

WHAT MEANINGS DO CHRISTIANS PLACE ON THEIR  
EXPERIENCE OF PRE-MARITAL SEXUAL CONTACT?:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A DISSERTATION

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without Him, I would not have been able to start, persevere, or complete this entire study. Proverbs 3:5-6 was constantly on my mind, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; think about Him in all your ways, and He will guide you on the right paths.”

I also dedicate this to my precious baby girl, SadieAnne Marie. Mommy loves you very much and I am so blessed and so honored to have you as a daughter. Although you are so young and won’t remember how we both had to sacrifice some of our time together while I balanced being a mommy and working on this study, know that you were on my mind every step of the way. Praying that you will read this one day, and that it will draw you closer to God and give you a love for learning more and a quest to always be inquisitive and thus forever chasing after Truth. Mommy loves you, beautiful.

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## ABSTRACT

ANNAMARIE N. FARR-CHRISTIAN

### WHAT MEANINGS DO CHRISTIANS PLACE ON THEIR EXPERIENCE OF PRE-MARITAL SEXUAL CONTACT?:

#### A QUALITATIVE STUDY

MAY 2019

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the meanings of the experiences that heterosexual Christians aged 25 years and older placed on their experience of pre-marital sexual contact using a narrative therapy theoretical framework. The researcher interviewed 11 participants who volunteered for this study. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were recorded, transcribed word for word, and analyzed to discover themes. Three themes and fourteen subthemes emerged from the data. Theme One: Lacking Integration of Faith and Sexual Education with subthemes Why Wait to Have Sexual Intimacy?, No Discussion of About Sex Education, Participants Asking Parents About Sex Education, Positive Experience with Sex Education, and Sex Education From Outside the Family. Theme Two: Exploring Faith and Sex with subthemes Suppressing Sexual Thoughts, Grief Over Decision to be Sexually Active, Pre-Marital Sexual Experiences Impact Self-Esteem, Using Sexual Intimacy as A Tool To Control, Seeking God's Forgiveness for Pre-Marital Sex, Seeking a Safe Haven For Vulnerability, and Pre-Marital Sexual Activity Shapes Future Parenting. Theme Three: Meaning Making of My Faith and Sex with subthemes Marriage Before Sexual Intimacy and Marriage Not Required for Sexual Intimacy.

To support each of the themes, verbatim quotes are used. Through this study, the researcher was able to gain a better understanding of the meanings Christian adults place on sexual contact outside of marriage. The results of this study showed how people can be the stories they tell and as in narrative therapy, reality is formed by the language that is used to describe it. Also presented are clinical implications for family therapists and mental health clinicians, clergy members, parents, and young adults. Limitations to the study were also discussed as well as recommendations for future research.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular Christian abstinence-based programs, “True Love Waits”, was created almost 23 years ago by Southern Baptists who were wanting to educate and advocate for sexual abstinence before getting married (Friedland & Gardinali, 2011). The ideal audiences that this group specifically targets are teenagers and college students. Thousands have made pledges to the group vowing to remain free of any sexual contact before they get married. This commitment to remain abstinent is openly expressed by way of signing a declaration, wearing a ring on their left ring finger (known as a purity ring), or joining a group of like-minded people who will hold them accountable to abstain from all types of sexual contact before marriage. As of 2010, the creators of this program launched a new initiative called The Path to Purity. This action sought to encourage parents to get involved in having an active role in educating their teenagers about sexuality and encouraging those conversations instead of solely relying on the church to do so (Friedland & Gardinali, 2011).

Meschke, Bartholomae, and Zentall (2000) noted that the effort and the time that parents invest in their adolescents are directly related to their adolescents’ sexual behavior. Parental factors that appeared to be related to adolescent sexual behavior based on their findings were that of communication, values, monitoring and control, and warmth and support. Coley, Votruba-Drzal, and Schindler (2009) used family systems perspective and transactional models to evaluate how parenting and adolescent sexual risk behaviors develop together during the mid-adolescence years. Coley et al. (2009) believed that family relationships and the behaviors that parents displayed were especially important in molding adolescents' sexual activity.

Discussing the topic of Christian sexual ethics fosters different questions, and people will often cite specific texts from the Bible to justify their individual viewpoint (Tukker, 2013). Previous research focusing on sexual experiences, such as Powell (2008), Longmore, Eng, Giordano, and Manning (2009), and Zamboni and Silver (2009) to name a few, has predominately focused on adolescents and has used quantitative measures where faith is reported in the study if it was included in the demographics. While Christian adults also have sexual experiences outside of marriage, there is a lack of research and more importantly, there is very little qualitative literature that explores their meanings of pre-marital sexual contact. Pedersen (2014) conducted a longitudinal study of Christianity, sex, and marriage starting with adolescent participants and following them into their late 20s. Pedersen (2014) found that Christian involvement for adolescents, as defined by the author, was correlated with less masturbation, delayed sexual intercourse, postponing the initiation of romantic relationships, a smaller number of sexual partners, and choosing marriage rather than cohabitation before marriage. There was no correlation found between Christian involvement and same-sex experience (Pedersen, 2014).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Little research has focused on the meanings individuals place on their sexual experiences. More research with a qualitative approach is needed that includes adult Christians and their meanings and lived experiences regarding sexual contact outside of marriage.

### **Statement of Purpose**

A qualitative approach was applied in this study to gain a better understanding of Christians who have experienced sexual contact outside of marriage. For family therapists and others working with Christian adults, it can be easy to overlook a person's religious background and how their religious beliefs about sexual contact outside of marriage may affect that person's

self-esteem and their sexuality if they have chosen to engage in sexual contact outside of marriage. Through this study, family therapists and other professionals who work with Christian adults can benefit from the results of this study by gaining new knowledge and insight from the lived experiences of those who have chosen to engage in sexual contact outside of marriage. Most research has focused extensively on addressing adolescent and young college age adults and not those who are 25 years of age or older, thus the need for this specific research.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the meanings that heterosexual Christians aged 25 years and older placed on their experience of pre-marital sexual contact. Eleven audio-recorded, face-to-face interviews were conducted and a phenomenological approach was used to explore the meanings of the experiences of the participants. Through this study, the researcher was able to gain a better understanding of the meanings Christian adults place on sexual contact outside of marriage.

### **Research Question**

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following research question guided this qualitative study: What meanings do Christians place on their experience of premarital sexual contact?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework utilized in this study was narrative therapy, which was founded by White and Epston (1990). There are some assumptions that are associated with narrative therapy when working with clients from this therapeutic model. One is that personal experience is ambiguous, and that reality is socially constructed. Reality is shaped by the language that is used to describe it. Language and the meaning of an experience are recursive, and that the truth may not match a person's historic or another person's truth, but that to the client, it is the truth. Narrative therapy also sees that people can focus on the effects of the

problem and not the cause and that these stories organize our experiences and shape our behavior. When dealing with the problem, the problem is the problem, externalizing. Because people are the stories they tell, the stories that people tell themselves are often based on messages that they have received from society or their families, also known as social construction, and that people have their own unique filters by which they choose to process messages from society (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990).

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms were utilized.

1. Christian: a person who worships a monotheistic God, revealed in Trinitarian form (believing God is God, Jesus, and the Spirit) and who believes that they are a sinner saved from their sin by God's grace through faith in Jesus; who professes that the Bible is God's holy word; esteems worship and prayer as imperative in their daily lives; and thus to lead an ethical life (Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, 2007).
2. Sexual Contact: any touching the another person's body with the intent to arouse or to gratify the sexual desire of another person or self.
3. Non-Marital Sexual Contact: any type of sexual contact outside of marriage.

### **Assumptions**

This study was based on the following assumptions:

1. Participants in the study were a valid and reliable source and were able to be open and candid when reporting their experiences by recalling data accurately.
2. Participants knew the meanings that sexual contact outside of marriage had for them.
3. Participants were able to talk about sexuality to the researcher.

4. The researcher was aware of her own predetermined ideas and interpretations and suspended her own judgements, biases, and opinions during the study.

### **Delimitations**

The following delimitations were applied to this study:

1. The study was limited to individuals 25 years of age and older.
2. The sample was limited to those who self-identify as Christian.
3. The sample was limited to individuals volunteering to participate in in-depth audio-recorded interviews.
4. Participants were heterosexual.

### **The Researcher as a Person**

According to Creswell (2007), a researcher must grasp the concept that the participants' lived experiences are solely an interpretation and one that is viewed through the lived experiences of the researcher's biases, age, gender, culture, and knowledge of the subject matter. Patton (2002) explained that a researcher as a person enhances the research.

As a researcher, I identify and acknowledge myself as the study instrument that holds my personal biases that could potentially influence the results of the research study. I am interested in this study because of my lived experiences both personally and professionally, and those of others around me, regarding sexual contact outside of marriage for those who identify as Christians.

I am a Family Therapy doctoral student at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. I am a licensed professional counselor and licensed marriage and family therapist associate in the state of Texas. I have worked with adolescents both therapeutically and as a mentor in the Christian community for over nine years and have worked in local churches with the singles and

young married population for over six years. I want to know the meanings that Christians place on sexual contact outside marriage and how they would describe their lived experiences. Growing up in the Christian faith, I have struggled, and have seen others struggle, with the concept of abstinence within the Christian faith and the reasoning behind it and not wanting to depend on a loose interpretation of its benefit. Working with individuals on a personal and professional level, I have seen people who struggle with guilt and shame and how it crippled their future relationships or their perception of their self-worth and sexuality. Their choice to engage in pre-marital sexual contact always came with a backstory. However, I have also seen others who have had sexual contact outside of marriage and felt that their decision was the right choice for them, but for fear of retaliation or retribution, would not voice their opinion on why they find it acceptable to them.

By suspending my biases so that participants' true experiences can be revealed, and the integrity of the research not be jeopardized, I implemented what Wimpenny (2000) described as bracketing. As the researcher, I had to be able to bracket my own preconceived ideas and beliefs as they pertain to sexual contact outside of marriage. It was vital for the success of this research that I carefully examined my own biases before each interview, while analyzing the data, and in reporting it, and set those biases aside.

### **Summary**

Little research has focused on the meanings individuals place on their premarital sexual experiences. The purpose of this study was to discover the meanings that heterosexual Christians aged 25 years and older place on their experience of pre-marital sexual contact. Thus, the narrative theoretical framework was used in this qualitative phenomenological study to learn the meanings placed on participants' lived experiences. The research question What meanings do

Christians place on their experience of premarital sexual contact? was used. Definitions of terms were given along with assumptions, delimitations, and the researcher as a person was discussed. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will be able to offer more knowledge regarding this experience and offer insight to family therapists and others who work with Christians who have experienced pre-marital sexual contact and may be struggling with conflicting messages surrounding their experiences.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Regnerus (2007), a sociologist, found in his study that numerous evangelical adolescents followed through with religious decrees in all areas of their lives, but compartmentalized their sexual and religious lives apart from one another; they would adhere to their religious laws in most areas of their lives, except in their sexual lives. One can assume that the same can be said for adults, but not enough research has yet to emerge to see if the same is true for adults. To understand what Christians believe about premarital sex, earlier studies are reviewed and highlighted in order to gain a better perception of the rule regarding premarital sex as a sin, those who have kept that rule, those who have not, and the meaning placed on keeping the rule or not keeping the rule.

#### **The Rule: Premarital Sex and Sin**

According to Reek (2013) when describing faith, and trusting in the Lord, the Biblical scriptures use the same language that is used to describe human intimacy and human sexuality as an illustration of the relationship between Christians and their faith. Madueme (2012) reported that Christians believe that God created Adam and Eve in His own image and that they were not mythical Bible story characters; they were real people who are often referred to as the first humans and that the fall of man was a real historical event. The Fall of Adam and Eve refers to their disobeying a rule that God had put in place. Christians believe that this sin by Adam and Eve allowed sin to permeate throughout the rest of mankind causing severe consequences for all of humanity (Mahony, 2011). The disobedience of Adam and Eve is believed to have caused what Christians believe to be the sinful nature that resides within all mankind and that sin distorts

and perverts all things, including sex (Joo, 2015). Christians believe that the foundation on which a family is built is a marriage between one man and one woman with sex being a family because without sexual desire for another person, there is no uniting in marriage between a man and a woman (Joo, 2015; Veith, 2013).

Sprinkle (2015) wrote that some might argue that when the Bible condemns fornication and sexual immorality, it is also referring to premarital sex. If this is to be true, there needs to be proof of this and not just an assumption. Sprinkle (2015) cited one of the most detailed lists of sexually immoral acts found in Leviticus 18, which does not include sex before marriage explicitly. As an example, he used the passage from the Bible in 1 Thessalonians

4: 3-5:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God. (English Standard Version)

The author of 1 Thessalonians, Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ, is not only referring to adultery, but all types of sex that is outside of marriage and that in the era when the text was written, the Gentiles who lived among the Romans, viewed adultery as a crime, but saw sex with anybody (as long as they were not married) as permissible. Thus, Paul was telling followers of Jesus to be set apart and to not engage in the same behaviors as those who were not followers of Jesus, including pre-marital sex (Sprinkle, 2015).

There is no question that religious teachings have shaped how sexuality is perceived by Christians and that congregations are growing weary of hearing that sex is bad and nasty and should be reserved for the person you love (MacQueen, 2006; Patton, 1985). According to MacQueen (2006), there is a rise of sexual behavior, such as pairing scripture with sexual

practices and being more open to consenting sexual acts, among conservative Christians who feel that the institution of marriage is under attack from infidelity, divorce, common-law unions, and same-sex unions. Patton (1985) discussed how masturbation has been met with opposition both socially and religiously in the Western culture, more specifically with Judaism and Christianity. Because masturbation does not lead to procreation and is seen as selfish, it is viewed as a secret sexual sin.

DeRogatis (2005) followed the sex manual movement among evangelical Protestants and discovered that they embraced the sexual liberation movement and wrote their own manuals, hosted their own workshops, and conducted counseling sessions; they were comfortable in what they were doing because they held the belief that God created men and women to experience sexual enjoyment with the belief that the Bible was and is the most important and authoritative book on sexuality. These sex manuals define limits of “natural” sexual behavior and discuss those desires through scripture. According to DeRogatis (2005), the manuals play a very important role in the evangelical faith in that an individual should not be confined to expressing their faith only by their words and outward deeds, but also by using their bodies in the confines of marriage through sexual intercourse and bodily acts.

