The Warrior Wives of Evangelical Christianity

Comment from Elder Tess

Counterfeit feminism within evangelical Protestantism

Like the article above, this article is particularly relevant to elder Tess' 4th and final presentation at the LVS camp-meeting, regarding the Papacy, Evangelicalism, and their common ground on the subject of gender.

This is a challenging, relevant, and important article to read and understand.

Article from The Atlantic

The intense focus on sexuality, purity, manhood, and womanhood in certain faith communities—and its consequences

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"Your husband will want sex way more than you do," advises Elizabeth of the blog Warrior Wives in a post called "Wifey Sex Confessions."

"God just made him to think about sex more than you. ... Never demean this about him. Never laugh at him or make fun of him. Accept it as a difference."

Accept it as a difference. It may sound like so much cliched marital advice, but this is a much-discussed idea about sexuality in the evangelical Christian community: Men and women are different.

"There's a lot of concern among evangelical men and women about traditional roles being overturned," said Amy DeRogatis, an associate professor of religion at Michigan State University, in an interview. Her new book, Saving Sex, focuses on the anxieties evangelicals feel about sexuality in American culture. But not other people's sexuality—their own.

Amid the recent wave of gay-marriage legalizations and debates over reproductive rights that were sparked by this summer's Supreme Court decision in Hobby Lobby, it can be easy to assume that evangelical teachings on sexuality are straightforwardly traditional. But "how you have sex, when you have sex, the amount of sex you have, when you have children—even the smallest act within an evangelical marriage can have these larger-than-

life meanings," said DeRogatis. "How you have sex within marriage is incredibly important for you as a Christian, and also as a form of witnessing."

What this means is that there's a surprising amount of sex talk within the evangelical community. A vast industry is dedicated to publishing Christian self-help books with titles like The Gift of Sex and Sexperiment: 7 Days to Lasting Intimacy with Your Spouse. Megachurch preachers like T.D. Jakes and former Mars Hill Church pastor Mark Driscoll have given numerous well-publicized sermons about male and female sexuality and appropriate sexual behavior for Christians.

And then there are the blogs—blogs on blogs on blogs. There are so many sites focused on sexuality within evangelical marriages that they even have their own organization: the Christian Marriage Bloggers Association, "a place for those who support and encourage strong marriages."

Within this constellation of writers, there are a few distinct movements. Some identify with the label of "Biblical Womanhood" or "Titus 2," which refers to a passage in the Bible about the traits that distinguish men and women. There are pro-natalists, who argue against the use of any kind of contraception. And the "purity industry," as DeRogatis calls it, encourages teen women to commit to remaining virgins by taking pledges, wearing rings, participating in workshops, and attending "purity balls."

Some of these movements have gotten attention in pop culture. The 2012 TLC show Virgin Diaries followed adult men and women who had never had sex, many of whom were evangelical Christians. Another TLC show, 19 Kids and Counting, features the Duggars, a 21-member family in Arkansas that's part of the Quiverfull movement, also sometimes called the Christian Patriarchy Movement. According to DeRogatis, this name comes from a passage in Psalms:

Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opportunities in court.

Among these groups, there are a number of perspectives on sexual morality. Some say kissing before marriage is fine, some don't; others say condoms are fine, or not. There's even a degree of internal conflict among them: In a 2009 blog post, Stacy McDonald, an author and Quiverfull apologist of sorts, asked, "Am I 'quiverfull'? No, I think I'd rather be 'Jesus-full.'"

But these groups also share certain qualities and ideas. The first is probably obvious: Evangelical sexuality is overwhelmingly framed in opposition to "mainstream" culture. "Over the past thirty or forty years, evangelicals have been galvanized, often by pastors, and

sometimes political leaders, to look at secular culture and see it as being in opposition to moral values, traditional values, Biblical values," DeRogatis said. This has created a sense of division between evangelicals and the rest of American culture, and "one of the arenas where that gets worked out has to do with sexuality."

Of all the secular specters that haunt the evangelical community, "feminism" is probably among the most disdained. Insofar as the movement is associated with certain legislation, litigation, and causes—like the Equal Rights Amendment, and Roe vs. Wade, and birth-control access—it has very much been in tension with evangelical teachings and sensibilities.

This isn't just about moral opposition to abortion, although that's certainly part of it; it's also about reaffirming the God-given, differentiated sexuality of men and women. "The feminist doctrine of our time upholds the notion that femininity is a matter of cultural conditioning," writes the evangelical author Carolyn Mahaney in her book Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God. "Many feminists argue that the only essential difference between men and women is our anatomy, but Genesis teaches otherwise."

