s response, he echoes that “For me to come home from work and say, hey, did you like it last time? I mean that would be—that would be such a weird question for me to ask.”

Seth similarly struggles with ways to approach conversations of sex with his wife:

Seth: [When asked if he talks to his wife about sex] I think she would treat that like, where is this going? And immediately probably be defensive, like am I about to hear, hey, I didn’t like it last time? Or, what is coming next, instead of just, it’s a casual communication, hey, I care, I want to know, I want to make you happy. (pause). I don’t think there is ever a casual conversation about sex. And I don’t know if there should be. I think the secular world talks about it causally, but I think they do it in the wrong way because they don’t care about it.

When sex is presented as sacred, and held in such high regard, it becomes difficult for these men to approach it in a casual manner. However, this is not due to a lack of desire for more casual approaches to sex. By the end of my interview with Seth, he said the following:

Seth: I don’t know if it is because nobody has set that example to say, here is how to do it that way, to go in and talk to your wife about something that we do hold in such high regard, and value that aspect of a marriage. Because I’ve honestly never heard anybody talk about it like that. It’s like, how do you talk about it like that when nobody has set that example?

These conversations shifted between discourses of change, and reasoning that highlights very normative understandings of masculinity and appropriate Christian relationships. While many of the men called for church leadership to begin conversations about sexuality in marriage, in an effort to provide positive examples for them as parishioners, these same men also said that, when it comes down to it, you don’t need to talk about sex with your wife as a strong man, because, as Peter says, “it is a confidence issue. I like to believe things are going great...no news is good news.” Aidan adds that, “Since I don’t hear anything, I assume it’s fine.” As a member of the IT workforce, he

uses a computer analogy to demonstrate this same idea: ‘I’ve never heard, “Hey, my computer is working today!” “Great, thanks!” If I heard that I might die.’”

In the final moments of my initial group-interview with the former members of The River, Peter reflected on the following:

You know what’s funny. There are a lot of books and a lot of authors out there that do talk about sex within a marriage and within the confines of—let me rephrase that. There are a lot of books and authors about um, sex within a marriage, but I think the majority of them are not Christian, I think most of them are secular. I mean, we’ve all seen *Meet the Fockers*, right? His mom, Ben Stiller’s mother, is a sex doctor, and it’s all about how to keep things interesting with your spouse, but it’s with your *spouse*, and that is totally normal, to find authors promoting sex within marriage.

Author: Do you guys read that material?

Group consensus: No

Peter: But this conversation makes me wonder, I mean there is obviously something to it, why aren’t there more Christian authors talking about it? If they’re Christian authors, and they have this platform to write a book would their first inclination be to write about sex? Probably not, I mean the holy spirit you know, maybe that’s why.

Aidan: They want us to hear about Christian-y things, not human things.

The sacred is still profane. The sacred is still “beastly”, still human, still dirty.

While these men do question the potential for conversations around sex and sexuality in married life, as long as they remain unguided by the church on appropriate ways to do so, their temptations, fears, and desires will remain internalized. The transition to marriage removes the intricate webs of communication, replacing them with a standard, rigid model of marriage and married life.

## Discussion

For these young men, the “beastly” elements of sex do not disappear because of the sanctity of marriage. Further, because of the ways in which men have been constructed to think about the “beastly”, the sacred aspects of marriage promised to these men become difficult to navigate. The web of support and control disappears, but the need for control does not. This is not meant to imply that we should feel poorly for men who maintain pledges of abstinence until marriage. Rather, we need to think critically about the ways in which conversations about sex and sexuality pre-marriage carry over into married life. Positive understandings of sex and sexuality do not occur after over twenty years of sex negative messages, and the absence of this transition creates the potential for serious implications for both men and women, as it relates to their relationships and the ways in which they perform their understandings of appropriate gender identities. Men are encouraged to have space to talk about sex and sexuality pre-marriage, but these *collective performances of temptation* (Wilkins 2008) leave them understanding sex as something that needs to be controlled, and masculinity as something dependent on their wives as simultaneously protected, non-sexual beings *and* providers of their sexual activity. Women are given a fairly impossible contradictory role as wives to these men, with seemingly few resources to navigate such assumed responsibilities; women are never encouraged to have space to discuss sex or sexuality. This highly-gendered structure of sexuality as “beastly”, wonderful, promised and unfulfilled is damaging for everyone, and it seems that no one comes out with the support they need.

While this longitudinal data highlights the fluidity of masculinities during the transition to married life, it is meaningful to scrutinize this case study because it is an

instance of something larger: a close coupling with religious institutions complicates life course transitions and the ways in which masculinities are organized around those transitions. While I take no moral stand on the religious decisions of individuals, we do need to think critically about how religious institutions shape patron's understandings of gender and sexuality, both pre and post marriage. The church encourages *collective performances of temptation* pre-marriage through small groups and accountability partners, but in discouraging this open space post-marriage, the church leaves little room for understandings or enactments of gender and sexuality outside of strict categories of masculinity and femininity. By highlighting the many processes that facilitate this transition to a highly gendered married life, we can begin conversations about the ways in which these processes might shift and expand going forward.