### **Do Christians Keep the Rule?**

American attitudes and beliefs concerning sexual behavior have been influenced by the Christian perspective that sex exists for the sole purpose of reproduction (DeLameter, 1981). Since God created male and female as sexual beings, sex is looked upon as something that God gave as a gift to be used within the confines of marriage for the couple to enjoy each other, reproduce, and have a family (Sonnenberg, 2013). By comparing and contrasting studies of those who have made a choice to abstain from premarital sex until marriage and those who engaged in

premarital sex before marriage, researchers can gain a better understanding of the importance that some Christians place on adhering to the rule of abstinence and the rules others have created on their choice to not abstain.

According to Uecker (2008), social scientists know more about the impact that religion and abstinence pledging have on premarital sex during adolescence than they do about any other age group. By using a longitudinal study that contained a series of waves, Uecker (2008) assessed the effect of religion and abstinence pledging on the frequency of premarital sex and examined the processes by which those two variables influence premarital sex. The researcher also asked with whom individuals were having sex. Data taken from Waves 1 and 3 of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health study were used for Uecker's (2008) research. This study contained detailed questions about sexual behavior and included a series of questions about religion that were included at each wave.

Wave 1 took place in 1994 and 1995 and was comprised of in-depth interviews with 20,745 American adolescents in Grades 7-12. Data were collected from their parents, siblings, friends, romantic partners, fellow students, and school administrators. Wave 3 took place in 2001 and 2002 and had 14,322 of Wave 1 respondents with valid sample weights. This wave focused on relationship, marital, childbearing, and educational histories, and dates of key labor force events. Uecker's (2008) longitudinal study afforded researchers the opportunity to see the developmental growth of the adolescents as they transitioned to adulthood. At Wave 1, there were 20,745 respondents and at Wave 3, only 15,197 of the Wave 1 respondents were interviewed, but only 14,322 of them had valid sample weights. The respondents were between 18 and 25 years old at Wave 3 and had married at an early age.

Results from this study showed that premarital sexual activity is frequent among those who marry at young ages. Of the sample, 11% remained sexually abstinent until they were married, 67% had premarital sex with somebody other than their future spouse, and 22% had premarital sex only with the person they married. Uecker (2018) reported that the Mormons in this study reported an abstinence rate of 43% and 16% of conservative Protestants abstained from sex before marriage. However, Black Protestants are less likely to remain sexually abstinent before marriage, with more than 80% reporting they had premarital sex with somebody else other than their future spouse. Uecker (2008) discovered that when the respondent's religious service attendance and personal religious salience were accounted for, married young adults who attended religious services once a week or more during adolescence were approximately eight times more likely to abstain from sex until marriage as opposed to those attending less than once a week or not at all.

Uecker's (2008) results suggested that religious affiliation is less significant for premarital sexual behavior than religiosity, but that some religious traditions are effective in educating their youth on premarital sex. Because more than half of the young adults who considered themselves religious engaged in premarital sex, this study showed that youths were not immune from the secular messages about sex and could be a sign that the influence of the church has diminished when discussing sexual behavior. Participants who remained abstinent until marriage credit the restricting sexual script of their religious group or pledging organization (Uecker, 2008).

College-age students are afforded with the opportunity to explore and cultivate a new sense of self (Davidson, Moore, Earle, & Davis, 2008). By looking at sexual attitudes, levels of premarital sexual involvement, and risk-taking sexual practices, Davidson et al. (2008) wanted to

see if these differed based on race in never-married college students at four distinctly different universities. Researchers provided an anonymous questionnaire to volunteers enrolled in courses from the social sciences and family studies department of the participating universities. The questionnaire contained open-form and closed-form questions covering several areas, including sexual history, attitudes, and guilt and used a Likert-scale on some closed-form questions. Participants were from four different types of universities: A Southern private university (SPRU), a Midwestern university (MWU), a Southwestern university (SWU), and a Southern historic Black university (SHBU). There were 1,618 never-married women and 884 never-married men who volunteered to participate in this study. Researchers used a chi square test to establish any group differences for nominal data and one-way analysis of variance for ordinal and interval data.

Their results indicated that SWU women and SHBU men were more likely to engage in casual dating while SHBU women were more likely to prefer dating exclusively. MWU men were likely to be engaged, and SPRU women and men were less likely to be dating. SPRU and SWU women were more likely to be Mainline Protestant, SHBU women and men identified as Baptist, and MWU women and men were more likely to identify as being Catholic. SHBU women and men were more likely to classify themselves as religious in comparison to others while SWU women and men were least likely to classify themselves as being religious. SHBU women and men were more likely to approve of premarital sexual intercourse (PSI) with a casual acquaintance and an occasional dating partner, MWU women and SWU men were more likely to engage in PSI with a dating partner that they were regularly dating, and both SWU women and men were more likely to approve of PSI if they were in a serious relationship. MWU and SWU women were more likely to approve of PSI if they were engaged. SHBU women and men were

more likely to have had sexual intercourse and more lifetime sex partners than any other of the participants in this study.

SHBU men reported sexual intercourse more frequently than any of the other men who participated in this study. SWU women had sexual intercourse more often than SHBU men and were more likely to achieve an orgasm. SWU women and SPRU men reported the greatest level of guilt over PSI; MWU women and SHBU men reported the least amount of guilt associated with PSI. SPRU women were more likely and MWU women were least likely to indicate psychological satisfaction and SHBU men were more likely and MWU men least likely to indicate physiological satisfaction. Researchers discovered that those students who attended a religiously affiliated university were more sexually conservative than those who did not attend a religiously affiliated university. The researchers were unable to answer why that was and expressed a need to explore that in future research (Davidson et al., 2008).

There has yet to be a study that has shown a direct relationship between the concepts of religiosity and sexual satisfaction (Hackathorn, Ashdown, & Rife, 2015). Because of inconsistent findings in previous research between religiosity and sexual satisfaction, Hackathorn et al. (2015) wanted to offer more details and clarify how religiosity possibly relates to sexual satisfaction. This study examined sexual guilt that resulted from sensitivity to internalized religious beliefs and teachings, as a possible intermediary between the two concepts. Religiosity was based on how much participants internalize their religious beliefs as opposed to self-report measures of attendance to religious services. There were 258 participants in the study who were recruited through MTurk, a survey via Amazon.com's website. The mean age was 31.17 years old. The data were split into two groups: married and unmarried. Researchers had 100 married individuals participate who had been in their current relationship on average for 10.29 years.

There were 135 unmarried participants and of those who participated, 111 were dating, 25 were engaged, and the length of the relationships, on average, was 2.57 years. The Christian Religious Identity Scale (CRIS) was used and is a survey that has two subscales that characterize two types of internalization: identification and introjection.

Religious identification measures the amount of personal value as it relates to religious activities and beliefs that an individual experiences and how that individual sees his or her own religious behavior based on an internal locus of control. Religious introjection measures how much an individual internalizes religion centered on guilt, self-approval, and the need for esteem. Participants of this study also completed the Revised Mosher Sex-Guilt Scale that measures a variety of attitudes about sexual behaviors, and used a scale that rated sexual satisfaction. This research found that internalization of religion negatively predicts sexual satisfaction. Findings from this study proposed that the more unmarried people internalize religious beliefs, the more guilt they may experience about their sexual behavior and the lower their sexual satisfaction was. When researchers looked at the married participants, the opposite was found to be true and the researchers assumed that this was because once married, the same sexual behaviors that were engaged in by the unmarried participants were now seen as appropriate and holy because they were taking place within the confines of marriage (Hackthorn et al., 2015).

Rosenbaum and Weathersbee (2013) surveyed 151 newly married young adults from 9 Texas Southern Baptist churches who had been married for less than 5 years. A self-administered written survey was given to the participants at the beginning of Sunday School by a church employee and reassured participants that the data collected were strictly confidential. Only those who identified as having accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and who attended church *often* or *very often* were used for this survey. This study sought to investigate the frequency and



predictors of premarital sex within a sample of highly religiously involved Southern Baptist young adults, sources of their sex education, and their current attitudes towards secular sex education. Regarding premarital sexual activity, 72.9% reported that they had vaginal or oral premarital sex; from this number, 82.7% reported that they regretted not waiting until they were married. The median age of those who were sexually active prior to marriage and initiated vaginal or oral sex were between the ages of 18-20. Results from this research showed that 25.5% of participants who identified as technical virgins--a person who has never had intercourse--had premarital oral sex. Those who attended church faithfully during childhood were found to have been less likely to engage in vaginal sex, but regarding premarital oral sex, there was no difference found. More than 70% of those who participated in this study reportedly had premarital vaginal or oral sex. Rosenbaum and Weathersbee (2013) discovered that most of their participants were sexually active prior to being married, while still attending church and Sunday School, and supported not having premarital sex due to their religious beliefs. Only one of the 9 surveyed churches showed that abstinence was common among those who married between the ages of 21-24 (Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013).

Discussions about sex are occasionally shunned in religious communities and there are many young adults who are raised in religious homes that struggle with transitioning from being teenagers to becoming young adults; they tend to carry with them the perception that sex outside of marriage is sinful and that a person should wait until they are married to engage in sex (Williams, DeFazio, & Goins, 2013). An open-ended online survey was conducted that examined the transitions that college age students attending a Christian university experienced regarding their relationship between sexual beliefs and behaviors. The Christian university in this study was in the northeastern region of the United States. Williams et al. (2013) hypothesized that the

transitions people experience throughout their lifetime are influenced by others around them such as their values, beliefs, and social norms from family members and close friends. Data from this study were part of a larger project that focused on the sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of students who attended the university that was being researched. This collection of data took place over a two-year period and each question was constructed to reveal the transitions that students attending a Christian university encounter when shifting from the influence of their parents or guardian to being on their own in college. This study had 10 freshmen, 25 sophomores, 20 juniors, and 25 seniors participating.

Of the participants, 57% reported that they would abstain from sexual intercourse until marriage, but 37.5% reported that they were comfortable with, were engaging in premarital sex, or were contemplating premarital sex. The study reported that none of the freshmen who participated reported that that they were engaged in or condoned premarital sex. Williams et al. (2013) explained that when a transition happens between what a person believes as opposed to what they have been taught to believe, it is known as the middle of the road. This occurs when the student attempts to renegotiate the views and beliefs that they are taught by their parents or guardian and the new views and beliefs they encounter while in college. The researchers saw this phenomenon increase from sophomore year to junior year of college. Students who expressed their openness to premarital sex within the confines of a long-term committed relationship believed that it was permissible to engage in premarital sex with their significant other.

The reader can see that there is a vast difference of opinion from the freshman and sophomores to juniors and seniors. One participant was a female Chinese student who said she believed that marriage is the only avenue by which a couple can have sex and that it was especially true within her culture. Another female who was African American and a sophomore

had a very similar view as she said, “I’ve been taught to believe that sex before marriage causes emotional and relational problems, not to mention the risk of contracting sexually transmitted disease” (Williams et al., 2013, p. 554). One white male senior expounded on his beliefs about this:

I believe that premarital sex and living together before marriage is appropriate only when in a long-term, marriage orientated relationship. I think that within this type of relationship, living together and sleeping together can help couples evaluate whether they are right for each other and whether marriage between them would work. I would rather live with someone and sleep with someone before I marry them than get a divorce because I didn’t know what I was getting into. (Williams et al., 2013, p. 556)

A black female senior had a similar view:

I believe that intercourse and other sexual exchanges are meant to be experienced between two people who plan (and will) spend their lives together, I don’t believe that a marriage license is incredibly important, (it’s just a piece of paper) however, it is a good symbol of commitment. (Williams et al., 2013, p. 556)

What the researchers discovered was that their study supported the idea that many students at the beginning, middle, or end of their college transition are committed to abstaining from sexual intercourse until marriage and, as this study exposed, there are others who have not yet made that commitment. Williams et al. (2013) explained that the transition happens once the student starts to distinguish the difference between what was previously taught as being acceptable behaviors and what he or she presently believes is acceptable to them as they mature, grow, and experience new things. Students that participated in this study were taught that engaging in premarital sex or sexual activities of any kind outside of marriage is a sin against

God and morally wrong. This study found that most seniors, as opposed to sophomores and freshmen, believed that if a person is in a long term committed relationship, sex was a permissible part of the relationship and that if both individuals were serious about marriage to one another in the future, that premarital sex was justifiable (Williams et al., 2013).

### **Summary**

Although no qualitative studies were found that looked at the meanings Christians place on their premarital sexual contact, studies have explored the quantitative data between religiosity and pre-marital sex. Most of the studies incorporated other faith-based religions and were not exclusively focusing on Christianity and that most of the studies found focused on adolescents and college age young adults and not mid to older adults. The literature reviewed explored how premarital sex is described as a sin biblically and if Christians are following the rule of no sex before marriage or not and why they have made whichever decision they have chosen. Further research is needed to explore what sexual contact outside of marriage means to Christians.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the meanings that Christians aged 25 years and older place on sexual contact outside of marriage. A phenomenological approach allows for discovery of others' experiences (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995). The results from this study will provide helpful information for family therapists and other professionals who work with individuals who identify as Christians and have had sexual contact outside of marriage. This chapter describes the qualitative research methodology that was utilized to collect and analyze the data related to the research topic.

#### **Methodological Approach**

The primary purpose of this study was to discover the meanings that Christians aged 25 years and older place on their experience of sexual contact outside of marriage. To achieve the purpose of this study, the researcher implemented the phenomenological approach. A phenomenological approach allowed the participants to interpret events and their relationship to those events by being self-aware of the meaning these events had for them specifically. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) explained the importance of the phenomenological analysis by stating that it "...is principally concerned with understanding how the everyday, intersubjective world (the life world, or *Lebenswelt*) is constituted. The aim is to grasp how we come to interpret our own and others' action as meaningful..." (p. 297). It is important not to have the participants remember, but rather expound, experience, and formulate what type of significance and implication each event or experience has on their lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

## **Sampling Procedures**

Snowball sampling was used for this study. Snowball sampling is used whenever participants may be challenging to locate (Babbie, 2001). In snowball sampling, participants, or others who know of the study, use their social resources to refer others who might be interested in participating in the study. Participants were given a flyer after the interview and were asked to pass it along to others who meet the study criteria and might be interested in the research. With snowball sampling, the researcher is enabled to recruit individuals whom they otherwise could not have recruited on their own via other sampling methods (Babbie, 2001).

For this qualitative study, 11 adults, ages 25 and older, who self-identified as Christians, as heterosexual, and who had pre-marital sexual contact voluntarily chose to participate. Data saturation was assumed to be reached once no new information was found (Wray, Markovic, & Manderson, 2007). Participants for this study were recruited on a local level. According to Kvale (1996), the sample size used in this study was suitable to support the study's purpose while maintaining the reliability of the research.

A recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) was created and was emailed out asking for permission to pass out and post in several locations: public bulletin boards, physician offices, therapist offices, churches, and other locations serving the public. Proper consent for posting the recruitment flyers was received at each venue prior to displaying the flyers. Electronic mail messages (see Appendix B) with the recruitment flyer attached were sent to acquaintances who were willing to pass along the research study information to others who might be interested in participating in the study. Interested participants were to call or email the researcher to get more information about the study. Via social media platforms of Instagram and Facebook, the researcher posted a digital flyer (see Appendix I) to her personal social media accounts with the

goal being for others to share the research study with others in hope to reach an even larger audience that otherwise would have not been reached. The researcher was to respond to these inquiries using the phone script (see Appendix C) or the email script (see Appendix D). For those interested in participating in the study, an interview appointment was set at a time and place agreeable to the participant and researcher.

### **Protection of Human Participants**

The research was submitted for approval by Texas Woman's University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to safeguard the participants. No data were collected until the study was approved.

To protect the participants' confidentiality, a coding system was used. The researcher was the only one to have access to any information that identifies the participants. Numerical codes were assigned to each participant and consecutive coding started with the date the interview was taken and then the letter F or M--F for a female and M for a male. The only place the participants' names appear was on the consent forms. The participants' code will appear on the demographic forms and transcripts. Transcripts, audio recordings, consent forms, and the list of the participants who requested a summary of the study's results were kept in a locked cabinet in the home office of the researcher. The researcher is the only one to have access to this locked cabinet. All identifying data, audio recordings, and transcripts will be destroyed two years after completing the study.

### **Instrumentation**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument, and the interview process is the most important part of gathering data. Creswell (2007) wrote that researchers who are creating a qualitative interview procedure should draft a central question. A research question is an

expansive question that asks for an exploration of the research concept in a study so as not to limit the views or answers of the participants during the study. The researcher had an interview guide (see Appendix E) with prompts. For this study, one research question, an interview question, and prompts were implemented. The research question that guided this study was:

What meanings do Christians place on premarital sexual contact?

The interview question that was used in this study was:

Tell me your story regarding your experiences of pre-marital sexual contact.

The researcher used prompts for clarification (see Appendix E).

The interviewing process was the primary method for collecting data because it allowed the participants to explore their lived experiences (Patton, 2002). The interview process was central to the study and the researcher made every effort to conduct all interviews in the same manner. Sprenkle and Moon (1996) wrote that they believe humans to be meaning-making individuals within a socially created paradigm and that everyone's experiences may have multiple meanings within a socially constructed 'truth'. The researcher has the responsibility, as the primary instrument, to have an attitude which that respect towards the participants while also upholding a neutral stance during the interview process (Patton, 2002).

### **Interview Procedures**

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews in a semi-structured, in-depth interview that was conducted using one interview question followed by prompts to encourage participants to speak freely. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for emerging themes. Results have been presented in a narrative format. A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study in order to invite participants to examine the meanings of their lived experiences, personal insights, and stories regarding pre-marital sexual contact.



At the start of the interview, the researcher introduced herself and reviewed the consent form (see Appendix F) with the participants. The participants were given two copies of the consent forms to sign and told that they may ask questions before, during, and after the interview. Each participant was given one of the copies of the signed consent form. In addition, each participant was given a referral list of counselors (see Appendix H). The researcher asked the participants to complete a demographic information form (see Appendix G) that would be kept with any notes made by the researcher during the interview. The researcher offered to answer any further questions after the demographic forms were completed and before proceeding. The researcher followed the interview guide (see Appendix E) to begin the interview. The researcher informed the participant that the interview was to begin when the audio recorder is turned on. Once the audio recorder was turned on, the participant was asked the interview question and the researcher used prompts to clarify and to keep the interview moving (see Appendix E). The researcher made notes on any observed nonverbal behaviors during the interview. Once the interview was completed, the researcher announced that the interview was completed and turned off the audio recorder. The participant was asked if there were any final questions at the completion of the interview and was told that they could contact the researcher or her advisor directly during and after the research process should they need to at any time. Participants were asked if the researcher could give a recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) that they could pass along to anybody else they think might be interested in participating in the research study. The researcher thanked all of the participants for their willingness to participate in the research study.

## **Researcher as a Person**

It is the responsibility of the researcher to separate her biases when she is interviewing the participants. Sprenkle and Moon (1996) report that in all research there is a bias; to minimize bias, the researcher implemented bracketing. Bracketing is a technique whereby the researcher's preconceptions or biases are suspended so that the participants' true experiences of their phenomenon will be revealed to the researcher (Wimpenny, 2000).

According to Creswell (2007), one of the most important components of a qualitative research is to clarify the bias of the researcher to enhance the accuracy of the results. The person of the researcher is a critical dynamic that must be taken into consideration (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). I, the researcher, identify myself as being a Christian and I consider myself dedicated to my faith. I am of mixed race, African-American and Hispanic, 32 years old, married for almost four years, and have a two-year-old daughter. My family and I attend one of the largest and most historically well-known churches in the nation. I serve on leadership teams at the church and am an active member.

I began to identify as a Christian as a child. I grew up in a household where both parents identified as Christians and took my family to church and we were involved in the church as well. When I was in the fourth grade, I began attending a Christian private school; within a week of attending the school, I made the choice to be more dedicated to my faith and went through the prayer of Salvation (when a person confesses their sins and asks Jesus to be their Savior). My faith had always been something that was my parents', and I just assumed I was okay because they were dedicated to their faith. I realized later in fourth grade that I had to take ownership of my own religious beliefs and make a proclamation of faith on my own.

Growing up, I was involved in my local church by way of helping with service projects, serving on leadership committees, and helping in any way that I could. I realized though, that at most of the churches that I was a part of growing up, the youth department and young adult singles group at the church I attended were poorly managed at times. It was as if no attention was paid to those two populations. Not much was said or expounded upon when it came to sexuality and sex. Luckily for me, I had parents who were open and willing to discuss sex with me should I ask. However, I was too shy to ask about it, and I heard things from my peers, which often contradicted what I believed to be true regarding sexual contact outside of marriage and what society said was permissible.

My parents taught my siblings and me about sexuality from a very early age. It started with the "good touch/bad touch" talk and what our genitals were created for by God to do. As my siblings and I got closer to puberty, our parents started to teach us about sex and what the Bible had to say regarding sex. For me, I had heard about sex from my friends at this point and had already formed my opinion about sex. I was struggling with how my peers could be so right and how my beliefs could also be so right at the same time, yet they were very opposite of one another. I appreciated that my parents were willing to be honest about their sexual experiences. What frightened me the most about sexual contact outside of marriage were the consequences to follow physically, spiritually, and emotionally if I chose to engage in sexual contact outside of marriage. It was a real struggle to me at the time because I knew the Bible and what it said regarding the subject, but my faith, believing, if the consequences were as bad as it sounded in the Bible was a concept I could not grasp. I think this was because my peers at the time made it appear that all the negative consequences were fabricated and silly. The confusion of attempting

to mix my faith and socially accepted norms in the society shaped my perception of how to conduct myself sexually.

Because total objectivity is not feasible in qualitative research, Ahern (1999) discussed how researchers are called to put aside assumptions and biases so that the authentic and true lived experiences of participants are reflected in the data analysis and reporting of the research. As the researcher, I had to suspend my personal morals, values, biases, and beliefs in order to ensure the validity and credibility of this research study. By using reflexivity to identify areas of possible bias and by bracketing them, I was ensuring that they influenced my research process as little as possible (Ahern, 1999).

### **Pilot Interviews**

The first three interviews conducted were considered pilot interviews. Interviews were conducted in the same protocol as described earlier. Once each pilot interview was completed, each participant was asked for suggestions for changes they felt could be made regarding the research question, interview question, prompts, and style of the interview. The pilot data were collected, transcribed, and analyzed along with the other interviews. No significant changes were made as a result of the suggestions from the pilot interviews. The pilot interviews were then combined with the other interviews and included in the data analysis procedures.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Immediately following the interviews, the audio-recordings were reviewed and an audio transcription program transcribed the data verbatim. The researcher listened to the audio-recordings, read the transcripts, and made the appropriate edits to the transcripts, adding pauses or non-verbal gestures that the researcher could recall to the transcript. The researcher listened to the audio recording with the transcription and verified that the transcription was done correctly to

include non-verbal cues such as pausing or sighing or anything that was not able to be picked up by the program. The researcher organized the data by reading the verbatim transcripts several times.

Creswell (2007) advised that the data analysis for phenomenological research is comprised of specific steps. The first step would be to read each interview numerous times to arrange and sort the data, and then to highlight significant statements. The significant statements that are found will allow the researcher to develop a list of meaning clusters, which were utilized to explain the experience and perspective of the context surrounding the phenomenon. The researcher must follow these steps exactly as they are outlined. From this data, emerging themes will reveal the most frequent experiences shared by the participants (Creswell, 2007).

### **Credibility**

The researcher had a peer reviewer who was able to help improve credibility, through triangulation. The triangulation method is used to check bias in data analysis. The peer reviewer, who had taken a course in qualitative research methods, independently analyzed data and compared their findings with that of the researcher (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004; Patton 2002). The research assistant was given copies of four transcripts and was instructed to read each of them in their entirety and identify themes. The research assistant also checked for any biases within the data analysis, as well as analyzed, coded, and looked for central themes for comparison with those of the researcher. No identifying information about the participants was given to the research assistant. The researcher compared her findings with that of the research assistant's and they discussed any differences they found, resolved them, and clarified the themes that emerged (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

## **Summary**

This qualitative research examined phenomenologically the lived experiences of 11 Christians who are 25 years of age or older and have had pre-marital sexual contact. Participants' confidentiality was used by utilizing a coding system. Data were collected from the participants who met the criteria. Three pilot interviews were conducted and after they were completed, each participant was asked for suggestions on how the process could be improved. The interviews included one research question, interview questions with prompts used for clarification. They were audio-recorded, transcribed, peer-reviewed, and then analyzed for any emerging themes.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to discover the meanings that Christians aged 25 years and older place on their experience of premarital sexual contact. This chapter reports the results from an analysis of data that were collected from the interviews. The researcher interviewed 11 individuals who reported that they identified currently as Christians and acknowledged that they had premarital sexual contact outside of marriage, who volunteered for the study. In this chapter, the researcher presents the demographics of the sample, and a narrative of the emerging themes.

#### **Description of Sample**

A religious affiliation of Christianity was required to participate in this study. The research sample consisted of 11 research participants. The age of the participants ranged from 30 to 48 with a mean of 32.3. The sample size consisted of 9 (82%) female and 2 (18%) male participants. The researcher conducted 11 face-to face interviews of individuals residing in the North Central Texas area. African Americans made up the majority of this study at 82% (n = 9) and the remaining 18% (n = 2) identified as one of two other ethnic groups: 1 identified as Hispanic and 1 other as half African American and American Indian/Alaskan Native. All participants professed to be Christians (see Table 1). There were two participants who were dating each other during the time of this study (915F and 123M) and who had been in a serious relationship for almost two years prior to this study. One of the partners discussed how she had been celibate for several years now and she had not been in a serious relationship in almost seven years. The female did her interview first and mentioned how she knew her partner would enjoy

talking about this research topic and passed the information to him. The couple's interviews were done separately and approximately three months apart

The relationships of the participants consisted of 6 (55%) single, 1 (9%) divorced, and 4 (36%) married. This sample of participants was highly educated with 5 (46%) holding a master's degree, 1 (9%) a professional degree, 2 (8.2%) a bachelor's degree, and 3 (27%) a high school diploma. No professions overlapped and included one of each of the following: Sanitation Coordinator, Teacher, Attorney, Professor, Nurse, VP Technology Consultant, Entrepreneur, Mortgage Lender, Human Resource Consultant, Therapist, and News Anchor (see Table 2).

Of the participants, 5 (45%) reported having children with their median age being 9 years old and ranging from 1 years old to 21 years old. Of the participants, 6 (54.5%) reported having no children. Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being *very* and 5 being *not at all*, how religious and spiritual they considered themselves to be (see Table 3).

Table 1

*Participants' Study Number, Age, Gender, and Race*

Participant	Age	Gender	Race
214M	33	Male	African American
417F	30	Female	African American
716F	32	Female	African American
89F	39	Female	African American
810F	34	Female	African American



<b>828F</b>	48	Female	African American
<b>915F</b>	32	Female	African American
<b>109F</b>	33	Female	African American
<b>1127F</b>	34	Female	Hispanic
<b>123M</b>	32	Male	African American
<b>1211F</b>	38	Female	African American

Table 2

*Participants' Relationship Status, Education, and Occupation*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
<b>214M</b>	Married	High School Diploma	Mortgage Lender
<b>417M</b>	Single	Some College	Human Resources
<b>716F</b>	Single	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher
<b>89F</b>	Married	Master's Degree	VP Technology Consultant
<b>810F</b>	Single	Professional Degree	Attorney
<b>828F</b>	Divorced	Master's Degree	Nurse
<b>915F</b>	Single	Master's Degree	Therapist

<b>109F</b>	Married	High School Diploma	Entrepreneur
<b>1127F</b>	Single	Bachelor's Degree	News Anchor
<b>123M</b>	Other	High School Diploma	Sanitation Coordinator
<b>1211F</b>	Married	Master's Degree	Professor

Table 3

*Participants' Number of Children, Children's Age, Religious Rating, and Spirituality Rating*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>Children's Ages</b>	<b>Religious Rating</b>	<b>Spiritual Rating</b>
<b>214M</b>	1	1	4-Religious	4-Spiritual
<b>417F</b>	None	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>716F</b>	None	N/A	3-Neutral	5-Very Spiritual
<b>89F</b>	1	19	2-Somewhat Religious	4-Spiritual
<b>810F</b>	None	N/A	4-Religious	5-Very Spiritual
<b>828F</b>	3	9, 10, 21	4-Religious	4-Spiritual
<b>915F</b>	None	N/A	4-Religious	5-Very Spiritual
<b>109F</b>	2	2 and 10	3-Neutral	4-Spiritual

<b>1127F</b>	None	N/A	4-Religious	4-Spiritual
<b>123M</b>	None	N/A	4-Religious	4-Spiritual
<b>1211F</b>	3	1, 3, 16	4-Religious	4-Spiritual

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*\*Religious and Spiritual Ratings were done on a scale of 1 to 5 with participants answering how religious and spiritual they consider themselves to be. The intent of this question was to see where the participants placed themselves at in relation to their religious and spiritual life. The following possible answers were: 1-Not at all Religious/Spiritual; 2-Somewhat Religious/Spiritual; 3-Neutral; 4-Religious/Spiritual; 5-Very Religious/Spiritual*

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## Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to discover the meanings that Christians aged 25 years and older place on their sexual contact outside of marriage. To guide this study, the researcher concentrated on the following research question: What meanings do Christians place on their experience of premarital sexual contact? In qualitative studies, the study is guided by the interview question stated by the interviewer. The interview question for this study was: Tell me your story regarding your experiences of pre-marital sexual contact. The participants in this study were not limited to answering only the interview question. Every participant was encouraged to speak freely and to provide specific details as much as he or she felt comfortable in doing. As needed, prompts and follow up questions were used to gain a clearer explanation on a specific comment that the participant made (see Appendix E).

