Electronic Thesis & Dissertation Collection

J. Oliver Buswell Jr. Library
12330 Conway Road
Saint Louis, MO 63141

www.covenantseminary.edu/library

Ethics As Good News
Investigating the Spiritual Formation of Young Adults

By
David Royes

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2024

Ethics As Good News

Investigating the Spiritual Formation of Young Adults

By
David Royes

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Graduation Date   May 10, 2024

Dr. Dan Doriani
Faculty Advisor

_____

Dr. Seth Troutt
Second Reader

_____

Dr. Joel Hathaway
Director of DMin Program

_____

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how young adults experienced spiritual formation at home that helped them to uphold a biblical sexual ethics while studying at residential universities. Away from their families and centers of spiritual formation, young adults face tremendous ethical pressures from their peers and often find themselves without the necessary tools to navigate those challenges.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with eight young adults who not only navigated those challenges, but also encouraged their peers toward a more biblical worldview resulting in ethical behavioral change. The interview analysis concluded that their experience of spiritual formation in their teenage years was a significant component for them upholding biblical sexual ethics in college and remaining in church later.

The literature review focused on three key areas to understand the biblical sexual ethic and its subsequent development in adolescents: Modern commentary and exegesis of 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, The Greco-Roman context and ancient sexual ethic, and systems theory and its implications for parenting.

This study found that adolescents described social pressure in four areas: humor, experimentation, overt challenge, and transactional behavior. Because of these challenges this study concluded that there are three necessary components to sustain healthy spiritual formation in adolescents for them to uphold biblical ethics: courageous clarity, heart-centered intentionality, and calm adaptability. In light of these elements, this study identified best practices for parents and youth leaders that contribute to lasting spiritual formation in youth.

To my wife Megan, whose love is my most cherished earthly gift.

Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight.

— Psalm 119:143.

Contents

Illustrations

Figures

Tables

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
BFST	Bowen Family Systems Theory
SFST	Structural Family Systems Theory
IFST	Internal Family Systems Theory

Chapter 1

Introduction

"Going to college can be like moving to Mars."[1] That is how Philosophy professor J. Budziszewski describes the experience that thousands of young adults undergo as they begin their studies at institutes of higher education. His interest in this metaphor is not only to communicate that transitioning to college can be disorienting, but also that it is accompanied by ethical challenges for professing evangelical Christians. One of those challenges is living consistently with a biblical sexual ethic in an environment that is away from one's center of spiritual formation.

Research shows that there is a huge challenge for professing young adults to continue as active participants in the church. David Kinnaman, president of The Barna Group describes what he calls the "dropout problem" among evangelical young adults.[2] His research underscores two significant observations. The first, according to Kinnaman, is that teenagers are some of the most religiously active Americans. On one hand, teenagers zealously participate in youth groups and even short-term mission trips. Kinnaman's second observation however is that while youth are very active, American twentysomethings are the least religiously active group. He writes, "Overall, there is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement… The problem is not that this generation has been less churched than children and teens

---

[1] J. Budziszewski, *How to Stay Christian in College*, 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: TH1NK, 2014), 22.

[2] David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

before them; the problem is that much spiritual energy fades away during a crucial decade of life—the twenties."[3] LifeWay Research also points to the young adult years as a time of departure from the church. They claim, "70 percent of young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school will stop attending church regularly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two."[4] More recently, pastor and author Jim Davis describes what he calls a "jolting" shift regarding religious membership in the United States. This shift is that "Tens of millions of formerly regular Christian worshippers nationwide have decided they no longer desire to attend church at all. These are now what we call the dechurched."[5] Davis believes this national "dechurching" is of greater significance than the Great Awakenings or any revival in American history, except in the opposite direction.

In addition to a departure from church participation, data also shows a discernable shift in attitudes among young adults regarding relationships and intimacy. Popular dating app Tinder reported the emergence and popularity of the term "situationship" among the new generation on their platform. This semi-casual, non-exclusive relationship status is seen as a low-pressure way of getting to know someone that deliberately lacks definition. Tinder reported a 49 percent increase in its users listing this casual form of intimacy as something they were looking for, and their preferred way of developing a

---

[3] Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me,* 22.

[4] LifeWay Research, "Reasons 18-To-22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church," LifeWay Research, August 2007, https://research.lifeway.com/2007/08/07/reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church/.

[5] Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), 3.

relationship.[6] Sociologist Mark Regnerus contends that this change in mindset can be seen among Christians as well. He writes, "Most [Christians] no longer think of marriage as a formative institution but, rather, as the institution they enter once they think they are fully formed."[7] Regnerus claims that this is a significant shift in young adults' attitudes because it signals that marriage is no longer considered to be a foundational institution but rather a destination. Writing further about this shift, Regnerus also observes an attitude of individualism that is affecting Christian youth. He claims, "They are urged to drink deeply from the waters of American individualism and its self-focused pleasure ethic, yet they are asked to value time-honored religious traditions like family and chastity. They attempt to do both and this serving of two masters is difficult."[8] These observations represent a challenge faced by youth in western culture. If Regnerus is correct, the voice of religious tradition encourages young adults to view marriage as valuable. On the other hand, the current of expressive individualism diminishes the marital impulse and encourages a casual attitude toward intimacy.

How does this lack of engagement in church and subsequent change in mindset affect actual behavior? Christian ethics has long promoted the design of human sexuality in the context of committed, monogamous, heterosexual Christian marriage. In August 2020, The Pew Research Center published the results of a study conducted in October of the previous year. Their data suggests that while most all Christian traditions disapprove

---

[6] Tinder Newsroom, "Tinder's Year in Swipe 2022," Tinder Newsroom, November 2022, https://www.tinderpressroom.com/2022-11-28-TINDERS-YEAR-IN-SWIPE-TM.

[7] Mark Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 38.

[8] Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 205.

of premarital sex, nearly half of U.S. Christians agree that casual sex between consenting adults is sometimes or always acceptable.[9] Regnerus' research would confirm that these views are being lived out in actual behavior. He claims, "Evangelical adolescents don't display average sexual activity patterns, but rather above-average ones."[10] Author and college professor Alex Chediak likewise warns, "Just fewer than four out of every five churchgoing, born-again Christians who are currently dating someone are sexually involved in some way."[11] Relevant Magazine states the behavioral challenge even more strongly in an article arguing for the failure of evangelical purity culture. It leads with the data, "Eighty percent of the unmarried young adults at your church have had sex. Sixty-four percent have done so within the last year."[12] Writer and former editor for Christianity Today Tyler Charles makes the case that while the church has been clearly outspoken on issues of premarital sex and abortion, data from Guttmacher institute and the national campaign to prevent teen and unplanned pregnancies suggest that the church's voice is not very effective in the lives of young people.[13] Dharius Daniels, pastor of Kingdom Church in Ewing, NJ explains why he believes the voice of the church is diminished in the lives of his young adult congregants. Daniels laments, "Most of them

---

[9] "Half of U.S. Christians say casual sex between consenting adults is sometimes or always acceptable," Pew Research Center, Updated August 2020, Accessed June 1, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/31/half-of-u-s-christians-say-casual-sex-between-consenting-adults-is-sometimes-or-always-acceptable/

[10] Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 205.

[11] Alex Chediak, Alex Harris, and Brett Harris, *Thriving at College: Make Great Friends, Keep Your Faith, and Get Ready for the Real World!* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2011), 90.

[12] Tyler Charles, "True Love Isn't Waiting," *Neue* 6 (May 2011): 32–36.

[13] Charles, 33.

have already been discipled about sex by culture… Culture is louder than us on this issue."[14]

The sexuality belief-behavior contradiction can also be observed in the rise of cohabitation. Christianity Today published an article in which they assert that cohabitation is a "New norm among young, professing evangelicals."[15] Author David Ayers describes this as a dilemma for ministry leaders because of the way popular professing evangelicals -including actor Chris Pratt and Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes- celebrate their decisions to cohabitate with their partners in news media. Sexual activity outside of marriage is not only increasing but it is also being commended to young adults by some influencers without any suggestion of a contradiction between their beliefs and decision to cohabitate. The Institute for Family Studies likewise believes that "Living together outside of marriage is now accepted by most Evangelicals. For those under 45, most have cohabitated, plan to do so in the future, or are open to the possibility."[16] Data from the United States Census Bureau also accords with this shift in cultural mindset. From a 2018 study, their data indicates that living with an unmarried partner is now common for young adults. In the United States, "Among those 18-24, cohabitation is now more prevalent than living with a spouse: 9% live with an unmarried partner in 2018, compared to 7% who live with a spouse… Fifty years ago,

---

[14] Charles, 34.

[15] David J. Ayers, "The Cohabitation Dilemma Comes for America's Pastors," *Christianity Today*, March 16, 2021, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april/cohabitation-dilemma-comes-for-american-pastors-ayers.html.

[16] David Ayers, "Cohabitation Among Evangelicals: A New Norm?," Institute for Family Studies, April 19, 2021, https://ifstudies.org/blog/cohabitation-among-evangelicals-a-new-norm.

in 1968, living with an unmarried partner was rare."[17] Evangelicals seem to mirror the patterns and attitude of broader culture: cohabitation is up, and marriage is down.

With a decreased participation in church and a discernable cultural shift in attitude toward sexual ethics, what is the added effect of a college environment on youth? This contradiction between biblical principles, theological tradition, and actual behavior is compounded in college even more. Peter Gomes of Harvard University maintains that being religious in college is not at all synonymous with being unintelligent. He maintains, "There is more active religious life now than there has been in 100 years."[18] Young adults do not display patterns of spiritual disinterest. The Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA published findings that, "College students report high levels of spirituality and idealism. They espouse many spiritual and religious values and virtues."[19] Researcher and writer Donna Freitas agrees when she writes, "Todays college students are fascinated by religion and spirituality… Evidence also demonstrates that America's college students are exceedingly sexually active."[20] Freitas believes this to be due to their immersion in a culture that encourages it. Sociology professor Kathleen Bogle agrees but also offers the label of "hookup culture". She writes, "The college campus is not only the place where

---

[17] Benjamin Gurrentz, "Living with an Unmarried Partner Now Common for Young Adults," United States Census Bureau, November 15, 2018, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/11/cohabitation-is-up-marriage-is-down-for-young-adults.html.

[18] Peter Gomes, "Matters of Faith Find New Prominence on College Campus", *The New York Times,* May 2007, accessed June 6th, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/02/education/02spirituality.html

[19] "A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose: A Summary of Initial Findings," UCLA High Education Research Institute, https://spirituality.ucla.edu/docs/reports/Spiritual_Life_College_Students_Exec_Summary.pdf

[20] Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*, Updated ed. (Oxford University Press, 2015), 10.

people hook up, but there is something unique about campus life that makes the hookup culture flourish there."[21]

Professor and researcher Jennifer Beste adds to this the observation that being in college means navigating two identities. She observes, "In the daytime, you're the responsible young adult who successfully manages the myriad demands of classes, jobs, extracurricular activities and social life."[22] After the sun sets however, Beste says there is another powerful social script in which, "You may find yourself adopting an alternate persona… reckless behavior that often involves excessive drinking and hooking up."[23] Not only does university culture normalize alcohol consumption and sexual activity, but it also provides a code of social constraints to fit in. For Betse, hookup culture thrives because being disinterested in casual sex on campus amounts to social suicide. In addition to peer pressure, Betse's research points to pluralistic ignorance on campus. That is, "Widespread misperception that one's preferences concerning a particular behavior are different from the beliefs of almost everyone else."[24]

The social pressures of college life led health scientists Martin, Baralt and Gorrido-Ortega to conduct a study to examine the relationship between religiosity and reproductive health knowledge on campuses. Their findings are that while religion has a protective effect on one hand against permissive attitudes, religious students were generally less educated on reproductive health and less likely to consider themselves at

---

[21] Kathleen A. Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (NYU Press, 2008), 71.

[22] Jennifer Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 17.

[23] Beste, *College Hookup Culture*, 17.

[24] Beste, 121.

any sort of risk than non-religious ones.[25] Their conclusion was that being religious did not put young adults at a lower risk of sexually transmitted diseases but a higher one. These findings represent a challenge for Christian parents and ministry leaders to consider: To what degree are their voices effectual and formative in the sexual ethics and subsequent behavior of those under their care? Are ministry practitioners successfully reaching and shaping the next generation?

Purpose Statement

Students face immense sexual ethical pressures during their years as undergraduate students. Often away from their families and centers of spiritual formation, young adults find themselves without the necessary tools to navigate those challenges. Some young adult graduates have not only navigated those challenges, but also encouraged peers toward a more biblical worldview resulting in ethical behavioral change. Examining their stories of spiritual growth can help to identify what elements from their upbringing most contributed to their perseverance in biblical ethical behavior during college.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Christian young adult university students experienced spiritual formation while living at home that helped them to uphold biblical sexual ethics while living at residential universities.

---

[25] Nancy Martin, Lori Baralt, and Claire Garrido-Ortega, "What's Religion Got to Do with It? Exploring College Students' Sexual and Reproductive Health Knowledge and Awareness of Sexual and Reproductive Health Services in Relation to Their Gender and Religiosity," *Journal of Religion and Health* 57, no. 5 (October 2018): 1856–75.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. What sexual ethical challenges do Christian young adult university students face while living at residential universities?

2. How do Christian young adult university students navigate sexual ethical challenges of living at residential universities?

3. How do young adults describe the spiritual formation they experienced while living at home that help them uphold biblical sexual ethics while living at residential universities?

Significance of the Study

This study has significance to better mentor children and teens in preparation for leaving home. The data shows a tremendous need for church leaders and parents to understand the elements of spiritual formation that most prepare young people to tackle the current pressures of college to live in ways contrary to biblical morals. The findings of this study will help various leaders understand what has been most effective in helping young adults embrace biblical morals through the college years.

The findings of this study will particularly serve the church by providing knowledge about best practices for mentoring. Teens and young adults represent the future generation of leaders, and the cost of not knowing how to effectively engage them is detrimental to the church. This study will offer knowledge to parents of teenagers, but also those with adult children. It will be a helpful resource for parents to understand how to better exercise influence in the lives of their children as they also give up control.

Additionally, youth pastors and young adult ministry leaders will benefit from the results of this study. Pastors invested in the lives of youth will understand the sexual and ethical pressures at university and how some have successfully navigated those pressures. This research will better resource pastors seeking to improve the content and focus of their youth ministries.

Definition of Terms

For the sake of this study, key terms are defined as follows:

Spiritual Formation – The process and practices by which a person progresses and increasingly embraces their religion.

System – A set of interrelated parts or people that form a connected whole.

Culture – A set of unspoken assumptions or beliefs that dictate how a group behaves.

Party Culture – A particular set of beliefs and norms in social settings that inform young adult behavior and expectations.

Biblical Ethic – Moral principles consistent with the Christian scriptures and orthodox historical Christianity.

Social Pressure – The exertion of behavioral influence on a person or group by another person or group.

Systems Theory – A psychological theory that looks at people as part of interconnected networks and communities.

Differentiation of Self – The process by which an individual can regulate their emotions to remain connected to others but not have their behavior determined by them.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christian young adult university students experienced spiritual formation while living at home that helped them to uphold biblical sexual ethics while living at residential universities.

The literature review focuses on three areas to provide a foundation for qualitative research. First, the researcher considered literature related to understanding 1 Corinthians 6. This biblical text has significance for the traditional Christian sexual ethic and is analyzed with a specific interest in reviewing modern evangelical commentary and exegesis. Secondly, the literature review looks at the morality and sexual ethic of the Roman Empire. This analysis not only provides biblical context but also insight into the transformation of cultural norms. Finally, literature concerning Systems Theory and parenting is considered for insight into other invisible forces that shape adolescents.

The Ethics of 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

1 Corinthians 6 is a significant Christian text that is central to the biblical sexual ethic. Paul's exhortation, originally declared to a Greco-Roman audience was efficacious in the subsequent transformation of the prevailing cultural sexual ethic. How has the modern evangelical community understood and proclaimed this important biblical text?

Approaching the Book

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 is epistolary in nature. The letter's first line identifies the author as "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle" (1 Cor. 1:1). Pauline

authorship of this book is hardly contested, and chapter 6 falls in the context of the

Apostle's broader correspondence with the "church of God that is in Corinth" (1:2).

A Unified Work

The epistle of 1 Corinthians carries the complexities of a two-way

correspondence. Prior to chapter 6, Paul wrote that issues in this church were, "reported

to me by Chloe's people" (1:11). After chapter 6, Paul speaks of "matters about which

you wrote" (7:1). All this leads David Garland to note that the letter's broad sections

alternate between referencing an oral report and a Corinthian letter addressed to Paul.

> Oral Report (1:10-4:17 / 4:18-6:20)
>   Corinthian Letter (7:1-40 / 8:1-11:1)
> Oral Reports (11:2-34)
>   Corinthian Letter (12:1-14:40)
> Oral Reports (15:1-58)
>   Corinthian Letter (16:1-12) [26]

Garland sees this as an organizing feature of the book, which is an arrangement of

warnings against various perils. Andrew David Naselli is inclined to view the book as a

series of ten controversial topics to which the gospel is the solution.[27] Commentators

Ciampa and Rosner see four elements in the epistle that they believe form a pattern of

argumentation detectable in Paul's other epistles.[28] These elements: wisdom, sexuality,

worship, and resurrection form a logical flow. For Ciampa and Rosner, an organizing

---

[26] David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 32.

[27] Andrew David Naselli, "1 Corinthians" in *Romans–Galatians*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

[28] Roy E Ciampa and Brian S Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (La Vergne: IVP, 2020).

principle of the book is that a lack of wisdom leads to sexual immorality and idolatry. Scholars are divided on how the book itself is organized and why Paul approaches the issues that he does.

Ferdinand Christian Bauer is a spokesperson for one school of thought that sees the book as a part of a struggle between two versions of Christianity – Petrine or Pauline.[29] His approach, true to the Tubingen School, is to see opposing theses and he therefore seeks to reconstruct the views of Paul's opponents. While Bauer's work does not show up in modern evangelical scholarship, Robert Von Thaden believes that Bauer's work from 1831 forged the beginnings of an early influential movement and a paradigm of interpretation.[30]

Karl Barth approaches the issue of coherence by using chapter 15 as a lens. He says that the resurrection of Jesus, "forms not only the close and crown of the whole epistle, but also provides the clue as to its meaning, from which place light is shed unto the whole and it becomes intelligible… as a unity."[31] For Barth, the resurrection begins (2:1-5) and ends (15:12-13) the book because a misunderstanding of this truth underlies all the problems in the Corinthian church.

More recent commentators Anthony Thistleton and Gordon Fee both approach the book with the hypothesis that the Corinthian church suffered from an "over-realized

---

[29] Ferdinand Christian Baur, *The Christ-Party in the Corinthian Community*, ed. David Lincicum, trans. Wayne Coppins et al. (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2021).

[30] Robert H. von Thaden Jr, *Sex, Christ, and Embodied Cognition: Paul's Wisdom for Corinth*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2017), 30.

[31] Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, trans. H. J. Stenning, rep. ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 11.

eschatology."[32] In this view the church struggled to live in the present age because of an over-focus on the benefits of the age to come. Commentators Carson and Moo speak for this over-realized eschatology view when they say the Corinthians are, "far too confident in the blessings they think they already enjoy, and are far too ignorant of, and too little anticipating, the blessings still to come."[33] David Garland critiques this view when he argues for the near opposite. He writes, "I think that over-realized eschatology has been over-played by interpreters. The Corinthians' problems are more attributable to a lack of a clear eschatological vision."[34]

Professor Guy Waters agrees with Garland's critique and holds a similar position to Barth's resurrection theory. He believes that Paul is not simply naming problems and proposing solutions, but that the apostle, "Sets those problems in redemptive-historical context… in terms of negotiating life as those who belong to the age to come but also continue to live in this present age, an age to which they no longer belong."[35] For Waters, Paul is bringing an appropriate eschatological worldview to bear on all of life.

A Corinthian City

Virtually all scholars point out that the city of Corinth has a colorful history and that it is important to distinguish between the old Corinth and the new. The original city

---

[32] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

[33] D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2005), 429.

[34] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 29.

[35] Guy Waters, "1-2 Corinthians," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 206.

was destroyed by the Romans in 164 BC but reestablished by Caesar as a Roman colony in 44 BC. Scholars follow the ancient texts of Strabo and Pausanias to reconstruct its Greco-Roman historical context.[36] While the old Corinth was predominantly a Greek city, the new Corinth of Paul's day was the capital city in the province of Achaia. While it was reflective of many cultures, the city was predominantly Roman. Thomas Schreiner says, "It is important to recognize that the city was Roman."[37] Garland likewise says, "This letter should be read against the background of Corinth as a city imbued with Roman cultural values."[38]

Bruce Winter argues that it is the influence of these Greco-Roman ethics that form the basis of what Paul confronts in the letter. Competitiveness, division, litigation, permissive ethics and even head coverings are best explained because of the secular ethics surrounding the city. Winter's thesis is that problems arose after Paul's departure, and they did so, "Partly because the Christians were 'cosmopolitans'… residents of Roman Corinth."[39] For Winter, this historical context is more significant than other theories of gnostic beliefs, realized eschatology, or the Corinthians' possible confusion over Paul's changing teaching. Anthony Thistleton's pastoral commentary similarly says

---

[36] See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, reiss. ed. (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002), 8 and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 27.

[37] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 7:2.

[38] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 23.

[39] Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*, ill. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 2001), 27.

that "competition, patronage, consumerism and multiform layers and levels of success were part of the air breathed by citizens of Corinth."[40]

Reading Through the Text

Regardless of broad approach, scholarship generally agrees that chapters 1-4 of 1 Corinthians address the issue of division (1-4). 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 falls in the immediate context of Paul addressing matters of incest (5) and lawsuits among believers (6:1-11). This literary context gives way to the apostle's famous treatment of sexual ethics (6-7).

Repetition and Emphasis

The most prominent repeated word in 6:12-20 is body (σῶμα). While Paul has used this word once before in the letter (5:3), the frequency of use in chapter 6 signals an important focus for the author. The body has an intended purpose (6:13). Christian bodies are members of Christ (6:15), temples of The Spirit (19) and sexuality thus joins and affects one's body (6:16, 18). While a particular instance of sexual immorality was addressed in chapter 5, the apostle is not only concerned with purging evil (5:13), but also that his audience use their bodies to glorify God (6:20).

Another prominent feature is the repetition of sexual immorality (πορνεία). The apostle uses this word five times in 6:12-20 and no less than nine in chapters 5-7. On one hand, matters of sexual immorality in this church were reported to Paul (5:1). On the other hand, the Corinthians explicitly wrote asking the apostle about these matters (7:1-

---

[40] Anthony C. Thiselton, *I Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*, rep. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 6.

2). It is in the context of both hearing about these matters and being asked about these things that the apostle offers his discourse. Sexual immorality is to be mourned (5:1), it brings guilt (5:11) and is evidence of unrighteousness (6:9). Sexual immorality is not the purpose of the body (6:13) yet is a real temptation (7:2), and thus should be fled (6:18).

Another repetition is Paul's use of the phrase "Do you not know that" (οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι). This rhetorical device is first used in the letter in chapter 3, but it is especially abundant in the apostle's treatment of matters of sexuality. Paul asks his audience if they do not know that a small amount of leaven can affect the whole (5:6) and that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom (6:9). Paul uses this same construct to say that bodies are members of Christ (6:15), temples of the Holy Spirit (6:19), and that being joined to a prostitute is to become one body with her (6:16). This recurring formula provides the effect of an urgent appeal to action.

Logic and Literary Features

1 Corinthians 6:12 follows the apostle's declaration of washing, sanctification, and justification of believers in Christ by God's Spirit (6:11). Verses 12-20 contain only two imperatives: flee (φεύγετε) sexual immorality and glorify (δοξάσατε) God in your body. These commands signal the aim of his argument – his audience is to put away one behavior while embracing another. To arrive at these two imperatives, the apostle begins with a series of contrasting statements. Verse 12 positions the word "but" (ἀλλ') between opposing ideas. The author contrasts things lawful with things helpful, and things lawful with things that dominate. A plain reading of the text could reasonably lead the reader to conclude that Paul is offering some sort of rebuttal of ideas known to his audience or arguments he has anticipated. Verse 13 follows a similar pattern in referring to food and

biological appetites. There is a literary parallel between food and the stomach with sexual immorality and the body. These literary features signal a series of counterreplies in the letter. One plausible reconstruction of the historical context is that there is a prevailing view of sexuality in Corinth that is overly permissive. Paul anticipates or dismantles an incorrect line of ethical reasoning: that sexuality is no different from other biological appetites, that physical bodies do not matter and thus prostitution can be justified.

Bodies Resurrected by God.

