

Does True Love Have to Wait?

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Church in the Modern World

Does true love have to wait? Are you a better person in God's eyes, or in the eyes of the church, if you refuse to engage in premarital sex? Will sex outside of marriage not feel as good as sex within marriage, as I was told in youth group? Or is premarital sex simply a ticket straight to hell? These are all questions based on statements made in youth groups, books, and other pro-abstinence materials, which shape many children's and young adult's opinions concerning sex and sexuality. In order to answer these questions, it is important to read and understand books such as I Kissed Dating Goodbye by Joshua Harris. Books of this nature have a strong influence over teenagers and young adults in the church. For this reason, a summary of the book will be included as a way to help the reader understand its message.

Beyond the book, it is important to look into the church community and understand what different religious leaders have to say about the church and sex. Because of this, five area pastors were interviewed regarding their views on sexuality and the church community. Sex is a hot topic in our culture, and it is important for the modern church to understand not only the concepts included in this book but the influence it has on youth and young adults. But also, the church must understand other opinions regarding sex, marriage, and dating so that a firm foundation is in place for youth who are coming of age in a culture which says, "just do it," and a church which says, "just say no."

One of the first statements Harris makes in his book is about what he calls his "Little Relationship Principle." This principle is: "the joy of intimacy is the reward of

commitment.”<sup>1</sup> This is an important concept for Harris and it is referred to repeatedly in other parts of his book; in fact, this statement is why Harris himself “kissed dating goodbye.” Harris sees this principle as the golden rule for dating, as each person deserves to be respected and valued in a relationship. This does not mean that boys and girls should never have relationships; rather the relationships should be appropriate for the setting.<sup>2</sup>

Having an appropriate relationship with a member of the opposite sex is often harder than it may seem because of the fine line people often walk between friendship and romantic involvement. Harris suggests that the best way to handle these romantic feelings involves looking at one another as “brothers and sisters in Christ.”<sup>3</sup> When people view one another as members of the same family their understanding of the value of each person changes, “and while there are limits to how close men and women can be in friendships, we can’t shirk our responsibility to care for, encourage, and build up our brothers and sisters.”<sup>4</sup>

As readers come to view one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, Harris believes they will come to new understandings of their role within relationships and how their actions help or hinder their fellow family members. According to Harris, one of the most important messages boys must remember when interacting with girls is that boys are more tempted by their sex drives, or lustful feelings, while girls are more deeply affected by their emotions.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, along with being the spiritual leader in a

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Sisters: Multnomah), 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

relationship, boys are called to have open, honest communication and to help guard girls' hearts by not being flirtatious or playing any "games."<sup>6</sup>

Girls, or sisters in Christ, can also take steps to help their brothers stay focused on God and on their own purity. One of the most important pieces of advice Harris gives girls in these situations is to dress modestly.<sup>7</sup> This means not wearing short shorts, tight blouses or skirts, or any clothing which might reveal too much of their body and cause their brother in Christ to stumble and think impure thoughts. Harris notes that boys ultimately are called to have self control but girls can help if they are aware of how their clothing effects boys.<sup>8</sup>

According to Harris, the reason men and women need to take these steps as they come to view one another as brothers and sisters in Christ is for sexual purity. Harris sees sexual purity as a mindset that is hard to obtain and easy to veer off from. Harris also points out that "respect for the institution of marriage should motivate us to protect it from violation while we're single. We can do this by recognizing the deep significance of sexual intimacy—at any level—and refusing to steal these privileges before marriage."<sup>9</sup> Beyond sexual intercourse this includes some forms of touch, having lustful thoughts, and even kissing. Harris feels that actions such as kissing, which may seem innocent, can wear down one's resolve and pave the way for other sexual acts. Therefore, he encourages his readers to set their standards high and stop sin before it starts.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 96.