The researcher was able to analyze each narrative provided by the participants by listening to the audio recordings and transcribing them from each of the interviews. After analyzing the data, the researcher was then able to find several meaningful statements that were grouped into various categories (Creswell, 2007). A peer reviewer was used to analyze four randomly selected transcripts and separately identify meaningful statements and themes. Once compared, the reviewer's themes were consistent with those that were identified by the

researcher. As participants were able to talk about their experiences with premarital sexual contact, three themes and fourteen subthemes emerged from the data. Theme One: Lacking Integration of Faith and Sexual Education with subthemes Why Wait to Have Sexual Intimacy?, No Discussion of About Sex Education, Participants Asking Parents About Sex Education, Positive Experience with Sex Education, and Sex Education From Outside the Family. Theme Two: Exploring Faith and Sex with subthemes Suppressing Sexual Thoughts, Grief Over Decision to be Sexually Active, Pre-Marital Sexual Experiences Impact Self-Esteem, Using Sexual Intimacy as A Tool To Control, Seeking God's Forgiveness for Pre-Marital Sex, Seeking a Safe Haven For Vulnerability, and Pre-Marital Sexual Activity Shapes Future Parenting. Theme Three: Meaning Making of My Faith and Sex with subthemes Marriage Before Sexual Intimacy and Marriage Not Required for Sexual Intimacy. To support each of the themes, verbatim quotes are used.

### **Theme One: Lacking Integration of Faith and Sexual Education**

As the participants began the interview, most of them responded to the interview question by providing information about where they had learned about sex and what type of religious upbringing; if any, they had, what type of relationship they had with their parents; and where they learned about sex from. Participants expressed that the message they heard in church and at home was pretty consistent, but that it varied greatly from what they learned outside of the home and church by way of peers, non-parental figures, and media. This caused confusion and curiosity about sexual exploration and experimentation.

**Why wait to have sexual intimacy?** All of the participants described how their religious upbringing did little to enhance their understanding of why they should wait until marriage to have any type of sexual contact other than it is a sin. Growing up in a Christian faith-based

household and attending church had little to no impact on their decision due to the fact that they just did not understand the why behind the message of waiting.

For example, two of the participants described how going to church was just another family activity that was not questioned and just obeyed.

(716F) ...when we were little we would go to church, but it was like you know your mom coming to wake you up "Oh we're going to church" but it wasn't like I was having conversations with my mom and dad about the Word. [shrugs shoulders].

(89F)... a kid growing up it was you go to church on Sunday because that's what you're supposed to do. That's what we do. We go to church on Sunday we go to Bible study on Wednesday. You don't do this you do do that. And it was I wasn't going to church because I had a connection with God and I wanted to go to church. I went to church because that's what I was expected to do. That's what my mother did. That's what her mother did. That's what we did. You know and like...as a culture that's what Black people did. You go to church. If something's wrong you go to church. Um [laughs] so it wasn't necessarily that connection, it was I was doing it out of this is what I've been told and so I'm doing what I'm supposed to do.

Two other participants depicted how their parents emphasized the importance of the Christian faith as a part of their family legacy.

(810F) So I grew up in a Christian home. Uh my parents are umm from Nigeria. So, they're super spiritual. I don't know how much you know about Nigerians, but they love they love God. Umm and so that's the environment I grew up in. [shrugs shoulders and leans head to the side].

(109F)... growing up in a Christian household, my dad was very adamant that we're going to learn about Jesus and you know and things like that and the goal for him was for us to be saved, and so once I accepted Christ I knew that God did not like did not ordain premarital sex which was basically intercourse before marriage. Um so I was I was brought up that way to not do it [premarital sex]. It was very much shunned you know. [made eyes bigger for added emphasis].

**No discussion about sex education.** For all but one of the participants, it was significantly evident that they had little to no discussion or education about sex from their parents from a biblical perspective or even about basic sex education. With the exception of one participant, the other ten described how they learned the majority of their basic sex education outside of the home. Growing up, the participants expressed that they felt uncomfortable to talk to their parents about sex largely due to hearing their parents either not discuss sex, echo the church's message of not having sex because it was a sin, condemnation to hell, that sex was seen as gross or disgusting outside of marriage, and for the females of this study, possibility of pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease was almost guaranteed.

Three female participants described how their parents painted a very negative picture of men as an avenue to explain why sex before they were married is wrong or sinful. The hope was that in doing so, they would discourage their daughters (the participants) from having sex outside of marriage and wait to even pursue a romantic relationship until they were older and in college, preferably.

(417F) I didn't have the birds and the bees talks with my mom... once my mom got married, and she married a pastor and that whole thing, they didn't talk about sex. The only conversation we ever had was men are dogs so just don't deal with-....Just don't. It

[long pause]. Was more so like you know men are, well not on really my mom's end, it was more his [referring to step-father] perspective like men only see... men only see this [points to vagina] and that's just what it is. But no one ever said like what happened.... (89F) My mother was just one of those people um you know we talked about a lot of things and we're pretty close but never really like conversations around sex, and are you having sex and different things like that. It was just you don't have sex until you're married period. You know there was no other discussions around it outside of that conversation. And then with my dad. It was definitely umm you know if you have sex then that made you not a good girl...I was always a daddy's girl... With my dad... and I don't know if maybe that was like if I put the fear in you, maybe you won't do it [have premarital sex]”

This particular participant explained how the pregnancy scare tactic was used in her home.

(810F) I didn't really umm have the closest relationship with my parents not because I didn't want to umm or they didn't want to just because they're working all the time. So, they just didn't have a whole lot of time... but I heard that umm don't have sex. Don't get pregnant. So yeah...

**Participants asking parents about sex education.** Some participants described that they were the ones that initiated the topic of sex to their parents, who, to them, appeared apprehensive and uncomfortable talking to their child about sex and mentioned to them that they shouldn't have sex but still lacking the reasons behind their beliefs as to why.

(214M) I guess it's always awkward to talk to your parents about sex and things of that nature... I think my earliest memory with that I think I asked my dad I think I asked him

you know was it okay. What. I mean why do why why when I see a pretty girl my you know my anatomy, why does it get hard? And he explained to me you know that...was a natural thing for that to happen but you know it's you're not supposed to act upon it or do anything like that at my age... I was probably 9 years old and yeah uh so that was I was like ok well I'm not abnormal. This is supposed to happen...

(89F)... After I came to her it still was not a conversation. It was like “Hey well if you feel that that is needed you know we'll go to the doctor and you know make sure you get tested for everything and you know do what you're asking me to do but you still know that this isn't what you should be doing.” And that was like the only conversation around it and we've never have any other discussion and even as a grown woman we've never had any other discussion really ...

Some of the participants described how their parents never talked to them about sex at all. They were unsure how and if they should broach the subject with their parents and were intimidated to do so. One participant describes how her mother was very secretive and private about her experiences with sex even though she knew that her mother had, after becoming a widow, a child out of wedlock. The participant described how she was intimidated to ask her mother about sex in general.

(1211F) My mom never talked about it. She [got] mad when I did. But she never talked about it.

Another describes how her parents did not talk to their children about sex whatsoever and yet still expected them to remain virgins via an unspoken rule. Ironically, however, the participant describes how she and her brother are not virgins and her sister prefers to be in



relationships with other women and how neither of them followed the unspoken rule of being sexually pure.

(716F) They didn't really talk about it with us [says shockingly] ... My parents never ever talked to me about sex...I can remember when I first went to college my Mom, umm she was like helping me unpack my room and what not and she gave me some condoms and I was like, "What mom?!" And she was all like yeah here you go. [laughing] but that was it...I just feel like we as a family we've never been open about anything and good at communicating.

**Positive experience with sex education.** One participant, who is the anomaly of this particular study, described how her relationship with her mother set the course for how she viewed sexuality and premarital sexual contact in her own life. She describes how her mom set the tone for accepting sexual exploration as a natural occurrence at every developmental stage at life and how when her mother discovered her masturbating at the age of six, her mother embraced her and set some parameters around her sex life as young person that she feels set her up for success later on in life. This experience that she describes is vastly different from the other participants but was echoed as something they wish they would have received from their own parents.

(1127F) It was as a conversation my mom would openly have with me that it was not something to focus on in my teen years that my schoolwork was more important. That was more so her approach. Although the Bible was always there. But what I read in the Bible and what I heard from church is something that I held as my truth and when I would come home of course my mom would go to church with me. So we believe those things but they were just so ingrained in me that I know my mom has said she just knew I

wasn't. Going to be doing stuff like that. But she also wanted to make it clear that I had one job to do as a kid and that was to make good grades to be focused. She didn't want me to be boy crazy. So yeah that's what I heard from mom... And I do um I really do uh get my mirror image from my mom. And I accredit that to her because. My mom has never shame me for my sexuality. And for the choices I've made. And I think that helps a lot because there's a lot of people whose opinions I care about. And of course, my mother is one of them. But [emphasized] in her case there's so much information. It started when I was a kid. My mom actually caught me masturbating. and that may have been the breaking moment that it would have been completely awful. She could have absolutely shamed me about it but my mom never did. She said it was OK [smiles largely]. Um It was OK and it wasn't not [emphasized by clasping hands together] normal. It was something that people did. But, at the same time. I. Know that. I'm. Not perfect and uh Even as an adult my mom knows I'm not married. And she also knows that she doesn't have grandkids. Like she knows I'm not irresponsible. She also knows that I make good decisions. So uh even sexual encounters is our is conversation topics. If it's just me and her sometimes. Uh It just it. That's not anything I got from the church. That was my mom. She just let me know that yeah it does feel good. Like You know don't be embarrassed because I was embarrassed (makes a grand gesture and rolls eyes) like something in me told me be embarrassed about this. And it's the weirdest thing. How your thoughts evolve, and you know I probably shouldn't. It was so taboo. But she walked in on me and it was that was it. She made feel completely comfortable about it [smiles warmly].

**Sex education from outside the family.** Be it peers, social media, entertainment, older siblings, or family members, most if not all of the participants discussed learning about sexual contact from outside of their household. Some by watching family members and peers' experiences and others by just experimenting sexually and trying to figure their way through their experiences.

Some of the participants described how they felt that they did not learn about sex until they actually had sex with their partner. Their stories were similar in the sense that they both acknowledged some awareness, by a family member, telling them to make sure that whomever they had sex with knew how to protect themselves, but that it was not until they had sex for the first time that they felt that they actually learned about sex.

For example:

(1211F) Um my grandmother. I remember a long time ago. She was like maybe the only one that said if you ever have sex make sure he wears a condom. So, she kinda showed show me how to put a condom on a banana type [starts to laugh hysterically]... But as far as how I learned about sex I just think it came from people that were already having sex that they were pursuing. ..But I just think that was from men or guys that pursued me that knew something that I didn't know you know because people can bring you in their world. And I think I got brought in different worlds that I was kind of blind to. But then I became a part of it in some way. And I had to find my way out.

Other participants described how they watched their family's lifestyles play out and how that influenced and became apart of their education regarding sex and how it later on shaped their attitude towards it.

(417F) So everyone in my family either dated a really long time. They have children and they got married and they've just been together forever. Like that's really like their story...But I definitely got it from like my [older] cousins and things like that...And so just them talking about it. I personally didn't want to have sex. Because I was just like if this is how guys treat women like this ... like I don't want to be treated like that ... And then so I just kind of held onto my virginity and kind of took a stance...I want to wait till I'm married... in my family, you know, we had people having kids as young as 13...But also, you know as far as like faith and everything like that like that's important you know that you give a why because some people aren't necessarily just fully compliant. Some people need to understand. Like why these are necessary.

Others described how their culture and environment in the education system is what influenced their understanding as it pertains to sexuality.

For example:

(915F) ... like in umm culture and in marriage I had no real understanding, or I guess information, to help me make good good decisions I'll say. So umm my teachings a lot came from what I saw like culturally like with peers and in umm media and just in in culture period...And at the same time culture is teaching you that this is normal. This is something that everyone does. We all desire to have relationships... my first real relationship I was like "OK. So this is what I'm supposed to do and he loves me so that makes it OK." ...it was something that I thought was necessary to have like a committed relationship.

(123M) I grew up in an inner-city school so it was often times expected that you have already had it [sex] by the time you get to high school. So. Um it was more so doing it for

having that that kind of that experience or somewhat experience in uh my freshman year and then going all the way up to when I was in my junior year. Uh but yeah that's how I began... Yeah it's you're more so asking people around your age because they're the only ones who will talk to you. The people who the people that are a little bit older who may not have the best influence...we were all in like 7th grade we were twelve and he [friend's older brother] was like "you ain't got none [sex] yet?" And I was like "no I haven't" [laughing]

(214M) Well we had in school I mean we had anatomy classes when we were like in elementary, we just didn't know about the body parts and things of that nature. But as far as details about sex period I learned most of what I knew when I was younger from other kids to be honest. Uh when I was in. I mean I can go so far as to remember kids in elementary talking about. I remember hearing the word virgin. I remember I was on a school bus in elementary and someone asked me was I a virgin. And I didn't know what it was. I didn't even know what it meant. So I said no just because I didn't know it was in all the kids started laughing...

## **Theme Two: Exploring Faith and Sex**

Participants reflected on their premarital sexual contact experiences and described the series of emotions that they felt during and after. As they processed their sexual education and their faith, they were brought to a place where they felt they were forced to make a decision of how they were going to choose to live their life. By reflecting on their personal spiritual journey and their religious knowledge and upbringing and combining that with their sexual experiences, they started to make meaning out of this flood of emotions and circumstances that they were feeling and found themselves at an impasse where they felt forced to decide how they were going

to live their life moving forward. It prompted the participants to initiate some sort of change for themselves and to choose to understand their faith and their beliefs for themselves.

