



Current Sexual Practices of Evangelical Teens and Young Adults

By: David J. Ayers

Evangelicals¹ have historically held a simple view of sex outside of marriage—*don't*. Yet social science has shown for years that most self-identified Evangelicals engage in premarital sex. Despite the official teachings of their churches and clear instruction in the Bible, sex outside of marriage has become increasingly morally acceptable among them as well.

For example, in the General Social Survey (GSS), in 2014 through 2018 combined, only 37% of “fundamentalist”² adults said that sex outside marriage was “always wrong,” while 41% said it was “not wrong at all.” From 1974-1978, the same percentages were 44% and 27%, respectively. Meanwhile, the GSS showed that among never-married fundamentalist adults between 2008 and 2018, 86% of females had at least one male sex partner since age 18, while 57% had three or more. For males, 82% had had at least one sex partner, and 65% had three or more. This includes respondents as young as 18 or 19, which reduces the percentages who are sexually active, because percentages rise as singles get older. In a previous analysis of 2000-2016 GSS data for never-married members of conservative Protestant denominations who were 25-40 years of age, I found that 89% of men and 92% of women had at least one opposite-sex partner in the past five years.³

The wholesale abandonment of most of the traditional sex ethic among modern Evangelicals is well-documented.⁴ Joshua Harris is, of course, the most recent example. As Dale Kuehne

¹ By the term ‘Evangelical’ I am referring specifically to Protestants who embrace the following core beliefs: “the Bible is the inspired, infallible and authoritative Word of God; classical doctrines on the Trinity; the virgin birth, perfect life, miracles, atoning death, physical resurrection, ascension to the right hand of the Father and personal return in power and glory of Jesus Christ; the lost and sinful state of all human beings, who can only be saved through by being ‘born again through faith in Christ alone’; the work of that same Holy Spirit in the lives of all true believers; the resurrection of all humankind to either eternal life or eternal damnation; the spiritual unity of all true believers in Christ; the need to personally share with unbelievers their need to trust in Christ, to accept the free gift of salvation and the forgiveness of sins accomplished by his death on the cross.” Note that this is consistent with the National Association of Evangelicals understanding of this term, and what denominations who are part of the NAE generally embrace.

² “Fundamentalist” and “conservative Protestant” in the GSS both match typical understandings of “Evangelical.”

³ See Ayers, David J. *Christian Marriage: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), page 68.

⁴ See *ibid*. See also Mark Regnerus’ excellent *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

aptly noted, in sexual matters, our culture has moved from an ethic of covenant to an ethic of consent, viewing limiting sex to married individuals as unnecessarily repressive.⁵

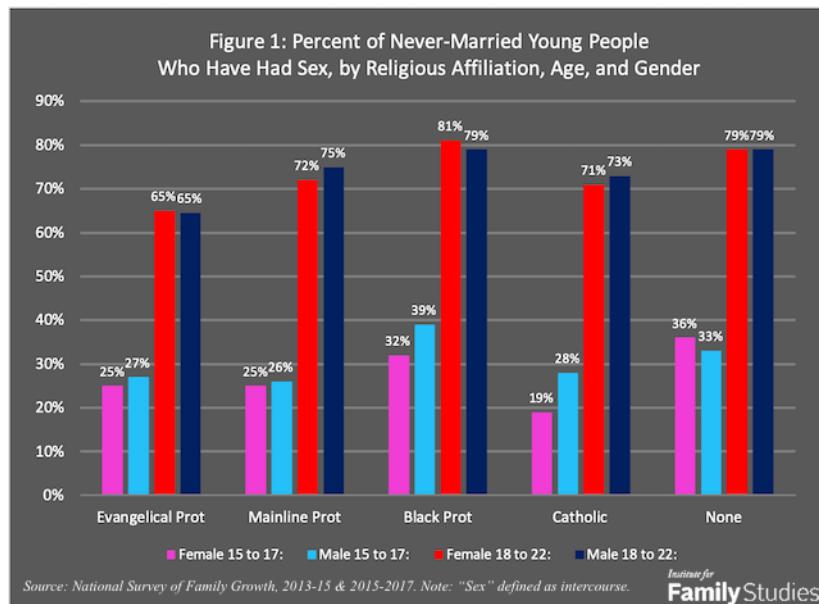
Yet, my years of teaching in the church and in so-called “Evangelical” higher education has shown me that too many spiritual leaders, educators, and parents in the Evangelical world do not grasp the extent of premarital sexual activity among their unmarried young people, including the types of sexual activity being engaged in and their consequences. This helps to explain the appalling inadequacy of their attempts to promote and enforce a consistent, traditional sexual ethic among their singles.

In my recent book, *Christian Marriage*, I sought to address this by looking at data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), among other sources.⁶ In this research brief, incorporating the most recent NSFG cycle released in December 2018, I extend this overview of sexual activity among never-married evangelical young people, combining the cycles for 2013-15 with the latest 2015-17 survey.