To counter the permissive sexual ethic, Paul does not merely employ the law but reasons theologically about the body. Verses 13 and 14 form parallel and contrasting ideas. The phrase "food for the stomach and the stomach for food" finds its literary parallel in "The body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord." The phrase "And God will destroy both" finds its parallel in "The Lord will also raise us up by his power". The following structure can be observed:

> *A Corinthians*: "Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food"
> *B Corinthians*: "God will destroy both one and the other"
>
> *A' Paul Replies*: "The body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord."
> *B' Paul Replies*: "God … will also raise us by his power."[41]

Regardless of whether Paul is responding to Corinthian slogans, general sayings of the culture, or a hypothetical argument, this structure reveals a direct challenge to believing that deeds done in the body are inconsequential. God will not abolish corporeal existence. The apostle re-frames the discussion of what is permissible to that which is good. He re-frames the issue of that which is enjoyed to that which enslaves. The deeds done in the

---

[41] Adapted from Kimlyn J. Bender, *1 Corinthians*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022), 111.

body are of eternal importance because just as Jesus was raised from the dead, so too will the Corinthians be raised up bodily.

It is significant that 6:14 is Paul's first reference in this letter to the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus and subsequent resurrection of all believers is further expounded in chapter 15 and reflect important Christological and eschatological convictions. Paul writes, "If the dead are not raised, 'let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die'" (15:32). This informs the logic of Chapter 6 and clarifies that the future resurrection informs the Christian sexual ethic. Paul is affirming that the body is good because the resurrection affirms the goodness of the physical creation. Secondly, Paul implies that what is done in the body is eternally important and should be informed by the coming resurrection. Third, there is a divine intention for sexuality and the Lordship of Christ should be displayed in all things.

Embodied But (Spiritually) Joined to Christ.

While the future resurrection informs Paul's argument, the apostle employs the familiar question "do you not know" (οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι) three times to speak of present realities that inform how to live the body. The bodies of believers are members of Christ. Paul's interest is not to emphasize that the church is united to Christ, but that each individual believer has an intimate spiritual connection to Jesus. This expands the apostle's argument. Not only are the bodies of believers meant for the Lord, and not only does God have authority over them, but their bodies are spiritually united to the Son. This union is grounds for sexual ethics.

Paul rhetorically asks, "Shall I take the member of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!" (6:15). Two distinct types of unions can be observed which are described in the following verses:

> Unity 1: Anyone united to a prostitute becomes with body with her (16)
>   It is written: the two shall become one flesh (Genesis 2:24)
> Unity 2: Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with Him (17)[42]

These two unitive realities are foundational to Paul's argument. On one hand there is the mysterious union between Christ and His people since believers are joined to Him by The Spirit. On the other hand, there is the sexual union which – consistent with Genesis— unites people physically. Joseph Fitzmeyer takes these two realities to, "preclude all free and casual use of the body in sexual intercourse."[43] Anthony Thistleton reasons that Paul puts forth a sexual ethic that takes up the mystery of the whole person in complete self-giving.[44] Thistleton believes that however trivial prostitution may have been to a Greco-Roman culture, it joins a man and a woman in a union that belongs to God-ordained marriage. Professor Kimlyn Bender points out that this ethic stands in sharp contrast to its cultural moment. He writes, "The Christian teaching on sexuality is grounded not on shame but on a respect for the mystery of the sexual union as a sign and enactment of the marriage bond and a reflection of Christ's relation to the church and each of its members."[45] This reasoning leads Paul to his first of two imperatives: to flee sexual immorality.

---

[42] Bender, *1 Corinthians*, 115.

[43] Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 268.

[44] Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 474.

[45] Bender, *1 Corinthians*, 116.

Bodies are Indwelled by The Spirit

To arrive at his second imperative, Paul returns to the theme of the physical body and asserts that, "The sexually immoral person sins against his own body" (6:18). It is difficult from a plain reading of the text to know whether Paul is offering a rebuttal, and scholarship is divided as to whether the first half of verse 18 represents a Corinthian slogan. Whatever the case may be the apostle transitions his argument from Christology to Pneumatology. Not only are believers' bodies members of Christ, but they are also temples of the Holy Spirit.

Paul has previously referenced in the letter that the church is God's temple (3:16). He has previously argued that it is perilous to act against the well-being of Christ's church because God's temple is holy. A similar line of reasoning is detectable here as he speaks of the dangers of sexual sin. In this way the text builds to its final imperative: glorify God in your body. It can be observed that the body of a believer is the location of the redemptive work of The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Interpretive Issues

The amount of work done on 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 is vast. Virtually all scholars agree however that one's understanding, and exposition of this section depends heavily on how one understands the historical context and the ongoing dialog between Paul and the church. James Dunn expresses this well when he writes, "1 Corinthians cannot be properly understood unless it is read against the backdrop of its historical context and as a

part of a dialog with the Corinthian church itself."[46] Scholarship also recognizes several

exegetical complexities that cause a variety of interpretations. Brian Rosner claims that

Paul's treatment of sexuality contains, "what is widely acknowledged to be one of the

most difficult passages of the Pauline corpus."[47] These difficulties typically surround

matters of dialog and context. One must offer some historical reconstruction of what Paul

is responding to.

Corinthian Slogans as Primary

A very common view in scholarship is that Paul is addressing commonly

espoused sayings in Corinth. Beginning his argument with "All things are lawful for me"

(6:12) can be constructed to be a direct quote from a prior now-lost communication, or a

known Corinthian saying. This view is employed broadly in evangelical scholarship.

Gordon Fee and C.K. Barrett both understand Paul to be offering counterreplies.[48]

Anthony Thistleton is also a spokesperson for this when he writes, "Most commentators

agree that 'liberty to do all things' is a slogan or a catchphrase used in Corinth."[49] More

recently Michael Goulder comments, "It is clear that Paul is citing catch phrases used by

his opponents and then demolishing them and there are some persuasive suggestions on

---

[46] James D.G. Dunn, "Reconstructions of Corinthian Christianity and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians," in *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*, ed. David Horrell and Edward Adams, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 308-309.

[47] Brian S Rosner, "Temple Prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20," *Novum Testamentum* 40, no. 4 (October 1998): 336–51.

[48] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; C. K. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 1994).

[49] Thiselton, *I Corinthians*, 93.

how to see which is which."[50] In a modern resource for preaching pastors, New Testament Professor Stephen Um says that while Paul may not be directly quoting a slogan, he is debunking a "prevailing sentiment" that would represent the basic mantra of a sexually progressive day.[51] Thomas Schreiner acknowledges that discerning the citations is "complicated", but also holds to the slogan hypothesis despite the many complications.[52]

The slogan hypothesis is helpfully illustrated (Table 1) by Ciampa and Rosner's conversational reconstruction. [53]

Table 1 – Reconstructing Paul's Rebuttal of Corinthian Slogans

Corinthian Slogan	Paul
I have the right to do anything	But not everything is beneficial
I have the right to do anything	But I will not be mastered by anything
Food is meant for the stomach	The Body is not meant for immorality
God will destroy them both	God will raise us also

According to this reconstruction, Paul refutes Corinthian beliefs to admonish his audience to flee sexual immorality and prostitution. Even though there is not agreement in scholarship as to where the various Corinthian citations begin or end, this is the majority

---

[50] Michael D. Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth* (Peabody, MA: Henderickson, 2001), 118.

[51] Stephen T. Um, *1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 74.

[52] Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 126.

[53] Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 231.

position among evangelicals. On the widespread nature of this view, Timothy Bookins and Bruce Longnecker write, "Virtually every commentary published in the last fifty years has understood this axiom to be a quotation of the Corinthians and not Paul's own formulation."[54]

There is also no agreement in scholarship of the origins of these maxims. Scott Mackie says that the citations are Corinthian slogans, but that they could reflect a misunderstanding of Paul's teachings, or even Jesus' teachings in the gospels.[55] Bruce Winter attributes the citations to sayings that were common to the city's elite class. Some scholars holding to the slogan hypothesis but conclude that Paul is addressing a broader libertine movement in the church. Others still say that slogans exist in the text, but that Paul is narrowly addressing the issue of prostitution.

Creation Purpose as Primary

Brian Dodd critiques the slogan hypothesis on several levels.[56] Most notably he points out that Paul does not include any sort of indication that he is introducing a citation in 6:12-20, which contrasts with the many instances in the letter where he does. For Dodd, since Paul regularly introduces both Corinthian citations and scriptural citations, he finds it unconvincing that in this text he would simply fail to do so. Dodd's further critique pertains to Paul's use of the word "I". Dodd sees a persuasive style where the

---

[54] Timothy A. Brookins and Bruce W. Longenecker, *1 Corinthians 10-16: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016), 142.

[55] Scott D Mackie, "The Two Tables of the Law and Paul's Ethical Methodology in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 and 10:23-11:1," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (April 2013): 315–34.

[56] Brian J. Dodd, "Paul's Paradigmatic 'I' and 1 Corinthians 6.12," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 18, no. 59 (January 1, 1996): 39–58.

apostle is adapting a saying for rhetorical effect, not quoting something verbatim. Dodd

totally rejects the notion of any citation in 6:12 and sees the entire verse as a Pauline

construct.

David Garland also finds the slogan hypothesis unconvincing because of how

unlikely it was that the original audience would have any need to justify immoral

behavior in their cultural context. He believes Paul's words are best understood to be an

ontological sort of argument based on creation order. He writes, "It is more likely

however, that Paul cites these maxims to refer to the order of creation: food is for the

belly, and both will be destroyed; the body is for the Lord but will not be destroyed."[57]

For Garland, it is this rule of creation – not a Corinthian saying— that explains Paul's

point. This position believes that Paul would have no need to prove that sexual

immorality is a sin. Instead, he is showing how grave of a sin it is through a series of

parallel statements. Garland believes the flow of thought it best captured by New

Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey's insights on textual parallelism (Table 2)[58].

Table 2 – Parallelism in 1 Corinthians 6

Statement	Parallel Statement
Food for the Belly	The Belly for Food
God will destroy the Belly	God will destroy Food
The Body is for the Lord	The Lord is for the Body
God Raised the Lord	God will also raise our bodies

---

[57] Garland, *1 Corinthians,* 153.

[58] Kenneth E. Bailey, "Paul's Theological Foundation for Human Sexuality: 1 Cor 6:9-20 in the Light of Rhetorical Criticism," *Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 3, no. 1 (1980): 27–41.

For Bailey, these parallel statements reflect that the Christian's body is destined for resurrection. Because the future does not promise redemption from the body, but resurrection for the body, believers should always live consistently with who they are. The point of dispute between Paul and the Corinthians—in this view— is not about a citation, but about how much value should be placed on bodily experience.[59] This ontological argument is therefore that sexual activity is not simply the joining of bodies, but the joining of persons with all their spiritual associations.

Rejecting Incest as Primary

Theology Professor Will Deming proposes a significantly different scenario for interpreting the text. He critiques these other views as not having done justice to the progression of thought in Paul's letter.[60] Deming believes that the entirety of chapter 5 and 6 should be understood to be Paul's response to a sexual offence (in 5:1) that triggered a lawsuit in 6:1-8. He offers the following historical reconstruction of events:

> 1. A man has committed an offense against the sexual norms of the Christian community.
> 2. The community is divided. Some want the man punished; some do not.
> 3. The former group, unable to rectify the situation to its satisfaction from within the community, take the man to the public courts.
> 4. To their dismay, they lose the case.
> 5. The matter remains unresolved within the community and is exacerbated by the animosity that has arisen from the court fight.
> 6. Finally, the matter is reported to Paul, who responds in 1 Corinthians 5-6 to a situation that is now many-sided and convoluted.[61]

---

[59] See Brendan Byrne, "Sinning against One's Own Body: Paul's Understanding of the Sexual Relationship in 1 Corinthians 6:18," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1983): 608–16.

[60] Will Deming, "The Unity of 1 Corinthians 5-6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 2 (January 1, 1996): 289–312.

[61] Deming, 294.

Deming does believe that Paul is offering citations in 6:12-20, but that they derive from Stoic discourse on the distinction between what is moral and what is legal. According to this view, the stepmother of chapter 5 is the prostitute of chapter 6. There is therefore a single case of misconduct that Paul is responding to, and the exhortation to flee sexual immorality is not to be generalized.

Christian Identity as Primary

Another reading of 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 places it in the broader concern of the social boundaries and establishment of Christian community. Seeking to be true to the flow of thought, this view is a critique of the libertine hypothesis. Alistair May leaves from for Corinthian slogans, but ultimately views them as secondary. He sees 6:12-20 to be primarily about identity and is contextually connected to the surrounding chapters by the theme of social insiders and outsiders. He writes, "The seriousness of sexual sin: not just why it is sinful – but why it is such a (uniquely) serious infringement of Christian identity."[62] According to May, Paul deliberately deploys body language because sexual ethics can both construct and deconstruct Christian identity. In this view, prostitution (πόρνης) is a parallel to the immorality (πόρνοι) that the Corinthians once were when they were outsiders. Since such things exclude from the church (5:1-13) and believers were once identified as immoral but now washed (6:9-11), Paul is defending participation in the body.

---

[62] Alistair May, *The Body for the Lord: Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5-7* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 97.

A similar view is held by J. Brian Tucker who views the letter of 1 Corinthians through the lens of social identity and self-categorization theory.[63] With this lens, Tucker sees a cohesive theme of identity between chapters 5-7. Chapter 5 he believes to be a problematic sexual identity, which is followed by the problem of a Roman legal identity (6:1-11). Tucker believes in the slogan hypothesis, but believes that Paul is solving an identity crisis by offering, "A vision for a new way to embody the Corinthians' identity, one that is Christ like (6:12-20) … To be in Christ is a social identity, one that cannot coexist with sexual immorality."[64] Again, a special Pauline theme is primary for this interpretation: that what one does with their body goes to the root of who they are. Sexual immorality is thus incompatible with a Christian identity.

Rhetoric and Metaphor as Primary

A final interpretive lens for this text is the approach in scholarship that emphasizes rhetorical discourse. Robert Von Thaden is a spokesperson for this when he argues that 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:7 should be best understood to be an example of early Christian wisdom literature.[65] Von Thaden sees the slogan hypothesis as credible but has little interest in historical reconstruction based on Paul's letters. Instead, he turns to conceptual integration theory and the principles of socio-rhetorical interpretation when he writes, "In 6:12 Paul functions as the wise father-teacher dispensing gnomic sayings of a paradoxical nature so that the members of Corinthian community will think about the

---

[63] J. Brian Tucker, *Reading 1 Corinthians*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017).

[64] Tucker, *Reading 1 Corinthians*, 35.

[65] Von Thaden, *Sex, Christ, and Embodied Cognition*, 3.

impact of their behavior."[66] For Robert von Thaden, meaning is found in the contextual blending of words, and Paul is therefore combining paradoxical sayings to cause reflection.

Jill Marshall proposes a similar reading of 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 to reconcile it with Ephesians 5. Marshall sees the rhetorical power of metaphors in the text as primary and interprets it with the ruling metaphor of "community is a body."[67] She writes, "Paul is comfortable with blending multiple conceptual metaphors to express ideas about the body and community… Paul gives concrete advice about how to conduct sexual and marital relationships."[68] For both Marshall and Von Thaden the concrete advice is an apostolic admonition against sexual activity altogether (7:1).

Is Sexual Sin Unique?

1 Corinthians 6:18 continues to be a source of division in scholarship. The literature is divided as to whether Paul is stating that sexual sin is unique—because every other sin is outside the body- or if Paul is citing a Corinthian claim. Seminary Professor Andrew David Naselli describes this division when he writes, "There are really just two main views: 6:18b is either Paul's statement or a Corinthian slogan."[69] Scholars who take this to be Paul's statement see the apostle diving sin into two categories: nonsexual sin

---

[66] Von Thaden, 211.

[67] Jill E Marshall, "Community Is a Body: Sex, Marriage, and Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:7 and Ephesians 5:21-33," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 4 (2015): 833–47.

[68] Marshall, 847.

[69] Andrew David Naselli, "Is Every Sin Outside the Body except Immoral Sex? Weighing Whether 1 Corinthians 6:18b Is Paul's Statement or a Corinthian Slogan," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 4 (2017): 970.

(that takes place outside of the body), and sexual sins (that are against a person's body). On the other hand, scholars who view 5:18b to be a Corinthian slogan interpret the text as a refutation of a common justification for sexual sin.

Interestingly, many scholars who advocate for the slogan hypothesis, do not believe Paul is employing a slogan in 6:18. Ciampa and Rosner believe 6:18 is Paul's own statement and agree that sexual sin is unique because it creates a one-flesh union that uniquely defiles the body.[70] Gordon Fee also speaks for the "unique nature of sexual sin", because in this sin, "one sins against one's own body as viewed in terms of its place in redemptive history."[71] New Testament scholar Bruce Fisk speaks for this view when he writes, "Sexual sin is intrinsically different and more destructive; it does have powerful and negative effects on the sinner and it does distort both vertical and horizontal relationships… because sexual sin is uniquely body-joining it is uniquely body-defiling."[72] These scholars believe that the text does not suggest, support or introduce a Corinthian slogan (in 6:18). Because of this sexual sin is believed to be qualitatively worse than other sins in its effect. Marshall and Von Thaden would also agree that sexual sin is unique in Paul's writing. David Garland rejects the slogan hypothesis but follows Fisk in affirming that sexual sin has a "distinctive character."[73] Schreiner similarly calls

---

[70] Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 264.

[71] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 290.

[72] Bruce N. Fisk, "ΠΟΡΝΕΥΕΙΝ As Body Violation: The Unique Nature of Sexual Sin in 1 Corinthians 6.18," *New Testament Studies* 42, no. 4 (October 1996): 557–58.

[73] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 156–57.

sexual sin "particularly egregious" because of the profound "psycho-physical union" that is formed.[74]

In the opposing view, many scholars claim that a slogan understanding of 6:18 is not only a more natural reading, but also a more theologically consistent one. This view would affirm that other sins (like gluttony and suicide) are also against the body, and that Paul is not making a theological statement but instead quoting an incorrect Corinthian belief. Bruce Winter seems to support this reading because of his belief that secular ethics shaped the Corinthians and subsequent Christian permissiveness.[75] For Winter, 6:18b sounds like a plausible Corinthian belief. Since Paul has refuted the Corinthians (or a hypothetical objector) so many times in the text, it is reasonable to think that he would do so again in the same thought unit. New Testament Professor Richard Hays also supports this view due to the parallelism and form of argumentation he sees in the text.[76] Naselli seems to be convinced by Hays' opinion when he writes, "The cumulative force of the arguments has more explanatory power for the view that 18b is a Corinthian slogan than for the view that it is Paul's statement."[77] For Naselli and others, Paul is not making a theological statement about sexual immorality. While *porneia* is to be avoided, it is not to be understood as a special category of sin against the body.

---

[74] Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 129.

[75] Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 76–109.

[76] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 102–5.

[77] Naselli, "Is Every Sin Outside the Body except Immoral Sex?", 987.

Summary of The Ethics of 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Scholarship is significantly invested in but divided on issues related to 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. Interpretations vary surrounding the overall cohesion of the book, but also regarding the significance of this important section. Evangelical commentators will generally agree that sexual immorality should be avoided, with some emphasizing that it is of special urgency to do so because sexual sin is uniquely damaging. The slogan hypothesis is the most prevalent, yet commentators face the challenge of consistency of application of these slogans. Evangelical scholars also differ on explaining Christian sexual ethics within the broader purpose of the book. The variety in the literature is possibly representative of a lack of clarity in the message that adolescents hear in evangelical churches.

Morality and Sexual Ethic of The Roman Empire

The sexual ethics of the ancient world is an area of interest in scholarship because of the ways that culture experienced swift ideological change. Before the Christianization of culture, many of the ethical categories of sin, shame, lust, and immorality did not exist in the same way that they do today. What were the frameworks that governed permissiveness and restraint in the Greco-Roman world into which the New Testament was written?

Categories of Morality

The sexual ethics of ancient Rome has at times been perceived and portrayed as a totally hedonistic, licentious lifestyle. Alastair Blanshard maintains that this an oversimplification and projection unto classical antiquity that can be traced to an early

Christian polemic.[78] He writes, "It is easy to see this eroticization of Rome as the perpetuation of a Christian technique that sought to denigrate pagan practice by associating it with sin, especially bodily sin."[79] Opposed to this caricature, scholarship recognizes a complex interaction of Greek and Roman attitudes that makes up the Greco-Roman world.

Homosexuality

Scholarship is divided on the Greco-Roman attitude toward homosexual behavior. One common view is that Roman ideals excluded homosexuality before the eventual prevalence of Greek customs. According to one view, the Romans rejected homosexuality, but their eventual acceptance of it as a practice came from subsequent Greek influence. L.P. Wilkinson speaks for this view when he writes, "In the early Republic the Romans' attitude to homosexuality was that of most non-Greeks; it was a Greek idiosyncrasy which they despised… but in the second century when captured Greece captivated its rude conqueror, there was an increase in homosexual practices."[80] Historian Ramsay MacMullen agrees with this when he suggests that the Roman ideal was the enemy of homosexuality.[81]

---

[78] Alastair J. L. Blanshard, *Sex: Vice and Love from Antiquity to Modernity*, 1st ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 5.

[79] Blanshard, 5.

[80] L. P. Wilkinson, *Classical Attitudes to Modern Issues: Population and Family Planning, Women's Liberation, Nudism in Deed and Word, Homosexuality* (London: Kimber, 1979), 136.

[81] Ramsay MacMullen, "Roman Attitudes to Greek Love," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 31, no. 4 (1982): 484–502.

An opposing view maintains that the Romans did not have to wait for
Hellenization to allow the practice. Craig Williams argues that Rome had no blanket
condemnation of sexual practices when he writes, "The sources left to us from ancient
Rome make it abundantly clear that Roman traditions fell squarely in line with the
worldwide trend: homosexual behavior was not condemned, and a citizen male could
admit to sexual experience with males in certain contexts."[82] Williams argues for
scholarly inquiry into the contexts in which the practice was acceptable, without
imposing our modern social formulation. Eva Cantarella similarly believes that
"Homosexuality in itself was neither a crime nor a socially reproved form of behavior."[83]
New Testament Professor William Loader contributes the insight that attitudes toward
sex depended heavily on the context of Roman class. He writes, "Official Roman law
deemed same-sex intercourse among citizens as *stuprum*, a criminal act… The Romans
on the other hand tolerated same-sex intercourse with non-citizens of all ages."[84]

Another division in scholarship has to do with whether the modern concept of
sexual orientation can be detected in the ancient world. The essentialist position argues
for a universal pattern of same-gender attraction that is transcultural, while the
constructionist view argues that no essential identity existed between practitioners of
same-gender love. Classical scholar Kenneth Dover is representative of the
constructionist view when he argues that Greco-Roman culture did not recognize any sort

---

[82] Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

[83] Eva Cantarella, *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, trans. Cormac O. Cuilleanain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 104.

[84] William Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 136.

of permanent sexual orientation related to one's identity.[85] On the other hand, Thomas Hubbard maintains that "Some forms of sexual preference were, in fact considered a distinguishing factor for individuals. Many texts see such preference as inborn qualities and thus essential aspects of human identity."[86] For Hubbard, these essential aspects and inborn qualities would be akin to a modern understanding of sexual orientation.

Power

French Philosopher Michael Foucault 's work is commonly cited in scholarship for the ways it has shaped the discussion of sexuality in the ancient world.[87] Foucault argued that the concept of individual sexuality was something unknown to the ancient world. Foucault was one of the first to suggest that sexuality had more to do with one's vision of the human person, and shaped scholarship by pointing to power as being central to the discussion. Paul Veyne's work is similarly cited in scholarship for illustrating how power dynamics shaped sexuality.[88] These scholars believe that the Romans were not in fact uninhibited regarding sexuality but were even timid at times in their approach to sex depending on the circumstances. The Romans certainly enjoyed the pursuit of pleasure, but there were also strict rules to be followed for a pursuit to be considered morally appropriate.

---

[85] K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, upd. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[86] Thomas K. Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

[87] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, reiss. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1990).

[88] Paul Veyne, "La Famille et l'amour Sous Le Haut-Empire Romain," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 33, no. 1 (1978): 35–63.

Professor of Classics Kyle Harper argues that in antiquity, behavior was governed by something deeper than personal permissiveness, restraint, or preference. He writes, "Moral expectations were in tune with social roles, and social roles strictly determined both the points of release and rigid constraints in ancient sexual culture. The value of a sexual act derived, first and foremost, from its objective location within a matrix of social relationships."[89] For Harper, Roman ethics was not about preference or sexual orientation, but more related to a complex social structure of power and status. Historian Catharine Edwards agrees and argues that Roman categories of morality do not map well unto our modern ones. She writes, "The political and moral were often overlapping categories… discourses of morality in Rome were profoundly implicated in structures of power."[90] For both experts, ancient sexual ethics can be understood as an interconnected system of values and negotiation.

Honor and Shame

Immorality as understood in our modern context does not have a Roman equivalent. The closest comparison would be actions that result in *pudor*, a sense of shamefulness.[91] Professor of Classics Rebecca Langlands explains that the Roman ethical code was shaped significantly by their culture of honor and shame. She writes, "Roman ethics was concerned with the positioning of the individual within a network of

---

[89] Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 78.

[90] Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

[91] Edwards, 3.

hierarchical social relationships. *Pudicita* was instrumental in regulating the system…

virtue is always about an individual's constant renegotiation of position and status within

the community."[92] For Langlands, the Roman ethic was hardly about an absolute sense of

right and wrong, but more about the appearance of propriety and projecting modesty.