**Suppressing sexual thoughts.** Most of the participants discussed the process of suppressing their thoughts and desires for premarital sexual contact and the inner conflict and turmoil that it produced within them. They described themselves at times rationalizing to either abstain from sex or to engage in sex. By inhibiting these thoughts and feelings, participants either felt that they were not acknowledging and dealing with their feelings or normalcy of having sexual urges. They described how they, at times, felt that they were in situations where they were compromising who they were and felt a struggle of how to handle what they felt sexually. The consensus among the participants was why would God create something so bad to share when you are not married and then when you got married, it was made good again; and, if sex was so bad, why did they desire to have premarital sexual contact and struggle with the idea of remaining abstinent or not engaging with the opposite sex romantically and intimately.

(214M) So there's a battle that I face each and every day. Um the spiritual side versus the flesh side and the spiritual part of me convicts me of any any kind of sin that I am tempted to engage in. And my flesh battles that spiritual side to give in to that same sin. So um I'm left with a choice of which one I'm going to listen to ... when it comes to premarital sex...I liked it and.. I wanted to experience it again. I mean I didn't want to disobey God so I would make up an excuse to kind of make myself feel better about myself. To kind of suit what I want to do. So I would say to myself you know what, I'm only having sex with one person it's not like I'm doing you know going out and try and have sex with every girl I see. I love this person you know. So I would make excuses as

to why it was OK for me as a way to deceive myself into thinking God is OK with it. He understands He knows my heart. And even though I knew it was wrong I made excuses.

(123M) Yeah I was taught not to do it [says hesitantly and ashamedly] but it was one of those things I wanted to experience. Or I guess experienced played a- [pauses] And so for a while there I was like I was going to be a savage. And I tried it for three months and it wasn't cool. So I quit. It wasn't for me. [chuckles a little bit].

(1211F) Um I still could not fight off the sin. because like if you don't know the depth of the consequence, You know. I mean that but that's just what it was. So to be honest um we started dealing with lust [chuckles] in your heart. And you start confusing affection and the passion with love. You don't know. (1211F)

(810F) So from like 16 to 25 I really just didn't do much...Thinking that I could just do it on my own and then ask God for forgiveness later and I just had I had to go through a journey and I had to be honest with that journey and say OK, um God I'm not really going to ask for your permission at this moment but um and realizing like it didn't it didn't offer me the satisfaction that I thought it was going to offer it really just brought about brought about a lot just opened a door that I knew shouldn't of been opened and um I can understand that now umm versus obviously early on... It wasn't really understood like. OK well then why did why was I created this way. You know I'm supposed to have sex when I got married. OK well what am I supposed to do with these feelings and I didn't really understand any of that it took me years to figure out that what I'm feeling is normal. I just have to really allow God to be my parameter creator you know like OK utilize utilize the word of God Holy Spirit.

(1211F) But it was just a part of what I did if I was in a relationship with someone. So I didn't sleep around with people but I tend to have long relationships. And then it would become a part of that and I would break up and get out of a relationship because of that. Trying to stop me you know. Um but because I didn't know the word of God um and the consequences of my sin. it never could take root, like my faith could never take root to get me to fully stop...Even though I knew it was wrong, I felt for whatever reason, that needed to (claps hands together) solidify the situation. (1211F)

**Grief over decision to be sexually active.** Several of the participants described feelings of deep sadness and disappointment over their choice of committing a great wrong against God, and to some, against the person they were with. Participants would describe how, although in the beginning of their journey it was not enough to keep them from doing something sexual, they arrived at a place in their journey where the feeling of grieving God's heart became too much to tolerate, and they began to feel feelings of regret and remorse.

For example:

(716F) ...umm I regret doing it because I I have always believed that God wants me to wait until I'm married... so I just had sex and I wish I never did but umm (looks away in sadness).

(214M) Um Did I feel remorseful afterwards? Yes I did. Did it stop me from doing it? I wish it would have my convictions would lead me to want to stop. But uh my flesh eventually took over and I gave in to it... So that was my first experience which I would say wasn't the best, well it was the best as far as like teaching me a lot about myself.

(417F) ...it was the weirdest thing and I was just reflecting on that like why did you even you probably should have kept it. But, losing my virginity taught me a lot about myself.



A lot of things that I thought that I would never do. Kind of did and so that was one part of it... but for me personally it was just like. This is like it's not worth it [whispers] to me you know as far as like how things can play out... Yes. So. Me losing it was the dumb(est) was not a good reason to do it.

At the time of this interview, this participant, who was a mother to two boys and one girl, had recently found out that her teenage son had sex with his first girlfriend. A few days before the interview, she explained how his behavior began to change and how he became defiant and he eventually asked to move out of her home and move with his father who was in the next neighborhood. She described feeling regret and remorseful over her premarital sexual decisions and although she felt like he should take responsibility for his own actions, she could not help but feel that she was more responsible for the direction his life was going in the area of sexual purity.

(1211F) I take blame for my life. I feel like this happened because of me. Like because I didn't save myself. You know like I just feel like. It was just bound to happen because it's the same enemy tricks.

Of those who participated in the study, eight of the participants described feeling as though they had saddened the heart of God but were unsure of the why. They recalled feeling like they had let themselves, their family, and their personal convictions down. They felt ashamed and overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and concluded that it was due to committing a sin with one's body against God.

(214M)...I didn't feel great about it afterwards...Well each time I reflected upon what I did for a period I felt bad about it. I went to God and asked for forgiveness. Um and at that time I told myself that I wasn't going to do it again.

(716F) It makes me emotional [begins to sob almost uncontrollably] like I wish I had never did it and like just thinking about the people that I did share myself with like. I just feel like you know more like when you wait, that you will know if somebody loves you... So yeah, shame on me [starts to laugh].

(810F) I never met the person before which is so embarrassing, but hey, I'm over it now... so I just decided to kind of go along with whatever he wanted to do with the exception of actually having sex. So, anything. Pretty much umm besides that. And uh that was Yeah like I said it was so embarrassing ... I wanted to kind of experience like what it would feel like if I did. And immediately afterwards I was so like not even just embarrassed, but I was so um ashamed. I was really shamed. I just felt like now I have to do so many other things to get back into God's good graces again. Umm saying sorry and not you know wanting to do it again wasn't enough because I just had the wrong mindset. I didn't know any better. I just knew don't have sex. That's all I knew. I didn't understand like what was the reason or what was the point.

(109F) And I mean of course I felt horrible afterwards and I felt (snickers) like if my parents every found out they were going to unlove me. (laughs) at any given moment you know... Pretty horrible. (laughs)... . I did feel dirty because it was not in a very respectable place. It was in a car. (109F)

(1211F) But I remember feeling some type of shame and leaving and I was like Take me home. Take me home. And I remember him never talking to me again after that. So that was my first incident. Um I didn't know why it wasn't right. But it wasn't right. Um It was like innocence was taken away in that moment. That was. I I remember feeling, now this is kind of embarrassing to say... (1211F)

**Pre-marital sexual experience impacted self-esteem.** Participants described how their experience had a direct impact on their self-esteem and deemed themselves as being unworthy and what that process was like on their journey to understanding what place sexuality has in their life. Some of the participants described feeling as if though either God or their parents would not love them anymore or that they might have to give penitence of some sort to make restitution for their sin and how the relationships with their partner also played a role on how worthy or unworthy they saw themselves.

This participant describes how she, being very competitive in general with all things in her life, constantly felt like a failure when young men would dismiss her and the relationship due to her being a virgin (before meeting the man she would lose her virginity to) and how that feeling of failing in previous relationships took its toll in her view of her sexuality.

(417F) Really. It made me feel like hey what the heck. I feel like a failure. I feel like I lost it. And so that's how it made me feel because you know with him he was so receptive and then to these other guys it was like I would either get ghosted because I was a virgin. It was like a terrible stigma for me to haven't [had sex]. And I was just like okay whatever and just kind of kept rolling... But. It eventually happened [losing her virginity].

Others described how initially, they did feel like they were unworthy of love or any type of romantic affection prior to engaging in any type of premarital sexual activity and how not until after having been intimate with a partner, that at some point, they realized that they did carry some value and were worth the effort of being pursued and waiting if that's what they choose to do.

(810F) Saw myself as broken and I just didn't feel like I really needed to or really should've deserved any sort of grace or mercy it was just a very uh frustrating time for

me... Yeah. So it wasn't an official relationship it was just we kind of just kind of fell into it. So, it's like Oh OK. Umm you know. I was not happy...don't have sex you know your worth girl because you know is God God wants you to be a virgin before you get married. You know it's the best way to do it ... and I have to really understand who I am and understanding that I don't have to compromise for the sake of OK, well I really love this person or well this is how I was created anyway.

(1211F) So I don't think I knew like how to value myself. I didn't think I knew who I was in Christ.

One participant describes how her tumultuous relationship with her father, combined with having a pregnancy scare and being told to abort the potential child, and trauma of being sexually molested more than once in her life, set the tone for dealing with severe depression and issues of feeling unloved, not beautiful, suicidal ideation, and not worthy to be loved like she wanted to be, which at one point, transcended even how she saw her relationship with God.

(109F) So high school year ... ninth [grade] I was bullied as a kid in school. And so your self-esteem kind of takes a hit after a while. I didn't really have great self-esteem ... to begin with... kind of feel like the odd ball out...and I didn't care to be popular but I was very much a people's pleaser ... My self-esteem was just dwindling. So yeah know...You know like going through that whole experience. I think about how I always felt like everybody saw me as crap... I don't really know fully know why I thought he [her father] would not love me anymore just because that's how strict he was growing up...and am I unworthy and I had to go to church that weekend and I felt very much dirty and was like ugh it's horrible. You know I hadn't told anybody what I had done...so it was just that secret thing very much a burden. Yeah it's horrible... that and so I really had to dig into

the word and know that God says I am I am above his flowers and birds and things that but it's hard because I really feel my self-esteem really I feel like at this point was very much crushed.

**Using sexual intimacy as a tool to control.** As participants retold their experiences of premarital sexual contact, some of them described how, with their respective partners, they often either felt the need to be in control due to feeling out of control spiritually and felt that they tended to manipulate the situation to fit their needs, or they felt manipulated and objectified by their partners.

These two participants described how they felt, initially, safe and cared for enough to justify and necessitate a reason to be intimate with their partners, despite what they felt about premarital sexual contact in the beginning: that it was a sin. Both echoed very similar experiences regarding how they felt blindsided by their partners' treatment of them after being intimate with them.

(1211F) And I remember a young guy that I was dating ... I remember him... He was a year older than I was. So that was like his... aim. Was to break my virginity. And ... he kind of planned the whole situation out... And again he wanted it. So eventually I ended up falling into that...it was nothing I ever wanted to do but it was just.[pauses] I [pauses] Felt like [pauses] I don't know. Maybe I was just and accommodator... I would say my my temptation to stay in sex came from my inability to say no to people. You know what I mean? letting Them have power over me.... I didn't feel I felt like it was my choice but it really wasn't my choice. I was letting someone umm dictate to dictate the situation.

(109F) ...and he knew that I was [waiting to] have sex before marriage... He would still try...He supposedly respected that but it didn't really pan out so he would try or ask and

whatever and I'm just like no and he would attempt to do things and I'm like no. And after I don't know four or five months. And so just a lot of things I I just felt like I was getting beaten down by everything but he was so persistent too so that on top of my self-esteem issues and not feeling wanted by other people kind of just like I gave in to his persistence... I never told many people this. I was actually molested in third in the second grade. You know the guy you know decided he wanted to fill me up whatever and my cousin did the same thing (in the tenth grade). You know so it was all that and this was and all that happened before having sex.

Others came to the conclusion that they did not want to cheapen themselves or others or feel obligated to have sex because they were in a relationship.

(716F) Like I don't want to feel like just because I'm in a relationship that I have to have sex.

(810F) ...because um when I say relationship, I actually use that word pretty loosely because it wasn't an official relationship it was just I guess you could call it more like a situational relationship. Um so it was like OK well this is the only way I can really get close to you and all right you know fine. umm I felt more in control that way because I kind of dictated what I wanted to happen and what I didn't want to happen. Umm pretty selfish but that's how I saw it. Umm I had a very skewed view as to what it's supposed to be like.

(123F) I'm probably better now but I'm glad I didn't do as much as I probably could have or had access to. Um because I see the way that it changes men and how they relate to women later on in life. It begins to you look at women as a tool and not as a person. Or a

thing. And not as a human being with feelings and emotions. With wants and desires themselves.

**Seeking god's forgiveness for pre-marital sex.** Many of the participants were able to recall the moment they felt redeemed and forgiven by God after choosing to engage in premarital sexual contact. Although they did acknowledge on many levels experiencing some sort of consequence for being what they felt was disobedient towards God, they felt that they had a chance to grow through their experience after seeking forgiveness and experiencing redemption that molded them into the person they currently were at the time of this study. They saw the lesson as a blessing.

(716F) ...over the years I can see that this is true for me because there have been plenty of experiences in my life where like umm I feel like He's either saved me like from having a STD or like things that could have been worse than they are so for me..Umm I forget what the message was in church yesterday but ummm I really realized like He has a plan for each and every one of us and that was you know my road to travel [started to get emotional and cry]. Had I not travelled down that road I would not be where I am today. I wouldn't be who I am today. That journey was really necessary. It was necessary.

(214M) The moment that you don't have the Holy Spirit convicting you is when you're really in danger. It's what it where it's what the Bible calls you have any reprobate mind at that point. So even though I've done wrong several times and tried to drown out the Holy Spirit He still talks to me and tells me what I shouldn't be doing when I'm in a situation where I should be following God and that conviction is always there and I thank God for that because He could've easily stripped it away from me and just let me go on about my way. And that's obviously a place that no one should want to be in.

(109F). But I mean of course you know um Christ is forgiving and no matter how many times we sin He always forgives us and so I'm grateful of that.... I just felt like I was closer to God back then drew it drew me closer to God because like I literally felt like crap...I just felt like God was reminding me that you know I love you and I made you and no matter what your faults are you're going to be my child... [Begins to tear up] Sorry I'm getting emotional. [cries] Um So I got some control over here but how I made it through that whole part my life is just really just diving into God's word and reminding myself that you know God does love me and no matter what people made me even feel God doesn't think bad things of me.

**Seeking a safe haven for vulnerability.** Participants seemed to find a safe haven within their own created community. For most, it was surrounding themselves with likeminded people whom they felt they could learn from, grow in their faith, and be held accountable to and with. They described these relationships as being very purposeful and intentional. They helped to aid the most in making their journey to self-discovery regarding their spirituality and sexuality more manageable, less taboo, and free to express their true authentic self. Within the confines of their community, they felt comfortable being vulnerable.

