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Audrey Hickey

*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

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# Adolescent Virginity Pledges in the United States

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Audrey Hickey

## ABSTRACT

*This paper presents a brief history of teen-focused abstinence groups and virginity pledge traditions. It then examines the various meanings virginity pledges have for the adolescents who take them. Much of this information is drawn from abstinence groups' websites, as well as from personal interviews conducted by sociologists studying virginity loss. Several reasons for taking a virginity pledge were identified. Many of these reasons referenced Christianity. More specifically, pledge-taking was viewed as an act of worship, as a way to adhere to Biblical directives and as a way to honor God's gift of virginity. Familial reasons were also given as a rationale for taking a virginity pledge. Pledgers referenced their parents' beliefs regarding abstinence, as well as a desire to avoid emotional pain family members had endured as a result of having premarital sex. Pledgers also maintained virginity as a way to ensure positive romantic relationships in the future, with many desiring to give their virginity as a gift to their spouse. Finally, pledgers mentioned health-related reasons for maintaining virginity, particularly the desire to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.*

Virginity, or abstinence, pledges taken by adolescents in the United States come in various forms and contain a plethora of meanings. Most simply, a pledge is a written statement of intent that stipulates that the signatory will not have sex prior to marriage. However, it is also common for these pledges to be publically announced in front of family, peers and religious leaders (Burke 2007). Most of the scholarly research on this topic evaluates the effectiveness pledges have on premarital virginity maintenance (e.g. Bearman and Brückner 2001). Significantly less research has been completed that employs qualitative methods to examine why adolescents take the pledge, what the pledge means to them and how it impacts their lives. There are a few scholars who have endeavored to answer these questions, however. Typically these researchers utilize semi-structured interviews with pledge-takers. Theses have proven to be a fertile source of qualitative research. Therefore, three theses and two books, as well as primary, web-based resources from pledge organizations will be examined in order to understand the meaning behind virginity pledges why adolescents decide to take them. A documentary, as well as newspaper articles will further supplement scholarly findings.

In order to analyze the meanings behind virginity pledges, it is necessary to first examine their history, as well as investigate who promotes them, their prevalence and what types of adolescents make pledges. This information will better define the topic and serve as necessary background information for understanding the meanings imbued within a pledge.

Pledges are a relatively recent phenomenon. They grew out of the Christian Sex Education Project and the Southern Baptist Church in the early 1990s (Wright 2011). Two Baptist ministers, Jimmy Hester and Richard Ross, sought to make virginity visible and acceptable for the adolescents in their congregations and thus expanded their previous programs to create True Love Waits (TLW). Currently the largest organization of its ilk, TLW started as a grassroots movement among evangelical Christians, particularly Baptists and Protestants (Wright 2011). Wright (2011) and Reimer (2012) argue that the organization formed in response to the sexual revolution of the 1960s that, among other things, made premarital sex the norm, as well as sexualized American culture. Just six months after its founding in January 1993, True Love Waits had accrued 100,000 signed virginity pledges (LifeWay 2012). By 2001, 2.5 million adolescents had signed pledges (Bearman and Brückner 2001).

True Love Waits spawned several similar organizations including the True Love Alliance and the Silver Ring Thing (Burke 2007). These organizations expanded their influence by providing their materials to other churches, through their websites and through merchandising (Lifeway 2012). Part of their appeal may also come from their non-denominational approach. While these organizations have strong ties to the Baptist and Protestant sects, they attempt to reach out to all Christian adolescents. True Love Waits defines itself as an “interdenominational parachurch organization” (Wright 2011, 46). Similarly, Silver Ring Thing is described as “para-church youth ministry” (Silver Ring Thing 2012). In other words, these organizations aim to attract Christian adolescents, regardless of denomination (Wright 2011).

Typically these organizations have pledge cards that adolescents sign during church youth group meetings, or during class at parochial schools. However, Silver Ring Thing’s approach is vastly different. This organization travels around the United States and performs shows that involve lights, loud music and comedy performances centered on the abstinence message. In addition, the organization promotes silver rings as a way for adolescents to physically signify their commitment to abstinence (Silver Ring Thing 2012). Purity rings are also sold by jewelers in astonishing numbers, suggesting that many adolescents value making their pledge public (Rosenbloom 2005).