Finally, as the first qualitative study investigating the married lives of those who have pledged abstinence, we can move beyond the theoretical framing of marriage as a “noun” for these sexual conservatives. Marriage marks a transitional shift in gendered behavior and the outlets for such behavior. The “beastly” does not disappear “once the ring slips on”; issues of sex and sexuality are constantly negotiated, albeit with little room for negotiation. If we think of the unions within these institutions as static, we encourage the continued messages of rigid confines of sexual activity, sexuality, and gender performance. We need to think of marriage as a “verb” for all individuals.

## **Future Research**

While this study provides insight into the intersections of abstinence, masculinities, and marriage, this study also highlights many areas for future research. Most importantly, future research should focus on the ways in which women who have taken abstinence pledges within the church transition to married life. My research indicates that, unlike their male counterparts, evangelical women are talking openly, and regularly, with each other about sex and sexuality. Because these women are not given the formal space to talk about these issues, nor acknowledged by the church or evangelical men as sexual beings, it is important to understand the ways in which these women have found networks of support to talk about sex. Until this research is done, current work runs the risk of maintaining the church's stance that sex and sexuality are men's issues.

Secondly, a lot can be done on the actual sexual lives of these couples. While this research highlights men's struggles with porn addictions and the potential for affairs, lack of communication, and the inability to think of sex in a positive way, we do not know if these men are actually engaging in positive sexual behaviors. More research in this area will help better determine the effects of a virginity pledge, either in strengthening some of the points I've made, or perhaps, more optimistically, highlighting ways in which discourses of sex and sexuality can change over the life course.

Finally, I encourage researchers to further tease out the importance of both small group formations and accountability partners. The data from this longitudinal study highlight the structural changes that these group and intricate networks of accountability

experience during transitions to married life, and also highlight the ways in which these spaces for performances of temptation encourage the dichotomization of sex as both “sacred” and “beastly”. However, one could compare participants in this study with men who have pledged abstinence in a large church but not participated in small group or accountability support. This will help to separate the role and messages of the church from those of the small groups, allowing for a better understanding of the most influential sources for information on sex and sexuality. This will allow us to better equip religious organizations and all of their large and small parts with better tools to promote healthy conversations of sex and sexuality moving forward, should they so desire.

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## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Scholars credit the “beginning” of what we currently know as the abstinence movement to the Southern Baptist Church, who sponsored the first abstinence pledge movement in the United States in 1993. The movement gained federal support with section 510(b) of Title V of the Social Security Act, which defines abstinence only education as a curriculum that’s purpose is “teaching the social, psychological and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity” (Sabia & Rees 2008). The Act goes on to state that sexuality outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological effects (Sabia & Rees 2008). Since the Act was passed under President Clinton in 1996, well over \$1 billion has been dedicated to abstinence-only sex education programs through state and federal funding (Rose 2005). Although the majority of this funding will disappear under the Obama administration, along with some of the powerful political allies for this cause, the movement has had lasting effects on cultural understandings of sexuality in the United States, and it has not slowed in response to these newer political hurdles (Calterone-Williams 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The terms “liberal” and “conservative” came from the individuals that Luker interviewed. Luker adds the term “sexual” to the front-end of these labels to get at the idea that she has “become convinced that there is a chasm, wide and getting wider, between the *sexual* right and left—between people who hold liberal sexual values and those who hold conservative ones” (Luker 2006:91).

<sup>3</sup> The term “beastly”, as it references certain elements of sexuality, come from my individual interviews with these men. I therefore use this term throughout my work, with acknowledgement that it is not my own wording

<sup>4</sup> Of course, one could also argue that in defining marriage as the end goal—and as something that you are forever a part of—without the possibility of exit (through divorce, etc.) could also heighten and strengthen an individual’s commitment to the relationship. This weakens Luker’s argument in two ways: 1) it is clear that there are alternative ways to theorize the effects of a sexual conservative’s understanding of marriage, and 2) my respondents talked openly about divorce as a potential for many members of the church. It appears that Luker’s conceptualization of a “sexual conservative” is too narrow. Her definition of sexual conservatives is static, but the individuals she labels as such are not.

<sup>5</sup> All church group names and individual names have been changed to ensure the confidentiality of participants

<sup>6</sup> Although I distinguish the young men between Young Life, True Love Waits, and The River, it is important to note that many of the young men involved with both Young Life and True Love Waits also attend The Gathering on Friday evenings

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<sup>7</sup> The language in this section is drawn from The River’s Facebook site

<sup>8</sup> True Love Waits is not a church, but is an international campaign and brainchild of Lifeway Christian resources. True Love Waits challenges teenagers and college students to pledge abstinence until marriage through the utilization of “positive peer pressure” (“FAQ About TLW” 2007). Youth leaders of True Love Waits visit churches, health-care related groups, student organizations and school campuses across the country to present the message of True Love Waits and hold rallies. To date, over 1,000,000 youth have signed a “covenant card” as presented by True Love Waits leaders. The card reads as following: “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” (“FAQ About TLW” 2007). This campaign includes rings, other jewelry, bumper stickers, and a slew of available resources

<sup>9</sup> Young Life is a non-profit organization that exists in all 50 states and over 50 other countries worldwide. This organization is committed to reaching out to children and teaching them about Jesus Christ. Young Life hopes to spread the teachings of Jesus and the love of God to adolescents through weekly meetings, adult-student mentorship relationships, summer camps, and special age-focused groups for middle school, high school, and college students (“Five C’s of Young Life” 2009). After its initial foundation in Texas in 1941, Young Life moved its headquarters to Colorado Springs in 1946 and is still a thriving force within the greater community (“History” 2009).