(810F) It was it wasn't until I actually got honest because I think the what the enemy likes to do is keep us enclosed and keep us isolated. So, um once I really was (exhaled with relief) like ok I can share this. I don't really care what other people are going to say but I'm going to share this. And I remember sharing something with my friend ... it had to really...with like like premarital sexual, it was just thoughts that I was having, that I was like what are what are these thoughts, ... and she's like oh my gosh. Me too! And it just made our bond stronger because we realized that we have um we're not alone, and so it it



you know I was able to put the walls down to where we were able to talk about things that are more intimate more personal between us and not feeling like we this kind of surface relationship...But it was something that I needed to understand that I just needed to find a few choice people that God would place in my life and that my community and that's part of the church and hold me accountable because of what the Word says and hold me accountable... Nothing is weird nothing, nothing will make me look at you any differently. I'm just here to be here for you.

(915F) ...We had small groups but umm we had a young adult ministry. So there was more discussion about you know what your walk looks like as a young adult and talking about umm like sex and relationships in those terms and I was at that point like I felt like I was more confident to have conversations with people who were older than me...So at this point like I've come out of three relationships that really didn't do me any good so I'm broken .... and getting like acclimated to a church and uh uh and a group of young adults who are doing the same things I was doing and realizing that this may not be what the culture is doing but it's something that I can and I'm seeing other young adults do the same thing. That it's not as abnormal as umm culture make it makes it seem and when I say abnormal I mean that thing that I'm saying that it may seem to be abnormal is abstaining from sex. (915F)

(109F)...And that helped and being involved in church helped. I had a mentor at that time even though I didn't tell her any of this. Like we would talk about my daddy problems and that helped with that situation. (Begins to become visibly emotional) So it wasn't like I was bearing that all on myself. But The other demons that I was so that's how I made it through that (begins to sniffle and sob). So sorry I started crying...

**Pre-marital sexual activity shapes future parenting.** Due to their personal experiences with premarital sexual contact and not being able to get a theological or educational explanation behind sex from their parents, several of the participants felt that they would be more comfortable being more open with their children regarding the theological and biological reasons as to why it would be best to wait to have sex until either a more appropriate mature age or until they were married, depending if they felt like marriage was a prerequisite or not for premarital sexual contact. A lot of that conclusion was based on that they felt so ill equipped when they first had their sexual encounter and felt that to not begin the conversation as early as possible or teaching their children about their bodies, would be doing them a disservice in the long run. Also with the understanding that no matter what they decided, they would still love and support them and not shun them but rather foster an open and fluid dialogue about premarital sex.

(109F) Of course I wouldn't want them to have pre-marital sex. I don't want them to have sex period (laughs). Um but I know how I felt when it happened. And the feelings that I was feeling and I definitely don't want to ever convey to them ever that they can't talk to me about anything. And my family was very much you don't talk about your feelings and it didn't feel comfortable enough to talk to them about what I'd done. So i think that that made me feel that way. Very much closed off to them and umm I definitely don't want (names children) to feel like they can't talk to me about anything pre-marital sex or whatever. So I would hope that we're that I'm developing a relationship with them that they're open enough to tell me how they're feeling about what it is they think and they can know that I will always love them.

(123M) It's probably going to happen earlier than nine. Um because of the exposure that children have already to sexuality and the access that they have so it is far greater than

what I had at nine. And so I'm pretty sure I'll have to have that talk around 7. And uh just and uh just constantly having that conversation and not making it feel like it's awkward. not making it to be something that's a taboo conversation. But that is a very fluid and open dialogue where there's an open dialogue. And You're not afraid to ask questions or afraid to give answers because of the consequences that you may receive. That's the hope... And in my mind I'm thinking about all the things that were hindering me so no I think when i get older and when I. Well not older but when I have children um. this Conversation will probably be more often. And I'll try to make them as comfortable as possible. I don't know how much more comfortable I can make a child to have this conversation with their parent. Um but I want to have that dialogue early and often.

(915F) Umm I think that it's important to have a bunch of different discussions with your kids because sex is not just this one layer thing. There are umm we live in a day and age where kids are preyed on. So I think it's important to have conversations with them about their umm genetic makeup, anatomy, umm the being umm able to come to your parents or to protect themselves from umm pedophiles and also umm helping them to understand like umm specifics or the way God made them in their in gender and stuff like that and as they grow to continue to continue the conversation and be aware of where they are and paying attention to your kids and being able to umm evolve that conversation with them as they get older and they start to understand more. Umm and wrapping it in scripture and umm in like biblical knowledge so that they have a good understanding as they grow umm and as they evolve. And that message continues to evolve with them so that way when they get to the age where they need to make those decisions they have been (trails off) It's not something that so off limits umm and so uhh taboo if that makes any sense.

And I think that it's taboo in the conversation is to me more taboo in the church then it is in culture. In culture the conversation is wide open about sex. But it's in a different context then what is the current context for sex. So, exposing your kids to the reality in the biblical truth around sex is important because they're going to get this other information infiltration from culture. So, preparing your kids on the front end so they can decipher what's truth and what' not truth.

### **Theme Three: Meaning Making of My Faith and Sex**

As the participants reflected on their upbringing at home and in the church, combined with their experiences regarding premarital sexual contact, 8 (64%) of the participants felt that marriage is a prerequisite sexual contact of any kind. The other remaining 3 (36%) participants felt premarital for sexual contact of any kind was permissible to them and did not feel marriage was a requirement.

**Marriage before sexual intimacy.** The majority of the participants felt that marriage was a prerequisite for sexual intimacy of any kind. They felt very strongly regarding this stance due to not wanting to grieve the heart of God. Participants described how not wanting to grieve the heart of God took root in their lives and began to permeate beyond sexual sin and was applicable to sin of any kind. A few of them mentioned that this particular sin was the hardest for them to deal with and felt like it was, at one point, a constant struggle due to early exposure and not being properly educated both theologically and biologically on the onset of being inquisitive about it. Some also mentioned off the record that there was a history of sexual trauma that spurred some of that curiosity earlier than they would have liked to have had. Several of them discussed how it was not just sex that they were concerned about grieving God's heart over, but

any sin. Through their struggles, they attempted to reminisce on their personal relationship with Him on a daily basis in order to live a Godly life.

(716F) But umm I just feel like the way that He wants us to do it is the way for me. Like definitely... I feel like my sexual experiences up to this point have proven like to me why It's important to wait and I feel more umm concrete in the belief that I am going to wait because I find myself like whenever I get in a relationship that I will have sex, but I don't want to do that anymore... And I just feel like the times that I have had sex like that wasn't true love it was lust and I really want to be loved and so waiting is definitely worth it for me... When I get married, I really want to have a relationship where we are open and honest, and we can talk about the past. (716F)

(915) ...In summation I feel like there isn't a lot of tangible objective teachings umm that's also umm age umm appropriate for umm kids up until the age of like adulthood umm that teaches you what sex is about how that works. The sanctity of it and why it's so important to wait until marriage. Umm because I feel like I could have avoided a lot of brokenness if I understood how important it was and how umm necessary it was to keep that umm safe in umm and wait to exercise that in marriage because when you finally get into a healthy relationship with ha[ving] having already explored that part of yourself, there are there are wounds and things that you have to work through, and it's unnecessary but because you decided to do this out of the sanctity of marriage now you have to deal with the pains and the insecurities and umm the comparisons and the struggles and all that stuff.

**Marriage not required for sexual intimacy.** Some of the participants did not feel as though marriage was a prerequisite for sexual intimacy and also expressed not feeling ashamed

or condemned to hell for believing that way. Despite what they heard growing up, for them, this was acceptable, and they acknowledged that they did not readily share this with too many people in order to avoid confrontations or having to explain themselves.

(417F) ... that [losing her virginity] also kind of taught me like like now today I'm more so like you know what I could really just wait until you know I'm married or at least engaged or you know somewhere in that commitment. Because I mean everybody's different... I'm a little more progressive in my thinking and so I'm a little more like if you so choose like this is this is the good. Here is bad is it. Here it is. You know what I mean.

(89F) ...I guess also with being someone who did not wait until marriage that I feel like it's a very important thing for people to know if there is a sexual chemistry and those things. That for me I think that um definitely knowing as far as that and sexual connection with your partner is very important. In a marriage. So for me I even you know even still knowing exactly what the Bible says and I know that there are some people who have had premarital you know sex before marriage ... I still think that there are you know things that you have to know before going into marriage and that is one of them so [starts laughing].

One participant, never married and currently single at the time of this study, explained how she chose to not compartmentalize her life and pretend that God was not involved in everything she did in her life. Instead, as she explains, she chooses to live authentically to herself and answer to know one but herself and God.

(1127F) I actually did not have sex until I was in college. But I felt that for myself it was the right time because it was someone that I had fallen in love with and started the relationship... And from time to time if I do find myself in [emphasized this word] a

relationship since that time in my twenties, uh it's not something I give myself a hard time about. But I still do believe that I can not be casually sleeping with strangers.... I think at the end of the day the church has shaped me into the person that I am for my home, my community, my work, my my life. It's shaped me. It really has helped but it's helped me make those decisions. I still in my own beliefs think it's crazy to ask someone to not have sex for a very long time... I may not be promiscuous, but if I wanted to be promiscuous, I don't know that it's anyone's business. Um that's just the way I feel like we could have had this conversation whether I was promiscuous or whether I was a virgin and I still don't think that. Um. People Should be judged for which whichever decision they're making because if I had never fallen in love I would I would just have been a virgin. I just happened to fall in love. And you couldn't tell me that that was wrong at the time and honestly I don't feel bad about those decisions because. It just happened. ... I'm not someone that pretends like that. I'm not someone that will go to church on Sunday. And not take...God home with me or out on that date on Friday. I'm not someone that goes into a bedroom or gets into bed with a man and doesn't know full well, like I can't keep secrets... I know that God's watching everything I do.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the results of the phenomenological research study that explored the lived experiences of Christians who had premarital sexual contact. This study included 11 participants with two of them in a relationship with one another. The participants for this study resided in the North Texas area. A research assistant reviewed several transcripts as a way to triangulate the data and assist with credibility of this research. The demographic characteristics of the sample, three emergent themes, and verbatim quotes of the participants to illuminate the

themes were all presented in this chapter. The analysis of the interviews identified three themes and eight subthemes: (a) Lacking Integration of Faith and Sexual Education; (b) Exploring Faith; and (c) Meaning Making of My Faith and Sex. Each of these themes, along with several of the participants' comments, was included in this chapter.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lived experiences of Christians who have had premarital sexual contact and the meanings that had for them. A narrative therapy framework was used as a lens by which these Christians' experiences were assessed and a phenomenological approach permitted the researcher to uncover each individual participant's distinctive meaning that colored their lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from individuals who agreed to participate in this study. This chapter covers a discussion of the findings, conclusions, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research, and clinical implications.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

As the researcher analyzed the data, three themes emerged and 14 subthemes. Each of the themes were evident in the responses to the interview question: Tell me your story regarding your experiences of pre-marital sexual contact.

- Theme One: Lacking Integration of Faith and Sexual Education
  - Why Wait to Have Sexual Intimacy?
  - No Discussion About Sex Education
  - Participants Asking Parents About Sex Education
  - Positive Experience With Sex Education
  - Sex Education From Outside the Family
- Theme Two: Exploring Faith and Sex

- Suppressing Sexual Thoughts
- Grief Over Decision to be Sexually Active
- Pre-Marital Sexual Experience Impacted Self-Esteem
- Using Sexual Intimacy As a Tool to Control
- Seeking God's Forgiveness for Pre-Marital Sex
- Seeking a Safe Haven for Vulnerability
- Pre-Marital Sexual Activity Shaping Future Parenting
- Theme Three: Meaning Making of My Faith and Sex
  - Marriage Before Sexual Intimacy
  - Marriage Not Required for Sexual Intimacy

Theme One, *Lacking Integration of Faith and Sex Education*, was a reflection of the participants' response to recalling their upbringing regarding their faith and how and where they learned about sex, either from parents or from influences outside of their home. Participants described their relationship with their parents and how they did not discuss sex with their parents and received no sexual education from their parents that proved to be helpful for them in making decisions regarding their sexuality in the future. According to the participants of this study, parents took the stance that one should not have sex because it was a sin and other negative connotations, they could associate with it. That belief was confirmed in the church as well for the participants and either through experience, peers, media, or school, an explanation as to why abstinence until marriage was the best choice was rarely discussed if at all.

Participants continuously echoed that they were searching for the theological and humanistic explanation of why sexual intimacy was not permissible or favored and not just the passive explanation or answer of "It is a sin". They voiced how that did nothing to help them

understand why it was a sin if it felt physically pleasing. Earlier studies also reported that Christians were tired of hearing negative connotations associated with sex. MacQueen (2006) and Patton (1985) described how people in the Christian church were growing tired of hearing sex depicted in a negative light, which aligned accurately with what many of the participants reported in this study. *This type of negative dialogue and teaching is what caused the participants to feel conflicted and caused confusion on their thoughts of sexual intimacy being gratifying but bad at the same time.* Patton (1985) discussed how masturbation was seen as a selfish secret sexual sin and was met with opposition in the Christian and Jewish faith. However, unlike Patton's (1985) participants, two of these participants described how that was not their experience regarding masturbation. One described how her pastor preached that it was permissible for people, specifically single people, to masturbate to keep them from sinning sexually with another person; another described how her mother taught her that it feels good and is a normal part of self-discovery. None of the other participants discussed masturbation, which could be due to being shy about discussing this with the researcher.

The females of this study described the various scare tactics that their parents would use as a way to enforce and drive their point that sex is a sin and its only purpose was for that of reproduction, much like what DeLameter (1981) mentioned about how this exact attitude and belief impacted the American attitude and how the Christian church helped to influence that belief. Participants felt like this way of thinking is archaic and mentioned how they looked forward to changing the system with their own children by being more open and honest about sexuality to encourage effective communication about sexual intimacy whenever their children had questions in the future.

The question of how something could be so bad and yet be so good was confusing to the participants much like the participants described in the Williams, DeFazio, and Goins (2013) study regarding sex being shunned in religious communities and how sex was demonized and the struggle that exists when young adults transition from their family of origin to being out on their own, with influences coming from their values, beliefs, and social norms.

Theme Two, *Exploring Faith and Sex* involved participants expressing a myriad of emotions as they recalled their premarital sexual encounters. Many participants remembered almost vividly, but did not discuss in candid detail, their first and subsequent premarital sexual experiences. Participants acknowledged that their spirituality, religious upbringing, and belief system was compartmentalized and did not influence their decision to remain abstinent. Many participants discussed that at this time of their life, they were experiencing what Williams et al. (2013) described as the transition of the middle- of-the-road phenomenon where what a person believes is in direct opposition to what they have been taught to believe. Participants described how they too experienced times of renegotiating their views and their beliefs.