The NSFG allows us to tease out Evangelical respondents in a number of ways. The most straightforward is their designation of “Evangelical Protestant,” which includes non-Black denominations historically and strongly tied to evangelical teaching, or unspecified Protestant denominations, plus the respondent self-identifying as “fundamentalist,” “born again,” “charismatic,” or “evangelical.”⁷ Overall, my analysis was based upon 4,969 never-married respondents between the ages of 15 and 22, 51% female and 49% male—950 of whom were Evangelical Protestants.⁸ I categorized the age groups into ages 15 to 17, and ages 18 to 22.

Premarital Sexual Activity by Religious Affiliation

Most Christian young people are sexually active by the time they are young adults. Figures 1 through 3 compare the percentages of never-married female and male respondents in the last two cycles of the NSFG, in each of the age groups and designated religious affiliations, who have ever engaged in sexual intercourse, oral, or anal sex with an opposite-sex partner.



⁵ *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship beyond an Age of Individualism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), pages 20-21.

⁶ Op cit., see especially Chapter 7.

⁷ These are distinguished from “Mainline” and “Black” Protestants,⁷ Catholics, and those with no religious affiliation. There is also the “Other Religion” category, which includes a wide variety of smaller groups such as Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons and so on. I ignored this as it is a “grab bag” category and thus it is hard to interpret just what is being compared.

⁸ See Appendix, Table 1 for detailed breakdown of frequencies by category.

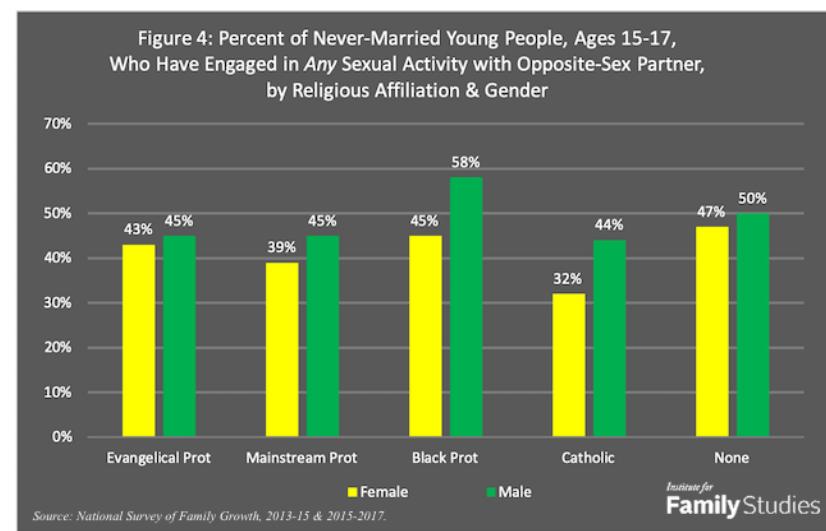
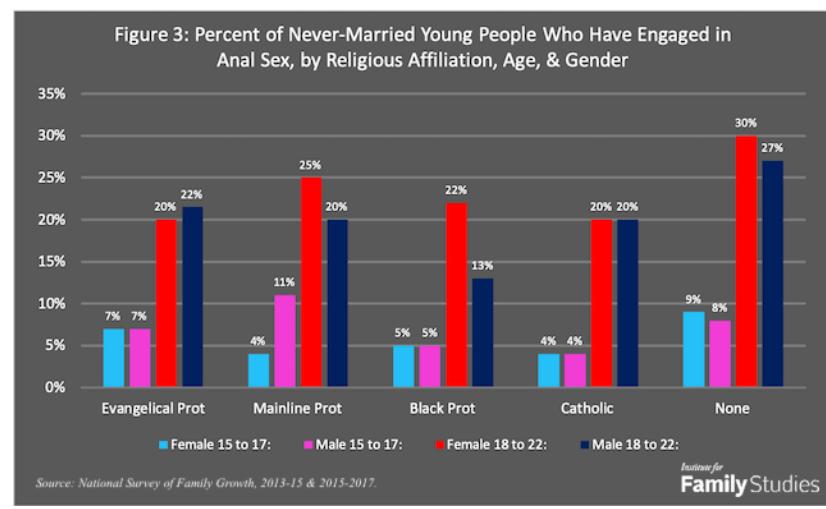
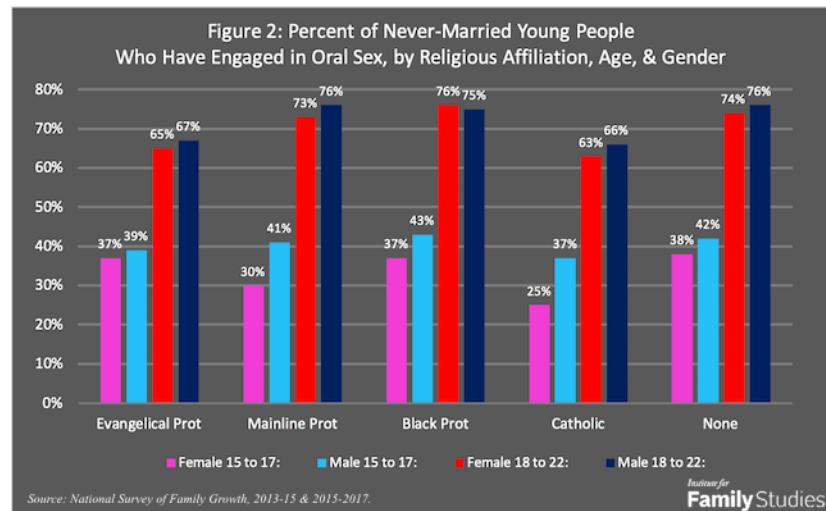
As we can see from Figure 1 on the previous page, 65% or more of both male and female never-married Evangelicals between 18 and 22 had engaged in sexual intercourse or oral sex.