<sup>10</sup> The one former member of The River who is not married is currently in the “courting” process, and will likely be engaged by the time this study is finished

<sup>11</sup> While I do not discuss the engagement period in much detail in this study, it was discussed frequently in my interviews as a short and oftentimes chaotic period of time. With marriage as the ultimate goal for these couples, it is not surprising that engagement periods varied from 3 months to a year at most. These period is also categorized by the respondents as an intense period of lust, and thus a very important time in which these men relied heavily on the small group and their various accountability partners.

<sup>12</sup> Because Aidan was the acting leader of The River, he was my default contact person throughout the interview process. I would go through Aidan to set up group meetings with The River, and Aidan also helped me to facilitate individual interviews. Aidan was at every group meeting due to his role as “leader.” Because of Aidan’s constant presence, and his role as point person, he is quoted extensively throughout my work. However, I acknowledge this overrepresentation while also acknowledging the potential for what Thorne refers to as “The Big Man Bias in Research on Boys” (1993: 97). As Thorne states, “a skew toward the most visible and dominant—and a silencing and marginalization of the others—can be found in much of the research on gender relations

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among children and youth.” While I believe this concept can be extended to most areas of research, and to most ages of research participants, I am not worried about the potential for this skew for two reasons: 1) Because these young men were involved in a small group, my unit of analysis is, to some extent, this small group, and the interactions that occurred within and around it. While I present individual quotes from members of this group, there is very little way for me to tease out the extent to which the opinions expressed are a result of some form of group-think, or who is more or less responsible for steering those dominant opinions. 2) However, because I rely on both focus groups AND individual interviews, I had the ability to see the extent to which individual opinion changed or expanded outside of the group setting. My findings in individual interviews were consistent with the group discussion findings. While, again, this does not rule out the extent to which group-think is taking over, it does rule out the possibility of a total big-main bias. Had my individual interview findings differed from those of the group setting, I would be much more concerned that I had allowed Aidan’s voice to inaccurately represent those of the other respondents.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that, although these men engage in a family values rhetoric, this rhetoric appears to be void of procreation talk. When asked, the men state that they look forward to having children in the future. However, when discussing the importance of sexual activity as confined to the marriage bed, the reasons given do not include procreation; rather, abstaining from sexual activity pre-marriage is strongly intertwined with promises of enjoyable sex and a healthy marriage. It is a modern conception to separate sexual activity from procreation in church teachings, and it is a separation that is still unheard of in many churches today. Why is the church so invested in controlling the sexual lives of these men, if not directly related to procreation? Is this perhaps simply a story of social control, and a story of social control that is tied directly to a specific kind of transition to married life? Luker makes a broader argument, stating that “In short, it’s not reproduction that separates the liberals from the conservatives, it’s *sex*. To be more precise, it’s about whether any kind of sex besides heterosexual married sex should be morally and socially acceptable” (2006:98). As the fight for same-sex rights and marriage “threaten” the evangelical church’s understandings of an appropriate family formation, Luker may be correct that the control over sexuality is no longer entirely about procreation, but rather more about the larger appropriate framework in which procreation should later occur.

<sup>14</sup> While the language of sex, and more specifically, of virginity, as a “gift” for the spouse is not new or unique (see Carpenter 2005), it should be noted that the ways in which these respondents talk about the “gift” of virginity from their spouse is also in terms of *possession*. These men are *entitled* to virginal women in marriage, which is yet another promised perk of the transition to married life. It would be interesting to interview the ways in which women discuss the concept of virginity as a gift, specifically in the context of married life. While both men and women within this community are both encouraged and presumed to be virgins on the wedding night, one can imagine a very gendered response to who is actually “entitled” to this gift.

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<sup>15</sup> References to same-sex desire only came up twice in the 2011/2012 interviews: once in a homophobic remark about being “limp-wristed” and the second when Aidan snickered while clarifying that cheating obviously happens with people of the opposite sex. I do not engage in an analysis of the changing definition of “beastly” elements of sex and sexuality; for now, I believe that this is outside the main goals of this work.

<sup>16</sup> There was one exception to this: a few of the men recalled reading *Sheet Music: Uncovering the Secrets of Sexual Intimacy in Marriage* by Dr. Kevin Leman. Peter recalls that, “I think if you’re going to do it his way [the author’s way] the intent is to read part of it separately before you get married and then to read the rest of it together once you get married, and under no circumstances to read it together before you get married, because it definitely encourages behavior.” Layers of control exist within available literature for these men pre-marriage, and the conversations encouraged by the literature seem to “drop off” post-marriage, mirroring the structure of their small group.