There are various translations and subsequent definitions offered by scholars for

the Latin term *pudicita.* It appears in literature as a personified moral quality that

governed the ancient Roman sexual ethic. Edwards at times uses the word "chastity", as

does historian R.E.A Palmer.[93] L.H. Greenwood renders Cicero's use of the word in

ancient speeches as "sense of decency."[94] Robert Cape translates *pudicita* as "modesty."[95]

While those translations are acceptable, Langlands points out the difficulty of them

leading modern audiences to assume a quiet, almost puritan understanding of this virtue.

She notes that Roman *pudicita* was an ethic that was competitive and even attention-

seeking.[96] Because one cannot compete in not doing something, *pudicita* meant more

than quiet chastity, but a moral quality that had to be represented and publicly celebrated

in society.

Roman *pudicita* also manifested itself as one of many divine beings in ancient

culture. Mueller notes that when Roman moralist Valerius Maximus speaks of *pudicita*,

---

[92] Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 365.

[93] R. E. A. Palmer, "Roman Shrines of Female Chastity from the Caste Struggle to the Papacy of Innocent I," *Rivista Storica Dell'antichità* 4 (1974): 113–60.

[94] Cicero, *The Verrine Orations,* trans. L. H. G. Greenwood, vol. 2 *Against Verres, Part 2, Books 3-5, B. Orations*, repr. ed. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1935), 117.

[95] Robert W. Cape, "Cicero's Consular Speeches," in *Brill's Companion to Cicero*, ed. James May (Brill, 2002), 113–58.

[96] Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 38.

he illustrates it to be an abstract goddess residing in Juno's couches and at the hearth of the goddess Vesta.[97] Romans recognized Juno to be the guardian of the state, and thus saw a relationship between how much modesty is displayed among women and the military success of men. *Pudicita* is depicted in literature as both a quality to be enacted, but also a personified deity who is prayed to. Literature speaks of at least two separate shrines with statues to *Pudicita*, where, "In such cult practice Romans created for certain virtues a visible and tangible form and then, by publicly displaying representations of them and coming together to cultivate them as deities, showed how important such qualities were for the community and for the state."[98] This honor-shame culture of the Romans was an indication that there was high value placed on maintaining the appearance of prudence and modesty, even more so that actually being prudent and modest. Literature reveals that very complex and nuanced roles and expectations existed. A social hierarchy influenced all of life, including sexual ethics.

Social Stratification as Contours of Ethics

Because virtue was often located in social structure, sexual desire could be fulfilled in any number of ways in the Roman empire. One's sexual desire was an appetite that was indiscriminate in its choice of object if the roles of strong, weak, dominant, and passive were maintained. The most notable social differences that shaped the contours of sexual ethic were freeborn men, women, prostitutes, boys, and slaves.

---

[97] Hans-Friedrich Mueller, *Roman Religion in Valerius Maximus* (London: Routledge, 2002), 22.

[98] Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, 42.

Boys and Slaves

The Romans believed that beauty resided in both the male and female body. It is significant to note the casual indifference in ancient literature to the gender of the erotic object.[99] Same-sex relationships were therefore common in the Roman world and even their gods were sexually indiscriminate. Boys were said to be, "beautiful so long as they look like females"[100] and pederasty was common and even approved of. Harper relates a story of the poet Nemesianus who imagines the joy of the afterlife to be one where, "All the wives are shared in common without jealousy… and the boys all submit to their pursuers without resistance."[101] It was not shameful for men to pursue boys, or for boys to submit to men. Again, ethics in the Roman mind has more to do with dominance and men taking the active role sexually. If a young boy was not old enough to turn the tables (and thus shame the pursuing man), pederasty was not considered "immoral."[102] Added to this, the ubiquity of slaves in the empire meant that there was constant sexual availability. Walter Scheidel estimates that one in ten families owned slaves, and that in an empire of 70 million, between 7 and 10 million were enslaved.[103] Slaves had the least power, and unquestionably submitted to their masters' authority. They functioned, "something like the part that masturbation has played in most cultures."[104]

---

[99] See Marcus Aurelius, "Meditations, 1.16", *Lexundria: A Digital Library of Classical Antiquity*, trans. George Long, https://lexundria.com/m_aur_med/1.16/lg.

[100] Harper, *From Shame to Sin,* 25.

[101] Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 24.

[102] See Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*.

[103] Walter Scheidel, "Human Mobility in Rome Italy, II: The Slave Population," *JRS 95* (Nov. 2005): 64-79.

[104] Harper, *From Shame to Sin,* 27.

Free Men and Prostitutes

In the Roman world, freeborn men were trained to be strong and always to take the role of sexual dominance. Men were taught to avoid adultery, exercise moderation, and to avoid being the passive partner in a homosexual relationship. Matthew Rueger comments, "In the Roman mind, the strong took what they wanted to take. It was socially acceptable for a strong Roman male to have intercourse with men or women alike, provided he was the aggressor."[105] Faithfulness in marriage was seen as a virtue, but male sexual energy was also seen as a sort of quantity that needed to be expelled somewhere. Free men could violate the *pudicita* of others, but they did not have *pudicita* that could be violated.[106] Add to this that prostitution was legal, uncontroversial, and an important part of Roman capitalism, it played a well-established role in keeping hierarchy. Prostitution was quite ethical since it, "Prevented adultery, [since] the prostitute's body acted as a safety valve for male lust."[107] The price of sex was also stunningly low. Thomas McGinn estimates that in an ordinary Roman town, it would have cost approximately the same price as a loaf of bread.[108] All of this leads Harper to lament, "In the brothel, the prostitutes body became, little by little, 'like a corpse'."[109]

---

[105] Matthew Rueger, *Sexual Morality in a Christless World* (Concordia Publishing, 2016), 27.

[106] Hans-Friedrich Mueller, *Roman Religion in Valerius Maximus*, 22.

[107] Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 47.

[108] Thomas McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World* (University of Michigan Press, 2004), 40-55.

[109] Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 49.

Women

Occupying the middle-ground of the Roman social power structure, women faced intense and complex ethical pressures. Women were expected not only to adorn themselves with *pudicita*, but they were also to display this personal quality of modesty to others. Langlands explains, "Ideally *pudicita* would shine forth from a married woman; it would turn heads as she walked down the street… it is not enough that a wife regulates her sexual behavior in accepted ways, it is required that her virtue in this area be conspicuous – plain for all to see so as to attract attention."[110] In a way, ancient women navigated a high-stakes game of advertised modesty. Women were under constant observation in a strict code of honor and shame. Their reputations were fragile and had to consider the many signs of potential immodesty in the public eye. Behind closed doors however, literature portrays that women were known to be sexually active, particularly with slaves. Harper says, "The specter of sex between the mistress and the slaves was a stock theme of folk comedy. The timeless weapon of the seducer is reasonable suspicion about the secret behavior of others: 'all women do it, my child... but bolt the door so we don't get caught'."[111] It is this advertised modesty on one hand, contrasted with private behavior on the other that stands out in classical scholarship.

Astrology in Ethics

An examination of the astrological literature of the high empire reveals that not only did the Romans maintain these social distinctions, but that they had their own

---

[110] Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, 37-38.

[111] Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 42.

scientific rationale to support it. Ptolemy of Alexandria wrote several astrological

treatises where he imagines some people to be erotic and attracted to women, others

passionate for boys, aggressive, adulterous, and so on. All this behavior he attributed to

the stars! The planetary bodies determined one's afflictions and deformations, and the

differences between men and women were that of degree rather than kind. The pull of

planetary forces could draw both men and women to different points on the spectrum.

Women were thought to be incompletely formed men, and patterns of desire were

ascribed to particular social types.[112] Not only did Rome have a sexual ethic based on

social stratification, but they also had a scientific framework to support it.

Summary of Morality and Sexual Ethic in Roman Empire

Scholarship is interested in the sexual ethics of the Roman Empire partly because

of the ways that our own categories of sin and shame do not map well unto theirs. There

is general agreement in the literature that the modern understanding of the ethics of

antiquity tends to be caricatured and perhaps unaware of a complex code of ethics that

governed behavior. The Greco-Roman world was heavily shaped by power, honor,

shame, and various social structures that mediated these variables. It is into this complex

world of imperial religion and virtue that the New Testament teaching on sexual ethics

found a powerful voice. Historian Larry Hurtado believes that "Christian religious

identity" would eventually become distinctive in this climate.[113] Harper likewise

---

[112] See Tasmyn Barton, *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine Under the Roman Empire* (University of Michigan Press, 2002).

[113] Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Baylor Press, 2016), 103–4.

contends, "Christianity put forward a new cosmology, a new ethics, and a new vision of human solidarity, in short, a new view of human destiny that makes sex far more important. Sexual morality is integral to the Christian vision of redemption."[114] The research calls modern leaders to be aware of the invisible forces and narratives that shape permissiveness and restraint in adolescents today.

Systems Theory and Adolescent Behavior

The examination of literature in the morality of the Greco-Roman world is now followed by a consideration of Systems Theory, narrowing on Bowen Theory as it intersects parenting and subsequent adolescent behavior.

Systems theory is oriented around the idea that people are best understood holistically. In this perspective, human behavior is not a result of simple causation, but is shaped by the complex living systems around it. Researcher and former director of the Bowen Center, Dr. Michael Kerr considers this theory to be a significant departure from other psychologies. He believes that the family should be conceived of, "As an emotional unit and the individual as part of that unit rather than an autonomous psychological entity."[115] Psychiatrist Richard Schwartz uses the analogy of a car with many parts working together in itself, but also interacting with other vehicles in a complex network of traffic.[116] Author Peter Steinke draws parallels between systems theory and field

---

[114] Kyle Harper, "The First Sexual Revolution," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life*, no. 279 (January 2018): 45.

[115] Michael E. Kerr, "Chronic Anxiety and Defining a Self," *The Atlantic*, September 1, 1988, 35.

[116] Richard C. Schwartz and Martha Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2019), 25.

theory in Physics. Just as invisible forces operate between matter, so also do emotional

forces affect people in groups. Steinke says that it is this field that, "Determines the

functioning of the parts more than any part influences the field, even though the presence

of the parts is necessary for creating the field."[117] Researchers Blanchard and Heeren

offer support to this theory in their study on parental burnout when they write:

> This quest for reductionism has fallen short. Scientists from different
> fields have repeatedly discovered that complex systems work together to
> generate ecological, social, human, and biological processes, and that
> singular components or simple models cannot adequately explain these
> complex systems… Clinical psychology research has started to embrace
> this perspective as well.[118]

Because of this, an individual is never considered apart from the multifaceted system in

which they exist.

Variety in Systems Theory

While all systems theorists approach the individual in the context of the broader

whole, there are also some significant differences. These differences become more

pronounced when considering pathology and therapy.

Structural Family Systems and therapy is particularly concerned with the changes

and organization within a family system itself. Developed by Salvador Minuchin, this

approach emphasizes hierarchies and roles as primary elements that shape behavior.

Minuchin describes his approach when he writes, "Structural family therapy deals with

---

[117] Peter L. Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times*, ill. ed. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), 67.

[118] M. Annelise Blanchard and Alexandre Heeren, "Why We Should Move from Reductionism and Embrace a Network Approach to Parental Burnout," *New Directions for Child & Adolescent Development* 2020, no. 174 (November 2020): 3.

the process of feedback between circumstances and the person involved… A shift in the position of a person vis-à-vis his circumstances constitutes a shift in his experience."[119] Structural Family theory observes that an unstable or conflicted parental relationship is one such structure that would put children at risk of taking on roles or taking sides. For Minuchin, the role of therapy is to help the family to change its organization so that the experience of the individual changes.

On the other hand, developmental theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner is generally credited with the development of Ecological Systems Theory. This theory emphasizes that a person's development is affected by several interconnected environments. Bronfenbrenner uses the analogy of environments being like nested Russian dolls to illustrate that one's immediate family should be taken together with several broader systems.[120] In this model, the interaction of various levels, or ecological environments, is primary for understanding children. Bronfenbrenner writes:

> The sequence of nested ecological structures can be illustrated… We can hypothesize that a child is more likely to learn to talk in a setting containing roles that obligate adults to talk to children… But whether children can perform effectively in their childrearing roles within the family depends on role-demands stresses and supports emanating from other settings.[121]

For Bronfenbrenner, the "settings" are five distinct but nested systems. The place of employment for a parent is understood to be significant in shaping the nested system of the home itself.

---

[119] Salvador Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2012), 10.

[120] Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.

[121] Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development,* 6–7.

Internal Family Systems has yet another emphasis in its theory that individuals have various systems within themselves. Psychiatrist Richard Schwartz challenges the external-only focus prevalent in systems therapy, while also seeking to integrate it individual psychotherapy. For Schwartz, everyone has various systems within their psyche. Like different members of a family, the "parts" or "voices" in one's mind each have their own demands and function as an internal system.[122] Schwartz writes, "I set about teaching my clients' inner families to communicate more directly, have better boundaries, try new roles, and establish appropriate hierarchies and leadership."[123] In this model, therapy helps one to manage and gain internal balance with their different parts that are regulating feeling. By understanding the three parts or subpersonalities of their emotional system, Schwartz proposes that an individual can construct a healthy non-reactive individual system.[124]

Schwartz drew much of his own inspiration from Virginia Satir, who is considered one of the original founders of the family therapy movement. Satir's model is a communications approach often called Conjoint Family Therapy.[125] Based on general systems theory, Satir's model emphasizes self-esteem, which is learned and expressed in the family system. She writes, "Treatment interventions are always two-fold: to connect with the person where they are and to help affirm their self-worth, before God and

---

[122] Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 12.

[123] Schwartz and Sweezy, 15.

[124] Schwartz and Sweezy, 265.

[125] Virginia Satir, *Conjoint Family Therapy*, 3rd rev., exp. ed. (Palo Alto, Calif: Science and Behavior Books, 1983).

everybody."[126] For Satir, low self-worth expresses itself in several coping behaviors:

placate, blame, super-reasonable and irrelevance.[127] Because self-worth is primary, this

model is optimistic about a person's innate goodness and the pathology lies in one's

coping methods. Satir herself distinguishes between parents who create troubled families

and those who create nurturing ones. Applying her theory to parenting, she writes,

"Parents in nurturing families know that their children are not intentionally bad. If

someone behaves destructively, they realize that there has been some misunderstanding,

or someone's self-esteem is dangerously low."[128] Because self-worth is primary, therapy

in this model seeks to help individuals relate to themselves in a new light.

Bowen Theory is another well-developed area in systems thinking. While

working with schizophrenic patients at the Menninger Foundation in Kansas, Professor

and Psychiatrist, Dr. Murray Bowen developed his theory of human behavior. Bowen

theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of families and the complex ways in which

each member affects the other. Psychiatrist Roberta Gilbert who was mentored by

Murray Bowen, writes, "Rather than thinking cause and effect one looks for the

interrelations of the group… One tries always for a bigger picture. Systems thinking

strives to look at the emotional process going on among people… the emotional system

itself operates as a unit."[129] In this way Bowen is more interested in how interconnected

---

[126] Satir, *Conjoint Family Therapy*, 10.

[127] John Banmen, "Virginia Satir's Family Therapy Model," *Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research & Practice* 42, no. 4 (December 1986): 480.

[128] Virginia Satir, *Peoplemaking* (Palo Alto, Calif., Science and Behavior Books, 1972), 17.

[129] Dr Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, ed. Greg Jacobs, 1st ed. (Leading Systems Press, 2018), 2.

individuals work as a group to create equilibrium. Dr. Michael Kerr describes the human family as an "emotional field."[130] The term is meant to capture the complexity of invisible reactivity - if one member changes it necessarily causes a ripple effect throughout the living system. Bowen Systems Theory is composed of eight interconnected concepts that Roberta Gilbert believes should be taken in order. She writes:

> The eight concepts of Bowen Theory, in the logical progression that builds on the family as the emotional unit, are:
>
> - Nuclear Family Emotional Process.
>
> - The differentiation of Self Scale.
>
> - Triangles.
>
> - Cutoff.
>
> - Family projection process.
>
> - Multigenerational transmission process.
>
> - Sibling Position.
>
> - Societal emotional process.[131]

These core concepts overlap but also mean that Bowen is less concerned with the individual's internal system or the broader nested system, but rather the relational disturbances and invisible forces in the family.

---

[130] Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory* (New York, NY, US: W W Norton & Co, 1988), 54.

[131] Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 3.

Bowen Concepts and Parenting

According to systems thinking, an individual is never a totally autonomous psychological entity. Because of this, certain elements stand out in the literature to be particularly relevant for considering parenting and subsequent adolescent behavior.

Differentiation

Differentiation of Self is the central feature in Bowen's view of family dynamics. Robert Creech defines this core principle as, "A person's capacity to remain true to their deepest principles, to be thoughtful rather than reactive, while remaining emotionally connected to others who are important to oneself… [It is] the capacity to separate our intellectual and emotional systems and choose between them."[132] Rabbi Edwin Friedman says it is, "The capacity to be one's own integrated aggregate-of-cells person while still belonging to or being able to relate to a larger colony."[133] This means that a healthy person is able to balance forces of "togetherness"- the desire for love and acceptance, with the force of "individuality"- the desire for autonomy apart from the group. Bowen himself described these two forces, along with a hypothetical scale to account for the full range of human functioning.[134] Paradoxically, it is this ability to separate oneself- to have a "basic self"- that enables one to form healthy bonds and make principled decisions.[135]

---

[132] R. Robert Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Baker Academic, 2019), 186.

[133] Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: SEABURY BOOKS, 2007), 184.

[134] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1983), 277.

[135] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 365.

Roberta Gilbert writes on the significance of differentiation for parenting. For Gilbert, it is only by becoming differentiated that children can grow to have principled lives. She writes, "The Differentiated part of us… it can be thought of as having an impermeable boundary around it. This is where principles reside – those well-thought-out beliefs that act as an internal guidance system for the person."[136] Adolescents who do not develop a basic, differentiated self will subsequently join emotionally with another and lose their ability to act, even if they were taught otherwise. Likewise, parents who are at lower levels of differentiation will be more prone to unreliable, anxiety-driven thinking. Gilbert goes so far as to say that the most important goal for parents, "is the goal of raising one's [own] level of differentiation of self."[137] This theory does not seek to directly change bad behavior in children, but slowly effect change in the overall family system. As parents progress to higher levels of differentiation they produce a generation with higher levels of basic selves. For Bowen, undifferentiation is a transmissible family trait.

Elements of Bowen Theory are detectable in modern parenting literature. Psychiatrist Foster Cline and school principal Jim Fay commend elements of this when they warn against "Drill Sergeant Parenting" that constantly tells children what to do. They describe this parenting style as, "You can't think for yourself, so I'll do it for you."[138] Cline and Fay do not employ Bowen's vocabulary, but sternly warn that children

---

[136] Roberta M. Gilbert, *Connecting With Our Children : Guiding Principles for Parents in a Troubled World*, 1st ed. (New York: Trade Paper Press, 1999), 92.

[137] Gilbert, *Connecting With Our Children,* 130.

[138] Foster Cline and Jim Fay, *Parenting With Love And Logic*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing, 2006), 26.

who are raised without the ability to think for themselves are more susceptible to peer pressure than others during their teen years. They write, "[Because] They were never allowed to make their own decisions but were trained to listen to a voice outside of their heads… When they reach their teen years and no longer want to listen to their parents, they still follow that same pattern, only this time the voice… belongs to their friends."[139] Cline and Fay subtly employ systems thinking in these insights and even point to fear as a contributing factor for ineffective parenting.

There is a significant amount of research related to differentiation, its transmission, validity, and subsequent effects.[140] Professors Ora Peleg and Nogood Harish conducted a study comparing parenting styles and differentiation of self with adolescents' subsequent abilities to have intimate social relationships.[141] Their research confirms that people with high levels of differentiation can experience higher levels of intimacy in relationships without extreme dependence. Peleg and Harish's work overlays these behaviors with the parenting styles experienced by Arab adolescents. They identify three broad parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. They assert:

> A relationship between parents and children that sets clear boundaries
> serves as a basis for transferring cultural messages and norms of behavior
> to relationships outside the family. This suggests that Arab adolescents
> who grow up in families where parents behave assertively and
> supportively, and do not limit and punish, feel more secure and

---

[139] Cline and Fay, *Parenting With Love and Logic,* 25.

[140] For two examples of recent research, see Soo-Whan Choi and Nancy L. Murdock, "Differentiation of Self, Interpersonal Conflict, and Depression: The Mediating Role of Anger Expression," *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* 39, no. 1 (2017): 21–30. and J. Drake et al., "Differentiation of Self Inventory—Short Form: Development and Preliminary Validation," *Contemporary Family Therapy* 37 (March 26, 2015).

[141] Ora Peleg and Nogood Harish, "Can Family Patterns Help Adolescents Establish Intimate Social Relationships with Peers?," *American Journal of Family Therapy* 50, no. 3 (June 5, 2022): 227–48.

responsible, and therefore achieve greater intimacy in their same-sex friendships.[142]

In this way they commend assertive but supportive parenting that is characteristic of their middle-ground "authoritative" style, as opposed to the extremes of authoritarianism or permissiveness. Their data suggests a positive impact of parenting that requires compliance with rules but also the expression of children's autonomous desires.

Anxiety

Closely connected to differentiation of self in Bowen Theory is the level of anxiety in the family system. Kerr says that anxiety is "interlocked" with differentiation, and that it is a naturally occurring phenomenon in every system.[143] Bowen makes a distinction between acute anxiety and chronic anxiety. Acute anxiety is a response to a real, particularized threat while chronic anxiety is not caused by any one thing. It is instead fed by the fear of what might be.[144] Robert Creech believes that chronic anxiety is distinguished by, "Peoples reaction to a disturbance in the relational system."[145] Leadership coach Jim Herrington uses the analogy of emotional maturity being like a reservoir and anxiety being like the water level inside it. While acute anxiety can be beneficial, chronic anxiety causes a "Heightened chemical state that prevents us from functioning at our best and sets us up to escalate additional symptoms of one sort or

---

[142] Peleg and Harish, 241.

[143] Michael E. Kerr M.D, *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 108.

[144] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 112–13.

[145] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 17–18.

another… we react rather than respond."[146] In Bowen Theory, anxiety is a key variable in the development of symptoms that inhibit healthy growth.

Gilbert employs these principles to parenting and believes that they are crucial to understanding a child's behavior. For Gilbert, anxiety travels through a family system like electricity in a circuit and that children are most often the "symptom bearers of the family."[147] She writes, "In this way if the adults in a family have a problem they do not deal with and resolve, anxiety gets displaced to a child. As the child becomes an anxiety sink for the family, he or she will definitely develop some kind of problem."[148] In this way the problem is self-perpetuating: the child takes on anxiety which results in bad behavior which causes more of an anxious focus on the child. Gilbert believes that family dysfunction, irresponsible behavior (including substance abuse) and even learning disabilities in children can be traced to this "vicious cycle" of anxiety.[149] This is consistent with what Bowen Theory calls "projection."[150]

Child health expert and founder of The Family Systems Institute in Australia, Dr. Jenny Brown agrees with this perspective when she recommends parenting that does not fixate on trying to change a child. She writes, "When a child's behavior is anxious or unsettled it gets tricky to see the big picture of the parent-child circular dance. It's all too easy to think that the problem is in the child… rather than in the system of

---

[146] Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 45.

[147] Gilbert, *Connecting With Our Children*, 77.

[148] Gilbert, 22.

[149] Gilbert, 23.

[150] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 188.

interactions."[151] In agreement with Gilbert, Brown believes that effective parenting is to make yourself the project: to study anxiety and see how parents and children are triggering certain behaviors in one another. Therapist Joanne Wright echoes this very principle as she reflects on her own therapy to clients who struggle to self-soothe. She writes, "For me, this requires an ongoing focus on my own capacity to self-regulate, because sitting with human need and distress activates my own emotional orientation to caretaking and problem-solving."[152] It is this fixation on problem-solving that paradoxically, creates problems.

Triangles

Key to understanding anxiety on a systemic level is the concept of the triangle. Central to Bowen Theory, the triangle is conceptualized as the most basic building block of any emotional system. Bowen called triangles, "The smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable other person to become a triangle."[153] Robert Creech similarly describes the existence of triangles as a human reflex to manage anxiety.[154] In Bowen Theory the formation of the triangle diffuses the anxiety of a two-person relationship into two additional relationships involving the third

---

[151] Jenny Brown, *Confident Parenting: Restoring Your Confidence as a Parent by Making Yourself the Project and Not Trying to Change Your Child* (Family Systems Practice, 2020), 10.

[152] Joanne Wright, "Self-Soothing — A Recursive Intrapsychic and Relational Process: The Contribution of the Bowen Theory to the Process of Self-Soothing," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 30, no. 1 (2009): 40.

[153] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 373.

[154] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 187.

person. For Bowen, a triangle of three can manage a greater load of anxiety than the sum of three independent relationships.