Harris breaks down relationships into four categories: “casual friendship, deeper friendship, courtship-purposeful intimacy with integrity, and engagement.”<sup>11</sup> During casual friendship there are three relationships readers are asked to think of before committing to moving into other stages of courtship/dating. These relationships involve God, the people around you, and the person you are interested in. When moving into deeper friendship, Harris advises girls and boys who are interested in each other to pull each other into their lives instead of dropping out of important activities to spend time together. This may include inviting each other to help teach Sunday School, or volunteering together, etc.<sup>12</sup>

During the courtship stage, boys are to take the spiritual lead in the relationship, and ask to talk with the girl’s parents. Harris believes this is a very important step in the process, as boys talk to fathers of the girls they are interested in courting. To Harris, courting means more than dating, it means developing intimacy with the intention of marriage. Therefore, he feels it is important for boys to be honest and invite fathers to ask questions about how he may plan to support his daughter, or about the man’s spiritual life. Assuming the father says “yes”, the boy is now free to talk to the girl about entering into a courting relationship.<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly, soon after the courtship stage comes the engagement. While purity is seen as important at all stages of the relationship, it is viewed as especially important after the engagement. Harris’s advice, as it is at all of the other stages, is to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 196-198.

“keep your hands off and your clothes on.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, the couple is encouraged to focus on the soul and save intimacy for marriage.

Harris’s book tends to take root in churches with a more fundamentalist background. Denominations such as Evangelical Free, Baptist, Open Bible, and Non-Denominational tend to agree with Harris’s approach to dating, sex, and marriage, while other denominations such as Episcopal, Lutheran, and Catholic tend to take a different approach. The role of pastors and priests are to handle many of the everyday issues involving sex in the church. When parishioners have questions concerning sex, dating, and marriage, they often come to the church with these questions. They often do so because they believe God may be present somewhere in this process and want to find out where exactly that is. Therefore, church workers usually have been trained and continue to read on sexuality issues and how to deal with them. For this reason, five area pastors were interviewed. They were asked specific questions on Harris’ book, as well as on their approach to relationships within both the youth and adult sections of the church community.

As mentioned above, denominations such as Open Bible, Evangelical Free, and Non Denominational tend to agree with Harris’s book. These denominations tend to prefer providing a list of “do’s and don’ts” for dating, based on the idea that sex outside of marriage is wrong. An example of this comes from an interview with Walt Rogers at Open Bible Church in Cedar Falls. The advice he gives his youth groups is to “draw an imaginary line around your neck and don’t let anyone cross that line,” he also tells his

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 200.

young men, “don’t do anything with a woman you are interested in that you can’t do with your mother.”<sup>15</sup>

Pastor Bill Burchit at Open Bible Church in Waverly had a similar approach. His belief is that youth will reach the expectations adults set for them. Therefore, if the expectation is set that “kids are going to have sex so we might as well give them condoms,” then the youth are never given the chance to learn about self control and commitment to abstinence; however, if the expectations of abstinence are set at a young age, the youth then have an alternative to sex. His preference is that expectations be set high enough to give youth a large goal to strive for.<sup>16</sup>

Both of these pastors felt that sexual purity is an obtainable goal for young people. Burchit feels the best advice young people can be given concerning sexual purity is to avoid situations where temptations lie. He feels that sexual purity is more than abstinence, it is a mindset of purity and a commitment to stay focused.<sup>17</sup> Rogers had a similar view of purity. He sets the goal of purity of the body and the heart for his youth. Therefore, he suggests they avoid any activity that may lead to lustful thoughts. This includes prolonged kissing and anything else that may be lustful.<sup>18</sup> Harris also understands purity this way, seeing it as an obtainable goal for both youth and adults.

This understanding of sexuality and sexual purity seems to fall under the Theology of Glory. This theology focuses on human mastery over events; this mastery can include bodily desires such as lust, sex, or impurity.<sup>19</sup> This understanding of human mastery over our bodies and our world can have many dangerous consequences for

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<sup>15</sup> Walt, Rogers of Orchard Hill Church, interviewed by author, 6 April 2004, Cedar Falls, Iowa.