In her book, DeRogatis notes an interesting twist in the relationship between feminism and evangelicalism. "Many people, over time, started to notice that some of the buzzwords within feminism could be reworked—particularly 'empowerment,'" she said in an interview. Evangelical leaders "pretty consciously started using the language of empowerment to redefine it in different ways."

Ironically, this is most potent for young women who grew up in an era of growing rights for women, DeRogatis said. "In the purity movement ... young women are told that [the way] to be truly valued, and truly powerful, is not through the promises of feminism," she said. It's "through the Biblical worldview, where women are protected, and their bodies aren’t disrespected, and they’re really valued for who they are and what they can do."

There are echoes of this kind of counter-feminist backlash among young women who aren't necessarily evangelical Christians, too. On the Tumblr page "Women Against Feminism," women hold up signs explaining their reasons for rejecting the movement, often using the vocabulary of empowerment—intentionally or not: "I am done with feminism because I have equality and my own voice." Or "I don't need feminism because I'm not going to empower myself by bringing others down." The distinctive sexuality of men and women comes up again and again: Feminism, these women claim, forbids femininity—something they see as fundamental to their identities.

People who write and preach on Christian sexual mores have almost certainly helped shape and grow this pushback against feminism in broader American culture. The effect is a kind

of momentum—a feeling of counter-cultural sisterhood. It's an "emerging, conservative feminist identity," as Sarah Palin called it in 2010.

In much of the evangelical literature DeRogatis explores, the tone defies stereotypes about Puritanical sexual mores in the Christian community. "...Many American evangelicals have come to believe that good marital sex is not just ordained by God, but is healthy and leads to strong self-esteem, financial prosperity, and heightened spiritual awareness," she writes. Often co-authored by husband and wife pairs, popular sex guides from the last two decades explore everything from the role of anal sex in Biblical marriages to the virtues of sex toys and raunchy costumes. One author, Marabel Morgan, suggests women should try setting up different scenes and creatively using props, such as a trampoline, to initiate sex.

"The message of this multi-million dollar publishing industry is clear: Evangelical Christians have the best sex," DeRogatis writes.

Predictably, this idea evolved symbiotically with the sexual revolution. "Most early twentieth-century Protestant authors who wrote about sex discussed it in moral and spiritual terms, leaving ... technique to trained medical experts," DeRogatis writes. But with the 1967 publication of Herbert J. Miles's Sexual Happiness in Marriage, that changed. He argued that the "one-flesh relationship" between husbands and wives is the natural basis of all marriages—and, moreover, that "sex is only Christian sex if both spouses are sexually satisfied."

Miles's approach of offering step-by-step intercourse instructions set the standard for modern-day Christian sex books, DeRogatis writes—a particularly important resource for people who deliberately remain chaste before their wedding day. This often includes gender-specific insights ("a woman never ejaculates or expels fluid as does a man," wrote the Christian couple Beverly and Tim LaHaye in their 1998 book, The Act of Marriage). Although that information is arguably logistically important, it also sets up an implied argument: Men have sex in a certain way, and this is how; women have sex in a certain way, and this is how.

Like the distinctively male and female gender roles defended by many evangelical writers, these definitive sexual roles are attributed to the Bible. In The Act of Marriage, for example, the Song of Solomon is cited as a guide for manual clitoral stimulation: "His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me." DeRogatis notes that this is a "uniquely Protestant approach to the joy of sex. The most authoritative text on sexuality is ... the Bible."

This raises the stakes of evangelical sexuality. Biblically inspired gender identity and sexuality isn't just a Sarah Palin-esque counter-cultural fad; it's tied to the foundational beliefs of a large group of Christians. Purity movements like "True Love Waits" and

organizations like The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood developed in response to, and in tandem with, the sexual revolution and everything after; ultimately, they're an attempt to protect what's seen as a core Christian value.

Firm expectations about the meaning of manhood and womanhood can have consequences, though. Some evangelical Christians believe in "complementarian" marriages, in which the husband is considered the rightful head of household and the wife is Biblically commanded to be submissive to him. Widely accepted ideas about gender identity in the evangelical community are rooted in this principle.

"According to evangelical literature, women are more submissive. They're more passive. They care more about emotional and relational issues," said DeRogatis. "Men, by nature, are aggressive. They're leaders. They're people who can sometimes have trouble understanding or controlling their emotions, and they can often act aggressively. These are truths that evangelicals understand are created by God."

Nothing in Christianity says this dynamic should include physical, mental, or emotional abuse; in fact, the book of Colossians in the Bible explicitly instructs, "Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them."

But the question is still troubling: If women are Biblically commanded to submit to their husbands, and their husbands were created by God as aggressive creatures, what's the line between "household leadership" and "abuse"? More importantly, how should evangelical women respond when they think their husbands have crossed that line?