Of the millions of adolescents who have taken the pledge, it is unclear how many have adhered to the pledge, or even realized what they were signing (Young 2007). Still, the number is striking. A study by Columbia University sociologists Bearman and Brückner (2001) found that most pledgers are evangelical Christians, live in the Bible Belt region of the United States, are close to their families, are white, are in the middle class and come from moderately educated families. According to Silver Ring Thing’s website, the organization mainly targets religiously-minded adolescents, but is interested in recruiting these teens’ friends to take the pledge, as these individuals are more difficult to reach as compared to their religious counterparts (2012).

References to God, the Bible and other Christian ideas about premarital sex are the most frequently cited reasons for making a virginity pledge. Within this theme, several sub-themes emerge. Among these, the idea that virginity is a gift from God and should be treasured, that maintaining virginity is an act of worship, acknowledging that God has bigger plans for them and referencing familial ideas about religion. These themes will be explored in more depth by referencing adolescents’ viewpoints on the importance of virginity maintenance found in Regnerus’ *Forbidden Fruit*, Carpenter’s *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, the previously mentioned theses, as well as from testimonials on abstinence websites.

One of the most common reasons pledgers give for remaining abstinent is because the Bible says it is the right thing to do and that not remaining abstinent is a sin. University of Texas sociologist Mark D. Regnerus conducted personal, in-depth interviews with 267 teens across the United States regarding their opinions of religion and sex for his book *Forbidden Fruit* (2007: 9). Regnerus profiles an interview with Jarrod, a 16-year-old Baptist from South Carolina. Jarrod claims that pre-marital sex is wrong because the Ten Commandments forbid fornication (35).

In British documentarian Jane Treay’s film “The Virgin Daughters,” interviewees employ similar reasons for sexual abstinence until marriage. Treay asks 13-year-old Claire why having an intimate relationship is wrong. Like Jarrod, she replies that one of the Ten Commandments prohibits it. Her 17-year-old sister, Rachel, chimes in and claims that the specific commandment is “Thou shalt not commit adultery. So that’s number seven” (2012). Rachel claims that you are going to marry the person eventually, so anything you do now is considered adultery. As stated previously, Biblical reasons for remaining abstinent were given more frequently than other responses. It is interesting to note that most respondents do not give more detail for this explanation beyond stating that the Bible says it is wrong. Symbolic interactionism is a particularly helpful explanatory tool for this phenomenon. Interviewees were inculcated with the idea of the Bible’s ultimate power and they came to believe that Biblical proclamations do not merit additional explanation.

The virginity as a gift metaphor was also especially prevalent in these works. A respondent in Regnerus' book claimed that sex is a gift from God and should only be opened after marriage (2007: 88). A 17-year-old male respondent referred to as Ben also states that sex and the pleasurable feelings it creates are both gifts from God (29). In her doctorate thesis in philosophy at the University of Toronto entitled "A Fountain Sealed: Virginity and the American Evangelical Family," Christina Reimer references a 2006 purity ball flyer authored by the Abstinence Clearinghouse that states "This night...celebrates your little girl and her gift of sexual purity" (2012: 109).

The True Love Waits website also displays similar opinions about the gift of virginity. For example, a respondent named Jen who identifies herself as a sophomore in high school states "I embrace my virginity! You can lose your virginity in a second and never get it back again. It is a precious gift from God" (LifeWay 2012). A 15-year-old named Sarah who was a born-again virgin, meaning that she had had sex but that she recommitted herself to abstinence, felt that she had lost a special gift by having sex (ibid). Clearly, the virginity as a gift from god metaphor permeates virginity pledgers' understanding of their decision to abstain from sex.

Another common theme that emerged in adolescent interviews and testimonials was that taking a virginity pledge was an act of worship and a way to honor God. Sarah, the 15-year-old who posted a testimonial on the True Love Waits website states "You have to surrender your sinful body to Him. You have to be willing to give up earthly pleasures to build up your heavenly treasures" (LifeWay 2012). In his Master of Arts thesis at the University of Missouri, Darren Wright references a script required for True Love Waits pledgers: "I commit my body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto Christ, which is an act of worship" (2011: 67). In addition, he claims that "pledgers conceive of the body and sexuality as potentially divine, and as symbolically or metaphorically representing God" (ibid).