Because of this, triangles are not normally conceived of in Bowen theory as intentional, but as inevitable. Herrington says that they are, "An aspect of human behavior that is neither good nor bad. They just are. Triangles are in themselves neutral."[155] Gilbert adds, "Triangles are ubiquitous… It's not a matter of whether we are in triangles. We always are in them, if the anxiety is up even a little… two intense people cannot resist the urge to bring someone else in. No one, on the other hand can resist the urge to join two intense others. It's automatic. It's human."[156] These automatic triangles are the complex web that allows for the escalation and transmission of chronic anxiety. Bowen Theory experts are less concerned with the formation of triangles, but instead whether leaders and parents can detect their operation. Triangles can "build", "interlock", or even "polarize."[157]

For parenting, this means that there will always exist a *de facto* triangle between two parents and a child. As anxiety is experienced, especially if it is unresolved, can become directed at the child. Triangulation can mean that two people agree that the other is the problem. Gilbert warns of this unhealthy sort of triangulation when she writes, "The parents feel fine and often their relationship appears to be doing well, but the child neither feels nor does well. He or she comes to be seen as the one with the problem."[158]

---

[155] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader's Journey*, 60.

[156] Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 43–44.

[157] Gilbert, 45.

[158] Gilbert, *Connecting With Our Children*, 80–81.

Gilbert believes that displaced anxiety for parents can be a mechanism for them to feel better at the expense of their child. Marriage and family experts Willis, Miller, Yorgason and Dyer conducted a study to examine the relationship between differentiation and triangulation as theorized in Bowen Theory. They state that most research on child triangulation centers on Minuchin's structural model.[159] Their study offers support for Bowen's belief that low levels of differentiation among parents will contribute to chronic anxiety and a higher likelihood of this unhealthy triangulation of children.[160]

Because of this, Bowen experts consider responsible parenting to be a differentiated self that is aware of how triangles operate. The concept of "de-triangling" is used in the literature, not in reference to avoiding triangles- which are believed to be inevitable- but to have a calm, outside position. Jim Herrington describes this as being able to stay calm and connected without getting in-between.[161] Gilbert believes this to be one of the reasons it is important that parents stay in emotional connection not only with their children, but also with the generations of their own family. She asserts, "It is virtually impossible to be cut off from one's family of origin and still function well as a parent."[162] This generational connectedness with high differentiation of self in parents helps a child to not become triangulated or suffer an anxious focus.

---

[159] Kwin Willis et al., "Was Bowen Correct? The Relationship between Differentiation and Triangulation," *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* 43, no. 1 (2021): 1-10.

[160] Willis et al., "Was Bowen Correct?", 7.

[161] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader's Journey*, 63.

[162] Gilbert, *Connecting With Our Children*, 189.

Implications For Ethical behavior

Because a systems approach does not consider the individual apart from the group, the literature focuses on changing the invisible forces in the family rather than trying to affect change in children directly. Bowen Theorists are careful to not focus on the pathology or adapt the system to immaturity. Because of this, systems thinking is generally silent on morality and a standard of ethical behavior but instead focuses on functional observable patterns.

Friedman and Herrington would both agree that healthy leadership should focus on self-differentiation and a non-anxious presence. Friedman says, "If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as head and work to define his or her own goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the organism, there is more than a reasonable chance that the body will follow."[163] Herrington says this means a "focus on yourself" and a "focus on connection" since conformity is not the goal.[164] Herrington applies this concept to parenting when he says, "Many parents waste their influence by being too weak to share their positions with their children or by coercing them into conformity and alienating them in the process."[165] Bowen experts delineate these two extremes of silence and coercion but do not define what these parental "positions" ought to be.

---

[163] Edwin H. Friedman, Gary Emanuel, and Mickie Crimone, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, Illustrated edition (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 229.

[164] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader's Journey*, 136–37.

[165] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, 140.

Roberta Gilbert similarly speaks of "irresponsible behavior" but is silent on any absolute ethical standard.[166] She believes that the goal of parenting is not to get children to act or think the way that parents want them to. For Gilbert, behavior is secondary to giving children a "relationship legacy."[167] In this view, parents do not teach ethics directly, but rather model ethics by being connected and clear on their own position. This "I-position" is what most closely resembles ethics in Bowen Theory. Jenny Brown speaks for this when she says that parents should demonstrate their inner convictions. She illustrates, "'How dare you swear at me? You're grounded!' can be replaced with: 'I'm not willing to be generous when I experience so much disrespect'."[168] It is these "I-statements" that are recommended in the literature. Gilbert agrees when she says parents should not invade a child's boundaries or allow children to invade theirs[169]. Cline and Fay have modernized some of these concepts in their "consultant" parenting model. They would partially agree with Gilbert when they distinguish between parents who make "fighting word demands" and those who make "thinking word requests."[170]

In this way, Bowen practitioners do not recommend a code of ethics be imposed. With differentiation and connection as the goal, it is implied that children will discover the value system that is modeled. Virginia Satir would likely disagree and recommend the somewhat different goal of raising a child's self-worth. This flows from a belief that

---

[166] Gilbert, *Connecting With Our Children*, 31.

[167] Gilbert, 30.

[168] Brown, *Confident Parenting*, 19.

[169] Gilbert, *Connecting With Our Children*, 140–41.

[170] Cline and Fay, *Parenting With Love And Logic*, 88.

children are inherently good.[171] For Satir, integrity, honesty, responsibility all come from

a child, "appreciating his net worth."[172]

Sociologist Jonathan Haidt offers categories and insights to the question of where

morality comes from. He describes the two most common answers: that morality is innate

(the nativist position) or that it is learned (the empiricist position)[173]. Haidt goes on to

demonstrate that, "In 1987 moral psychology was mostly focused on a third answer:

rationalism, which says that kids figure out morality for themselves."[174] In this view,

authority figures are obstacles to moral development since children will figure out and

construct morality on their own. Haidt's aim is to critique the rationalist belief

popularized by American Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. His work seeks to show that

morality cannot be entirely constructed by children based on their experiences. Instead,

Haidt believes that morality is a combination of innateness and social learning. His theory

of morality is called the social intuitionist perspective, due to the observation that

regarding morality, intuition comes before reason.[175] In this way, ethical behavior is not

improved by merely instructing people to reason more carefully. While Virginia Satir

would be a nativist, many Bowen theorists would likely agree with Haidt's intuitionist

view of morality since it is sympathetic to cultural and family processes.

---

[171] Satir, *Peoplemaking*, 17.

[172] Satir, 22.

[173] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, rep. ed. (New York: Vintage, 2013), 5.

[174] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 6.

[175] Haidt, 61.

Professor of Social Psychology Fiona White investigated the relationship between family process and subsequent adolescent moral thought. Her interest is to take a Family Systems approach to adolescent moralization due to what she considers to be shortcomings in Kohlberg's theories.[176] For White, a key variable for the development of adolescent moral thought is the cohesion and connectedness of the family system. In her findings she asserts, "The adolescents who perceived their families as higher in cohesion, and thus, in emotional warmth, tended to rate the family as significantly more influential than did the adolescents who perceived their family systems as lower in cohesion."[177] It is this emotional warmth that is a predictor of influence. White's "cohesion" closely parallels Gilbert's "relationship legacy" and Herrington's "focus on connection". These aspects of Bowen Theory seem to resemble what Haidt describes as moral intuitions.

Seminary Professor David Waanders notices this lack of an explicit ethical dimension in Bowen Theory.[178] Waanders asks, "When does differentiation become a preoccupation with self to the exclusion of others or a loss of focus on values which transcend the individual self?"[179] His interest is to point out that by valuing differentiation over fusion, selfhood can become its own moral reference point in Bowen thinking. Waanders recommends adding an ethical dimension to Bowen's scale of

---

[176] Fiona A. White, "Relationship of Family Socialization Processes to Adolescent Moral Thought," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 140, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 75–91.

[177] White, 87.

[178] David D Waanders, "Ethical Reflections on the Differentiation of Self in Marriage," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 41, no. 2 (June 1987): 100–110.

[179] Waanders, 101.

differentiation of self to avoid a narcissistic view of self.[180] He proposes the following

scheme (Figure 1) for expanding Bowen's Theory into four quadrants:

Self for Others

*Fused Self
for Others*

*Differentiated
Self for Others*

**Fusion
of
Self**

**Differentiation
of
Self**

*Narcissistic
Fusion*

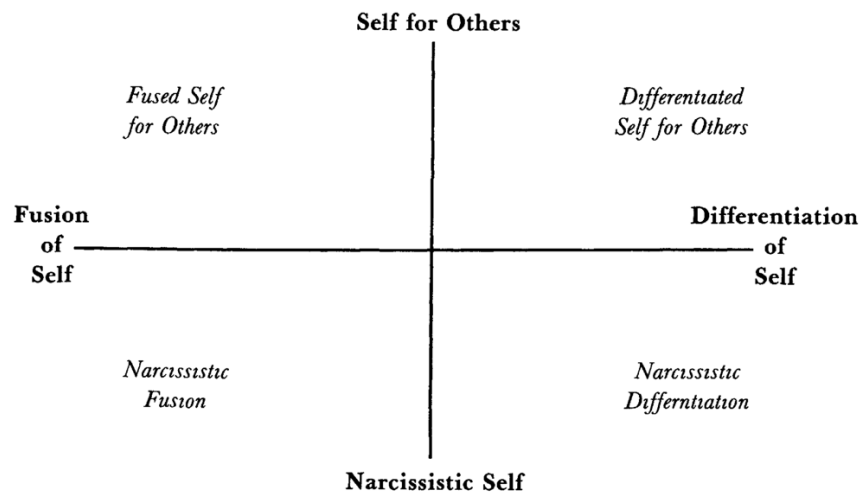*Narcissistic
Differntiation*

Narcissistic Self

Figure 1.

Just as fusion and differentiation can be represented on a continuum, Waanders suggests

an ethical scale of "narcissistic self" or "self for others". In this way, one can be

differentiated for the sake of others, or be differentiated in an unethical self-seeking way.

This model would imply that adolescents require some degree of instruction on what sort

of differentiated self they are seeking to become.

Summary of Systems Theory and Adolescent Behavior

Systems theory is particularly concerned with a holistic approach to people. The

literature warns against reductionistic thinking that sees simple causation behind human

behavior. The invisible forces within the complex living systems that surround people

should be considered. Bowen Family Systems Theory provides an integrated approach to

---

[180] Waanders, 108.

view people as being constituted in relationships. There is a significant correlation between a parent's level of influence and their degree of connection. There is also a relationship between a parent's ability to form these connections and their own level of differentiation. Bowen' principles offer many insights for anxious parents but integrating them with a robust ethical framework remains under-explored. Modern readers will also observe that social media has become a family system of sorts for adolescents.

Summary of Literature Review

In light of the literature examined, several themes have emerged for parents and pastors of adolescents. The first is that due consideration should be given to whether there is clarity surrounding the message of the biblical sexual ethic, and God's plan for our earthly bodies. The second theme is that there are likely complex dynamics that surround permissiveness and restraint in any culture. Parents would do well to study the narratives that make irresponsible sexual ethics appealing today. Third, parents should be aware that children do not simply behave according to the information presented to them. Rather, people are constituted in relationships and parents with a high level of differentiation will be able to cultivate the same with their children.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christian young adult university students experienced spiritual formation while living at home that helped them to uphold biblical sexual ethics while living at residential universities.

The assumption of this study was that students continue to face ethical pressures during their years at residential universities. Further, this study assumed that young adult students who have not only navigated these pressures, but also encouraged their peers toward a biblical worldview were shaped by elements of their upbringing. To address this purpose, the research sought to understand what past experiences were most formative in the establishment of a functioning sexual ethic. The following research questions guided the qualitative research and analysis of interview data:

1. Tell me about what social pressures concerning sexual behavior you experienced as an undergraduate student.

2. What role did your parents instruction have in navigating these challenges?

3. How did your church equip you to hold biblical sexual ethics?

4. How did your household equip you to hold biblical sexual ethics?

Design of the Study

The methodology of this study was a basic qualitative research design. Qualitative research was used to gain a rich understanding of the experience of spiritual formation while living at home that young adults attribute efficacy to for navigating ethical challenges while living on university campuses. Sharan B. Merriam, in her book

Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation, notes that the goal of a general, basic qualitative study is to, "Uncover participants' understanding of their experiences."[181] Merriam also explains that this sort of applied research deliberately seeks to, "describe, understand and interpret."[182] The data collected in this study is from a participant's point of view, with the understanding that it is undertaken, "to improve the quality of practice of a particular discipline."[183] This study was intended to help the church understand the experience of spiritual formation for young adults and use that to improve their ministries.

This study employed a basic qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. The researcher used an interview approach that began with specific questions but allowed latitude for follow-up and further exploration to gain deeper understanding. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of more comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives. The research focused on an inductive process that sought to gain meaning and understanding.[184]

Participant Sample Selection

To provide this study with relevant data, participants were needed who would be able to communicate in depth about their experience at undergraduate universities, and

---

[181] Sharan B Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2016), 24.

[182] Merriam and Tisdell, 12.

[183] Merriam and Tisdell, 3.

[184] Merriam and Tistell, 15-17.

about their experience in spiritual formation before enrolling. In addition to this, participants were screened and selected according to the following criteria. First, the participants self-reported to the researcher that they were presently members in good standing of an evangelical Christian church, are self-described followers of Jesus Christ and felt that their spiritual convictions had not significantly changed since their time as undergraduate students.

Second, participants were chosen between the ages of 23-26 years who graduated within the past four years. They self-reported to have completed a regular course of study at a residential university and to have experienced spiritual formation in their teenage years that contributed significantly to how they lived in college. Subjects were selected between these ages to access the most recent possible data consistent with current cultural realities and experiences at universities.

Third, participants were chosen for a unique type of sample to gain a narrow focus for best practices in the data collected.[185] The researcher used criterion that participants self-reported to have lived out a sexual ethic consistent with traditional Christian values. Subjects self-reported to never have engaged in sexual intercourse or arousal with a partner as undergraduate students. In addition to this, subjects self-reported that their sense of ethics in college was due in large part to their spiritual formation during their teenage years.

Finally, the researcher pursued participants who he observed to influence their peers toward a biblical view of sexual ethics. For this study, "influence" fits a definition

---

[185] Merriam and Tisdell, 97-98.

of regularly leading and recruiting others to a group bible study or discussion of the

Christian tradition in which they considered biblical sexual ethics.

The final study was conducted through personal interviews with eight young

adults. They were invited to participate via an introductory letter, followed by a personal

phone call. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. In

addition, each participant signed a "Research Participant Consent Form" to respect and to

protect the human rights of the participants. The Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is

"minimal" to "no risk" according to the Seminary IRB Guidelines. The following is a

sample of this consent form.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by *David Royes* to
investigate *how young adults experienced spiritual formation as teenagers before leaving
home for college* for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological
Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my
consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent
that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records,
and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:
1) The purpose of the research is to investigate how Christian young adult university
   students experienced spiritual formation while living at home that helped them to
   uphold biblical sexual ethics while living at residential universities.
2) Potential benefits of the research may include better understanding the social
   pressures of university culture, better parenting and mentor practices, and improved
   content for youth ministries. While there are no direct benefits for participants, I hope
   they will be encouraged by the experience of sharing their experiences with an eager
   listener and learner.
3) The research process will include seven individuals, with interviews recorded and
   made into a transcript.
4) Participants in this research will fill out an informed consent form, a brief
   questionnaire to confirm their suitability for the study, and subsequently participate in
   a 90-minute interview if chosen. Total participation time should be no more than two
   hours.

5) Potential discomforts or stresses: the participant may recall some difficult experiences from their upbringing.

6) Potential risks: Minimal. Participants are asked to reveal personal information regarding individual viewpoints, background, experiences, behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs. People are selected to participate based upon particularly unique characteristics (e.g., they all hold the same position in an organization; they have similar training; or, they come from a similar background), or extraordinary life experience. Topics or questions raised are probably politically, emotionally, culturally, spiritually, or psychologically sensitive and participants are required to reflect upon their own behavior, values, relationships, or person in such a way that one might be influenced or affected, and/or anxiety or concern might be raised regarding the subject matter of the inquiry. Participants may have regrets, concerns, afterthoughts, or reactions to the interview, or may become tired, weakened, or be mentally or physically impacted in any way from the research interview. The research may inconvenience participants by causing a delay or intrusion into their activities and/or may take more than 20 minutes of the participants' time.

7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.

8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.

9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

_____
Printed Name and Signature of Researcher   Date

_____
Printed Name and Signature of Participant   Date
Please sign both copies. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The

open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to build upon participant

responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly.[186] Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.[187]

The researcher interviewed seven individuals for 90 minutes each. Prior to the interviews, the researcher field-tested the interview questions to refine the interview protocol and determine the usefulness of specific questions in providing the data relevant to the research questions. To accommodate participant schedules, some interviews were conducted via secure virtual conference internet platform and were recorded for scripting. In person interviews were audio recorded only. By conducting two interviews in a week, the researcher completed the data gathering in the course of four weeks. Directly after

---

[186] Merriam and Tisdell, 110.

[187] Merriam and Tisdell, 210.

each interview, the researcher reviewed the manuscript, wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time.

The interview protocol contained the following questions:

1. Tell me about what social pressures concerning sexual behavior you experienced as an undergraduate student.

2. What role did your parents instruction have in navigating these challenges?

3. How did your church equip you to hold biblical sexual ethics?

4. How did your household equip you to hold biblical sexual ethics?

Data Analysis

As soon as possible and always within one week of each meeting, the researcher personally transcribed each interview by using computer software to play back the digital recording on a computer and typing out each transcript. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.[188]

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed. The data was searched for common themes and ideas, and congruence or discrepancy between the different participants.

---

[188] Merriam and Tisdell, 202.

Researcher Position

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary data collection and analysis instrument. Because of this, the researcher's own position and reflexivity can affect the validity and reliability of the results. Critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding worldview, assumptions and biases is necessary.[189] This researcher understood the data and participants' experiences from a Christian perspective.

The researcher is a reformed, confessional, evangelical Christian. He believes that the Bible in its original recording is the inspired, inerrant word of God. He also believes that the Bible is clear in its essential message: that God is the creator and rightful ruler of all things, that because of sin humanity is in a state of rebellion against God, and that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, sinful humans can be rescued from sin and restored to God.

The researcher grew up in a home with Christian parents who significantly shaped his view of the world. He was not born in the United States, but first experienced American residential university culture as an international undergraduate student. He is currently an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) who works full time as a campus missionary to college young adults at public state universities. His immediacy of connection with the university culture and Christian biblical ethics provides him a sense of urgency and vested interest in the research, with an insider's understanding of the data. Many of his experiences will also benefit the quality of research due to his expertise and personal observations over twenty years of campus

---

[189] Merriam and Tisdell, 259.

ministry. His experiences will inform the types of questions asked and assumptions avoided.

Being embedded in a particular context can certainly promote bias. The researcher exercised self-awareness to prevent overlaying his own experiences onto the interview data. Distortions of interpretation have been mitigated by comparative analysis, and by standardizing initial questions that allow subjects to freely answer with neutral prompts. In addition, the researcher's ethical framework requires him to capture and report on findings with integrity.

Study Limitations

Interviewing young adults will inevitably bring about varied and nuanced responses that are informed by several experiences and by the level of trust they have with the researcher. These features will benefit the study, but also limit the findings of the study.

Certain social dynamics that lie beyond the scope of this study could prove to be a blind spot in the data, since subjects may function within a framework of what they perceive to be acceptable responses within cultural biases in their recollection. The health of a subject's current church or family system at the time of data collection may also impact the participants answers. Due to limited resources, this study is also limited in scope to subjects' experiences at a sampling of residential universities. Because of this, the research does not draw from the experiences of other contexts and cultures. The researcher also noted that those interviewed were primarily of majority culture.

Some of the findings of this study may be generalized to other similar situations involving mentoring, parenting, or pastoring youth and young adults. Readers who desire

to generalize some of the aspects of these conclusions should test those aspects in their particular contexts. The data is descriptive of subjects' real experiences, but not prescriptive or transferrable to all situations. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how Christian young adult university students experienced spiritual formation while living at home that helped them to uphold biblical sexual ethics while living at residential universities. The participants were chosen because of their first-hand experiences as undergraduate students and their personal upbringing that was formative to their personal ethics at residential universities. Participants fulfilled the age and positive self-report criteria. This chapter provides the findings of the eight interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions.

To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. Tell me about what social pressures concerning sexual behavior you experienced as an undergraduate student.

2. What role did your parents instruction have in navigating these challenges?

3. How did your church equip you to hold biblical sexual ethics?

4. How did your household equip you to hold biblical sexual ethics?

Introductions to Participants and Context

The researcher selected eight individuals between the ages of 23 and 26 to participate in this study. These individuals self-reported that they experienced spiritual formation at home that helped them to uphold a biblical sexual ethic while they were away at a residential university. Participants self-disclosed that they consistently upheld a

biblical sexual ethic during their time as undergraduate students and were currently active followers of Christ and members in good standing of an evangelical church. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect identity.

In her mid-twenties, Alice is the daughter of parents who serve in full time Christian ministry. She is the third of four children and reported very positive experiences growing up in her ministry focused home. Alice is fairly established in her career and got married shortly after her graduation from a smaller undergraduate university. She has always had a reputation for excelling academically and socially.

Benjamin, 23, is a recent college graduate who is newly married and exploring a career in missions. He attended a medium-sized residential state university not far from his home. Ben reported a very positive experience with his church upbringing and his parents. He was notably a part of the same congregation throughout his childhood, teenage years, and time in college. Ben deliberately made a point of ongoing involvement at his home church while he was living at college.

Liam is established in his life and career and is in his in his mid-twenties. The oldest of three siblings (and the oldest participant in the study), he had very high praise for his experience with his parents. Liam went out of state and a great distance from his home to attend college, where he studied engineering at a prestigious state university. His father serves as an elder at his church, and his parents support several ministries as lay leaders. Liam's parents deliberately sought to keep him in the public school system for his high school education.

Nathan has just begun his first job after graduating from a large residential state university. The second of three children, Nathan moved out to attend college but

subsequently returned home to live with his parents. Not only was he home-schooled but Nathan has also been a part of the same church for his entire life and reported a positive experience with his family. Despite needing to drive a long way to his workplace, Nathan chose to move back home to be active in his church where his father serves as an elder.

Ken, 23 is engaged to be married. He is fund-raising for a local Christian ministry after graduating from a small residential university that has a reputation for being more conservative than most. Ken is a middle-child living on his own a great distance from his hometown. He reported positive experiences with his family upbringing and church.

Hannah is in her early twenties and recently decided to pursue a job with a non-profit Christian ministry. Prior to this she attended a prestigious college where she studied engineering. Hannah reported positive experiences with her parents and is the youngest child in her family of origin.

Angela is in her mid-twenties and more established in her career. She is unmarried and deeply invested in her work of campus ministry. Angela has a reputation for effectively befriending and mentoring other young women. She is the oldest child in her family of origin and reported very positive experiences with her church and upbringing.

Holly is in her mid-twenties and is working as a barista. She is a middle-child and was home-schooled before her enrollment and subsequent graduation from a local state university. Holly reported very formative experiences with her family and her particularly close relationship with her mom.

Social Pressures

The first research question sought to understand what social pressures Christian college students experience and describe to be challenging during their time away from home at undergraduate universities. To facilitate the conversation a variety of questions were asked, including:

    i.   Tell me a story about a time when you felt pressure to act contrary to your biblical sexual ethic.

    ii.   What helped you navigate these challenges?

    iii.   What are some reasons you chose to uphold a biblical sexual ethic?

Expectations For Behavior

In different ways the participants all expressed that there was a normalization of behavior in a university environment that was contrary to their personal ethic. Some participants were surprised, while others felt prepared for encountering this culture away from home. All participants agreed that social pressure exists in the form of explicit and implicit expectations. Benjamin summarized this culture when he described, "A normalization of an un-biblical ethic… It was expected and it was assumed… so to even hint at or say in a small way that it wasn't something I was interested in was like saying that I had three heads." Angela agreed when she shared that these expectations existed in the classroom as well. She reflected, "Even in my classes students and professors would talk about hooking up with people." While some participants did not experience the same levels of challenge to their sexual ethic, all agreed that a culture of varied expectations causes an implicit challenge. Participants shared those challenges to their biblical sexual ethic came in several forms.

Humor

One avenue of social pressure was that sexualized humor was expected and even praised. Several participants reflected that it was a challenge to interact with what their peers found humorous. Ken described what he called a "sexualized kind of humor" that pervaded his men's dorm. He recalled, "There was this joke… that the guys would all take their pants off [at a certain time] because the girls were not around anymore. Because it was funny, some guys would take it to the next level of no underwear or what they called progressive showering together." This was a real challenge, because in Ken's experience, humor made this "mild homoeroticism" acceptable to his peers. Ben likewise shared how his university's student activities board employed humor. He recalled, "They spent thousands of dollars to give away funny items every year in what I think was called sexy bingo." In many ways humor was experienced as a gateway for further social pressure contrary to the biblical sexual ethic. Participants reported that to reject something humorous was to go against cultural norms.