<sup>16</sup> Pastor Bill Burchit of Open Bible Church, interviewed by author, 1 April 2004, Waverly, Iowa.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Walt, Rogers of Orchard Hill Church, interviewed by author, 6 April 2004, Cedar Falls, Iowa.

Christians. It leads to a triumphalistic understanding of a God whom humans seem to have edged out of the world. God being edged out of the world means that God is no longer present in the world. If God is no longer present in the world then God is not able to be a part of the human experience, including dealing with issues of sexuality and sexual purity.<sup>20</sup>

There are many denominations that reject Harris's approach to dating and relationships. Some of these denominations are Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians. While these denominations share the goal of abstaining from sex until marriage, they choose to do so for different reasons. They also refrain from giving their youth, young adults, and adult members a list of "do's and don'ts" concerning relationships and sex. Instead they focus on a variety of issues accompanying abstinence.

Pastor Maureen Doherty at St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Waverly has a different approach to relationships. She agrees with her denominations' approach in asking people to abstain from sex until they are married, but she does not ask them to refrain from kissing or touching. She understands physical aspects of relationships to be a good thing. She believes touch helps teach people about the wonder and goodness of their bodies. For Doherty, her main concern is that people learn to love themselves and to have a good sense of self before they enter into an intimate relationship; she sees sexual behavior as the sacrament of the physical life and for that reason asks people to keep sex within a covenantal relationship.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Lighten our Darkness* (Lima, Academic Renewal Press), 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Pastor Maureen Doherty of St. Andrews Episcopal Church, interviewed by author, 30 March 2004, Waverly, Iowa.

Pastor Ramona Bouzard, a campus pastor and Director of Church Relations at Wartburg College, has a similar view to Pastor Maureen Doherty. She also agrees that it is important to have a healthy sense of self before entering into a physical relationship. In her mind, until you have a healthy sense of self you are more vulnerable to being hurt in a relationship. Bouzard was very frank in saying that kissing and other similar activities are not wrong before marriage, but when talking with students who are questioning sex before marriage, she stresses to them that unmarried sexual activity is very serious. It is serious because it relates to one's whole sense of self, and decisions one makes now will be carried on through the rest of their lives. For these reasons, she encourages students to abstain.<sup>22</sup>

Father Mike Tauke's beliefs on this topic are comparable to Bouzard's and Doherty's. Tauke views communication as an important ingredient in a healthy relationship. Because of this, he sees the need for strong communication before any sexual activity takes place. While the Catholic church has very strong opinions about issues relating to sexuality, Tauke believes the most important lessons the church can teach about sex come from focusing not on single issues such as abstinence, or homosexuality; rather these lessons are taught by concentrating on love, forgiveness, and peace within a relationship. Concentrating on the larger issues helps to ensure a healthy person, a healthy relationship, and a healthy commitment between two people.<sup>23</sup>

All three of these priests and pastors have a different understanding of sexual purity than Harris, Burchit, or Rogers. Bouzard said it best in her interview when she explained that the idea of sexual purity is based on a sacrificial understanding of God,

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<sup>22</sup> Pastor Ramona Bouzard of Wartburg College, interviewed by author, 31 March 2004, Waverly, Iowa.

meaning that if people abstain, or take steps to be sexually pure, God will love them more. She also said that this understanding assumes one can be pure.<sup>24</sup> Tauke responded by affirming sexual feelings and saying they make people who they are. For him, being pure is not about a person being innocent or non-human, rather it is about not acting on hormonal instincts which could hurt them or others around them.<sup>25</sup> The Ignite Bible Study Series also agrees with this understanding of sexual purity as it is written, “For followers of Jesus, holiness is characterized by forgiveness rather than purity.”<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, there are many different ways to interpret sexuality and sexual purity. Before continuing on with books and articles written about sex, sexuality, and abstinence, it is important to define abstinence and understand both the pros and cons surrounding this lifestyle choice churches are endorsing. It seems unfair to ask children and young adults to commit to such a decision as abstinence without providing them all of the facts surrounding this way of life. Planned Parenthood has assessed many different types of birth control, one of them being abstinence, and their Web site provides such information.