Moreover, many Evangelical parents and leaders would be shocked to learn (to the extent this data accurately reflects this population) that roughly one-in-five never-married Evangelicals, 18 to 22 years of age have engaged in sexual behavior as risky as anal penetration.

Among this age group, Evangelical Protestants do better than the other religious groups when it comes to sexual intercourse, and better than all of the other groups—except for Catholics—when it comes to oral sex. Shockingly, however, when it comes to anal sex, they only do better than the religiously unaffiliated. Most Christian parents, pastors, and other youth leaders would find these results discouraging.

Figures 4 and 5 (*next page*) consider those who have ever engaged in *any* type of sexual activity (of the three listed above) with at least one opposite-sex partner.

The results for those 18 to 22 are a bit more encouraging for religious groups who support premarital chastity but still disappointing. Evangelical percentages were the lowest among all religious groups shown, and especially distinct from those who were not Catholic.



Almost three-quarters of never-married 18 to 22-year-old Evangelicals have engaged in some form of premarital sex. Among the 15 to 17 age group, Evangelicals are not much lower than Mainline or Black Protestants and are somewhat higher than Catholics.

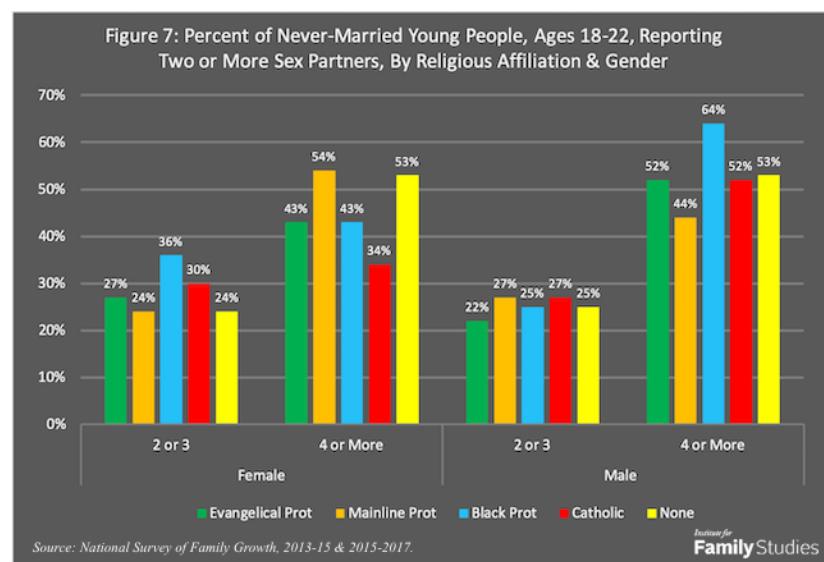
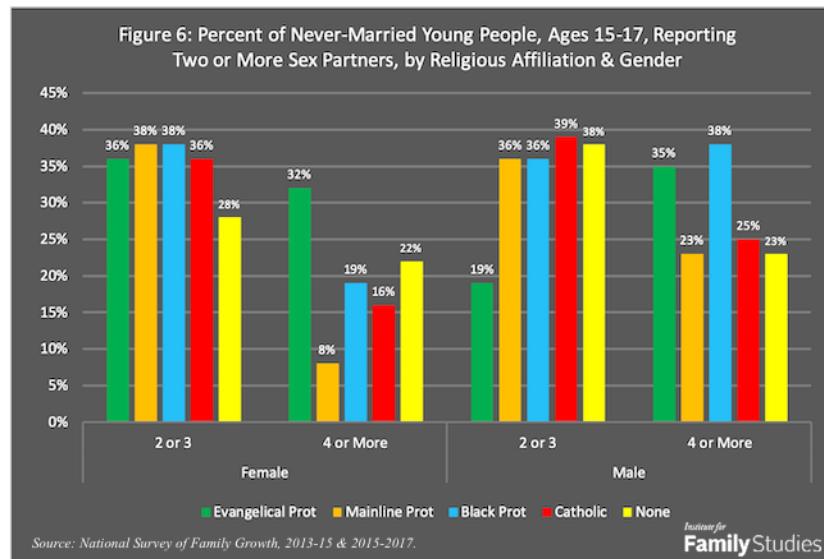
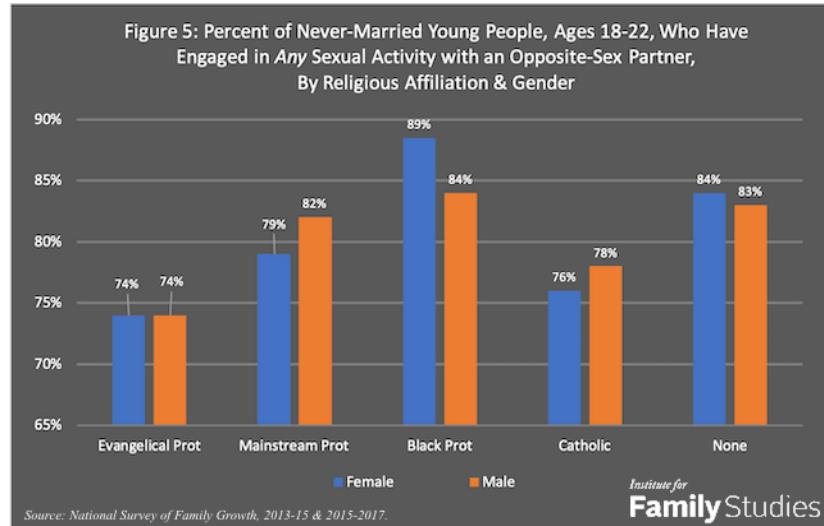
Number of Sex Partners