Experimentation

Another form of behavioral expectation reported by participants is that of sexual experimentation and exploration. Alice recounted a time when she was helping a fellow student in her class who was struggling with calculus. She shared, "We did homework in the common room or my room, and one of the times when my roommate wasn't there, he tried to kiss me. I said no, but he did this several different times." Alice did not think she was at all flirtatious, but that there was an assumption that everyone is open to experimentation. She lamented that her friendly personality and genuine desire to help others was often interpreted this way. Hannah shared a variation of this when she

77

recalled, "There was this guy who was interested in me. We were in a computer lab and so we were sitting right next to each other. No one else was there. He just started touching me in ways that he shouldn't have." Hannah rejected these advances but attributed this inappropriate behavior to an unspoken belief that women are eager to experiment with men who initiate. Ben summarized this well when he said, "In almost any social setting, if an advance is made, it's almost an assumption that it will go somewhere." Participants described this assumption as "chemistry", or that young adults will "go with the flow" and that "one thing will lead to another." Casual sexual encounters in campus culture were therefore remembered to be not only permissible, but also normalized.

Interviewees also reflected on "party culture", which most agreed had its own code of ethics. Alice said that her group of friends would all discuss together what level of experimentation they were each comfortable with before going to parties. She recalled that the reason for this was because so much happened at parties that was automatic and unspoken. She shared, "If a guy comes up to you at a party you are supposed to welcome it, because it means he thinks you're pretty. Next you will end up dancing together, just the two of you. After that kissing, and then going back to his place." Liam similarly described college parties as a form of "promiscuous advertising." For him there was a real challenge of, "Wanting to fit in, wanting to be understood and considered part of a group." For several others, being part of a group would mean embracing sexual experimentation as good.

Overt Challenge

At times interviewees expressed the social pressure of others seeking to directly defy and erode their biblical sexual ethic. Hannah said on one occasion her professor sought to challenge the class by, "Showing a pretty pornographic video that we had to watch." She shared that there was resistance from the professor when she explained her values and discomfort with the video. Hannah further explained that her friends would challenge her values by telling her to "try things out." She said one of her close friends asked, "What's the worst that can happen?" and encouraged her to change her mind about a young man who expressed interest in her. In this way, Hannah experienced pressure not only in the form of sexual advances, but also objection to her ethical reasoning.

Nathan's experience builds on this theme further. He shared, "I had one instance where [someone] heard I was a Christian and a virgin and she took that as a challenge to take that away from me." Nathan remembered feeling on one hand like his worldview was being attacked, but on the other hand flattered and seduced. He said, "She was asking about my ethics… then suddenly asked if I wanted to go back to her room to talk about it more privately… It was pressure to make me rethink my whole way of living."

Transactional

Another prevalent theme among participants is that there can be an expectation for sexual reciprocity as an extension of kindness. This was expressed by Liam who spoke of several "virtual situations" and pressures to reciprocate via social media. Benjamin's experience was similar when he said he would receive digital pictures from women that he knew. Both men said they felt an expectation to respond in kind to such vulnerable and flattering initiative.

Liam recounted a story of trying to help a slightly intoxicated woman who had come to talk with him seeking help. He said, "She had just gone through a breakup with her boyfriend. She started opening up to me… I got the sense here was pressure being put on me." For Liam, this woman's sadness was a bid for intimacy from him. He not only faced personal temptation but felt pressure to act in kindness and meet the "needs" of a hurting person who had come to him.

Alice offered a correlating experience when she said a friend once approached her at a party to dance. She explained, "I felt pressure to say yes because we had been talking. I really didn't want to, but I thought he would be mad." Because Alice had several prior interactions which were warm and even enjoyable, she felt an expectation from him for something in return. An invisible transaction was at play for Alice in what she called a "situationship." Female participants particularly expressed a desire to not hurt someone's feelings if they perceived social expectations. For many, not reciprocating intimacy was seen as going against the social norm of kindness.

Reflex Value Judgments

One theme common to nearly all participants for navigating the challenges of social pressure is that of split-second decision making. As a part of not allowing themselves to compromise on their biblical sexual ethic, interviewees shared in various ways that they were able to respond in difficult situations without much conscious thought. For many, their biblical ethic was not only a set of personal convictions, but also a pattern of reflex actions. These in-the-moment responses to social pressures were expressed in various way.

God's Presence

One theme to participants responses was that many expressed an awareness of God's presence that informed their decision making. Angela expressed this well when she said, "I was aware of my need for wisdom in the moment… I think the Holy Spirit gave me wisdom." When asked to further describe what this looked like, she explained, "The Holy Spirit brought Scripture to mind. In the moment I was aware I was being helped even though I panicked at first." Liam shared a similar experience when he explained, "I think having Scripture, the law of the Lord written on my heart. In the moment I really believed God. I thought of verses like 'The Lord will not leave or forsake you' and He 'will uphold you with my righteous right hand'… It wasn't about my parents; it was about my integrity with the Lord." Both Liam and Angela not only demonstrated a high view of what they believed God said, but also an awareness of God himself being with them.

In a similar way Ken shared that he had, "A high view of Scripture" which gave him "more confidence" than the persons putting pressure on him. He further explained, "I had an authority on which to base my moral decisions." Nathan also spoke of, "Discernment from the Holy Spirit to connect the dots to the Bible." He explained that this meant he was helped in the moment to live out the Bible's teaching. In these ways, interviewees expressed that they imagined God to be in the room with them. They believed they were not alone even in their most private moments.

Fear

Several participants also explained that they navigated challenges with a fear response that helped them to avoid difficult situations altogether. Hannah said she

experienced a "flight reflex" when her biblical sexual ethic was challenged. She explained, "One thing that helped me was just fear. I knew it was uncomfortable… So, a fear response helped me say no." Hannah went on to explain her belief that little compromises could easily, "lead to something worse". Alice shared a similar experience when she said, "One reason I didn't go after boys is fear. There was always an aspect of fear pertaining to [romantic] relationships." Holly said she had "very little taste" for many of the social pressures in college that seemed "weird." She elaborated, "Being homeschooled many of the temptations of college were so unheard of that I didn't want them… I wouldn't know what to do in those situations. I think it was a fear-based response." It is notable that participants did not usually reflect on this flight reflex as negative but usually expressed various degrees of thankfulness for having this instinct.

Liam expressed grief about people who have "walked away from the faith" because they are "deep in relationships that do not honor God." He went on to share about a time when this fear caused him to reflexively flee a situation where he felt pressure to act against his biblical sexual ethic. After sharing about the advances of a woman that he was alone with, Liam said, "I've never left somewhere so quickly. There was a real fear there that I felt. I think it was a biblical fear." Liam articulated the sense shared by many other interviewees that they were glad to be fearful of sin.

Beauty and Disgust

In terms of reasons to uphold a biblical sexual ethic, participants often spoke about discerning beauty and knowing what they wanted. Alice explained this bluntly when she said, "I didn't give into social pressure because I knew this was not what I was looking for. I did not want to be with someone who was not a Christian." Alice said she

saw hookup culture as unappealing compared to the "beauty of biblical marriage." She also commented, "The way biblical marriage was depicted caused me to long for that. I had desires for that kind of marriage. I knew I was not going to find that in a random guy." A pattern in the interviews emerged around the goodness of the Christian ethic.

Nathan aligned with this when he said, "I think that a lot of sexual sin is because of a void in someone's life." He explained that an element of disgust contributed to his reflex in the moment and that his desire was to act out of his "real identity." He said he was very motivated, "To know my value and what God thinks of me. We are new creations… like we are citizens of heaven." For Nathan, the biblical ethic was a compelling picture of flourishing. Ben also said that he was most helped by "A positive vision of what I'm pursuing." He shared Nathan's opinion when he imagined a "godly sexuality" that he described as "really, really good." Sexual experimentation in college seemed almost non-sensical to Ben because of this positive vision. He explained, "If you're going to spend all that effort, pursue the good one." It was notable how many participants identified this theme of beauty as significant in their decision making.

Summary of Social Pressures

Social pressures came in the form of various expectations that included humor, experimentation, transactional behavior, and overt challenge. These categories represented the primary avenues through which Christian young adults experienced the greatest challenges to their biblical sexual ethic as undergraduate students. In addition, various reflex value judgments were reported to be how these challenges were navigated. An awareness of God's presence, fear, disgust, and a developed sense of beauty were all elements of how Christian conviction was expressed in the moment.

Parents and Instruction

The second broad research question sought to understand what role participants' parents played in helping them to navigate social pressures and challenges during their time away from home at undergraduate universities. To facilitate the conversation a variety of questions were asked, including:

i.   How did your parents approach conversations about God and sexuality?

ii.   What was your parents' philosophy of parenting?

iii.   Describe how you remember being instructed in matters of biblical ethics.

Intentional Conversations

In various ways, participants all expressed high degrees of respect and thankfulness for their families of origin and the spiritual formation they experienced at home during their teenage years. All participants agreed that their parents sought to deliberately shape their worldview and teach them about biblical sexual ethics. Nathan described his experience growing up as being "thoroughly instructed" in many things. In various ways interviewees reflected on certain aspects of how their parents approached purposeful conversations.

Explicit

Ken remembered that "There was a lot of intentionality in very explicitly raising us as Christians." He shared the memory of his father not only having conversations with him, but also reading books with him to explain biblical sexuality. Alice offered a similar story when she explained, "My mom wanted to have open and honest dialog with me about every aspect of life including sexuality." She commented that these conversations

were "very awkward" at the time but foundational to her worldview. Nathan said that his father took a proactive role in his life and "Gave good instruction… he even warned me of the dangers of sexual sin early on." Angela likewise said that her parents, "Viewed Scripture as authority. So, they told us about marriage and that it was between a man and a woman. They told my brother and I to hold firm to what the Scripture says about everything." This authoritative regard for the bible and a serious desire to teach it was detectable in every participant's memory of their parents.

Ongoing

It was notable that many interviewees affirmed and were thankful for the intentional instruction from their parents, but many could not identify any singular conversation that was effective. Angela said she was taught many things, but that these teaching moments were just a regular part of life. Holly also described her relationship with her mom as one where they, "could talk about anything." Alice said her mom would have "honest dialogues" with her when they were alone together in the car. She reflected that this context not only provided regular opportunities but reduced the awkwardness for her because of "close proximity without eye contact."

Nathan offered a parallel experience when he reflected on the nature of intentional conversations with his parents. He said, "It was throughout my whole life. It was not just one talk that became a taboo topic that we [afterwards] couldn't discuss." Among all participants, Nathan specially emphasized how important it was that guidance from his parents was ongoing. He explained, "I think sexual sin is an isolating sort of sin." He said he was most thankful for his parents, "Breaking the taboo and talking about it; and not just talking about it once." Liam similarly called these sorts of topics, "Lifelong

85

conversations" and Ben said, "Everything was on the table for discussion." In this way all participants agreed that they remembered their parents initiating conversations about sensitive subjects, but that the formative effect on them was gradual and cumulative.

Individual

Another concept that emerged was that participants remembered that their parents cultivated meaningful relationships with them. Both Alice and Hannah shared that their parents related to them as individuals and not just as "the kids". Hannah said this regular on-on-one time was a part of her parents' philosophy of parenting since she was the youngest in her home. She reflected, "Growing up they took us on special times with them. Even though I had siblings, I remember feeling very cherished individually." Liam also spoke often of "quality time" and "high trust" being elements of his upbringing. Angela specially remembered that her mom would sit down with her across the dinner table and that she, "Listened really well. She would ask questions. There was this freedom to dialog that was welcomed. We would talk about our days. We would talk about what went well at school." Angela remembered this individual attention being so formative that, "To this day it's very weird for me to be at a table and not talk with someone." In similar ways other participants remembered that their conversations were facilitated by a bond that was deliberately nurtured. This nurturing attention was hardly ever spoken of as elaborate, but rather happened in the ordinary rhythms of daily life.

Interpretive

As interviewees reflected on their parents' intentionality, there was broad agreement that these conversations sought to help them to make sense of the world. There

were a variety of parental approaches to this, but participants remember being helped to interpret people and events around them. Liam's words reflect this well when he said, "There was a deep trust because my dad wanted to understand me and help me understand me. My dad was helping me explore my heart. He asked questions and slowly drew things out of me." Liam consistently shared his appreciation for the interpretive counsel of his parents for the world around him. Correlating with this, Holly said she would come home and ask her mom to interpret what the other athletes on her sports team had discussed that day.

Hannah said that she was helped by her parents even when watching movies. She said, "I learned from their comments and their reactions… I could see their live processing of events as they would unfold." In a parallel experience, Ben shared that some of his most formative childhood instruction came from his parents helping him to understand what he had learned at a summer camp. For Ben, coming back home and processing the teaching and relational interactions with his parents was what helped to solidify beliefs in his own mind.

Adaptive

Participants experienced parenting in their teenage years that was informed by biblical principles but also that was flexible and aware of the needs of their moment. The group spoke of various ways in which their parents changed their strategy to accommodate different circumstances or even different siblings in the family.

Principled but Conversant

Hannah said she was explicitly taught from a young age that, "People who followed the Lord, it [generally] went well for them." She said that her parents used appropriate consequences to teach her that boundaries were a blessing. Hannah reflected often that her parents had flexibility in their methods because her siblings had different needs and even different rules.

Liam also captured this well when he said, "I look back at my childhood and I think of my parents' philosophy… it wasn't about the to-dos. In our household, understanding the 'why' behind every 'what' was so critical for us." Liam explained that he experienced his parents as being "unhurried" in explaining things. They sought to have meaningful conversations even if it meant arriving late to various places at times. Alice likewise shared that in her home obedience was required, but that she could always make "an appeal." In this way participants reflected that their parents maintained robust principles yet adapted to various needs and situations. Parents did not enforce rules as an end, but welcomed changes if it provided an opportunity to access the heart.

Entrusting

Another theme among the group was that they experienced a degree of trust from their parents that helped them uphold biblical ethics. Nathan said, "If you view your parents as the enemy and you don't trust them, then that isolates you even more. My parents did a good job demonstrating [eventually] that they trusted me too." Nathan thoughtfully described a parental relationship of trust in both directions. While he could not say exactly how this balance was achieved, he praised his parents' ability to not only give "firm direction" but also "give up control" commensurate with what he could

handle. This dynamic of trust and adaptability was described by Hannah as well. She said:

> I think in some households it seems as though people grow up and they have to do things a certain way. Because there is no wiggle room [in their upbringing] college is a time to finally make their own choices. My parents disciplined me, and sin was bad, but you know I felt freedom to make mistakes. As I showed that I was trustworthy I got more freedom. So, when I came to college, I never felt like I was finally free. I was already free.

It was particularly striking how participants spoke of this balance in their parents' philosophy. While many described having strict rules, and a fear of sin and consequences, these same participants said they experienced freedom under their parents' leadership.

Issues as Opportunities

Another observation from interviewees was how was their parents adapted when they learned of their children's struggles or bad decisions. Despite being "instructed thoroughly", Nathan said that his parents discovered his use of pornography as a teenager. Recalling how his parents responded to this disappointment he said, "They both got involved as my unofficial accountability partners." Despite feeling awkward, Nathan felt that his parents were able to adapt with poise. He elaborated, "As a young boy, both parents kind of corrected me and told me why it was wrong… I still talk about it with them today as a testimony rather than a struggle." Liam shared a very similar experience when he said, "My parents found out that I had stumbled on to pornography." He went on to explain that his parents saw it as an opportunity for him to connect his lifestyle to his faith for himself. Liam said that he was impacted both by what his father did and chose not to do. He shared, "He did not simply rattle off all the scripture that he could have. He asked a lot of questions. He was trying to get to know what was going on in his son's

89

heart. He drew things out of me and then explained what the Bible said." For Liam and many others, every issue seemed to become an opportunity for biblical application.

Alice also said that one of her most formative experiences during her teenage years was due to her parents adapting to her unwise decisions. Alice remembered that when she began a romantic relationship in high school, her parents, "didn't love the idea." She added, "They didn't want me in that relationship." Despite her parents' concerns, Alice remembered that they honored her decision and adapted their parenting strategy. She said, "My dad got to know him and even read a book with him. I remember wanting to feel anger, but I felt thankful that I had a dad who wanted to take the time to do that with me and my boyfriend." It was significant for Alice that she had an opportunity to learn to apply biblical truths for herself. She said, "something happened subconsciously" and spoke of this "failed relationship" in high school as the turning point where she not only trusted her parents more, but also became convinced herself that a "biblical marriage" was what she wanted.

Exemplary Actions

Another concept that repeatedly came up was how often participants said that their parents diligently sought to practice their own Christian faith. Common to the group was high admiration for parents modeling the gospel in weakness rather than appearing as if they had no need for growth themselves. Parents lived out an "authentic faith" and recognized when they failed to do so.

Marriage priority

Various interviewees commented that critical to their own spiritual formation was that their parents modeled their faith by prioritizing their marriage. Participants said in various ways that their parents' marriage fueled their own desires to uphold biblical sexual ethics. Hannah remembered her parents being affectionate and deliberately making time for one another and "speaking highly of each other". Alice reflected on her family by saying, "I've literally never heard my mom badmouth my dad to anyone. I knew I had it better than most kids as I saw their parents hardly show affection."

In a related way Ken shared, "Growing up I remember that my dad would, very frequently and loudly say to my mom, 'have I told you lately that I love you?' Sometimes it would be four or five times [per day] he would do this." When asked why this was so formative for him Ken said, "Because I want to do that someday with my wife and kids. It's beautiful to demonstrate that I love you and I'm going to protect and provide for you." Spouses prioritizing one another was a way in which the biblical ethic was reported to be beautified to participants.

Attainable Personal Holiness

Another common report was that parents demonstrated personal commitment to grow in their faith in a way that seemed attainable. Ben said, "What I saw my parents do well was live out simple, steady faithfulness. I saw them pursuing Christ themselves and pursuing holiness." When asked how that related to his own spiritual formation, Ben replied, "Seeing that positive model helped me see that, by God's grace, the ability really does exist to do the hard thing and obey God and stay faithful." Others similarly shared that their parents made holiness seem attractive by their lifestyle.

Angela said that her father's personal spiritual discipline of reading the bible shaped her tremendously. She said, "Dad woke up earlier than I did and read his bible before work at the dining table. He would leave for work, and that bible would sometimes sit there open all day. When he would come home, it was only natural to ask what he had been reading." Angela added, "I don't remember my parents telling me to have a high view of Scripture. I remember that the Scripture directed their lives."

Weakness and Repentance

Another concept in the group was how repentance and humility were tools for effective parenting. Alice appreciated her parents "openness and honesty." She said, "Seeing my parents own their own sin. That was crucial for me. They really modeled asking for forgiveness." Similarly, Liam felt that his parents' sincere apologies were very formative for him. He shared about this humble approach recalling a time when he had sinned against his mom, and she had subsequently responded to him in anger. Liam said, "She came back to me and asked, 'who is responsible for mommy's sin?' To my surprise she told me that she was! She said 'I'm a sinner too and I sinned against you. Please forgive me'." In this way Liam appreciated that he saw application of all the scripture that his parents were themselves teaching.

In addition to modeling repentance, Ken expressed that his parents instructed him out of their own weakness. He commented that he always knew that they were also growing alongside him. Ken said, "My dad was a big James Bond fan. He told me about how these films approached sexuality. He told me how he himself fought temptations brought on by these movies. He trained his mind day to day." Ken remembered these conversations later in life during moments of temptation. He reasoned that his dad's

struggle with lust meant that he too could uphold biblical sexual ethics when he was challenged.

Summary of Parents and Instruction

Parenting practices that were most formative featured a both-and approach of being intentional yet adaptive. Intentional parenting did not shy away from thorough instruction and was reported to be explicit, ongoing, individual, and interpretive. Adaptive parenting however was principled, conversant, entrusting and saw issues in children as opportunities for growth. In addition to this, parental instruction was undergirded by parental example. An authentic spiritual life in parents was critical for teenagers to recognize the value of a biblical worldview. Exemplary actions included parents who prioritized their marriage, demonstrated personal holiness, and led in weakness and repentance.

Church Experience

The third research question sought to understand how participants' church equipped them to hold biblical sexual ethics. To facilitate the conversation a variety of questions were asked, including:

i. Tell me about your involvement at your church.

ii. How do you remember biblical sexual ethics being discussed at your church?

iii. What was your church's approach to shepherding its youth?

Explicit

In many ways the group expressed thankfulness for their home churches which were, to varying degrees, significant to their spiritual formation. When describing how they were equipped by their churches, it became apparent that interviewees were active participants in their congregations. Ben commented, "I was at church as often as the doors were open." Others likewise spoke of going to church "every week" as a routine part of their identity. Their experiences are broadly categorized into explicit and implicit spiritual formation. Explicit spiritual formation through their churches was described by participants in a variety of ways.

Pulpit

One prominent theme was that the group appreciated the preaching ministry at their home churches. Ben remembered this vividly when he said, "Sitting under the preaching of the word and hearing a conviction and sexual ethic preached from the pulpit." Being from a smaller church he appreciated the boldness of his church leaders to speak about these things. In similar way, Liam shared that his church was a place where, "We would hear the scriptures preached accurately and faithfully." When asked how this affected him, he said that he always knew that when opening the Bible there would, "always be [life] applications that flowed from it." Liam said he not only went to church, but also that church "came home with him" because the sermons were regularly discussed at the Sunday lunch table.

Angela also spoke of a very intentional preaching ministry at her church. She commented:

Our pastor would preach through different books. He affirmed that we
should not bow to our culture. He affirmed that marriage was between a
man and a woman only. He explained the difference between living by
how we feel and living by who we are in Christ. I knew from his sermons
that sex was a thing to be enjoyed in the right place and right way.

It is notable that Angela remembered her church preaching exegetically yet also making

memorable applications from the text to her as a teenager. She shared much appreciation

for her pastor who sought to apply the scripture rather than air his own opinions or

frustrations.

Programs

While some participants came from smaller churches that lacked the resources to

have established programs, others very much recalled the impact of youth groups, topical

discussions and various curriculums used by their leaders for spiritual formation. Nathan

particularly spoke highly of the efforts of his church. He said:

My youth pastor had a series for the high school youth group. He designed
a program called 'men and maidens' which walked us through the
relationship between men and women. We discussed sexuality from a
biblical perspective. We went through this curriculum for a while talking
about biblical marriage. We also talked about approaching dating in a
secular way verses a [wise] biblical way.

Nathan appreciated that there was thought put into how to give teenagers the opportunity

to learn about these things over an extended period in a way that felt safe.

In this same category, Ken said:

We had Sunday morning Sunday School. We had Wednesday night youth
group, but we also had a special Sunday night bible study. I remember
having to do prep work for this bible study. It became a group of more
committed guys, so our youth leader said to us that that we were going to
discuss sexuality because it was important... It was in this program where
I first confessed that I was addicted to pornography.

95

For Ken, having to do assignments and preparation not only challenged him, but also caused an increased sense of ownership for him. It is also significant how Ken spoke of his longing for practical help in his struggle with pornography. He said, "I wanted to stop, but I didn't know how to stop." He added that he didn't mind doing homework for this bible study since it, "Took things from the abstract, and moved it into how to actually fight sin." Church programs that were most effective in the group carried this theme of offering community but also practical theology.

Parallel Voices

Many participants expressed that church was a place where they experienced being influenced by a chorus of positive voices. Nathan said he experienced his church to be a place where "all the voices lined up." The alignment and corporate nature of church life, he claimed, "really helped me to believe it." Liam expressed this similarly when he said, "My pastors were teaching me the very same things I heard at home."

Alice expressed that her parents not only helped her listen at church, but that the people at church helped her to listen to her parents. She explained, "People would come up to me and share with me how much they appreciated my parents. Even people from more broken homes would express that I was fortunate to have the parents that I did. They told me about the effects of a non-biblical sexual ethic." Others in the group also experienced this synergy between home and church.

Another way participants remembered sexual ethics being discussed was through various mentors. Hannah spoke of a woman at her church who, "discipled me in high school." She explained that they would regularly meet together to talk about their lives and read the bible. Not only did Hannah say that they discussed biblical sexual ethics, but

96

also that she observed this ethic in her mentor's life. Hannah continued, "She was a really great example… I even saw her say no to different guys. It was new to me to see someone who I really looked up to make hard decisions for the Lord. Her example backed up everything my parents were teaching me." It is significant that this mentor was the most influential voice for Hannah in high school.

The impact of a mentor was also described by Ben when he said, "Another guy from my church mentored me during those four years [of high school]." Not only did Ben recall discussing biblical sexual ethics, but he also remembered his behavior being directly challenged by his mentor. Ben shared, "He told me that I was being a little too flirty and showed me what I was doing… He explained the concept of caring for people around us and that being constantly flirtatious was an unwise way to act." Spiritual formation was facilitated by specific behavioral feedback and loving, practical correction. Not only did this mentor reinforce biblical teaching, but he was also able to help Ben in contexts that were inaccessible to Ben's parents.