Planned Parenthood is a secular organization that provides birth control, access to abortion services, sexuality education, and many other services to people in need. On their Web site, Planned Parenthood identifies two different types of abstinence. The first type is periodic abstinence in which women keep track of their fertility cycles and abstain during fertile periods. The second type is known as continuous abstinence. Continuous

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<sup>23</sup> Father Mike Tauke of St. Mary’s Catholic Church, interviewed by author, 30 March, 2004, Waverly, Iowa.

<sup>24</sup> Pastor Ramona Bouzard of Wartburg College, interviewed by author, 31 March 2004, Waverly, Iowa.

<sup>25</sup> Father Mike Tauke of St. Mary’s Catholic Church, interviewed by author, 30 March, 2004, Waverly, Iowa.

<sup>26</sup> Ramona Bouzard and Katherine Kleinhans, “Biblical Texts on Sex,” *Ignite!* (Augsburg Fortress), 21.

abstinence is the type of abstinence focused on in this paper—not having any sexual encounters at all until ready, or, in the case of the church, married.<sup>27</sup>

Planned Parenthood identifies many advantages to using abstinence as a form of birth control. First, it is 100% effective against unwanted pregnancy and STD's. They also state, “Women who abstain until their 20s—and who have fewer partners in their lifetimes—may have certain health advantages over women who do not.”<sup>28</sup> They are less likely to get an STD, become infertile, or develop certain cancers such as cervical cancer.<sup>29</sup>

There are also problems identified with abstinence that are acknowledged on the Planned Parenthood Web site. One of the biggest problems is that people tend to have problems abstaining for long periods of time. This is an issue that needs to be addressed in youth groups and in the church. The church needs to understand this issue and take steps to help people when they struggle. This could be addressed through a supportive network of people, or the encouragement of open and honest conversation. Another problem with abstinence is that, “women and men often end their abstinence without being prepared to protect themselves against pregnancy or infection.”<sup>30</sup> It is important to recognize these issues in order to provide a well-rounded approach to abstinence in churches or schools.

Issues of sex, sexuality, and sexual purity are all important issues in the church and to the culture. For this reason, there have been many articles written concerning these topics from both a secular and religious standpoint. Concerning abstinence, there

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<sup>27</sup> Planned Parenthood Federation of America. “Is Abstinence Right for You Now?” [www.plannedparenthood.org/bc/abstinence.html](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/bc/abstinence.html) updated 2000

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 2.

have also been many books written within the church. Some include lists of abstinence “do’s and don’ts” while others take a more holistic approach to sexuality and abstinence.

In his book Embodiment, James Nelson identifies the Sexual Theology. Just as feminist theology and liberation theology have interpreted scripture in different ways, the sexual theology does just that. The Sexual Theology states, “How we experience ourselves and others sexually will condition and affect the style and contents of our Christian beliefs.”<sup>31</sup> This sexual theology is an important concept to understand when beginning to talk about the church’s ideas concerning sex, as well as how this is played out culturally. For a person to understand himself or herself sexually is to understand himself or herself as male or female, and then to look farther into the world and see how that self-understanding influences all other relationships and interactions they have.<sup>32</sup>

Understanding the sexual theology helps us address many of Harris’s arguments about cutting off all ties to our sexual selves and interacting solely as brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>33</sup> While churches are very clear that sex is to stay within the covenant of marriage, Karen Lebacqz, a Christian Ethicist quoted in Paulsell’s book Honoring the Body, provides a counter argument for Harris’s idea that any sexual intimacy before marriage is wrong. Lebacqz states:

A sexual ethic for single people...should have the protection of vulnerability at its core. For while sex renders all of us vulnerable, single people, she maintains, are uniquely so because they are unprotected by a covenant of fidelity. She believes that the church should provide a consistent witness against sex between unequal partners and at the same time leave room for the practice of pre and post marital adult sexual

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>31</sup> James Nelson, Embodiment (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House), 15.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>33</sup> Harris, I Kissed Dating Goodbye, 33.

intimacy, in which both partners make themselves vulnerable to the other.<sup>34</sup>

This idea of vulnerability is very important in understanding sexuality and the sexual body. As the sexual body is in no way separate from the physical body, it becomes important that people do not come to view their sexual nature as sinful and wrong. Rather it is important for people to honor our whole bodies, and in doing so, honor our sexual bodies and begin to understand sexuality as the gift that it is.<sup>35</sup>

This sexual theology extends into friendships and other man/woman non-dating relationships. Nelson points out that just because sex is not present in a relationship, it does not mean that issues of sexuality and power struggles will not be present. In friendships, “These are still two body-selves who rejoice in each other’s physical presence, and the closer the friendship the more likely physical touch will be important to ‘being in touch.’”<sup>36</sup> He goes on to clarify that even in friendship relationships, a form of love is very evident. The deeper the friendship, the better chances of physical touch playing an important role in the friendship.<sup>37</sup>

In her interview, Pastor Ramona Bouzard articulated a very similar approach to sexuality. For Bouzard, sex within marriage is seen as a gift. She understands that the body, mind, and soul are all connected and this is extremely important when helping people to understand their sexuality and its implications for their everyday lives. In her mind it is important to honor the physical body the same way one honors the spiritual

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<sup>34</sup> Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass), 160-161.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>36</sup> Nelson, *Embodiment*, 113.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

body; therefore it is important to remember that anything which makes the physical body vulnerable will also make the spiritual and emotional body vulnerable.<sup>38</sup>

The understanding of sexuality and vulnerability has many important implications for the youth of today. An article by Charles Henderson entitled “Sex Education in Church?” tackles this very understanding of sexuality. This article acknowledges that many people in the modern church are uncomfortable having sexual discussions in the church. Instead of helping youth understand sexuality or sex, it is easier to say “true love waits, end of story,” or worse, to say nothing at all and declare that these discussions should take place within the family.<sup>39</sup> What this approach forgets is the call of the church that is to be family to all members who are baptized into the body of Christ, this includes the youth. It is the call of the Christian church to act as family and in doing so, promote support to all involved.

When religious communities embrace the attitude (as many have done) that even a discussion of sex in the church is wrong, then the church has silenced any questions the youth may have. In doing so, they are forcing the youth to seek answers not from their family, the church, a group of people who cares about their general well being, but instead, the youth now must go elsewhere to learn about sex. The people they are left with are their peers or others who may have a different approach to sex than what the church is comfortable with and who may not have the best interest of the youth at heart.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps one of the reasons church members are so afraid of conversations about sex happening in the church is because of their fear of not having the right answers. The

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<sup>38</sup> Pastor Ramona Bouzard of Wartburg College, interviewed by author, 31 March 2004, Waverly, Iowa.

<sup>39</sup> Henderson, Charles, “Sex Education in Church?” <http://christianity.about.com/library/weekly/aa06130.htm> 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Henderson, Charles, “Sex Education in Church?,” 3.

Theology of Glory is focused on having the right answer for every question, instead of allowing time for silence and awe.<sup>41</sup> The Theology of the Cross takes a different view. Hall responds in his book, The Cross in our Context, “The people of the cross does not come to each new situation in the journey of humankind already armed with ready made answers; rather, it positions itself in such a way as to discover the appropriate ‘word from the Lord.’”<sup>42</sup> When this understanding is applied to discussions on sexuality, it is no longer important to have the right answer. Rather the importance is in adult members being able to say, “here’s what I think” or “maybe we should pray about that.”