Next, Figures 6 and 7 show the *total number of sex partners* for these groups who have ever engaged in any type of sexual activity. The focus is on those having 2 or more sex partners (*for the mean, or average, number of sex partners by religious affiliation, please see the Appendix*).⁹

Among never-married respondents in either age group, Evangelical Protestants do not compare favorably versus the other religious affiliations when it comes to the number of sex partners.

Overall, there is not much here to instill confidence in those who believe that religious teaching against premarital sexual activity would dramatically lower the number of partners for young people who have engaged in sex.

To put this another way, Evangelical parents and leaders seem to have more success in convincing unmarried young people to not engage in sex at all, rather than in getting them to avoid promiscuity once they have become sexually active.



⁹ Thus, for example, for Evangelical Protestant females ages 15 to 17, 36% of those who had ever had sex had 2 or 3 partners, and 32% had 4 or more partners. The remainder, 32%, only had 1 partner.

Premarital Sexual Activity by Church Attendance

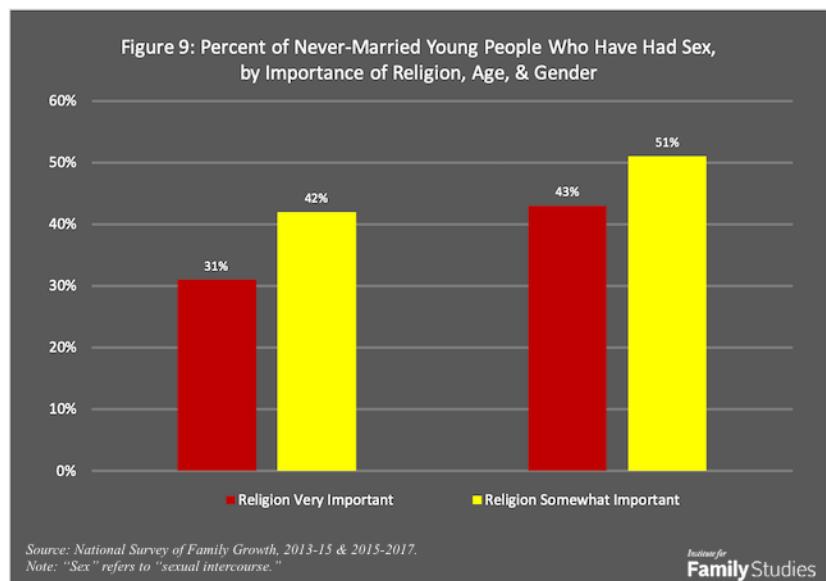
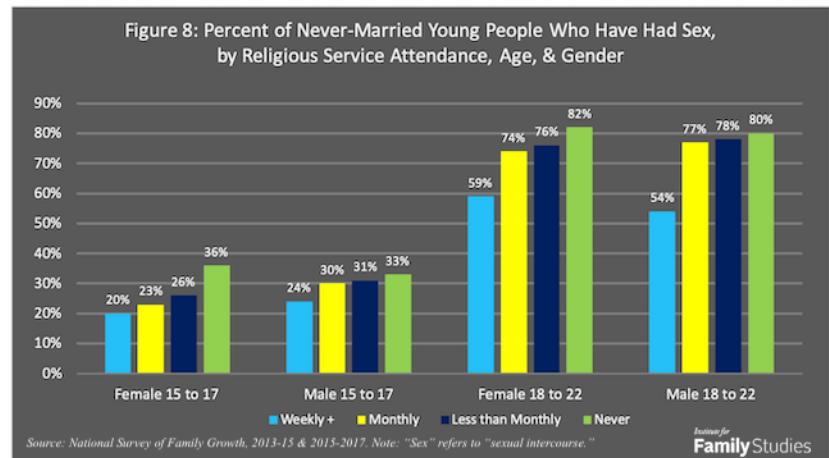
In and of itself, simply identifying with a religion, even in Evangelical Protestantism with its strict official teachings on sex, predicts sexual activity among unmarried young people *less* than many would expect.