Parachurch Ministry

Throughout the interviews, there was a sense that many participants came from churches who lacked the resources to shepherd them through every stage of life. The theme emerged that significant spiritual formation happened in robust parachurch ministries. Liam explained that he grew in discernment because of his involvement with Young Life. He said, "In this community of Christians I had a lot of deep relationships and real conversations about scripture." Liam shared that this high school ministry taught him how to do evangelism in a season where his church had no organized youth group. In a similar way Ben was grateful for the ministry of a local bible camp. He spoke highly of

this environment away from home which facilitated meaningful conversations and role models. He said, "At summer camp, I would see older men and women say no to sin. I saw others do the right thing and resist temptation. I learned that The Spirit really does give the ability for this… It was probably the most formative thing during high school."

Parachurch involvement was also significant for Angela and Holly. Angela remembered how important it was that her home church had a relationship with a campus ministry operating at the university she would soon attend. As a teenager, she expected and experienced going away to college as a "handoff" and "partnership" with this ministry. Holly went so far as to say that she "learned the gospel most clearly" in her teenage years because of her proximity to a local chapter of DiscipleMakers. She said, "I knew I was about to go off to college. But I saw the word at work in this group of Christians who went to a secular college campus. They really followed the Lord. I just remember thinking I wanted to be a part of something like that." For Holly, her church's partnership with a campus ministry brought local college students into the fellowship of the church. These students exemplified to Holly a biblical sexual ethic during her teenage years before she ever left home. Holly aptly summarized, "The party scene [in college] lost all its appeal before I even got there." This exposure to Christian college students during high school was central to her positive experience and ethical behavior in college.

Implicit

Interviewees also described a less tangible but equally significant sort of spiritual formation at work in their churches. The group expressed great appreciation for many things that they learned implicitly. They agreed that a degree of spiritual formation

occurred through what was unspoken and quietly lived out in their Christian communities.

Awe and Wonder

Several participants described an experience of respect and even astonishment over various aspects of church life. For example, Ben said he was often awestruck by "the number of healthy marriages" at his church, and how people worked toward this ethic. He also remembered, "In late high school there were older couples at the church that kind of adopted me. They took a special interest in me and took me under their wing. I don't know why, but they invited me into their lives and welcomed us into their homes." When asked why this was so formative for him, Ben continued, "Seeing the beauty of it. On one hand I was seeing how these couples lived out their lives and then [on the other hand] in public school I was able to compare that to how people interacted." Ben not only said that this aspect of church was remarkable, but he also chose words like "beauty" and "compelling" to describe it. Nathan used similar words to describe the high respect he had for many others at his church. Nathan spoke of "courageous" people and "awesome" work that happened in his community. He also admired many in his church who were suffering and reasoned that their joy had to be "supernatural."

It was also significant that Nathan was impacted by how much his church was a community of love. He said, "You know, your family has to love you. But when I came to church there were these people that didn't need to love me. They didn't need to, but they really did." Angela expressed a similar experience when she remembered people at her church. She said, "wow, they really love me" as she recalled her teenage years. This awestruck encounter represents how other interviewees reflected on their church

experience. Attendance was certainly a spiritual discipline for participants, but many

described a vibrant church life that contained the experience of being filled with wonder.

A High View of The Bible

Another concept common to the group was that their church involvement helped

them to develop deep personal convictions about the bible. Many spoke of this as

something that they saw modeled more than something taught explicitly. For example, as

Angela reflected on her church's approach to ministry she said, "You could feel that we

viewed the word as authoritative." She said that when it came to matters of the bible, she

always knew that "our pastor was really serious about this." Liam also spoke highly of

the elders in leadership of his church and said he could tell they held deep convictions

through many intangible things. He said that he knew that the bible was central in the

way that his leaders spoke and even how they carried themselves.

Ken also spoke to this theme when he repeatedly described the "high view of

scripture" that he gained through his church. He explained that the community and

structure of his church helped him to understand not only himself, but also why his

parents behaved the way that they did. Ken said, "Church gave me an authority on which

to rest my decisions. I came to see that it's not just that my parents arbitrarily raised me

this way, but that my parents raised me this way because that's what scripture says." For

Ken, scripture became a lens to view all of life, including how his parents wielded their

authority. Through his church, Ken learned that his parents were under authority as well.

This helped him to eventually realize that his childhood boundaries were as a result of his

parents trying to live consistently with the bible and what they were being taught.

Holiness Normalized

A final theme to the group's reflections on church life was that they greatly appreciated how Godly behavior was consistently lived out. Angela was very impacted watching older couples who she described as, "spiritual mothers and fathers in my church." She said that these older couples "held to their faith in Jesus even when they failed." Similarly, being homeschooled and being around others who took their faith seriously caused Holly to remember, "being cool never really had an appeal to me." One effect of church life was that participants said that they became accustomed to- even loved- the idea of being different from the world around them.

Ben's reflection particularly captured this idea when he said, "I grew up in a weird church". When asked why that was so significant for him, Ben explained:

> Being weird and swimming against the culture because of biblical beliefs was not new to me in college. I think if someone accuses you of being weird for holding biblical beliefs you're supposed to say 'yes'. When someone thought I was a little weird for my beliefs on campus, it was actually nothing compared to all that I knew about holiness and my home church.

Being set apart from the world was normal for Ben due to his upbringing. Other interviewees agreed that being different was not unexpected, and even joked that they had "made peace with being odd". Feeling excluded was never described as pleasant but it was interpreted as an experience consistent with participants' Christian faith.

Summary of The Role of Church

Church experiences that were most effective were described as both explicit and implicit forms of spiritual formation. Biblical sexual ethics were effectively and explicitly discussed in the pulpit, through various programs, parallel voices, and parachurch

ministries. A more subtle and implicit form of spiritual formation was reported due to the cumulative effect of congregational life. Indirect spiritual formation included awe and wonder, a high view of the bible and a normalization of holiness.

Household Dynamics

The final research question sought to understand how participants' household dynamics equipped them to uphold biblical sexual ethics and subsequently navigate social pressures when away from home. To facilitate the conversation a variety of questions were asked, including:

    i.   Describe the spiritual routines of your household.

    ii.   Tell me about the experience and priorities of your family growing up.

    iii.   What were some of your most formative spiritual experiences?

Inward Facing

In various ways participants expressed praise for the dynamics of their household that played a role in their spiritual formation. In describing how they were equipped at home, it became apparent that interviewees were shaped by far more than their parents' instruction, but also an entire system and way of life around them. The dynamics and routines of their homes are broadly categorized into inward facing and outward facing elements. Inward facing priorities were in themselves described by the group in various ways.

Safety and Grace

Many of the interviewees explained that their households were communities of safety. Liam repeatedly said in his interview, "my parents were so gracious and patient with me." He not only spoke of God's grace as a "superpower" but also noted that the concept of grace seemed to feature in the rationale for almost everything. Liam offered the example of a time when he was angry with one of his siblings. The foundation for healthy relationships, according to Liam, was that "The Lord has shown undeserved patience to us… the call is to have patience and show grace to them too." This commitment to patience was a priority for many growing up.

Alice described this dynamic as well when she said, "Growing up you were never in such deep trouble that you couldn't ask for forgiveness. We had a sense of being big sinners, but we could always ask for forgiveness from the person and from the Lord." For Alice, this ability to seek forgiveness meant that she always enjoyed security. On one hand she knew that she made mistakes often. On the other hand, these mistakes never disqualified her from intimacy with her family. Ken likewise asserted that, "I always knew that my parents loved me." Other participants described that their standing in the family did not depend on their moral or academic performance. This culture of safety was reported to be a crucial ingredient for the group to absorb parental instruction.

Calm Leadership

Participants all agreed that they experienced a clear sense of being under their parents' authority in their home. It was notable however that there was a theme of calm leadership accompanying parental authority. Liam said that while there was certainly

anxiety in his home, "I never felt like the sky was falling." He explained that his parents were never really "panic people" or "parents who freaked out".

Angela's experience also supported this theme. She said, "I remember when my brother and I were growing up we would have fights. In the intensity of our argument my mom would just start singing. She memorized the words of 1 John chapter 4, and she had a whole song." Angela emphasized how much she both "hated" and "loved" her mom's singing. She found it "annoying" that her mom refused to fuel her anger in the heat of the moment. On the other hand, Angela deeply admired her mom's ability to calmly de-escalate tension and even use scripture. She said this pattern was "Impactful… and I'm so thankful for it." For Angela, spiritual formation occurred not only in the content of what her mom said, but also in the surprise of a parent refusing to inject anxiety into the situation. Leadership was instead demonstrated in the form of calm correctives.

The group also spoke of discipline being a prominent feature of their homes. It is significant however that participants remember that discipline itself was usually conducted in a calm and loving way. Liam recalled times when his parents gave him "Stern and direct correction." He went on to explain that his parents tried their best to do this in a certain way. According to Liam his parents would say to him, "The Lord has called me to discipline you. And it's because I love you. I don't enjoy giving you this [consequence], but I have to discipline you and I know it's for your good." In this way the calm exercise of authority was a priority for families.

Scripture and Identity

Another theme to the group was that participants' families sought to have a routine of scripture reading, prayer and worship together. Nathan vividly remembered his

father coming back from work and doing family devotions, "even though he was tired".

In addition to this, his parents had a spiritual routine of, "praying with us kids before we

went to bed." These prayers were not merely a ritual, nor were they described as a

response to things that were wrong. For Nathan, prayer with his parents was a substantive

reflection on the day and a proactive means to talk to God. Talking to God was

commended as enjoyment of God, and recognizing His presence when life was going

well.

Hannah said that for her, "It was pretty normal to read scripture together as a

family." She described the routine of her father reading out loud to the whole family most

Sundays. She appreciated not only the spiritual truths she learned, but also that this habit

formed a deep bond between her and her parents. Hannah recalled these things as

markers that she was beloved. Bible reading, family worship and prayer became a part of

her identity as a child of God. Ben likewise said this was true of his family. He shared,

"When I got into late middle school, I remember [my parents] trying to do basic family

worship and just reading scripture together." Ben conceded that his parents were "not as

consistent" with this spiritual discipline, yet he expressed high appreciation for them. For

Ben, the efforts and intentionality of his parents were also impactful.

Sowing and Reaping

Interviewees also said that their households featured the principle of prudence –

denying short term pleasure for a reward yet to come. Liam explained that his parents

emphasized, "While all sin is equally damnable, not all sin is equally damaging." He said

that he was taught the idea that actions have consequences, and the importance of looking

ahead in life. Alice said her parents, "were wise" but also said that they made wisdom

"look beautiful." She expressed great appreciation for learning from them that problems "often happened through slippery slopes." From an early age, Alice explained, she was taught to think ahead to what sort of person she wanted to be, and what implications that would have for her life now. Nathan similarly said that he was taught that to avoid a danger in the future, it was sometimes necessary, "to do the hard thing now".

The theme of sowing and reaping was also detectable in Hannah and Ben's responses. Ben said that he would sometimes remind himself audibly, "Decisions have consequences. But remember that there is something after this. The hard thing feels like death right now but there is life in the future on the other side of this." Hannah also said her household repeated this principle. She said, "Every single time my parents would explain this concept of God's blessing…. It was in obedience. Consequences were always a way to help us get back on the path of blessing. That was something constantly said throughout our house." It was notable that for Hannah and many others, they were not only motivated by avoiding unethical behavior, but they were also motivated by the concept of reaping future joy. Denying themselves a short-term pleasure was viewed as an investment in their future.

Outward Facing

In the realm of household priorities, many interviewees explained that their families emphasized the importance of serving others. In various ways participants explained that they experienced spiritual formation due to their family's "Kingdom focus". Families balanced their inward facing objectives with outward facing aims.

Hospitality

One way that participants spoke of serving others was in the realm of hospitality. For example, Nathan said that his family, "was always hosting." He went on to explain that it was very important for his parents to have people in their home. Nathan remembered that his parents would sometimes welcome strangers, but also distinctly praised the church small group that met in his house. He explained, "I think hosting small groups with our church was big for me… having the older generation there. I was in the small group. I didn't have a choice. I was constantly surrounded by fellowship." The older generation in his small group taught Nathan not only that life was constituted in relationships, but also that relationships were to be beyond those who were like him. For Nathan, his parents' hospitality was an element in helping him reject a self-centered view of others.

Alice also remembered that during her childhood, "so many people lived at our house." She explained that her parents often opened their guest room as short-term housing for people in need. Alice continued, "Having people live with us was an opportunity for them to see us and for us to witness to them. I have memories of people telling me that our family was different." These live-in visitors she said, would become "almost part of the family." This outward focused priority helped participants form connections and learn meaningful lessons in their childhood.

Evangelism

Closely connected to hospitality is the theme of evangelism and missions. As previously explained, Alice's parents would explicitly seek to share the gospel with their house guests. Hannah also said that she respected her mom for being "so outgoing with

107

her faith. She was evangelistic in every situation." Hannah described how her mom demonstrated this evangelistic attitude, even at their annual neighborhood trick or treating. Hannah conceded that this was "embarrassing" and "hard for me as a child" yet also reflected on it as spiritually significant. For Hannah, her mom's evangelistic initiative evidenced a consistency between the inward and outward facing elements of her home.

Liam similarly said that one of his most formative experiences was reaching out to his high school friends. He did not naturally want to do this but was encouraged and taught to do so by his dad. Liam mentioned that their home was sometimes a gathering place for his friends, but more emphasized that his parents "partnered with a local high school outreach to share Christ." Liam got emotional as he shared about one of his friends who became a Christian because of his dad teaching him how to share the gospel. For Liam, spiritual formation was experienced as emulating not only his father's character but also his aim in life to make disciples of Jesus.

Service

A final category that emerged within the group was that households prioritized the value of giving to others. This theme took on many forms, but it was noticeable how much participants said they learned the value of investing in others and loving people through their families. Angela for example, said that while her parents did not have a lot of money, they still gave to their church, explained giving to her, and encouraged her to do the same. Ben said that his parents taught him to talk with others at church, even if he did not know them well.

Nathan appreciated that his parents prioritized and even helped to fund a short-term mission trip that he went on. This he explained helped him to learn that God's Kingdom was bigger than his own concerns. Ken said that while service trips were beyond his shy personality, his parents still made him speak to strangers, looking them in the eyes because "people are important."

Summary of The Role of Household Dynamics

The dynamics, priorities and routines of participants' households were experienced to be significant factors in spiritual formation. Best practices broadly maintained a balance between inward facing elements and outward facing ones. Inward household priorities included a community of safety and grace, calm leadership, scripture reading, prayer and the principle of sowing and reaping. Outward household priorities included hospitality, evangelism, and service to others.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined the various ways that young adults experienced social pressure while living away from home at undergraduate universities, but also how they experienced spiritual formation during their teenage years that most helped them to uphold biblical ethics in college. College students experienced a culture of expectation at residential universities that include experimentation, humor, overt challenges, and transactional behavior. Effective strategies to combat these social pressures were reported to be a variety of reflex value judgments. Participants reported to have resisted these pressures due to an awareness of God's presence, feeling fear, and a developed sense of

beauty and disgust. In addition to this, this chapter explored aspects of parenting, church life and household dynamics helped to form these reflex value judgments in young adult participants. Effective parenting held a balance of intentionality and adaptability. Parents sought to shape their children explicitly and individually in an ongoing manner. The focus of this intentional parenting was helping children interpret the world and their own hearts, while parents also lived out in humility the very message that they taught. Adaptable parenting was conversant, built trust, and saw problems as opportunities for bonding and growth. Among the strengths of church life, participants reflected several explicit elements like the preaching, programs, and other voices like para-church ministries. These voices explicitly helped them understand biblical sexual ethics. Implicit elements of church life included experiencing awe and wonder, a high view of the bible and a normalization of holiness. Best practices for spiritual formation in households included an environment of safety and grace, calm leadership, scripture, and the principle of sowing and reaping. In balance with this, the outward facing practices of hospitality, evangelism and serving others taught participants that they were a part of God's broader Kingdom purpose.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to understand how Christian young adult university students experienced spiritual formation while living at home that helped them to uphold biblical sexual ethics while living at residential universities. In chapter two, the literature review looked at modern commentary on 1 Corinthians 6, the morality and sexual ethic of the Roman Empire and Systems Theory related to parenting. These topics were explored alongside understanding young adult students who not only navigated social pressures of college, but also encouraged their peers toward a biblical worldview. To understand what past experiences were most formative in the establishment of a functioning sexual ethic, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. Tell me about what social pressures concerning sexual behavior you experienced as an undergraduate student.

2. What role did your parents instruction have in navigating these challenges?

3. How did your church equip you to hold biblical sexual ethics?

4. How did your household equip you to hold biblical sexual ethics?

In this chapter, the literature review of chapter two will be brought together with the findings of chapter four and summarized. Finally, the findings will be analyzed, and recommendations related to application and further research will be given.

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and then analyzed data from eight young adults who upheld biblical sexual ethics during their time away from home at residential universities.

The literature review shows that there is division in scholarship regarding the aim of 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. The Apostle Paul is concerned with matters of sexuality in a Greco-Roman context and offers two clear imperatives: for Christians to flee sexual immorality, and to glorify God with their bodies. This key text on biblical sexual ethics carries such variety in scholarship that there is a probable lack of clarity in instruction and application of these matters to modern audiences. The Greco-Roman context into which Paul wrote was shown by literature to have a sexual ethic comprised of a complex interaction of Greek and Roman attitudes. Forces of power, honor, shame, and social stratification were the primary predictors of virtue. Despite this ancient code of sexual permissiveness and restraint, there is recognition in scholarship that the New Testament teaching on sexual ethics found a powerful voice. The literature shows that individual behavior is closely connected to the broader system that the individual belongs to. In considering behavior, reductionistic thinking should be avoided. Instead, careful attention must be given to the invisible and reciprocal forces at work within a group. Because people are constituted in relationships, there is a significant correlation between a parent's level of influence with their child and their degree of connection. The literature also suggests a relationship between a parent's ability to form close connections and their own level of differentiation.

The data shows that Christian young adults do often experience situations that challenge their biblical sexual ethic in college. Some young adults navigate these challenges with a strong sense of God's presence and instinctive judgments that they learned during their childhood. Central to this ability was their parents' deliberate instruction. However, a key factor for hearing and embracing instruction was the household system that beautified God's wisdom. Young adults did not merely reflect on information that they learned, but instead gave rich descriptive detail of how compelling it was to see the Christian ethic work out around them. Parental intentionality was extremely important. Equally important however was parental adaptability when things did not go according to plan. Similarly, the data shows effective spiritual formation in churches that explicitly and courageously trained their youth with a high view of scripture. Parallel to this instruction was observing a culture of wonder that normalized personal holiness.

Discussion of Findings

This study has examined literature and the experiences of spiritual formation in several young adults. In this section, the literature and data are synthesized with my own experience as an ordained pastor and campus minister of twenty years. Three broad themes will be discussed before offering some recommendations for ongoing practice for pastors, mentors, and parents.

The literature reviewed in chapter two and my own experience suggest some clear elements that are present in deep spiritual formation for youth. An important aspect of this discussion is my first-hand experience over years with young adults from Christian families who abandoned their faith in college. While there are many explanations for this,

commonly cited reasons are their view of the Christian sexual ethic and the shame they

feel due to their own sexual compromise. The qualitative research is representative of

young adults who, against this trend, stood out among their peers as people of deep

conviction in an age of compromise. The data from this study represents an important

voice for the church to hear. Where do people like this come from? A synthesis of the

literature, research data and my own experience suggest three broad elements that are

present in young adult spiritual formation. These elements are courageous clarity, heart-

centered intentionality, and calm adaptability.

Courageous Clarity

One fascinating aspect from the literature is that the sexual ethic of the ancient

world was primarily driven by invisible forces of shame, social status, and the desire for

social reproduction. Harper has argued that moral expectations were in tune with social

roles and that these roles determined matters of moral permissiveness and restraint.[190]

Similarly, the literature's emphasis on *pudicita* in the ancient world reveals an honor-

shame culture that mediated a sense of right and wrong. It is into this context that

Christians championed a revolutionary sexual ethic seen in 1 Corinthians 6. The Apostle

Paul's exhortation to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6) moved the discussion of

sexual ethics from a social location to a theological one. In a way, ancient *pudicita* was

challenged by the concept of *porneia*. This ancient sexual revolution bears many lessons

for modern practitioners who also encounter invisible forces that mediate sexual

behavior.

---

[190] Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 78.

Ancient World and Modern Campus

Langlands described sexual morality in the ancient world as a constant "renegotiation of position and status within the community."[191] In a similar way, many young adults described the social pressure of college as "negotiating social status." Modern residential universities are not environments without the concept of restraint. Rather, young adults reported that they face powerful social forces – an invisible code of ethics— that governs permissiveness. On one hand they feel the burden of academics, appeasing their parents, and appearing studious before their professors. On the other hand, young adults encounter pressure to embrace sexual experimentation, humor, and transactional behaviors in social settings. Young women in particular reported that they were expected to display modesty yet respond to sexual advances of college men under the right circumstances. In this way, residential universities also feature a shame-based sexual ethic that is located in social status. Social stratification is still a feature that regulates permissiveness and restraint for young adults today. My ministerial experience confirms that young adults, unsure of their standing, pursue sexual partners to fit in, mitigate shame or even attain a perceived higher social status.

Another parallel between the ancient world and the modern college environment is the ease with which sexual content and sexual encounters can occur. The literature has shown that prostitution was legal, uncontroversial, and an important part of Roman capitalism. Not only was prostitution inexpensive but it was also commended as a safeguard against adultery. In a similar way, the modern reality of pornography, the close quarters of university residential life and the reality of dating apps means that for a young

---

[191] Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, 365

adult, sexuality is easily explored. In my experience, advances in technology (like video conferencing, augmented/virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and new social media platforms) are making this even easier. Young adults also reported that their peers viewed casual hookups on the weekend as a safeguard against the stress of college.

Almost universally, the modern church has adopted a pessimistic attitude toward reaching this demographic. College campuses are often seen as environments hostile to the Christian message and perhaps even beyond redemption. This attitude is detectable in literature that speaks of "surviving" or "staying Christian" in college. Add in the reality that matters of sexuality are contentious cultural flashpoints and what emerges is a defensive posture in the evangelical world toward matters of sexuality and spiritual formation. While there is certainly a moral decline in our day- epitomized by university campus culture- the literature also guards us from discouragement. The Roman world saw a seismic ideological shift due to the influence of Christianity. Today's university campuses feature some young adults who embrace biblical sexual ethics as superior, safe, urgent, and even beautiful.

The Gospel is Good News

How did biblical values take root in an ancient society so entrenched in immorality? As previously discussed, there is no unanimous answer in scholarship. It is reasonable to conclude however, that early Christians deeply believed that the Christian message was good news for all of life! In my experience, this contrasts with the modern church's defensive posture and understanding of the gospel. Christian young adults rightly view the gospel as the good news of salvation. They rightly understand the finished work of Christ for the forgiveness of sins and right standing with God. Lacking,

however, in many young people is an understanding of the gospel as being good news for how they choose to live. For some, justification by grace through faith is present but a love for the Law of the Lord is absent. Could the great de-churching be partially due to a confused or truncated message of the gospel? There is an opportunity for increased clarity on the joy of sanctification. The revival of the ancient world reminds us that the biblical sexual ethic is good news.

The literature on 1 Corinthians 6 shows that the Apostle Paul wrote about sin in a theological context against shame in a social context. For early Christians, the Bible's sexual ethic was not an embarrassment, but a recommendation of the religion. This dovetails with participants' appreciation for their church's clarity in presenting the "beauty" of biblical teaching. 1 Corinthians 6 features many themes consistent with interview data.

A Glorious Purpose for Earthly Bodies

Regardless of whether Paul is responding to Corinthian slogans, Garland shows that the structure of 1 Corinthians 6 reveals a direct challenge to the belief that deeds done in the body are inconsequential. Paul's repetition of "body" underscores the biblical teaching that God will not abolish corporeal existence. Rather, the bodies of believers are of utmost importance in the redemptive work of The Triune God. Paul says that bodies are joined to Jesus the Son (6:15). They are also indwelled by the Holy Spirit (6:19) and will be raised up by the power of God the Father (6:14). These three truths of the body loosely correspond to justification, sanctification, and glorification respectively. Waters points out that Paul wrote like this to set all the problems of the Corinthian church in their

proper "redemptive-historical context."[192] This full view of salvation has a transformative effect.

In the ancient world this teaching was good news because it meant that there was such a thing as moral agency. We saw in the literature that, according to Harper, "The individual was morally responsible, and moral responsibility required freedom, freedom from the stars and from social expectation alike."[193] People were not only moral creatures in this Christian worldview, but what they did with their bodies became detached from social expectation. Christianity struck at the very heart of the social imaginary of what it meant to be human.