In *Virginity Lost*, Carpenter cites two of TLW's "Top 10 Risks of Having Sex before Marriage" to highlight the worship aspect of premarital virginity. The first is "*the risk of permanently damaging your testimony as a Christian...you'll never be able to live as an example of committed purity.*" Secondly, "*the risk of shame... premarital sex imputes a spiritual state of shame that becomes a major weapon of Satan...you'll still be vulnerable to Satan's whispering accusations on your worth as a person and your value as an active Christian*" (emphasis in original) (2005: 182). An example of this theme can even be seen in popular culture. During the 2002 wedding of Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey, the priest stated "Jessica can stand up here in this white wedding dress because, a long time ago, she committed her purity to God, and she stuck with that commitment" (Media Education Foundation 2011). In other words, because Jessica kept her pledge, she was entitled to a Christian marriage and could honestly say she waited until her wedding day to have sex. This speaks directly to Carpenter's citation about keeping testimony in order to be a good, honest Christian.

A similar theme is the idea of honoring God by pledging virginity. Vanderbilt University sociologist Laura M. Carpenter discussed this theme in her work. Carpenter interviewed two women who had taken virginity pledges and discussed her findings in the chapter entitled "Abstinence" from her book *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*. One woman interviewed, 20-year-old Carrie, claimed that remaining a virgin is "a really great way to honor God, in the sense of knowing... whatever He has for me is going to be better than the things I can pursue on my own" (2005: 183).

Similarly, Wright (2011) cites an interview with an unspecified TLW leader who notes "God's will for their life or their relationship with God" as one of the primary reasons for TLW's focus on sexual purity and abstinence from premarital sexual behavior (63). Similarly, one of the founders of TLW, Jim Hester, stated that pre-marital sex is not part of God's plan for anyone's life (ibid). These interviews highlight that the prevailing idea among pledgers and pledge organizers is that God's power and life plan are best acknowledged by remaining abstinent before marriage.

Another important aspect of Christianity's relationship to abstinence pledges is what pledgers' parents or older siblings say about their faith. On TLW's website, Brittany claims that her decision to take a virginity pledge was reinforced by the strong Christian home she grew up in and the high standards her parents held (LifeWay 2012). Carrie, the 20-year-old interviewed by Carpenter in *Virginity Lost*, claims that her perspective on virginity was heavily influenced by her deeply religious Protestant family (2005: 183). Ben, a 17-year-old from Pennsylvania, claims that premarital sex is wrong because his dad said it was a sin (29).

The evidence from these sources makes clear that religion is the strongest component of virginity pledges. Indeed, Wright (2011) claims that "Upon first glance, it could easily appear that TLW is simply an abstinence organization for Christians who are attempting to make their choices about their sexual behavior based on their religious beliefs" (57). Moreover, pledgers' responses for refraining from sex rely heavily on citing the Bible, referring to virginity as a gift from God, referring to virginity maintenance as an act of worship and referencing familial attitudes about religion and premarital sex. However, there are deeper meanings in virginity pledges. Another frequently evoked reason for taking a pledge was for emotional or relationship-oriented reasons. More specifically, respondents claimed that teenagers are not emotionally ready for sex and that their virginity is a gift for their future spouse. These explanations are elaborated upon in the following section.

When adolescents mentioned that they and other teens are not emotionally ready for sex, occasionally they were vague as to why they were not, but many also relayed stories of friends or family members who had been hurt following a young sexual relationship. Jarrod, the 16-year-old Baptist from South Carolina interviewed by Regnerus asserted that while teenagers may be physically ready for sex, they are certainly not emotionally ready (2007: 34). Rachel, the 17-year-old interviewed by Treay in "The Virgin Daughters" generally had an opinion similar to Jarrod's. She claimed that dealing with all of the emotions created by sex seems like a hassle (2012).