However, regular church attendance is often associated with lower levels of sexual activity among unmarried young people.¹⁰ This was also the case here.

As Figure 8 shows, never-married young people who attended church weekly were much less likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse than those who did not, especially when weekly attenders are compared to those who never attend church. The pattern is similar when considering percentages who had engaged in *any* form of sexual activity.¹¹ As Table 2 in the Appendix suggests, there is also a slight tendency among those who have engaged in sexual activity for lower percentages having multiple partners, among young women and older young men, especially women ages 18 to 22. But this is pretty inconsistent and weak.¹² Again, the pattern is similar when considering percentages who had engaged in any form of sexual activity.¹³

Premarital Sex by Perceptions of the Importance of Religion

Considering one's religion to be an important part of one's daily life is also often associated with lower levels of premarital sex.¹⁴ This was true here, as Figure 9 demonstrates. Never-married respondents who considered religion to be "very important" are less likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse than those who said it was only "somewhat important."¹⁵



¹⁰ This is shown, for example, in my book, *Christian Marriage*, pages 172-179.

¹¹ Figure for this not shown, for the sake of brevity.

¹² "Monthly" attendance refers to 1 to 3 religious services per month. Those who attend less than that are sometimes referred to as "Less than Monthly," and then there are respondents who claim they "Never" do. In these analyses, for obvious reasons, those with no religious affiliation are excluded, and again, those placed by NSFG in the "Other" category.

¹³ Figure for this not shown, for the sake of brevity.

¹⁴ See again my *Christian Marriage*, pages 172-179.

¹⁵ Given that it excludes respondents with no religious affiliation, the "Not Important At All" category included such a tiny number of respondents that it was not usable. So only "very" and "somewhat" are included here.

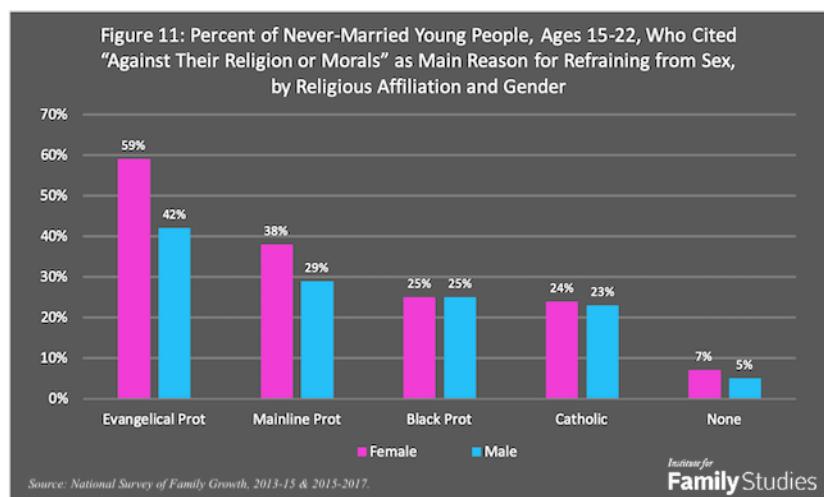
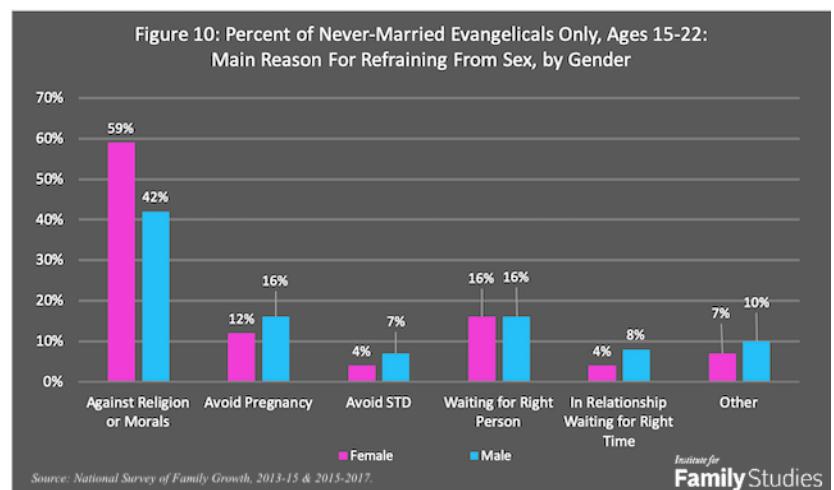
However, it is also clear that church attendance is a much more important factor. In fact, young men who considered religion to be “very important” are much *more* likely to have had 4 or more sex partners, while young women who considered religion to be “very important” are only slightly less likely to have had that many sex partners.