Parallel to this, young adults spoke highly of how their parents and home churches explicitly shared the gospel. For interviewees, the message of Jesus and the concept of a future God-honoring marriage captured their imagination. Alice and Ben repeatedly spoke of God's design for them as "beautiful" and "really good". Liam and Nathan likewise believed that the biblical sexual ethic was a compelling picture of human flourishing. Because their minds were set on "a better plan" and "a positive vision for that God had", participants instinctively resisted the prevailing ethic of their campus. Even more than resisted, while sexual sin was tempting for these young adults, it also seemed non-sensical to their imaginary. In addition to this, almost all participants shared that they carried some awareness of God's presence. Being embodied but also indwelled by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19) was expressed by Nathan and Angela alike. Nathan expressed his belief that sexual experimentation was due to people longing to "fill a

---

[192] Waters, "1-2 Corinthians", 206.

[193] Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 86.

void". He also said that he believed that "void" in his own life was already filled by God. Angela likewise expressed that she had "help" and "wisdom from the Holy Spirit" which helped her navigate social pressure.

I conclude that there is an opportunity for ministry leaders and parents to courageously teach a biblical view of human bodies. Admittedly, participants shared a degree of awkwardness that accompanied conversations with their parents about their bodies. The most prominent and repeated word in this key text of biblical sexual ethics however, is body (σῶμα). What a difference it would make if we were cognizant of Father, Son, and Spirit renewing our earthly bodies as central to this discussion.

Spiritual Union and Christian Identity

We also saw in the literature that apart from the discussion on Corinthian slogans, the apostle Paul employs the question "do you not know" (οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι) three times in the text of 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. This repetition not only gives structure, but is seen by Fitzmyer, Bender and Thistleton as an urgent call for biblical sexual ethics that come from a Christian identity. Every time Paul employs this construct he is speaking to the issue of union. The mysterious (spiritual) union between Christ and His people forms the basis of what is allowed in the physical (sexual) union of persons. Thistleton argues that union with Christ means that there is now a biblical sexual ethic that "takes up the mystery of the whole person."[194] Bender likewise believes that because of the union of believers and Christ, the Christian teaching on sex should transcend shame.[195] The

---

[194] Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* 474.

[195] Bender, *1 Corinthians*, 116.

literature indicates that the apostle is calling for a healthy respect for the unions that God has established.

The literature on the Greco-Roman world has also shown that the Christian message was not simply a more conservative version of Roman culture. Christianity was a powerful force for change because it transcended the honor-shame system of society. Christian leaders taught that *porneia* was unambiguously sinful and incompatible with their identity. Hurtado explained, "Christian religious identity was distinctive in replacing all others for its devotees. It was an exclusive religious identity, defined entirely by their standing in relation to The One God, not dependent on, or even connected to their ethnicity."[196] It is this new identity, being "in Christ", that formed the basis of new life and a new ethic.

This concept dovetails well with interview data. Hannah and Ken both expressed a strong sense of Christian identity which led them to long for "God's design" and a "Christ-centered marriage." Not only were they aware of being joined to Christ spiritually, but also that this meant they guarded their bodies physically. Nathan said he wanted to act out of his "real identity" and that he saw the need to "know my value and what God thinks." Alice also reflected the sentiments of 1 Corinthians 6 when she explained that she knew who she was and that her desire was to be united with a Christian spouse someday. She explained, "I knew I was not going to find that in a random guy." Alice refused an immediate (illicit) union because of her desire for a future (spousal) union based on her current (spiritual) union with Jesus.

---

[196] Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 103-4.

In my observation over the past twenty years, most Christian young adults do not enter college with a strong sense of Christian identity. Most believers at residential universities do understand forgiveness of sins, but very few view themselves as united to Christ. A strong sense of personal identity is not absent. In fact, various ones are quite common and easily detectable. Academic identity, athletic identity, racial identity, family identity or social identity— these are the most common ways that Christian young adults conceive of themselves and thus prioritize their lives. Is it possible that mentors and parents have somehow enabled this on one hand or neglected foundational truths that fuel sanctification on the other? I conclude that there is an opportunity for clarity in raising youth who understand their union with Christ to be the foundation of who they are.

Flee and Glorify

A third feature in the text and literature is that 1 Corinthians 6 contains two very clear imperatives that need to be included in any teaching on biblical sexual ethics. As discussed, verses 12-20 of 1 Corinthians 6 contain only two explicit imperatives: flee (φεύγετε) sexual immorality and glorify (δοξάσατε) God in your body. There is general agreement in scholarship that these imperatives carry the Apostle's intent regardless of the interpretive issues regarding slogans. In the literature, Naselli for example maintains that Paul is not making a theological statement about sexual immorality, nor is sexual sin a special category of sin. Clarity should be maintained by teachers of this text both in what is to be avoided (sexual immorality) and what is to being required (glorifying God).

The literature also suggests that these explicit commandments were a part of what made Christianity attractive in the ancient world. Christian preachers unambiguously condemned same-sex behavior regardless of whether it was with slaves or boys. If an

individual could be held accountable for fleeing immorality, then he was surely more than what fate (or the stars) had determined. If on the other hand he was being exhorted to glorify God, then what he did mattered in eternity before a divine audience. It was good news to ancient Christians that men could control themselves and that no one was at the mercy of sexual overflow or social pressure.

Interview data also featured this dual understanding of both "fleeing" and "glorifying." Liam shared quite a bit about physically running away from seduction in a state of "biblical fear." Other participants exhibited reflex responses such as shock and disgust consistent with Paul's exhortation to "flee". Angela and Hannah for example viewed certain situations as "dangerous" and Nathan said he was prepared by his parents to "do the hard thing". Others reported experiencing a "fight or flight response" when they were faced with sexual temptation in college.

Complementing the impulse to flee temptation was that interviewees demonstrated an understanding that their aim in life was to glorify God. In different ways, the data shows that young adults were positively motivated by a vision for their bodies. Nathan was catechized by his parents and knew that he existed to glorify God. Ben spoke often about the impact and marvel of "healthy marriages" at his church. Ken remembered his parents' faithfulness to one another and made it his ambition to do likewise. Young adult participants also said they benefited from the outward focus that their families adopted. Liam for example said that his family was always "on mission" for God. He appreciated that his father not only passed along a godly example, but also a godly aim. For some young adults, their attitude in life was not defensive, it was instead doxological.

In my experience most Christian young adults have been instructed to flee temptation. Fewer however have a working understanding of what it means to glorify God with their bodies. The prohibitions of Christianity are common knowledge. The privilege of Christian living is scarce. In addition to this, many parents know they should set a good example, but what about setting a Godly aim? I conclude that there is an opportunity to be clear on the calling, privilege, and mission for young people who profess faith to make much of God.

Finally, the literature and data present a compelling case for modern practitioners of the gospel to not be ashamed of the biblical sexual ethic but to truly proclaim it as good news. The gospel should be heralded and cherished in its many aspects. This certainly involves justification, but also sanctification, adoption, glorification, and the many joys that accompany the believer's union with Christ. Courageous gospel clarity at home and in the church is integral to lasting spiritual formation.

Heart-Centered Intentionality

Another important aspect from the literature is that people do not simply behave as they are told to behave. Systems Theory emphasizes that there are always invisible forces that shape thought and behavior since people are constituted in relationships. Young adults do not merely internalize information and then act consistently with it. People are complex. One of the reasons for this complexity is that they belong to a broader interconnected system. Bowen Theory emphasizes the invisible forces and disturbances within family relationships. Other branches of systems theory emphasize the internal systems (IFST), the nested systems (EST), and structural systems (SFST) affecting people. We saw that Kerr and Steinke described these invisible forces acting in

the family as a "field."[197] The literature therefore warns against the fallacy of reductionistic thinking in mentoring youth.

In my experience, popular parenting counsel can succumb to a simplistic cause-and-effect reasoning. The notion of "helicopter parenting" is common, usually with a negative sentiment. On the other extreme, parents are told to avoid a "free range" parenting philosophy that produces irresponsible children. Regardless of how these extremes are defined, conventional wisdom tells parents to strike a "balance." Not only is this concept of balance unclear, but it also inclines parents to feel like they are constantly erring. My main critique of conventional parenting counsel is that it can be inconsiderate of the complex forces at work in and around a family. The interview data correlates with this when young adults described effective spiritual formation that was "deep" and "accessed the why" in behavior. The data describes households that were aware of complexity, rejected simple behavioral management strategies and thus sought to reach the heart of children.

Intentional Practical Instruction

Because Systems Theory does not consider the individual apart from the group, the literature recommends a parenting style that does not try to intentionally affect change in children. For example, Brown speaks in chapter 2 against fixating on bad behavior in teens or trying to change a child. She instead recommends seeing "the big picture" and viewing the problem as being "in the system of interactions."[198] Bowen experts generally

---

[197] Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times*, 67.

[198] Brown, *Confident Parenting*, 10.

believe that parents should make themselves the project and observe how family members are triggering certain behaviors in one another. Satir similarly emphasizes self-esteem in children, creating a nurturing bond and is therefore optimistic about a child's innate goodness.[199] Bowen Theory speaks of irresponsibility but is generally silent on an objective standard of morality.

In this area the data is at odds at times with the literature. All participants expressed in different ways that their parents' direct instruction was instrumental for them to navigate life successfully. For example, Ken shared that his family "very explicitly" raised him in the Christian faith. Nathan spoke highly of being "thoroughly instructed" and appreciated how proactive his father was. Alice, Hannah, and Angela all described not only open and honest dialog, but explicit instruction and even discipline from their childhood. Participants also reported that their churches did the same from the pulpit and with programs that sought to give explicit instruction in matters of life and faith. Most at odds with the literature was Ben who said that he could not figure out most things for himself, and that he needed practical instruction from his parents and mentors, especially when it came to matters of sexuality. In my estimation, Reformed confessional Christianity seems to be opposed to systems thinking in its understanding of fallen human nature. Bowen theory recommends "thinking systems." However, what if people in their depravity lack the ability to reason correctly about themselves, authority, and eternity?

---

[199] Satir, *Peoplemaking*, 17.

A Sense of Authority

Almost universally, participants spoke about the legacy that their parents and churches gave them by teaching them to have a high view of the bible. An authoritative regard for scripture and a serious desire to teach it was in every participant's memory of their parents and home church. This cuts against what many systems experts seem to warn against. For example, Gilbert explicitly says that the goal of parenting is not to get your children to think, do, or become what you want them to.[200] The locus of authority in this model is the self. In contrast to this, Ken said that the Bible was a lens to view all of life, including how his parents wielded their authority over him. For Ken and others, the locus of authority was The Lord who puts parents in authority over their children. In my estimation, children need to have a healthy understanding of authority if we want them to embrace the joy of biblical obedience.

Sowing, Reaping, and Eternity

A second way that participants spoke about instruction was that they were taught principles of prudence. Alice, Hannah, and Ben said that they were told from an early age to think ahead, see danger, consider consequences, and make "investments" now. Nathan spoke about his father teaching him "to do the hard thing now" because he was motivated by a greater future joy. This concept of sowing and reaping is central to the Christian worldview. Systems thinking views the goal of parenting to be to leave "a relationship legacy." In contrast, Christian parents seek to outfit their children for eternity. This means that while children will not naturally deny themselves short-term pleasure, faithful

---

[200] Gilbert, *Connecting with Our Children*, 131.

126

parenting will mean providing some instruction on this discipline. It is my conclusion that the Christian worldview necessitates an intentionality in teaching.

Accessing Motives and Narratives

The literature also provides the insight that parental instruction is often not absorbed by children due to several factors. Societal regression and low differentiation can cause parental "over-functioning."[201] It is well known that constantly lecturing or telling children what to do can become overbearing. Systems experts warn that instruction can incline children to ignore their parents, or in more extreme circumstances, to cut off relationship entirely.

The data shows that wise parents of young adults did not give up on instruction on one hand but were also not overbearing on the other. For example, Liam spoke of being instructed by his dad as times when they built "deep trust" and when a lot of questions were asked in love. Alice remembered that her parents had rules but that they always tried to "get to the heart." Liam's parents' philosophy of parenting was not about controlling his behavior, but about "understanding the 'why' behind every 'what'." Other participants remembered their parents' words as being "wise" or "beautiful."

The literature shows that parents should avoid an over-functioning instruction that seeks to control a child's behavior. The data indicates that there is a way for biblical instruction to be effective if it reaches the heart. Both things are true. Parents should not give up on instruction but seek to intentionally understand and meet their child at the place of their deepest longings.

---

[201] Gilbert, 144.

In my observation, parents often feel the need to lecture their young adult children. While intended to provide protection and counsel, these prolonged discourses often have the opposite effect. Countless young adults confess to feeling misunderstood or berated by their parents because they do not perceive the deepest issues at play. The net effect is that young adults are trained to ignore their parents' counsel as irrelevant. From the past twenty years of listening to students, the following is a compilation of a few of the longings, assumptions, and deep issues at play regarding biblical sexual ethics that I have encountered:

1. "Sexual expression is my highest good and will complete me."
2. "Getting married will solve all problems in my life."
3. "Getting married will doom me to a life of misery."
4. "Marriage is for people who can afford it once they make it in life."
5. "People will finally take me seriously if I can just get married."
6. "Intimacy is quick and can be enjoyed apart from commitment."
7. "Intimacy with someone is a part of determining whether I should marry them."
8. "How I feel is the same thing as who I am."
9. "Dating is about experimentation and enjoyment, not clarity."
10. "Timing doesn't matter – everything will work if it's true love."
11. "If I am attracted to someone then it means I should let them know."
12. "It's my body, so I can decide what I do with it."
13. "Casual sex has no consequences."
14. "It's too late for me, I've already gone too far."

Parents and mentors should intentionally seek to engage these (and many other) deep-seated beliefs and cultural narratives. The data suggests that instructing young adults about difficult matters does not necessarily make them more afraid or hardened. Rather, engaging with them on the level of their presuppositions can give them the tools to understand their own hearts. Intentional training will require parents to be biblically grounded, emotionally available, and highly conversant.

Nurtured Parental Bond

Finally, because systems literature resists a cause-and-effect model of thinking, it focuses on the harmonious balance of relationships in the family system. Brown describes this as "a healthy mature connection with your children", as contrasted with "an out of proportion connection which, in Bowen's theory, is also referred to as fusion."[202] For Bowen experts, healthy attachment navigates the extremes of neglect on one hand and an over-idealized bond on the other. Gilbert believes the most important goal for a parent is to give kids what they most need - "a relationship legacy."[203] A healthy bond is commended as one in which there is kindness and warmth with affection and enjoyment. It is notable that the literature also says that a parental bond should also allow for disagreements without the relationship being threatened or broken. Each person takes responsibility yet tolerates the other party being upset with them. An intolerance of ideological conflict is a sign of fusion—an unhealthy enmeshment with the emotions and needs of others.

The interview data affirms these principles. In various ways, participants expressed that they experienced and appreciated a bond with their parents that was delightful despite the existence of conflict. Ben, Holly, and Angela all believed that they could talk with their parents "about anything" because of their deep bond. Liam similarly appreciated that his parents nurtured an "ongoing conversation" with him throughout his whole life. Hannah remembered the individual attention that her parents showed her, despite being one of four kids. This individualized "special time" did not mean emotional

---

[202] Brown, *Confident Parenting*, 12.

[203] Gilbert, *Connecting with Our Children*, 130.

fusion or an unhealthy enmeshment. Nathan explained that he still had "healthy debates" with his parents and that he always felt like he could disagree charitably. Hannah said she could always disagree or "appeal" any family decision. Interviewees spoke about a personal relationship with their parents, but most were careful to say that they knew that they were not the center of the family. A nurtured parental bond was strong. Individual agency was preserved.

In my experience many parents feel as if they must choose between either a parental bond, or a healthy individuality in their children. The literature and data together provide two ways that both things can be cultivated.

Parents Who Prioritize Their Marriage.

A logical consequence in the Bowen theory parenting literature for creating responsibility in children is the concept of boundaries. In systems thinking, boundaries are a necessary part of preventing enmeshment and the over-functioning parent. For Bowen, parents should not invade their children's boundaries or allow children to invade theirs. The data shows that spouses who prioritized one another caused their children to feel safer not less. This signals that there is a counter-intuitive opportunity for parents to nurture a deep bond and a healthy individuality in their kids by prioritizing the health of their marriage. While the demands of parenting may be high, the urgency of the marriage is also high. Spouses would do well to guard time with one another and pay attention to nurturing their bond. The Apostle Paul not only commends marriage as a picture of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5) but also implies that children are the first audience of this picture (Ephesians 6). Parents who maintain a high view of marriage are intentionally caring for their children, even if it comes at a cost.

130

Parents Who Take Responsibility for Their Own Faith

Related to boundaries in the literature is the concept of a clear "'I' position".

Rather than reacting to or controlling a child's behavior, systems experts urge parents to

be clear on their own "inner conviction."[204] Do children come to appreciate their parents

more when parents are clear on their own faith, standards, and convictions? The data

overwhelmingly affirms that they do. Children can tell if their parents are serious about

their own faith. This implies that there is an opportunity for parents to nurture a deep

bond while also creating individual agency in children by prioritizing their personal walk

with God. Instruction and intentionality can take the form of this "'I' position." Too often

parental instruction is haughtily framed in the second person - "you." Parents and

mentors can also offer instruction that is framed with "I" – how they themselves need to

repent and grow in grace. This would not only deepen a bond, but also make holiness

seem attainable and attractive.

Calm Adaptability

The literature shows that anxiety and differentiation are central concepts in

systems thinking. As discussed in chapter 2, Bowen experts make a distinction between

acute anxiety and chronic anxiety.[205] While acute anxiety is often helpful, it is chronic

anxiety that causes disturbances in any relational system. Anxiety is a state that prevents

us from functioning at our best, and one's emotional reactivity is a key variable in the

development of problems in a family. It is notable that for Bowen, anxiety is unavoidable

---

[204] Brown, *Confident Parenting*, 20.

[205] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 112-13.

and is transmissible to others like electricity in a circuit.[206] Herrington therefore believes that a lack of attention to one's feelings and the "inner life" is what undermines many Christians' sincere efforts to obey Jesus.[207] The problem of anxiety is worse for parents. Bowen experts believe that anxiety often settles in a particular child who becomes a "symptom bearer" or "anxiety sink" for the family.[208] Because anxiety is a naturally occurring phenomenon in every system, it is closely linked with the concept of differentiation of self. The literature indicates that the most important thing a parent can do is become more highly differentiated, thereby managing their anxiety and reactivity to problems.

In my experience, there is a great deal of anxiety that comes with being a parent. Not only are parents keenly aware of societal regression, but Christian parents are further aware of the many spiritual dangers and wicked ideologies in the world. The evangelical faith affirms that the world, the flesh, and the devil are real, yet modern parenting literature gives little-to-no instruction on emotional maturity, anxiety, and parental reactivity. Is there such a thing as a parent who has a non-anxious presence? Personal experience, interview data and the literature suggest that calm leadership is an important part of effective spiritual formation. Anxiety is inevitable, but parents and leaders can grow to discern anxiety, embrace the unexpected and challenge others without being coercive.

---

[206] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 108.

[207] Herrington, *The Leader's Journey*, 13.

[208] Gilbert, *Connecting with Our Children*, 22.

Discerning Anxiety in The System

Systems theory reminds us that anxiety is naturally occurring. This means that every family will have some established patterns of reactivity among its members. Calm and wise leadership will entail observation and diagnosis of certain anxious processes in the system. There are many aspects to systemic anxiety in the literature. For parents however, two areas stand out as needing careful discernment.

Parental Anxiety Creating Problems

If the nuclear family is an emotional unit, a child is but one part of that unit. Family Emotional Process in BFST means that actions, attitudes, or emotions of one person affects the whole group. If anxiety is transmissible, then the fears and unresolved distress of parents can not only be directed at a child, but also come to settle in that child. Gilbert describes this danger of parents moving anxiety, "that properly belongs with them to a child."[209] Brown similarly speaks of "The parental worry cycle" that functions as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Parents can inadvertently create the very problems they so desperately want to avoid.

While the data did not speak to this issue directly, it correlates indirectly. Participants shared that their parents' best practices avoided this dynamic. Interviewees typically reflected on their homes as places of "safety". Liam for example said that his parents "were not panic people" and were "unhurried". Nathan's parents would often take a moment to reflect and compose themselves before correcting his behavior. I conclude that parents of young adults would do well to practice honest self-awareness. Young

---

[209] Gilbert, *Connecting with Our Children*, 23.

adults have a growing awareness of mental health concepts and categories. The gospel and the Christian worldview are beautified by calm leadership. This means that naming and facing one's deepest parental fears is a most beneficial exercise. Parents should deliberately seek to discern how they see anxiety expressed and playing out in their systems.

Problems or Pleas?

The literature not only urges parents to be aware of their own anxiety but to also understand their learned response to anxiety in others. Herrington believes that expressions of fear and anxiety in others are often mis-labeled as "complaints" and "problems" by those in authority.[210] For systems experts, conflicts are typically considered to be symptoms rather than ultimate issues in themselves. One implication of this is that parents of young adults need to make a distinction between acts of rebellion and anxious cries for help. It is notable that triangles are an inevitable part of life in systems thinking, but that they resemble the sin of gossip.

In my experience, faith traditions -including as my own- that have a developed doctrine of total depravity are more inclined to frame problems in children as overt rebellion rather than weakness. To be clear, I believe that human rebellion is real, and that the doctrine of total depravity is unquestionably biblical. However, could it be that some unpleasant behaviors in children are actually anxious pleas for help? Are we hastily framing conduct as high-handed rebellion that could instead be expressions of weakness? Is it possible that this hastiness comes from our own emotional reactivity and not

---

[210] Herrington, *The Leader's Journey*, 42.

primarily the scriptures? I believe that at times, the answer to these questions is a resounding "yes", and that this is where the research offers a challenge to reformed Christians.

The interview data says that it is possible to have a high system of doctrine, and to also have a low level of emotional reactivity. Participants reported that they remained connected to their parents who "drew near" and who "practiced discernment", albeit imperfectly.

Embracing The Unexpected

Perhaps the most salient theme in systems literature is the concept of a "well-differentiated non-anxious presence."[211] Being highly differentiated means having the ability to remain closely connected to others in the system without being determined by them. This enables an individual to be resilient, self-regulated and have a degree of distress tolerance. In this way, differentiation is very much a biblical concept. The Apostle Paul was both non-anxious and present. He exhorted his readers to "not be anxious about anything" (Philippians 4), yet paradoxically claimed to have "unceasing anguish in his heart" (Romans 9). Jesus himself was deeply invested in people (John 11), yet his actions were certainly not determined by them. Steadfast trust in a sovereign God commends a non-anxious leadership paradigm.

All these qualities associated with differentiation are necessary for parenting because children and teens are sources of chaos. The unexpected is expected. Parents regularly need to improvise a thoughtful response rather than exhibit an anxious reaction.

---

[211] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 108.

The literature also indicates that self-regulation in parents promotes the development of self-regulation in children.[212] While participants did not explicitly use the word "differentiation" to describe their parents, they qualitatively commended the concept. They spoke of parents who were secure in their identity, yet highly empathetic. Two important areas are identified where parents of young adults are particularly challenged to exhibit this well-differentiated leadership.

Unexpected Sin – In Children

The results of this study indicate that a key moment for spiritual formation in teenagers was how their parents and mentors responded to disappointing discoveries. Both Nathan and Liam shared that their parents "discovered" that they had been viewing pornography. Ken remembered confessing an "addiction" to sexual sin to his church leaders. Alice told her parents that she was pursuing a romantic relationship with someone "against their wishes." In each of these cases, parents needed to adapt. Nathan's parents calmly built trust and began a conversation about the goodness of God's plan for sexuality that continues to this day. Ken's youth leaders began a discipling relationship with him and calmly offered practical instruction. Alice's parents respected her decision and offered to help her and her boyfriend honor God and walk in wisdom. Common to all these scenarios is that the unexpected issues were interpreted as training opportunities. It is notable that participants agreed that these moments were formative turning points when they learned to apply biblical truth for themselves. Alice commented that it was her

---

[212] Brown, *Confident Parenting*, 31.

parents' calm response to this "unwise relationship" that eventually convinced her that the biblical sexual ethic was best.

Another way the data brought this out was in the realm of discipline. The concept of discipline is itself adaptive because it is a measured response to sin. While many parents may practice discipline in a retributive or uncontrolled manner, Liam said that his experience of it was a calm exercise of parental authority. He said that his parents would consistently explain that disciple was because "The Lord has called me to discipline you."

I conclude that it is urgent for parents to learn to adapt to disappointments and to increasingly see them as God given opportunities. Parents should not only invite their teens to talk with them about anything, but to also have the composure and differentiation of self to engage with them when they do.

Unexpected Sin – In Parents

The interview data also indicates that a key moment for spiritual formation in teens was how parents responded to their own failings and shortcomings. Hannah and Alice both spoke about their parents being "open and honest" about their own sin. Ken said that his parents were keenly aware of and even admitted their own weaknesses. Liam said that he vividly remembered his mother coming to him, and after explaining her sin, asked "please forgive me?" This behavior is consistent with how Systems literature describes well-differentiated leadership. The parent shows resilience, adapting not only to the child's bad behavior but also to their own. They remain connected and exhibit a clearly defined self. They cultivate a relationship with the child, but also with God.