Examples of friends and family who had been emotionally hurt because of premarital sexual relations were numerous. On the TLW website, Geoff, a ninth-grader relayed the story of a friend who was a "Jesus freak" until he became involved with a girl. Their relationship became serious quickly, she became pregnant and he left her. Geoff claims that having sex changed everything in his friend's life and he could have avoided a lifetime of pain had he waited to have sex (LifeWay 2012). Megan claims that her decision to remain a virgin was influenced by a friend who went through an ugly breakup. The formerly strong friend was incredibly hurt and vulnerable following the breakup because she had lost her virginity to her boyfriend (ibid). In *Forbidden Fruit*, Carla, a 17-year-old evangelical Protestant from Florida, tells a story about her grandmother who had gotten pregnant before her wedding. She described how much her grandmother struggled with money after the baby was born and how her grandmother wished she had waited to have sex (2007: 40). It is clear that avoiding the emotional hardships experienced by peers and family who had premarital sex is a major reason adolescents pledge abstinence.

Another common theme that emerged was the citing of past hurts by born-again virgins as their rationale for recommitting to virginity. On TLW's website, Brittany claims that having sex with a boyfriend in college made her feel guilty and regretful. In addition, she urges adolescents who have not had sex to wait until marriage because "there IS pain involved and there IS attachment" (Lifeway 2012). In *Forbidden Fruit*, 18-year-old Christiana said that she regretted having sex before she was ready because afterwards she realized she did not even like the boy (2007: 148). Kimberly, an 18-year-old from Utah said that having sex caused her emotional pain and she caused her to become depressed (149). For these individuals, the emotional pain and guilt they experienced after having sex convinced them of the value in recommitting to an abstinent life before marriage.

Other born-again virgins experienced more concrete consequences than the emotional pain previously discussed. As an example, Sarah, a 15-year-old who had a pregnancy scare, claims that "Satan

often still uses that previous mistake to bring me guilt, and make me feel unforgiven” (Lifeway 2012). Jennifer, an 18-year-old who left a testimonial on the TLW website claims that she had sex on the night of her prom and now she is six months pregnant without any support (ibid). While sentiments like this were much less common than references to friends or family who had made mistakes, personal lessons learned from losing one’s virginity seem particularly salient in some pledgers’ reasons for recommitting to an abstinent life.

Thus far, the discussion of emotional and relationship-oriented reasons for virginity pledges has centered on avoiding negative consequences. However, many respondents gave responses that indicated the desire for future positive consequences. Generally, this was discussed in terms of building a strong relationship uninfluenced by sex, of giving virginity to one’s future spouse as a gift and making the first sexual experience special.

Carrie, the 20-year-old Protestant interviewed by Carpenter in *Virginity Lost*, said that remaining a virgin will help her love someone in a way that is not bounded by physicality. Furthermore, she thinks remaining a virgin will help her concentrate on the other parts of the relationship (2005: 184). Kate, a 24-year old born-again virgin interviewed by Carpenter, said that she wants a relationship based on friendship, love and a commitment to God rather than sex (188). Julie, a 16-year-old interviewed in a Ms. magazine article entitled “The Cult of Virginity” claims that “premarital sex ruins a relationship. It draws you apart, because you’re focused on something so worldly” (Werner 1997: 41). In “The Virgin Daughters,” 27-year-old Lauren is questioned about taking how an abstinence pledge impacted her marriage. She claims that dating without sex was wonderful because it allowed her and her husband to share their dreams and their hearts without the distraction of sex (Treay 2012). As these examples highlight, many pledgers view waiting to have sex as a strategy for building strong romantic relationships based solely on love and getting to know their partner.

A related theme is the idea of giving one’s virginity to one’s future spouse as a gift. Another way respondents referenced this idea was by claiming that it would be special to share sex with just one person. Wright (2011) references this idea in his thesis when he cites Tim Stafford, a writer for *Christianity Today* and a TLW supporter. Stafford discusses Adam and Eve in Genesis: “the ideal, the dream, as the Bible sees it: total nakedness, total unity, total love, total sexual satisfaction within marriage.” This statement summarizes pledgers’ sentiments about their desire for wholeness and completeness of the marriage relationship. It also raises an important point. Although pledgers’ explanations for pledge-taking have been separated into religious motives and emotional or relational motives, they are not this dichotomous. Rather, religious teachings inform pledgers’ ideas about what an ideal marriage looks like. However, for the sake of simplicity, religious and relational reasons have been discussed separately.