This was similar to the results of previous studies done by Regnerus (2007) and Uecker (2008). Participants in Regnerus' (2007) study mirrored how participants in this study were faithful in their commitments within the church and in following through with their spiritual beliefs in other areas of their life; but, at one point in their lives, they did compartmentalize their sexual activity apart from their faith. The obvious difference of this study and Regnerus' (2007) was the age demographics. Uecker's (2008) results that suggested that religious affiliation is less significant for premarital sexual behavior than religiosity and that secular messages were an influence for engaging in premarital sexual behaviors, aligned with what the participants

described about what it was like growing up and being sexually curious, how and where they learned about sex.

Participants described how after they had engaged in premarital sexual contact, they experienced a myriad of emotions that they internalized and began to experience a plethora of feelings as a result. Feelings of guilt, shame, and later on, those feelings manifested in other feelings associated to the core of who they were. Feeling like they had been manipulated or objectified, feelings of regret and remorse, asking for forgiveness, and feeling repentful. This was all as a result of feeling like they had betrayed their own religious convictions and that they had harmed their spiritual relationship with God.

Participants wished that the church would embrace discussing healthy sexual intimacy and revealed that they were so glad to have found a safe haven to discuss those things within their community of like-minded individuals. What they described as wanting from the church is similar to what DeRogatis (2005) discovered in the sex manual movement where healthy sexual expression within the confines of marriage was openly discussed via workshops and counseling sessions. Like the people described in the study conducted by DeRogatis (2005), participants also believed that God did in fact create men and women to experience sex joyfully and guilt free and that the Bible is the authority on how to do that. Like Sonnenberg (2013) described, participants agreed and believed as well that because God created the male and female in such an intricate and uniquely sexual way, that it was a blessing and a gift to be enjoyed and had benefits of making and creating a family if that is what the couple wanted.

The end result of this series of emotions and conflicted feelings, which the participants described in detail, resulted in the majority of the participants wishing that they had preserved their virginity for their current or future spouse. The results of this study also mirrored those

found in the studies conducted by Rosenbaum and Weathersbee (2013) and Hackthorn et al. (2015). Like in Rosenbaum and Weathersbee (2013), roughly the same percentage of participants in that study and this current study regretted not waiting until they were married to engage in sexual intimacy. Another commonality between the two studies is that participants in each study were still attending church and also choosing to engage in premarital sexual activity. Like Rosenbaum and Weathersbee's (2013) study, participants in this study also reported having sex education outside the home in the form of school and supported more sex education.

Participants described, similar to Hackthorn et al.'s (2015) study sensitivity to internalized religious beliefs and teachings that resulted in sexual guilt. Not because it did not physically feel good, but because they felt like they were grieving the heart of God, which resulted in the participants in this study to reevaluate their purpose of engaging in premarital sexual activity and how it fits for them in their spiritual journey.

Theme Three, *Meaning Making of My Faith and Sex*, is a final reflection summarizing from the participants the conclusion they have drawn from their experiences with premarital sexual contact. Most of the participants, after recalling the emotional, mental, and spiritual side effects they experienced with premarital sexual contact, expressed that they believed, for various reasons, that sexual intimacy should be within the confines of marriage. Participants explained how it was not until after their experiences with premarital sexual contact that they then realized that there was a connection between their faith, trusting in the Lord, and the Biblical scriptures that referenced sexual intimacy. Like the Bible verses referenced by Sprinkle (2015), these participants agreed that the Bible does condemn fornication and sexual immorality, which includes premarital sexual intimacy. Some also acknowledged that was in part due to what they described as their flesh, or their sin nature, that was predisposed to be attracted to things that

were in direct opposition to God and referencing the fall of man dating back to Adam and Eve. They also shared their belief that family is supposed to be created within the confines of marriage; although not always the case, they did expound on God's redemption and forgiveness. Their beliefs were similar to previous studies that expounded and elaborated on these same themes conducted by Reek (2013), Madueme (2012), Joo (2015), Veith (2013) and DeLameter (1981).

Because this study was a snowball sample and the majority of the participants were African-American, there was no way to compare if there was a difference in the results based on the demographics as was in the case of the Davidson et al. (2008) study. The Davidson et al. (2008) study was looking for differences based on race in never-married college students at four distinct universities by looking at sexual attitudes, levels of premarital sexual involvement, and risk-taking practices. The only conclusion one could draw up from this study and Davidson et al. (2008) study is that during the college-age, participants felt freer to explore and develop a new sense of self sexually that had already begun in their adolescent years. Participants in this study, similar to the study done by Davidson et al. (2008) did describe experimenting sexually and trying to decipher their sexual attitudes and what they felt were risk-taking practices with various partners.

There was a difference between the two males and the nine females in this study. It was obvious in the study that both genders were treated differently and heard various messages based on their gender. It was clear from all the participants that the males felt pressured to initiate and make sure they were not virgins but that the females were left with the pressure to make sure that they did not succumb to the sexual advances from males.

The males described how they were encouraged to lose their virginity and that it enhanced their masculinity within their community. The two males described feeling conflicted though because they knew the church condemned premarital sex, but that society and culture was telling them something contrary to the Bible. Even between the two male participants there was a difference. One male participant described how his father encouraged him to wait to have sex, while the other male reported that his father, although he did not advocate it much, told his son to be safe and not to get a girl pregnant. Participant 214M described how his parents shamed his sister about premarital sex but turned a blind eye to him engaging in it.

The females described being shamed relentlessly by their parents, culture, society, and the church if they engaged in premarital sexual activity. They discussed how they were even told to not entice the males in the church and that they were responsible for dressing and behaving decently so as to not spur on the males. Females reported that if they were spoken to about sex, even for a moment, that their mothers were the ones having to take that task on and that their fathers were either silent or echoed that they should not behave like harlots.

### **The Researcher's Voice**

As part of qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument. I believe, as with any research, the researcher's voice is a vital piece of the study. To not let my voice be heard and to hide who I am would do this entire process of this study a great disservice. Aside from being a doctoral student in the Family Therapy program at Texas Woman's University, I am also a Christian, a mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a church member, a licensed professional counselor and marriage and family therapist associate. In the Bible, 1st Corinthians verses 10:31-33 says this: So...whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God...not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many... (Christian Standard Bible). This is the approach that I took



with this entire research study and that if I were to do this, I would do it with as much excellence and dignity as humanly possible. Therefore, I will attempt to describe what effects this study had on me.

I believe that there can be times in one's faith where they feel like their voice, their experience, their stories, are not told or cared enough to be shared. As a result, people are left with similar feelings, but experiencing those feelings alone. As the research continued to evolve, I could not help but ask myself if I, being part of the church, was either a solution or creating more problems by how I approached people in similar situations. Asking questions such as how I can be more empathic towards others, compassionate, patient, and understanding, to those who are courageous enough to be vulnerable when discussing their stories, stuck with me throughout this process and profoundly impacted how I related to others moving forward.

Reading scriptures from the Bible, specifically the ones that were explicitly about love and sex, and not understanding them in totality, was very confusing growing up and as I began to make my faith personal and not something I adopted out of habit or ritual. On one hand I would hear scriptures that gave a list of behaviors that were not pleasing to God such as this for example; "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outburst of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things-as I warned you before- that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21, Christian Standard Bible). And another that echoes that verse by saying, "But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints...For know and recognize this: Every sexual immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, does not have an inheritance in the kingdom of

Christ and of God” (Ephesians 5:3; 5, Christian Standard Bible). However, on the other hand you come across scriptures such as this one in: “How beautiful you are and how pleasant, my love...your breasts are clusters of fruit...May your breasts be like clusters of grapes, and the fragrance of your breath like apricots...I am my love’s and his desire is for me” (Song of Songs 7:6-10, Christian Standard Bible).

That seemed contradictory and confusing to me. One part of the Bible is saying flee from sexual sin, but another part is showcasing two lovers who are very familiar with one another sexually-or at least desire to be. How could something so good be so bad and nasty? I was in high school when I began to ask deep questions, as any adolescent, about my faith. That was the turning point for me when my faith became mine and not my parents’ of my family legacy. It all started with inquiring about sexual intimacy and how could God create something that was dismissed and underdiscussed in the church, in the homes, and discussed with such negativity. I noticed that when a family member was getting married, the conversation about sex completely changed. It was discussed with much excitement, anticipation, and painted out to be the most extraordinary feeling there could be. Once again, I asked myself, but why? Does it not feel the same married or unmarried?

By doing my own personal research and understanding these scriptures, the spiritual connection that the Bible revealed behind sex, and others like it, in their entirety, allowed me to make decisions and choices with more confidence and dignity. As the study progressed, I continued to be more and more enlightened and inspired when hearing others’ experiences and what their journey looked like. There is strength in numbers, and I found myself wishing that as Christians, we could be more candid and honest about our own personal experiences for the benefit of helping those around us not feel isolated in their journey. It was not until I too, like

many of the participants in the study, was able to surround myself with people I could be vulnerable with about my own experiences, did I begin to evolve and become comfortable with who I was as a woman of faith. This study opened me up to be more transparent and also encouraged me to make sure I myself am prepared to do that first with my own daughter above anyone else. She deserves truth. We all do.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this research delivered probable answers to the research question: What meanings do Christians place on their experiences with premarital sexual contact? Based on the findings of this research, the following conclusions are provided, but are not limited to the following:

1. Christian participants in this study expressed the need for more sex education as a lack of sex education both in the home and outside the home was present among the participants.
2. Christian participants perceived that their parents were not candid with them about sex and sexuality via an open and fluid dialogue.
3. Being educated on the many facets of sexual intimacy is a lesson these participants plan on passing down to their children as early as possible.
4. Participants saw the benefit of forming a community with others and being able to foster vulnerability and transparency where faith and real life coexist together was detrimental to strengthen their personal relationship with God and others.
5. Being spiritually connected with God is more important than feeling or being religious to the participants in this study.

## **Clinical Implications**

The results of this study showed how people can be the stories they tell and as in narrative therapy, reality is formed by the language that is used to describe it and that the language and experience are recursive (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). While remembering that stories form a person's experiences and behavior, narrative therapy could be useful for family therapists to utilize when dealing with their clients who have had similar experiences as the participants in this study. Therefore, when working with Christians, marriage and family therapists might find it useful to consider that as Christians, clients may be already coming to therapy feeling judged and shunned as a result of having premarital sexual contact and may have already formed their own script and sometimes negative story about themselves. By looking at them through the lens of a systemic narrative theological framework, marriage and family therapists can help clients rewrite their negative script and start the healing process. Therapy is the last place a Christian would want to feel judged, and by taking the time to get to know their unique experiences, marriage and family therapists can help clients navigate and reauthor their experiences. It is vital to the therapy process that the client be helped to feel confident in their own decision-making process and not feel a need to please others. Many Christians may want to keep their relationship with God just that--a relationship between themselves and God.

Clergy members may be able to benefit from this study by looking at how they can offer the church and its leadership teams' information regarding healthy sex and suspending any bias or judgement and how to provide a safe forum within the church to have that discussion. Churches that are not doing so may want to look at offering classes, seminars, or guest speakers a chance to come and speak to the church about it as well.

When describing themselves as young adults, the participants expressed wanting to know and have a discussion about the positives instead of the negatives of sexual intimacy and being more open to the discussion of sex within the church. It was assumed among the participants that possibly, clergy members are either afraid or not equipped to discuss sexuality and if they do, it will entice members to want to experience it. Participants discussed in the study how their curiosity regarding sex started at young ages and endures across time when information is lacking. By providing as many spiritual and biological facts regarding sex as possible, the church might then see that by taking the approach of providing and informing their members, their members can decide what to do with the information they have received.

Parents may benefit from this study by starting the conversation about sexuality at home and normalizing that it is a part of who they are, which is what the participants planned to do with their children. By discussing topics on the importance of understanding gender, what body parts are created for, what sexuality means at age appropriate developmental stages, participants felt like it would help in encouraging their children as they grow older to help feel comfortable about discussing topics on sexuality; and, should something unfortunate occur to a child, they might be more likely to come and tell a trusted adult and their parents. Participants expressed how they believe that they will be the primary sexuality educators of their children and must equip themselves in order to equip their children.

If parents were more aware and educated themselves on sex, participants felt like they could have passed on their knowledge and experiences to them when they were children. As a young person, participants who described being timid and apprehensive about asking questions or felt as if one choice in life will condemn them to hell for all eternity, felt like those feelings

may have been able to be circumvented by having more of an open discussion regarding sex in the home.

As young people, the participants felt alone in how they felt towards their struggle with sexual intimacy and felt like this study could encourage other young people that they are not alone when they feel that scripture appears to be conflicting and confusing regarding sex. Obtaining information from reliable sources, asking questions, and surrounding themselves with a supportive community, can lead them to make sound choices and encourage their parents to have more candid and transparent conversations regarding sexual intimacy.

### **Limitations**

Some elements limit the generalizability of the conclusions of the study. The sample of the participants was not randomly chosen. Since the study focused on a topic that is considered sensitive and taboo, some Christians chose not to participate. A small number of individuals participated in the study and as a result, it might be difficult to generalize the findings to a larger population. With the exception of two people, the sample contained individuals who had college degrees and some with having graduate degrees. The outcome of this study might have been different if the participants had less education. All but two of the participants were females and the outcome of this study might have been different if there were more male participants to discuss their premarital sexual experiences. The outcome of delayed premarital sexual encounters and gender differences surrounding premarital-sexual activity might have been possibly influenced by gender as the two males reported having sex in high school and three women reporting having premarital sexual contact between ages 16 to 18 years old.

Participants were not asked about which specific church they were members of or affiliated with, nor where they asked about their church attendance status, if they were heavily

involved in their local church or not, and what their Christian denomination they were. Due to various denominations varying on how they interpret the Bible, it might have been useful to have known their denomination affiliation and what they believed and also knowing their church attendance and involvement to see if there was a correlation with their current beliefs about premarital sexual intimacy now.

With the exception of one, all of the participants were African American. The outcome of this study might have been different if the participants were from various ethnic and racial groups. As with any study that depends on reflective data, it may be assumed that the present may have an impact on one's memory of the past. In addition, none of the participants were in their 20s and were all 30 years old or older. Having younger participants might have been useful and may have impacted the outcome of some of the themes. There were times when participants seemed to be very careful about how descriptive they were in genital terminology or in describing their sexual encounters and it could be as to not offend the researcher. This phenomenological study was created to be illustrative only of these participants' experiences with premarital sexual contact, instead of being widely generalizable or foretelling.