In my experience, it is humbling for a parent to confess sin to a child. Some modern counsel even recommends against parents showing weakness. It may be that parents who lack differentiation of self may also lack to self-awareness to perceive feelings of shame that prevent them from admitting weakness and asking for forgiveness. Contrary to this, the data and literature indicate that repentance and humility are effective tools for spiritual formation. Being non-defensive is important for calm leadership. This is not only compelling for young adults, but it also authenticates the Christian faith.

Challenge without Coercion

According to Kerr, healthy differentiation of self provides the ability to enter emotionally charged situations, and to "tolerate the anxiety… associated with engagement."[213] It is notable that the literature mostly focuses on this tolerance of anxiety and self-management but is generally silent on how parents or leaders ought to challenge others. Friedman warns against the over-functioning leader and the danger of coercion.[214] Herrington says that a leader should guard against polarization and resist the temptation "to act as if there are only two options" in a conflict.[215] The literature alone does not provide a clear positive picture of what it means to speak into a situation beyond "honoring the complexity" of the conflict.

A positive picture of challenging teenagers while also honoring complexity was filled out by the interview data. Participants reported that they experienced challenging

---

[213] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 130-31.

[214] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve,* 128.

[215] Herrington, *The Leader's Journey*, 104.

correctives from parents who were both calm and thoughtful. Angela described a well-differentiated leader when she remembered her mother's ability to speak into conflict. In the middle of an intense argument, Angela explained that her mother would break out into song! Not only were the words of this song corrective, but the surprise and humor of her non-anxious presence had a way of de-escalating tension. Angela's mother honored the complexity of the situation and did not act as if there were only two sides or options in an argument. Parallel to this, Liam explained that he certainly received "stern and direct correction", but also that he knew the "clear principles" behind it. For Liam and other participants, direct did not mean derogatory. Correction was not the same as coercion.

The data is consistent with what Herrington calls a "shared vision."[216] In my experience, parents can easily feel as if they have no choice but to raise their voice or employ strategies such as scolding, mocking, or shaming their children. But the biblical message is not easily heard if it is contained in these vessels. Parents should certainly reject anxious under-functioning by providing no correctives in crisis. On the other hand, parents should also avoid anxious over-functioning that is coercive. Parents should discern that there is a third option that honors complexity. Calm adaptability means appealing to a shared vision to engage the crisis. This proficiency in parents inspires wonder and provides a setting of silver for wisdom to be heard (Proverbs 25:11).

---

[216] Herrington, 54.

Recommendations for Practice

Considering the findings above, several recommendations emerge for parents, mentors, and practitioners of the gospel. These recommendations fall into three broad categories: preaching to the imagination, coaching on emotional maturity and ministry that normalizes holiness.

Preaching To The Imagination

It seems imperative for us to carefully consider our teaching and preaching to young adults at home and in the church. Despite the reality of "de-churching", young adults do still exhibit high degrees of interest in spiritual matters. This represents an opportunity to sharpen our message, and to not be ashamed of our message.

Persecution, expressive individualism, and the increase of overt sexual immorality certainly register as discouraging realities today. We should remember however that the church has thrived in far worse climates before. The biblical sexual ethic is not something to be embarrassed about or to apologize for. Rather, it is to be compassionately heralded as good news for humanity. The good news of Christianity should not only be limited to justification and atonement but should also include all the benefits of being in Christ. We must herald sanctification as joy. This is key for ministry to young adults. To do this, preachers would need to increasingly practice teaching the law of God as a part of the good news in their sermons. One suggestion would be to present the gospel to teenagers by teaching through Psalm 119 or the epistle of James. Beyond their preaching, I recommend that pastors discourage online church attendance and consider how the liturgy of their worship services are informing the social imaginary of their youth.

Most young adults have only been engaged regarding biblical sexual ethics on the level of information. Philosopher James Smith critiques the common ministry methodology that is overly rationalistic and focused on information transfer.[217] Young adults need clear information on ethics. Since people are most shaped by what they worship, preachers and teachers must also engage the imagination. I recommend a discipleship strategy that speaks to the interpretive frameworks and cultural narratives that surround our youth—not just having a conversation but feeding the imagination.

To do this, parents should specially emphasize union with Christ, but could also have ready answers for certain cultural phrases and concepts affecting the biblical sexual ethic. For example, the biblical concept of freedom today has been hijacked by the false deification of sexuality and individuality. Teaching our youth means more than rote memorization of what the catechism says about freedom. Freedom should be carefully defined as living as we are created to live, not simply according to our disordered desires. These distinctions feed the imagination with the beauty of the Christian identity. The concept of individual responsibility, living for the glory of God and an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 6-7 seem to be critical content for making these distinctions for young people today. Mentors of youth should reject coercion, but instead call on young adults to imagine what their life would be like if the fullness of obedience was embraced.

A related suggestion is to shepherd young adults away from a shame-based social ethics and toward a robust understanding of who they are before God. This would recommend discussing the impact of social media with teenagers. We should also discuss

---

[217] James Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Baker Books, 2009), 17.

the reality of sexual immorality while simultaneously feeding the imaginations of our students the cosmic stage of sin and redemption, idolatry, and right worship.

Coaching On Emotional Maturity

Building on Herrington's insights, parents and leaders would do well to receive training in emotional maturity and more openly discuss the concept of parental anxiety. Systems theory has very keen insights across cultures with respect to anxiety. These insights have an explanatory power that is under explored by Reformed Christians.

I recommend that pastors and leaders explicitly teach parents about anxiety and emotional maturity. If families function as emotional units, then instruction on concepts such as differentiation of self, emotional triangles, family emotional process and multigenerational process will yield good returns. Systems concepts should not be taken as biblical truth. I do not recommend they be preached from the pulpit but treated as common grace insights which are yet to be fully understood. Some of these insights map well unto the Christian's identity and spiritual union with Christ.

The literature calls for parents to urgently understand that their parental instruction is interconnected with their relationship with their children. In my observation, most parents are blind to how their own anxiety plays out in their home, and even ignore the concept of emotional maturity. Unspoken fears and shame affect our lives (and the lives of those under our care) more than we realize. Herrington is right to point out that many Christians know the right thing to do but lack the inner resources to do the right thing in the moment.[218] Quick tempered words dwell in our homes with us more

---

[218] Herrington, *The Leader's Journey*, 28.

than we like to admit. I believe parents should more readily take responsibilities for themselves, admit weakness, and ask for forgiveness when appropriate. This may be the single most powerful leadership dynamic to shape the home.

Developing Calm Adaptability

I recommend that parents seek to deliberately develop a way to receive feedback from older parents on how they see anxiety affecting their home. Ideally this coaching would come from friends or family with a long history of trust and some familiarity with systems concepts. The following are example questions that could either be discussed by spouses or posed to observant coaches:

1. At what times did you feel tension in the home?

2. How did you experience my words and tone towards others?

3. What reactions most surprised you in the family?

4. What specific moments seemed the most emotionally charged?

5. To what persons or topics is most of the anxiety in our home directed?

6. How did you see me take on the anxiety of another?

7. What fears do you think I need to courageously face?

This anxiety audit would provide direct feedback and help parents to discern blind spots, make adjustments, and reflect on patterns in their own families of origin. Since anxiety is an indicator of one's level of differentiation, gaining insight into the level of anxiety in one's home would be invaluable. It would offer an opportunity for parents to stand apart from the emotional process of the home and increase their self-awareness.

In addition to the anxiety audit, parents should slow the pace of unexpected high stakes conversations and have a paradigm for Godly differrentiation when counseling

143

teenagers. Godly differentiation would resemble Waanders' insights and expand Bowen's concept of a linear scale into a diagnostic grid (Figure 2).
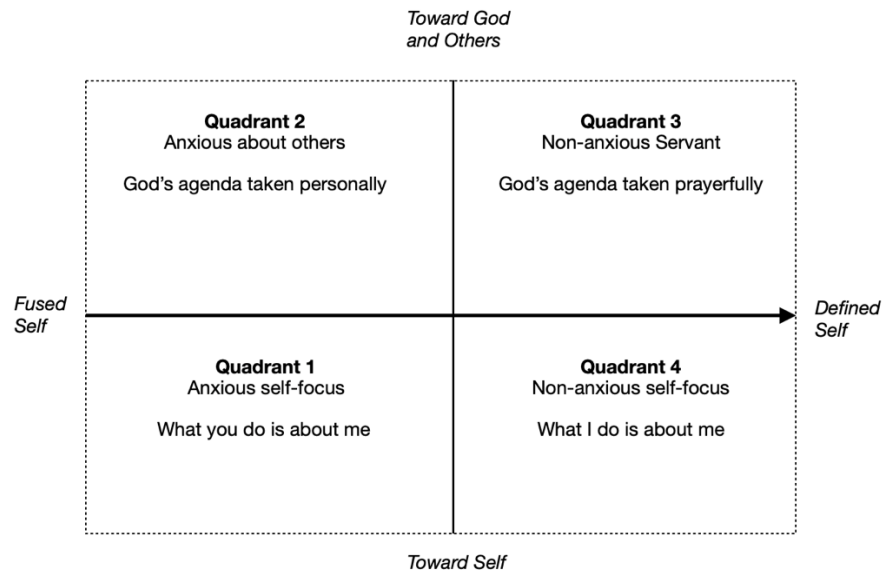

Figure 2

Each of these quadrants represents a different approach to high-stakes conversations. Parents can learn calm adaptability by first identifying their tendencies and where they fall in this scheme: The anxious self-focus (quadrant 1), the anxious about others (quadrant 2), the non-anxious self-focus (quadrant 4), or the non-anxious servant (quadrant 3).

For illustration, let us consider how each of these might respond to a teenager who has unexpectedly confessed to a parent about being secretly sexually active with their significant other. Amid such surprise and deep disappointment for the Christian parent, what comes next?

The Venting Parent: An Anxious Self Focus

This parent (quadrant 1) is highly anxious, but scarcely concerned about God's agenda. Instead, the child's behavior is so connected with their own identity that they can hardly see beyond how the situation reflects on them. The high-stakes conversation is likely to be one-sided venting: "You did what? I can't believe that you would keep this secret from me and taint our family name!"

The Lecturing Parent: An Anxious Others Focus

This parent (quadrant 2) is highly concerned about what God wants and has a deep commitment to serving others and nurturing healthy children. They know the Bible well, have good doctrine and parenting strategies. However, because they lack differentiation, these parents see their children as extensions of themselves and have little boundaries. The high-stakes conversation is likely to be a lecture with rhetorical questions: "Don't you know what God says about this? Sexual sin is a monster, and you better not be thinking that getting married will solve it! We should back away from this relationship and get right with God." Notice that this parent reasons correctly about sin and uses biblical language. However, they are slow to understand and quick to think for their young adult child. They propose solutions that others may not be bought into. Their anxiety brings an unhealthy enmeshment that makes it difficult to discern rebellion from weakness.

The Consultant Parent: A Non-Anxious Self-Focus

This parent (quadrant 4) has a highly developed sense of self and recognizes that children need to develop their own agency. They can stay connected to others without

being determined by them but lack a conviction for spiritual formation and God being cherished. The high-stakes conversation is likely to be a consultation: "I'm a bit disappointed to hear that, but I can accept what you are sharing. I am willing to talk about it if you are." Notice that this parent is calm and connected. This conversation may be fruitful but would likely be lacking in spiritual focus and biblical ethics. An over-use of "I-position" without any sense of calling or mission runs the risk of creating a differentiated but narcissistic environment.

The Adaptable Parent: A Non-Anxious Servant

This parent (quadrant 3) combines a high level of differentiation with a strong love for God and others. They recognize that young adults need to develop their own agency, and that teaching involves far more than telling. The high-stakes conversation is likely to be an actual conversation: "Wow, I'm feeling surprised. But also, thankful. I would love to be a resource to help you honor God. What made you decide to share this with me now?" Notice that this parent is calm and connected. They honor the teen's agency and responsibility before God and deliberately seek to slow the conversation and reduce emotional reactivity. Finally, the adaptable parent draws near by asking a question that first engages the issue of secrecy but also furthers spiritual conversation.

In summary, a Non-Anxious Servant seeks to slow the pace with prayer, shares personally to draw near, and advances the conversation with a question. Real world situations will admittedly carry far more complexity and nuance. Still, parents could employ these tools and scripts to develop calm adaptability.

Ministry that Normalizes Holiness

Some of the most surprising interview data was shared by Ben. As he interacted with my question of why he refused to give into social pressure, I particularly pressed him for answers on why he chose to live "against the norm." To my surprise, his response to my question was to challenge my own assumption of the definition of normalcy. For Ben, being "normal" did not mean fitting into what the world said was good. His conviction as a teenager was that living a life of holiness was normal for a Christian.

Parents should take opportunities that intentionally engage children on their fear of being weird. To do this they would need to explain the healthy longing for community and God's call for his people to be set apart.

Too often our ministry to youth has sought to compete with the world rather than live distinctly from it. I would encourage youth leaders against employing entertainment strategies to keep their youth, but to provide straightforward instruction regarding holiness, accompanied by a culture of holiness. This means not only teaching the content of the biblical sexual ethic but also the concept of holy living. I would recommend regularly teaching through the book of Leviticus to youth groups, and training children how to listen to exegetical sermons.

A final recommendation is for pastors to carefully evaluate when it is helpful to employ age-segregated ministry programs. The data overwhelmingly points to the fact that young adults will learn about holiness and experience awe in community mostly from older people. Perhaps keeping teenagers with all ages in church now is a healthy way to prepare them for being separated in college later.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on the experience of spiritual formation in young adults that helped them to uphold biblical sexual ethics in college. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be. The pursuit of the following three areas could be highly fruitful for future research.

First, it seems from the literature that there is little dialog between ethics and Family Systems Theory. Most of the insights from systems thinking are richly descriptive but suffer from a real lack of any objective moral standard. The literature does refer to irresponsibility, dangerous behavior, and regression, but stops short of saying what responsible behavior is. BFST convincingly illustrates that anxiety is to be mitigated and differentiation is to be sought after. A danger to this is that parents and ministry leaders may struggle to discern between healthy differentiation and narcissism. It would be fruitful to explore if there is a way to unite BFST with a robust system of ethics. This would allow for a new category of godly differentiation.

Secondly, a historical exploration of the teaching of the early church that engaged the cultural realities of that time would be a fascinating resource for pastors and teachers today. I am unaware of any resources written for the popular level that intentionally compiles and analyzes teaching that engaged the ancient sexual ethic. The ministry of Clement of Alexandria and others could provide a wonderful resource to the church that faces a modern sexual revolution.

Finally, it was striking to read about Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to systems theory which emphasizes childhood development in interconnected environments. As research emerges today regarding the effects of connective technology

and social media use, there may be benefits to exploring this data in conjunction with Ecological Systems Theory. Teenagers today participate in many nested systems and there remains an opportunity to modernize our conception of how anxiety flows in digitally connected environments.

Bibliography

Adams, Edward, and David G. Horrell, eds. *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*. Ill. ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Ayers, David. "Cohabitation Among Evangelicals: A New Norm?" Institute for Family Studies, April 19, 2021. https://ifstudies.org/blog/cohabitation-among-evangelicals-a-new-norm.

Ayers, David J. "The Cohabitation Dilemma Comes for America's Pastors." *Christianity Today*, March 16, 2021. https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april/cohabitation-dilemma-comes-for-american-pastors-ayers.html.

Bailey, Kenneth E. "Paul's Theological Foundation for Human Sexuality: 1 Cor 6:9-20 in the Light of Rhetorical Criticism." *Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 3, no. 1 (1980): 27–41.

Banmen, John. "Virginia Satir's Family Therapy Model." *Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research & Practice* 42, no. 4 (December 1986): 480.

Barrett, C. K. *First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Black's New Testament Commentary. 2nd ed. London: Continuum, 1994.

Barth, Karl. *The Resurrection of the Dead*. Translated by H. J. Stenning. Rep. ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003.

Baur, Ferdinand Christian. *The Christ-Party in the Corinthian Community*. Edited by David Lincicum. Translated by Wayne Coppins, Christoph Heilig, Lucas Ogden, and David Lincicum. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2021.

Bender, Kimlyn J. *1 Corinthians*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022.

Beste, Jennifer. *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Blanchard, M. Annelise, and Alexandre Heeren. "Why We Should Move from Reductionism and Embrace a Network Approach to Parental Burnout." *New Directions for Child & Adolescent Development* 2020, no. 174 (November 2020): 159–68. https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20377.

Blanshard, Alastair J. L. *Sex: Vice and Love from Antiquity to Modernity*. 1st ed. Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Bogle, Kathleen A. *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus*. NYU Press, 2008. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg39g.

Bowen, Murray. *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. 1st edition. Jason Aronson, Inc., 1993.

Bronfenbrenner, Urie. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Brookins, Timothy A., and Bruce W. Longenecker. *1 Corinthians 10-16: A Handbook on the Greek Text*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016.

Brown, Jenny. *Confident Parenting: Restoring Your Confidence as a Parent by Making Yourself the Project and Not Trying to Change Your Child*. Family Systems Practice, 2020.

Budziszewski, J. *How to Stay Christian in College*. 1st ed. Colorado Springs, CO: TH1NK, 2014.

Byrne, Brendan. "Sinning against One's Own Body: Paul's Understanding of the Sexual Relationship in 1 Corinthians 6:18." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1983): 608–16.

Cantarella, Eva. *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*. Translated by Cormac O. Cuilleanain. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Cape, Robert W. "Cicero's Consular Speeches." In *Brill's Companion to Cicero*, edited by James May, 113–58. Brill, 2002. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047400936_006.

Carson, D. A., and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2005.

Charles, Tyler. "True Love Isn't Waiting." *Neue* 6 (May 2011): 32–36.

Chediak, Alex, Alex Harris, and Brett Harris. *Thriving at College: Make Great Friends, Keep Your Faith, and Get Ready for the Real World!* Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2011.

Choi, Soo-Whan, and Nancy L. Murdock. "Differentiation of Self, Interpersonal Conflict, and Depression: The Mediating Role of Anger Expression." *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* 39, no. 1 (2017): 21–30. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-016-9397-3.

Ciampa, Roy E, and Brian S Rosner. *The First Letter to the Corinthians*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. La Vergne: IVP, 2020.

Cicero. *The Verrine Orations*. Translated by L. H. G. Greenwood. Reprint edition. Vol. 2 Against Verres. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935.

Cline, Foster, and Jim Fay. *Parenting With Love And Logic*. Rev. ed. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing, 2006.

Creech, R. Robert. *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry*. Baker Academic, 2019.

Davis, Jim, Michael Graham, and Ryan P. Burge. *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023.

Deming, Will. "The Unity of 1 Corinthians 5-6." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 2 (January 1, 1996): 289–312. https://doi.org/10.2307/3266857.

Dodd, Brian J. "Paul's Paradigmatic 'I' and 1 Corinthians 6.12." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 18, no. 59 (January 1, 1996): 39–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X9601805903.

Dover, K. J. *Greek Homosexuality*. Upd. ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Drake, J., Nancy Murdock, Jacob Marszalek, and Carolyn Barber. "Differentiation of Self Inventory—Short Form: Development and Preliminary Validation." *Contemporary Family Therapy* 37 (March 26, 2015). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-015-9329-7.

Edwards, Catharine. *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014.

Fisk, Bruce N. "ΠΟΡΝΕΥΕΙΝ As Body Violation: The Unique Nature of Sexual Sin in 1 Corinthians 6.18." *New Testament Studies* 42, no. 4 (October 1996): 540–58. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002868850002141X.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Yale Bible. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. https://search.covenantseminary.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=nlebk&AN=278447&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Reiss. ed. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Freitas, Donna. *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*. Updated ed. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Friedman, Edwin H. *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. New York: Seabury Books, 2007.

Friedman, Edwin H., Gary Emanuel, and Mickie Crimone. *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. Ill. ed. New York: The Guilford Press, 2011.

Garland, David E. *1 Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.

Gilbert, Roberta M. *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*. Edited by Greg Jacobs. 1st ed. Leading Systems Press, 2018.

Gilbert, Roberta M. *Connecting With Our Children: Guiding Principles for Parents in a Troubled World*. 1st ed. New York: Trade Paper Press, 1999.

Goulder, Michael D. *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth*. Peabody, MA: Henderickson, 2001.

Gurrentz, Benjamin. "Living with an Unmarried Partner Now Common for Young Adults." United States Census Bureau, November 15, 2018. https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/11/cohabitation-is-up-marriage-is-down-for-young-adults.html.

Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Reprint edition. New York: Vintage, 2013.

Hans-Friedrich Mueller. *Roman Religion in Valerius Maximus*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Harper, Kyle. "The First Sexual Revolution." *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life*, no. 279 (January 2018): 41–46.

Hays, Richard B. *First Corinthians*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

Herrington, Jim, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech. *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020.

Hubbard, Thomas K. *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

Hurtado, Larry. *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*. Baylor Press, 2016.

Kerr, Michael E. *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2022.

———. "Chronic Anxiety and Defining a Self." *The Atlantic*, September 1, 1988. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1988/09/chronic-anxiety-and-defining-a-self/668356/.

Kerr, Michael E., and Murray Bowen. *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co, 1988.

Kinnaman, David, and Aly Hawkins. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*. 1st ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.

Kruger, Michael K. ed. *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.

Langlands, Rebecca. *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Loader, William. *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013.

Mackie, Scott D. "The Two Tables of the Law and Paul's Ethical Methodology in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 and 10:23-11:1." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (April 2013): 315–34.

MacMullen, Ramsay. "Roman Attitudes to Greek Love." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 31, no. 4 (1982): 484–502.

Marshall, Jill E. "Community Is a Body: Sex, Marriage, and Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:7 and Ephesians 5:21-33." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 4 (2015): 833–47. https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1344.2015.2889.

Martin, Nancy, Lori Baralt, and Claire Garrido-Ortega. "What's Religion Got to Do with It? Exploring College Students' Sexual and Reproductive Health Knowledge and Awareness of Sexual and Reproductive Health Services in Relation to Their Gender and Religiosity." *Journal of Religion and Health* 57, no. 5 (October 2018): 1856–75. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0432-y.

May, Alistair. *The Body for the Lord: Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5-7*. London: T&T Clark, 2004.

Minuchin, Salvador. *Families and Family Therapy*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2012.

Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome. *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*. Reiss. ed. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002.

Naselli, Andrew David. "Is Every Sin Outside the Body except Immoral Sex? Weighing Whether 1 Corinthians 6:18b Is Paul's Statement or a Corinthian Slogan." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 4 (2017): 969–87. https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1364.2017.200020.

———. *Romans–Galatians*. ESV Expository Commentary. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020.

Palmer, R. E. A. "Roman Shrines of Female Chastity from the Caste Struggle to the Papacy of Innocent I." *Rivista Storica Dell'antichità* 4 (1974): 113–60.

Peleg, Ora, and Nogood Harish. "Can Family Patterns Help Adolescents Establish Intimate Social Relationships with Peers?" *American Journal of Family Therapy* 50, no. 3 (June 5, 2022): 227–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2021.1909511.

Regnerus, Mark. *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

———. *The Future of Christian Marriage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Rosner, Brian S. "Temple Prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20." *Novum Testamentum* 40, no. 4 (October 1998): 336–51.

Satir, Virginia. *Conjoint Family Therapy*. 3rd. ed. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, 1983.

———. *Peoplemaking*. Palo Alto, CA., Science and Behavior Books, 1972.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol 7. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018.

Schwartz, Richard C., and Martha Sweezy. *Internal Family Systems Therapy*. 2nd ed. New York: The Guilford Press, 2019.

Smith, James. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*. Baker Books, 2009.

Steinke, Peter L. *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times*. Ill. ed. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *I Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*. Rep. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub Co, 2011.

———. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013.

Tucker, J. Brian. *Reading 1 Corinthians*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017.

Um, Stephen T. *1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

Veyne, Paul. "La Famille et l'amour Sous Le Haut-Empire Romain." *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 33, no. 1 (1978): 35–63.

Von Thaden, Robert H. Jr. *Sex, Christ, and Embodied Cognition: Paul's Wisdom for Corinth*. Emory Studies in Early Christianity. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2017.

Waanders, David D. "Ethical Reflections on the Differentiation of Self in Marriage." *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 41, no. 2 (June 1987): 100–110.

White, Fiona A. "Relationship of Family Socialization Processes to Adolescent Moral Thought." *The Journal of Social Psychology* 140, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 75–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224540009600447.

Wilkinson, L. P. *Classical Attitudes to Modern Issues: Population and Family Planning, Women's Liberation, Nudism in Deed and Word, Homosexuality*. London: Kimber, 1979.

Williams, Craig A. *Roman Homosexuality*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Willis, Kwin, Richard B. Miller, Jeremy Yorgason, and Justin Dyer. "Was Bowen Correct? The Relationship between Differentiation and Triangulation." *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* 43, no. 1 (2021): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-020-09557-3.

Winter, Bruce W. *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*. Ill. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 2001.

Wright, Joanne. "Self-Soothing — A Recursive Intrapsychic and Relational Process: The Contribution of the Bowen Theory to the Process of Self-Soothing." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 30, no. 1 (2009): 29–41. https://doi.org/10.1375/anft.30.1.29.