Reasons for Refraining from Premarital Sex

Evangelical pastors might take comfort in the thought that their unmarried young people who have refrained from sexual intercourse, even if they have experimented with other forms of sexual activity,¹⁶ are motivated by their Christian moral values. But, here again, the NSFG disappoints—at least when it comes to young men.

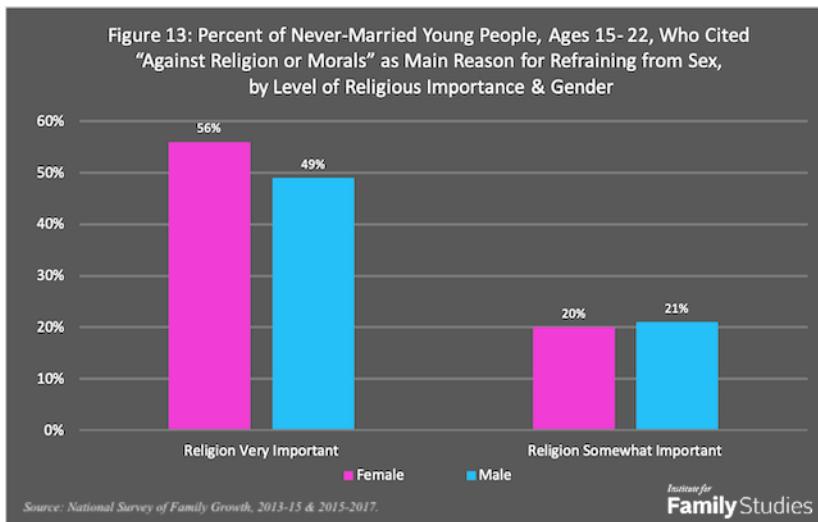
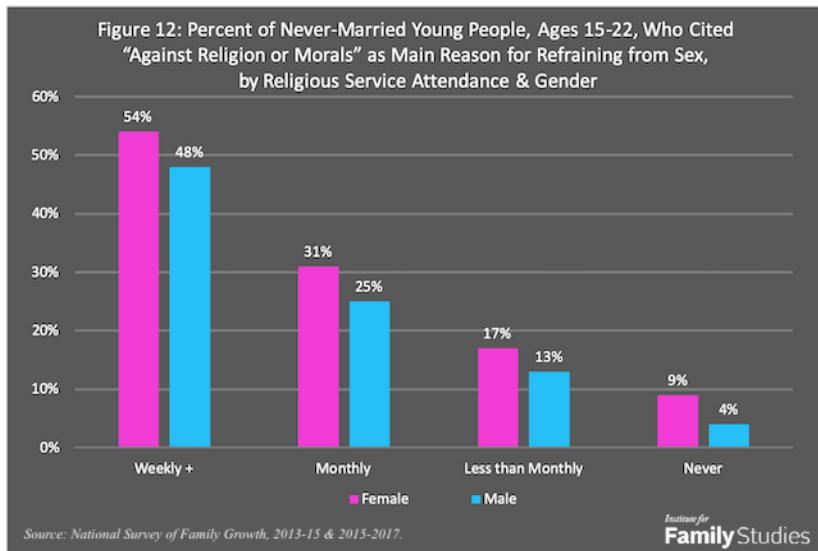
Figure 10 suggests that religious and moral values were the main reason for abstaining from sexual intercourse for the majority of female—but not male—never-married Evangelical young people. However, Evangelical abstainers were far more likely to cite this motivation than respondents from other religious groups, as Figure 11 illustrates.

Among those who have abstained from sex, church attendance and perceived importance of religion are associated with being more likely to cite moral or religious values as the main reason for refraining from sexual intercourse.



¹⁶ For the four age/sex categories here, between 24% and 33% of those who had not had sexual intercourse, and thus were asked this question, *had* engaged in oral or anal sex. Certainly, some additional percentage had engaged in “petting” behavior as well.

Figures 12 and 13 show robust relationships for both of these factors, in the predicted direction.