### **Recommendations**

While this study enhanced the body of literature that examines the lived experiences of Christians and their sexual practices, more research might be more useful to broaden the field and better inform professionals who may work with Christians who are sexually active or curious. The following are recommendations for future research. This study could be replicated to include other racial, ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. Research that examines what Christian parents say to and explain to their adolescent about sex and what that adolescent actually heard would offer insight into the communication style and process of

such discussions. Researchers should examine relationship and communication style between parent and young adult to see how parents can initiate the conversation of sexual intimacy and keep it going in their home. Special attention should be given to those Christians who believe that premarital sexual contact does not require marriage as a prerequisite. In this study, there were three participants who held that belief and this study could be replicated to include other Christians who hold those same beliefs and how their experiences impacted that belief. Lastly, due to the limited number of males who participated in this study, more male perspectives would have given the study more information on the gender bias when it comes to sex education in the home and outside the home in a Christian upbringing. More research on the difference between religiosity and practicing rituals and spirituality in connection to one's sexuality would be beneficial as well.

### **Summary**

This study explored the lived experiences of Christians who experienced premarital sexual contact. The narrative therapy framework was used as a lens through which these participants experiences could be viewed, and a phenomenological approach permitted the researcher to comprehend the meaning that Christians place on their experiences with premarital sexual contact. A discussion was provided for the three themes and fourteen subthemes from the data that were analyzed. The findings of this study have implications for marriage and family therapists, clergy members and leaders, parents, and young people. Recommendations were made for future research.



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## APPENDIX A

### Recruitment Flyer

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Pre-Marital Sexual Contact:  
What does it mean to **YOU**?



- Are you 25 years old or older?
- Do you identify as a Christian?
- Do you identify as heterosexual?
- Have you ever experienced pre-marital sexual contact?

**If you answered YES to these questions, this confidential research study may be for you**

I'm AnnaMarie Christian, a doctoral student at Texas Woman's University conducting voluntary confidential interviews to discuss what meanings Christians place on their pre-marital sexual contact. Your interview will take about an hour and will be at a confidential and agreed upon location you and I choose. It's my hope that the results of this study will aid family therapists and other professionals to understand those who identify as Christians and have experienced pre-marital sexual contact.

**Questions? Want to know more?**

Please contact me, at (972) 987-0455 or email me at [afarr1@twu.edu](mailto:afarr1@twu.edu)

If you know of others who may be interested in this study, please pass along my contact information.

My research advisor, Linda J. Brock, Ph.D. can be reached at (940) 898-2713 or [LBrock@mail.twu.edu](mailto:LBrock@mail.twu.edu)



As with any electronic submission, there is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, and internet transactions.

## APPENDIX B

### Email Script For Sending Out Flyer



**Email Requesting Distribution of Recruitment Flyer  
(Recruitment Flyer Will Be Attached to this Email)**

**What Meanings Do Christians Place on Their Pre-Marital Sexual Contact?  
A Qualitative Study**

Thank you for your interest in my research study and your willingness to share my participant recruitment flyer. Attached is the flyer containing basic information about the study and who may volunteer plus contact info for me and my advisor.

Please let me know if you have any questions and thank you so much for helping get the word out!

Thank you and have a wonderful day,

AnnaMarie Christian

## APPENDIX C

### Telephone Script

## Telephone Script

For callers asking about possible participation in the study

“Hello, this is AnnaMarie.” [Caller identifies self and nature of the call]. “Hello [Says caller’s name], how are you?” [Let caller respond]. Thank you very much for calling me about my study, I am so glad you called me. May I ask where you saw my flyer? [Caller gives response] What made you interested in my study? [Caller gives response] I feel very honored that you would be interested in participating. Let me fill you in on the purpose of my research study.

“Because most Christian denominations say that pre-marital sexual contact is a sin, I am interested to learn about the experiences of those who have had pre-marital sexual contact. I’m especially interested in the meaning that individuals place on these experiences. I’m conducting voluntary, confidential, face-to-face interviews with people who are 25 years of age or older and identify as heterosexual and Christian, to tell me their story regarding their experiences of pre-marital sexual contact. I have only the one question and you can say as much as you wish. The research is a part of my doctoral studies at Texas Woman’s University. All interviews are voluntary and confidential and will be audio-recorded so that I can listen to the interview, transcribe the data accurately, and analyze the data for my research. [Pause for response.] “What questions do you have?” [Answer any questions.] “May I schedule an interview with you?”

[If YES face-to-face interview] “I am very glad that you are willing to participate in my study. I have a private office where we could meet which is located at [give address]. Would that work for you? If not, we could meet at a library that has a private meeting or study room or another safe, quiet place. Which would you prefer? [Pause for response] What does your availability look like so we can agree upon a date and time for this to take place? [Caller gives availability and caller and I reach an agreed upon time, place, date] “Just to confirm, we will meet at [name place] on [say date] at [say time]. All I ask is that if something comes up, please let me know as soon as possible so we can reschedule if we need to. “What other questions do you have?” [Respond to any questions.] “Thank you very much and I’m looking forward to talking with you soon.”

[If NO] “Do you know of someone else who would be interested in participating in this study and if so, would you be willing to pass my contact info along to them? Thank you very much for calling me and have a good day.”

## APPENDIX D

### Email Script For Inquiring Participants

## **Email Script**

### **What Meanings Do Christians Place on Their Pre-Marital Sexual Contact?**

Thank you for contacting me and showing an interest in my research study.

Because most Christian denominations say that pre-marital sexual contact is a sin, I am interested to learn about the experiences of those who have had pre-marital sexual contact, so I'm conducting voluntary confidential interviews with people who are 25 years of age or older to tell me their story surrounding their experiences regarding pre-marital sexual contact. All I am going to ask you in the interview is to tell me your story regarding your experiences of pre-marital sexual contact. All interviews will be confidential and will be audio-recorded so that I can listen to the interview and analyze the data for my research. Should you choose to participate, I will give you a detailed consent form that explains that process.

If you would like to participate and learn more about the study, please contact me at 972-987-0455 and we can discuss the research in detail over the phone and I can answer any questions you may have before we set up a time and place to do the interview.

Thank you and have a wonderful day,

AnnaMarie Christian

APPENDIX E  
Interview/Protocol Guide

## Interview Guide

**Protocol Participant's Code:**\_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Interview:**\_\_\_\_\_

“Hi, I am AnnaMarie Christian. It is such a pleasure to meet you! Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As we discussed, the purpose of this research is to will be to discover the meanings that Christians aged 25 years and older place on their experience of pre-marital sexual contact. Do you have any questions?”

“Before we begin the interview, let’s go over the consent form you’ll sign.”  
“Do you have any questions about the consent form? After you sign both forms, I will give you a copy to keep.” “Let’s go over the demographic questionnaire.” “Do you have any questions?”

“The question I ask you during this interview will be centered on your experience of pre-marital sexual contact and being a Christian. During the interview, I will be taking some notes. Any names used in our interview, including yours, will not be used when I transcribe the recording. Only your code number will be used.” “Do you have any questions before we begin?”

“I am going to turn on the recorder now” [Turn on recorder] “Ok. My research question is “What meanings do Christians place on their experience of pre-marital sexual contact?”. Tell me your story regarding your experiences of pre-marital sexual contact. (Pause to hear response and use prompts as needed.). At the end of the interview, the researcher will turn off the recorder and thank the participant for sharing their story, give them a referral list of people they can speak with, and let them know that they can contact her or her research advisor. They will be given a recruitment flyer that they can pass along to anybody else who might be interested in the study.

### **Prompts:**

Share whatever you want and speak as freely as you feel comfortable doing so.

What happened?

Nodding

How?

I see.

How did you manage that?

Silence

What effect did that have?

Could you say more about that? What else comes to mind?

Smiling Yes

What was that like? Anything else?

What else happened?

Interesting.

Yes.

And by that you mean...?

So how have you felt about that since time has passed?

## APPENDIX G

### Consent To Participate Form



TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: What Meanings Do Christians Place on Their Experiences With Pre-Marital Sexual Contact?  
A Qualitative Study

Investigator: AnnaMarie Christian, B.A., M.A.C.....AFarr1@mail.twu.edu  
(972) 987-0455

Advisor: Linda J. Brock, Ph.D.....LBrock@mail.twu.edu  
(940) 898-2713

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in the dissertation research study conducted by AnnaMarie N. Christian, B.A., M.A.C. at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. The purpose of this study will be to explore the meanings of the lived experiences of Christians who have had pre-marital sexual contact.

Research Procedures

For the purpose of this qualitative study, the principal investigator will conduct a face-to-face individual interview with you. This interview will be scheduled at a time and location that is safe and mutually agreed upon by you and the researcher. The interview will be digitally audio-recorded for later transcription and data analysis to provide accuracy in reporting the information discussed. Your interview will be transcribed and assigned a confidential code. Only the P.I., advisor, and research team member will have access to the transcripts. The maximum time commitment for the interview is approximately 1 hour.

Potential Risks

Potential risks related to your participation in this study may include emotional discomfort. If you experience emotional discomfort regarding the interview questions, you may stop answering any of the questions at any time. The investigator will provide you with a referral list of names and phone numbers that you may use if you want to discuss this discomfort with a mental health professional. The participant may stop or withdraw from the study without penalty.

Another potential risk may include. fatigue during the interview. To avoid fatigue, you may take a break (or breaks) during the interview as needed.

Another potential risk may be the loss of anonymity and anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Another possible risk to you because of your participation in this study is release of confidential information. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. The interview will take place in a private location agreed upon by you and the researcher. Only the investigator and her advisor will have access to the recordings. The flash drive, hard copies of the transcriptions, and the thumb drives containing the transcription text files will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the investigator's locked office. All materials will be destroyed within four years of the completion of the study. It is anticipated that the results of this study will be published in the investigator's dissertation as well as in other research publications. However, no names or other identifiable information will be included in any publication.

The researcher will try to prevent any problem that could happen because of this research. You should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will help you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

Participation and Benefit

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential and you may discontinue your participation in the study at any time without penalty. The only direct benefit of this study to you as a participant is that at the completion of the study you may request a summary of the results to be mailed to you.

Questions Regarding the Study

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep. If you have any questions about the research study you may contact the researcher or advisor. Their contact information is provided at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or in the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (940) 898-3378 or via email at [IRB@twu.edu](mailto:IRB@twu.edu).

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Signature of Participant

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Date

- As with any electronic submission, there is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, and internet transactions. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the TWU's Institutional Review Board at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at [IRB@twu.edu](mailto:IRB@twu.edu).
- If you would like to receive a summary of the results of this study, please provide an address to which this summary may be sent.

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APPENDIX G

Demographic Information

## **DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PARTICIPANT CODE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**AGE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**GENDER:**

( ) Female: \_\_\_\_\_

( ) Male: \_\_\_\_\_

**RACE/ETHNICITY:**

( ) American Indian or Alaskan Native

( ) Asian

( ) African American

( ) Caucasian

( ) Hispanic

( ) Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

( ) Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

**RELATIONSHIP STATUS:**

( ) Married

( ) Single

( ) Divorced

( ) Widowed

( ) Other

**NUMBER OF CHILDREN:** \_\_\_\_\_

**CHILDREN'S AGES:** \_\_\_\_\_

**OCCUPATION:** \_\_\_\_\_

**EDUCATION LEVEL:**

( ) High school diploma or GED

( ) Associate degree (for example: AA, AS)

( ) Bachelor's degree (for example: BA, AB, BS)

( ) Master's degree (for example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA) ( ) Professional degree (for example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)

( ) Doctorate degree (for example: PhD, PsyD, EdD)

( ) Other

On a scale of 1-5 how religious do you consider yourself to be?

<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Very Religious</b>	<b>Religious</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Somewhat Religious</b>	<b>Not At All Religious</b>

On a scale of 1-5 how spiritual do you consider yourself to be?

<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Very Spiritual</b>	<b>Spiritual</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Somewhat Spiritual</b>	<b>Not At All Spiritual</b>

## APPENDIX H

### Counseling Referral List

## **Referral List for Persons Participating in the Study**

### **What Does it Mean When Christians Have Had Pre-Marital Sexual Contact? A Qualitative Study**

#### **Denton, Texas**

Counseling and Family Therapy Clinic Texas  
Woman's University  
Human Development Building, Room 114  
Denton, TX 76204  
(940) 898-2600

#### **AAMFT** (Therapist Locator)

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy  
<http://www.aamft.org/therapistlocator/>

#### **APA** (Psychologist Locator)

American Psychological Association Practice Organization.  
<http://locator.apa.org/>

#### **AACC** (Counselor Locator)

American Association of Christian Counselors  
[https://store.aacc.net/ccn/ccn\\_search.php](https://store.aacc.net/ccn/ccn_search.php)

## APPENDIX I

### Digital Social Media Recruitment Flyer



## Pre-Marital Sexual Contact: What does it mean to YOU?



- Are you 25 years old or older?
- Do you identify as a Christian?
- Do you identify as heterosexual?
- Have you ever experienced pre-marital sexual contact?

If you answered **YES** to these questions, this confidential research study may be for you

**Who am I?:** AnnaMarie Christian, a doctoral student at Texas Woman's University

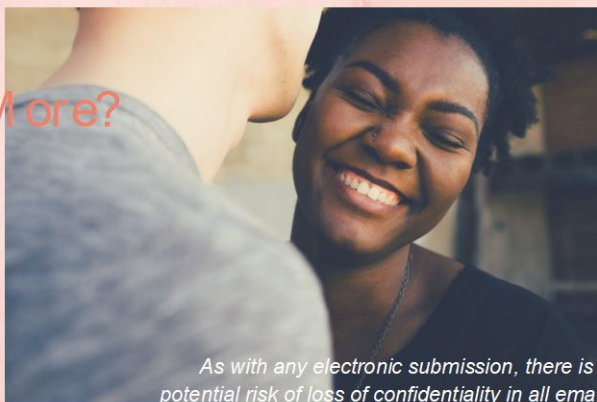
**What am I doing?:** Conducting voluntary confidential interviews to discuss what meanings Christians place on their pre-marital sexual contact.

**How long will this take?:** About an hour & will be at a confidential & agreed upon location you and I choose.

**It's my hope that the results of this study will aid family therapists and other professionals to understand those who identify as Christians and have experienced pre-marital sexual contact.**

## Questions? Want to Know More?

If you or anybody else may be interested in participating, please contact me, at (972) 987-0455 or email me at [afarr1@twu.edu](mailto:afarr1@twu.edu)  
My research advisor, Linda J. Brock, Ph.D. can be reached at (940) 898-2713 or [LBrock@mail.twu.edu](mailto:LBrock@mail.twu.edu)



*As with any electronic submission, there is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email downloading, and internet transactions.*