

True Love Waits pioneer defends sexual purity movement

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NASHVILLE (BP)—Amid new claims sexual abstinence pledges harm teen girls, an early leader in the evangelical purity movement said he does not second-guess its central message.



Richard Ross

“Inviting teenagers into a lifetime of sexual holiness and purity, if consistent with Scripture, is a beautiful thing,” Richard Ross, cofounder of the True Love Waits sexual purity movement, wrote in a December blog post. “I do not feel guilty, nor do I second-guess the rightness of the original message.”

True Love Waits launched in 1993, and since then has spread to at least 100 denominations and student organizations in 100 countries worldwide, with an estimated 3 million students making purity pledges.

Each February, the Southern Baptist Convention observes a True Love Waits emphasis on its denominational calendar. LifeWay Christian

Resources continues to offer True Love Waits resources.

Critics assert purity movement shames girls

The latest in a 25-year stream of True Love Waits critics claim abstinence emphases by evangelical churches wrongly shame girls and cause them to view their bodies as threats.

Linda Kay Klein, author of *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*, said she and other women who took purity pledges as evangelical teens experienced “fear and shame and anxiety” regarding their sexuality.

Sexual thoughts, feelings and choices have driven women in the evangelical subculture to nightmares, panic attacks and other physical symptoms that “mimicked classic PTSD” (post-traumatic stress disorder), [Klein told National Public Radio](#).

The purity movement “was all about how (a woman) needed to be a good Christian by protecting (men) from the threat that is you—the threat that is your body” by wearing modest clothing and keeping mind and body free of sex until marriage, Klein said.

Another critic, Nadia Bolz-Weber, has asked women to send her their purity rings—which symbolize a commitment to sexual abstinence until marriage—so she can melt them down, *The Huffington Post* reported. In exchange for her purity ring, each woman will receive a silicone “impurity” ring and a “certificate of impurity.”

In her forthcoming book *Shameless*, Bolz-Weber claims evangelical teaching on sexual purity has shamed women, and women must reclaim their bodies.

Grieved by impact of ‘distorted messages’

Ross wrote on the [Theological Matters blog](#) that he is obligated to consider such criticism and ask whether “this movement harmed rather than blessed a young generation.”

“I grieve that distorted messages have harmed some teenagers. And I doubly grieve when I learn that some have carried pain into their adult years. But that grief does not cause me to doubt the beauty and rightness of the original True Love Waits message,” Ross wrote.

Seth Buckley, a South Carolina youth pastor who has used True Love Waits since its inception, agreed. He said teaching sexual purity the right way protects teens from harm and does not load them “with guilt if they make mistakes.”

True Love Waits “should never wane because our students are being bombarded with images and music and things on the internet,” said Buckley, minister to students at First Baptist Church in Spartanburg, S.C. “In many ways, it feels like we have an uphill battle. But we must continue to raise the standard of cherishing one another” and teach youth not to “sell out for sexual pleasure.”

Still, Buckley said critics of True Love Waits over the years have helped refine his presentation of biblical truth. Now, for instance, he tells young couples in premarital counseling to expect challenges in their sexual relationship even if they saved themselves for marriage. He also spends more time talking to youth about pornography and the “redemptive side” of True Love Waits, which emphasizes healing and forgiveness following sexual sin.

“I value criticism. (It) allows us to see another perspective,” he said.

Changing approach

Another minister to modify his teaching on sexuality and relationships is Joshua Harris, author of the 1997 bestseller *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Last year, he announced he had changed his mind about some key points in the book—like the wisdom of steering clear of the dating culture.

In December, [Harris told NPR](#) a sexual abuse scandal at the Washington-area church where he was pastor until 2015 made him start rethinking parts of his writings on sexuality. Harris was not implicated in the scandal.

“While I stand by my book’s call to sincerely love others, my thinking has changed significantly in the past 20 years,” Harris said in a statement on his website. “I no longer agree with its central idea that dating should be avoided. I now think dating can be a healthy part of a person developing relationally and learning the qualities that matter most in a partner.”

Ross, professor of student ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said tweaks to individual ministers’ presentations do not change the overall rightness of the purity message.

When “distortions” are stripped away, Ross wrote, *True Love Waits* still proclaims essential messages: “All sexual expression should take place only between a husband and wife in biblical marriage,” and “Christ’s death on the cross makes forgiveness for sexual sins possible.”

Many adults reported *True Love Waits* “was an important factor in their sidestepping sexual sin in their teenage years,” Ross wrote.

“Multitudes of single adults continue to embrace and live out that message. Multitudes of married adults report that the absence of scarring from their teenage years is a major factor contributing to the beauty and joy of their current sexual expressions. Christ be praised,” Ross wrote.