Putting it All Together

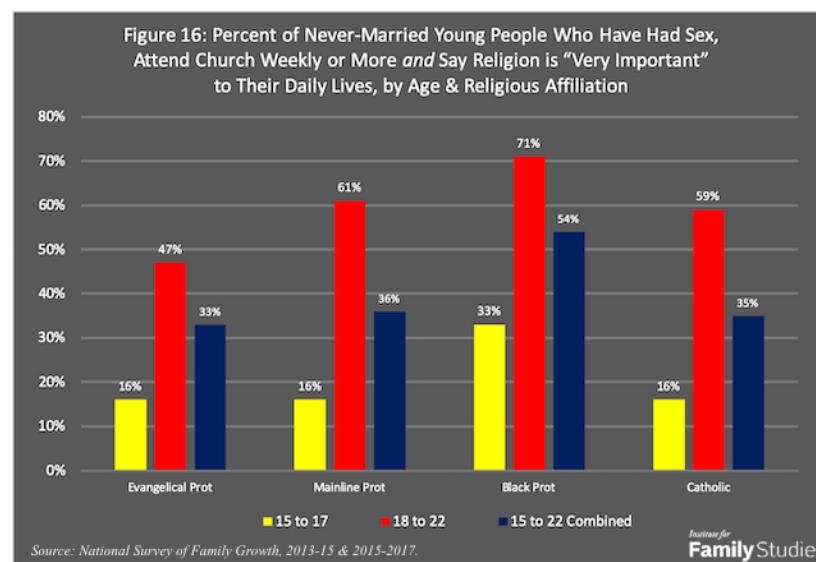
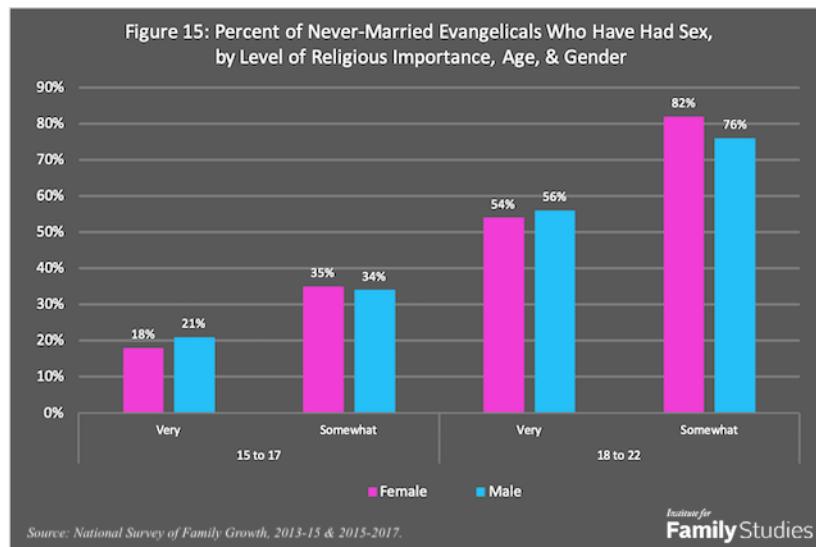
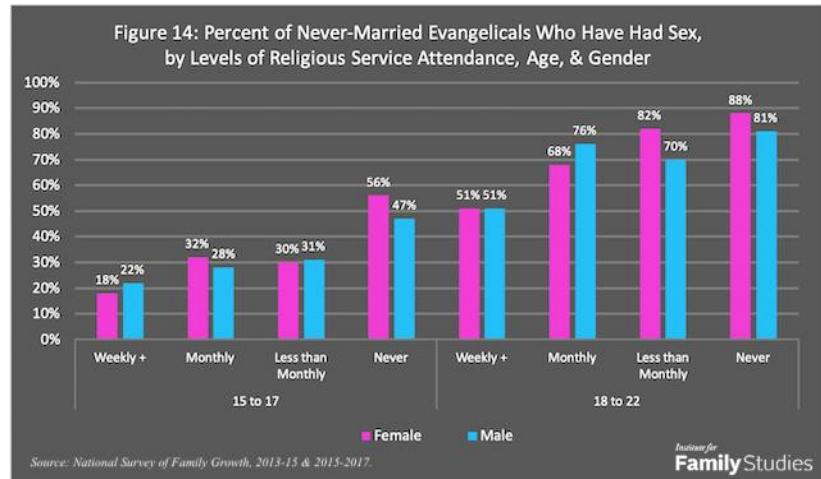
What might explain the anemic association of Evangelical Protestant religious affiliation with lower levels of sexual involvement? Perhaps the disappointing percentages of professed church members who actually attend church weekly or who consider their religion to be “very important.”

Combining the age groups together, only 55% of young women and 48% of young men attend religious services at least weekly, while 25% and 31% (respectively) do so less than monthly or never. Moreover, 70% of women and 61% of men consider their religion to be “very important” to their daily lives.