John Piper, a Baptist preacher and the founder of the website Desiring God, answered this question in a video interview in 2009. This is a man who has published more than 50 books, and who serves as chancellor of a Christian college; he has 675,000 followers on Twitter.

Here is what he said.

"If it's not requiring her to sin, but simply hurting her, then I think she endures verbal abuse for a season, and perhaps she endures being smacked for a night, and then she finds help from the church."

Since then, Piper has written on his website to clarify the intention of that statement. But even if he wasn't meaning to excuse domestic abuse by suggesting that women should "endure being smacked for a night," the ambiguity is there: The aggressive/submissive dynamic of complementarian marriages gives men power over their wives, and it's hard to know how that will express itself over the course of a marriage.

"I think that the majority of American evangelicals would say no, that's not how husbands and wives respect each other," said DeRogatis. "But there is an understanding that men and

women are created differently, and in order for marriage to work, you have to understand these differences ... and work with them."

In a survey of 1,000 mainline and evangelical Protestant ministers conducted by the Southern Baptist organization Lifeway this year, researchers found that two-thirds of pastors speak about domestic abuse in their congregations roughly once a year, if that. Although a third of American women and a fourth of American men report that they have experienced intimate-partner violence, 75 percent of pastors estimated that less than 20 percent of their congregants had ever experienced abuse. Nearly 40 percent estimated that less than 5 percent of the adults and children in their congregations had experienced abuse.

Perhaps more troublingly, when these pastors actually did encounter domestic abuse in their congregations, many dealt with it in a "dangerous or even potentially lethal" way, according to the study's authors.

"The top priority in sexual and domestic violence should be to ensure the immediate safety of victims or potential victims," they write. "For example, counseling someone to remain at home with their abusive spouse or partner and 'work it out' can potentially lead to devastating consequences for the safety and health of the victim and others in the home." Yet, 62 percent of pastors reported that they had addressed issues of domestic abuse by providing private marriage counseling to couples.

Choosing to resolve these situations otherwise "may be countercultural for U.S. clergy, especially those who ... view family matters as strictly private, place a high priority on family 'stability,' teach an absolute prohibition against divorce, [or] practice 'male headship' and submission of women," the authors add.

In parts of the evangelical blogging community, the idea that women should submit to their husbands and do everything in their power to preserve their marriages can take a troubling tone. In a Warrior Wives post from 2012, the main blogger, Elizabeth, writes:

_You can pray that God will bless your "sex session." You can pray that he would bring the desire to you. ... I've sometimes felt like, I just can't do this. This isn't going to be enjoyable. I REALLY DON'T WANT TO!!!! And then I've quieted my spirit and prayed. God wants sex to be good! ... He made it to strengthen marriage!

At least sometimes, it seems, this is what it means to be a "warrior wife."

In the final chapter of her book, DeRogatis specifically addresses the experience of non-white evangelical Christians. According to Pew's comprehensive survey of American religious affiliation from 2007, about a fifth of evangelicals are black, Hispanic, Asian, or other races. Since then, that proportion has probably grown; as of 2013, an estimated 16 percent of Hispanic Americans identified as evangelical.

Yet, the many YouTube videos and blog posts and books about sex in the evangelical community are almost exclusively created by white people, DeRogatis said. "Part of that represents the book industry, and part of that is who has been identified as evangelicals, and part of that is the history of the black church—many people not claiming the term evangelical because it's associated with white people."

This creates some symbolic problems—purity being associated with whiteness, homogeneity in the racial depictions included in books, etc.—but it's also an issue of experience, she argued.

There's a "really strong emphasis in the literature that you refrain from sex prior to marriage, then you get married, and within marriage you have children, and you stay married," she said. "There isn't a lot of wiggle room there, or even frank discussion, about the real people who don't live up to that ideal."

Although she stressed that this topic was not a main focus of her research, she did find somewhat different language in the sermons of African American pastors like T.D. Jakes.

"What I saw in Jakes was a tendency to focus more on wholeness and on forgiving yourself: Your sexual past or things that might be seen as sexual indiscretions might be forgiveable. They don't ruin you for the future," she said.

Although DeRogatis said that the audience Jakes is speaking to probably includes more people with experiences that fall outside of the evangelical "ideal" of a lifelong marriage and a minivan full of kids, she also pointed out that this experience probably isn't shared by many white evangelicals, either. It's all about "who's writing the books and who's selling them—who has the market on the books, and who's buying them."

This seems to be a fitting observation for the whole warrior wives enterprise. Everything suggests that these ideas are earnestly and genuinely important to a lot of Christians, and a lot of Christian women in particular. But who's selling them?

https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/11/the-warrior-wives-of-evangelical-christianity/382365/