Beyond the youth becoming sexually active, there is something greater at stake when this approach to sex is embraced within the church:

What the church actually teaches either by its silence, or worse, by wittingly or unwittingly communicating the message that ‘sex is sinful,’ is that God does not care about the passions, trials, and the experiences of real human beings trying to make their way in this world of flesh and bone. If God does not care about the sometimes painful experiences of puberty, is such a God any more likely to care about the problems people face later on in life’s journey?<sup>43</sup>

When youth are taught that the church is out of touch with their reality, or afraid to talk about one issue they are facing, then they are less than likely to return to the church with other issues. When this happens, God is no longer perceived as in their world, and this is dangerous. For such reasons it is imperative that discussions about sex and sexuality take place in the school, the home, and especially in the church. This allows children to see that God does love them and has provided people to help them sort out these difficult issues. It is because God loves people that he has given them the gift of their sexuality.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Douglas John Hall, Lighten our Darkness, 227.

<sup>42</sup> Douglas John Hall, The Cross in our Context (Minneapolis, Fortress Press), 201.

<sup>43</sup>Henderson, Charles, “Sex Education in Church?,” 3.

<sup>44</sup>Henderson, Charles, “Sex Education in Church?,” 2.

This understanding of sexuality as a gift seems to be similar to Hall's understanding of the Theology of the Cross. The call of the Theology of the Cross is to be in tune with the world it is a part of.<sup>45</sup> It reminds people of God's association with the world, not God's distance from it. This is an important understanding when dealing with sexuality as it puts God and God's community, the church, right in the middle of questions and concerns regarding the sexual body. The God who is willing to meet his people in their darkest points and even in their death surely will not abandon them in their struggles with adolescence, puberty, sexuality, and sex.<sup>46</sup> When people are reminded Emmanuel, God is with us, they are reminded of a God who would struggle with God's people to help them understand the wonder and goodness of a body God has created, not a God who views any bodily urge as sinful and unclean.<sup>47</sup>

Sexuality, in itself, was not created to bring suffering. However, in today's society, it is all too often accompanied by suffering both from the secular society, as well as the church itself. "If the church does not see this suffering, and if, seeing it, it does not take the burden of it upon itself, then it's whole life must be called into question."<sup>48</sup> In our secular society many messages actually teach the importance of sex and having it whenever and with whomever feels good, and this often leads to misuse of the body. When the church takes the attitude that even lustful thoughts outside of marriage are wrong, then they too are encouraging a view of sexuality as suffering, as the body is seen as dirty and sinful.

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<sup>45</sup> Douglas John Hall, Lighten our Darkness, 132.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>48</sup> Douglas John Hall, The Cross in our Context, 153.

If the church sees that sex is all too often accompanied by suffering and refuses to change its approach, then it is no longer being the church. A church which has embraced the Theology of the Cross, would be a place where people can come to understand the beauty of their whole being, their creation, and baptism into God's family. This includes the creation of the sexual body. In order for this to happen, it is important to understand the suffering that often accompanies sexuality today, refuse to look away, and affirm the bodies God has given his people.<sup>49</sup>

So, what exactly is the church supposed to do about sex? Clearly, the church is split on this topic. While nowhere is the "just do it" approach taken, there are a variety of "just say no" approaches. Joshua Harris's book, I Kissed Dating Goodbye, is a clear example of the amount of confusion about sex in the American society. Culturally, our secular society seems to send the message that when it comes to sex, the sooner the better. Religiously, Harris's book presents the other extreme that even kissing before marriage makes one sexually impure.

Therefore, the call of the modern church is to fall somewhere in the middle of this debate. To have relevance, the church must not deny society's approach, but rather offer an alternative, which doesn't include denying the body; instead, it nurtures the soul. This is an issue which requires the entire community's response, as sexuality and sexual questioning is often seen as a form of darkness and fear for many young adults as their bodies and minds begin to change and grow. It is only by entering into questions, myths, and fears surrounding sexuality that one can fully appreciate the true gift of sexual intimacy.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 152.

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