First, as Figures 14 and 15 suggest, among Evangelical Protestants, both of these variables are associated with much lower percentages of those who ever engaged in sexual intercourse.

Although the percentages are still higher than many Evangelical leaders and parents would find acceptable, percentages for regular church attenders and those for whom religion has a high place of importance in their daily lives are much better than the overall numbers, and certainly than those for the less committed young people. It also appears that both factors are also strongly associated with delayed onset of sexual intercourse.

Finally, Figure 16 depicts these aspects of ever having had sexual intercourse among the 936 NSFG respondents from these last two survey cycles who were either Evangelical, Mainline or Black Protestant, or Catholic, and who claimed to *both* attend religious services at least weekly *and* consider religion to be a “very important” aspect of their daily lives.¹⁷ (*This figure combines men and women within our two age levels to keep samples of sufficient size within each group. There is also a bar combining both age groups, which of course has the best frequency size.*)



¹⁷ Results were similar when all forms of sexual activity were combined. Figure not shown here.

Among 15- to 17-year-olds, Evangelical Protestants only have lower percentages than Black Protestants. However, among both age groups combined, and especially among those aged 18 to 22, Evangelical Protestants had the lowest percentages, followed by Catholics.

Conclusion

Although we must be careful making any kind of causal claims from data such as this, given all we know about the impact of commitment and social support, teaching young people to prioritize church attendance and keeping religion central in their daily lives will most likely help religious young people be more faithful to their church's sexual teachings, provided that instruction remains orthodox. Certainly, both factors—holding faith to be very important and frequent church involvement—go together and are mutually reinforcing. Moreover, it is hard for religious leaders to effectively discipline and instruct young people in sexual mores if these young men and women are not present in church or committed to their faith. This is especially true in a culture where classical Christian teaching on sex is increasingly rejected and even viewed with hostility. Casual, lax Christianity is not going to encourage young people to swim against the currents of their time and their peers.

We have also seen that it is critically important to encourage and help young people to delay sexual activity as long as possible, ideally until marriage. Once they become sexually active—at least in terms of sex partners—it appears to be harder to prevent them from moving into levels of promiscuity similar to those outside the Evangelical world. This is true even among those who attend church regularly and rate religion to be highly important.

With this, churches may need to consider better forms of intervention in the lives of their young people who have begun to be sexually active. For example, perhaps returning to a robust understanding of classic doctrines about the holiness of God, the nature of true repentance, but also divine mercy and forgiveness, with greater practical support for those who seek to change, will yield better fruits. Regardless, young people must first be present in church and committed to their faith for this kind of teaching to reach them and make a difference.

David J. Ayers is currently Professor of Sociology and Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania. His latest book is Christian Marriage: A Comprehensive Introduction (Lexham Press, February 2019). Dr. Ayers has taught college-level classes in Marriage and Family for well over 30 years.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Frequencies Unmarried NSFG Respondents, 15 to 22 Years Old by Religious Affiliation, 2013-15 and 2015-17 Cycles Combined

	Evangelical Protestant	Mainline Protestant	Black Protestant	Catholic	None	<i>TOTAL</i>
<u>Females</u>						
15 to 17:	202	150	166	294	255	1,067
18 to 22:	283	183	261	319	412	1,458
<u>Males</u>						
15 to 17:	200	150	156	271	273	1,050
18 to 22:	265	172	205	272	480	1,394
<i>TOTAL</i>	950	655	788	1,156	1,420	4,969

Table 2: Number of Partners for Those Who Have Had Any Sex, Showing Those with Two or More Partners, Never-Married, Ages 15-22, by Levels of Attendance at Religious Services

	Males Ages 15-17	Females Ages 15-17	Males Ages 18-22	Females, Ages 18-22
Church Attendance				
<u>Weekly or More</u>				
2 or 3 Partners:	31%	36%	25%	33%
4 or More Partners:	33%	19%	49%	31%
<u>Monthly</u>				
2 or 3 Partners:	35%	33%	29%	30%
4 or More Partners:	29%	16%	49%	46%
<u>Less than Monthly</u>				
2 or 3 Partners:	45%	30%	21%	24%
4 or More Partners:	24%	19%	59%	52%
<u>Never</u>				
2 or 3 Partners:	31%	34%	26%	27%
4 or More Partners:	25%	25%	55%	50%

Table 3: Number of Partners for Those Who Have Had Any Sex, Showing Those with Two or More Partners, Never-Married, Ages 15-22, by Importance of Religion

	Males Ages 15-17	Females, Ages 15-17	Males, Ages 18-22	Females, Ages 18-22
Importance of Religion				
Very				
2 or 3 Partners:	28%	37%	24%	32%
4 or More Partners:	37%	18%	56%	39%
Somewhat				
2 or 3 Partners:	40%	35%	27%	28%
4 or More Partners:	23%	20%	51%	45%

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