Carla, the 17-year-old evangelical Protestant interviewed by Regnerus in *Forbidden Fruit*, says that sex is the ultimate commitment: “You have me completely, you know, 100 percent” (2007: 40). Stephanie, a teenager from Kentucky who attended a True Love Waits event in Atlanta compared sex to a Christmas present which, if opened early, makes it less precious (Werner 1997: 43). Human Events, a self-proclaimed conservative magazine, published an article entitled “Many Teens Are Opting for Abstinence” and interviewed 18-year-old Rick from Texas. Rick claimed that sex is something God created so people could say ‘I love you.’ By having sex with multiple partners, you lose your ability to express your love through sex (Thomas 1993). Jana, a 17-year-old evangelical Protestant from North Carolina said that waiting to have sex until marriage makes the honeymoon memorable because it represents the time you made the ultimate commitment to another person (Regnerus 2007, 95).

This theme was also common in “The Virgin Daughters.” Lauren, the 27-year-old interviewed in the documentary, claimed that waiting to have sex until she was married made it more special (Treay 2012). As with the discussion of abstaining from sex in order to build a strong relationship, the theme of

waiting until marriage to have sex shares the same idea of constructing the ultimate relationship by only sharing sex with one person.

The final thematic area for discussion is the idea of abstaining from sex for health reasons. Specifically, pledgers claimed that not having sex was the only way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. These ideas speak directly to the purity movement's conservative roots. Organizations such as The Abstinence Clearinghouse and The Heritage Foundation support abstinence-only education in public schools and claim that condoms are ineffective in preventing sexually transmitted disease and HIV. In addition, they claim that "sex before marriage is psychologically and emotionally damaging and can inhibit the ability of young people to form stable and healthy relationships in a later marriage" (Abstinence.net 2012; Wright 2011). Similar ideas appear in pledgers' responses about the health benefits of having sex only in marriage.

Carrie, the 20-year-old Protestant interviewed in *Virginity Lost*, claims that she is in the lowest risk group for contracting sexually transmitted diseases (2005:183). In "The Virgin Daughters," several interviewees make similar statements. Claire, aged 13, claims that having sex just in marriage is safer, especially if both husband and wife waited until marriage (Treay 2012). Khrystian, aged 20, claims that she does not date or want to have sex before marriage because she does not want to bring anything unhealthy into her body (ibid). Christy, an 18-year-old Catholic from New York who was interviewed in *Forbidden Fruit*, expresses, fears that protection is not 100- percent effective and is therefore dangerous (Regernus 2007: 109). These statements highlight that in addition to religious and emotional reasons to abstain from sex, pledgers also abstain for health-related reasons.

Several explanations for virginity pledges have been elucidated including: religious reasons stated in the Bible and by family, the desire to avoid painful emotions that could result from sex and to maintain good health. These findings are preliminary, as there is little qualitative, scholarly research about taking a virginity pledge. Most work on this topic has been quantitative and has analyzed the effectiveness of pledges for virginity maintenance. This work is valuable, but it leaves much to be desired in terms of trying to understand what pledges mean to the adolescents who take them. Therefore, further qualitative research, specifically personal interviews with pledge-takers and pledge organization leaders should be conducted on this topic.

These interviews could provide valuable information about an increasingly-popular movement. This movement concerns not only the millions of adolescents who have taken the pledge, but also their families, friends and communities. The rapid growth in the number of pledges taken might indicate that beliefs about sex in the United States are transitioning from the liberal milieu created by the sexual revolution in the 1960s to a more conservative climate. Evidence for this change can already be observed in federal spending decisions. As of 2005, the United States federal government spent \$1 billion dollars on abstinence-only sex education. In addition, even public schools are including virginity pledges in the sex education classes (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United 2005). Given these extraordinary circumstances and the future ramifications of these decisions, this is certainly a relevant topic that will continue to inspire interest within the sociological community and beyond.

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