

The conversation about faith and sex that *The Bachelorette* sparked

## And that conversation's inevitable limits

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Luke Parker and Hannah Brown in season 15 of *The Bachelorette* (ABC)

When I started watching *The Bachelorette*, I didn't expect anything more than a guilty pleasure. The show's premise is ridiculous: select one man or woman to weed through 30 potential suitors and then pick who they want to marry. Baked into that premise are assumptions around gender roles; heteronormative relationships; and the toned, tanned, wrinkle- and wobble-free bodies that represent a very narrow template of beauty.

Generally, the conversations between contestants that viewers see are stripped down to the most predictable, repetitive subjects: At what stage on the road to "falling in love" are they? And how open to love and marriage do they consider themselves to be? If political debates or discussions of world events take place, they

don't make the broadcast. Nobody talks about the great books they have read, the music in which they hear life's deepest truths, or the people whose ideas have caused them to see the world in a whole new light.

I was surprised to learn that a large proportion of the show's audience identifies as Christian. Despite the show's titillating premise, its traditional understanding of marriage has been a major point of appeal. Recent years have seen more and more of the contestants speak about their Christian faith (and ABC cater more and more to this audience).

Season 15, which finished airing last week, takes that Christian content to a new level. Lead Hannah Brown speaks in the language of "God putting a word on my heart." She quotes scripture regularly and occasionally gathers with the contestants to lead them in a time of prayer. The love interest that catches her eye immediately, Luke Parker, is a born-again Christian and a born-again virgin.

For his part, Luke [has stated](#) that "spreading the message of Jesus" was his aim in going on the show. "Our guys are praying for him every day," a friend from his church [told the Gainesville Times](#). "He wants to share his faith on national TV."

Excitement for Luke's platform quickly turned to outrage, however. Throughout the season, Luke is depicted as manipulative, lying, sociopathic, and judgmental. Eventually he is sent home—after an argument with Hannah about sex before marriage.

Many conservative Christians thought ABC gave Luke a [villain edit](#) precisely [because he's a Christian](#). It's hardly the first time the mainstream media has been accused of deliberately misrepresenting conservative Christian values. As a Christian from a more progressive tradition, I too have felt frustrated by the depiction of faith I generally see in the media.

But while I would usually find myself bristling at such a troubling character being the one associated with faith, this season of *The Bachelorette* intrigued and encouraged me. That's because Hannah talks openly about her faith as well, as do several of her other potential suitors. They are presented not as crazy, hypocritical, or judgmental, but rather as if faith is a natural and reasonable part of their lives. I appreciate the conversation this variety of faith voices on the show has sparked this summer on matters of faith and culture.

Yet I've also been aware of the shortcomings of TV as a platform for this kind of discussion.

As [Marshall McLuhan wrote decades ago](#), "the medium is the message." Neil Postman expanded on McLuhan's work, [noting that](#) the format of television inherently proclaims this message: nothing that is being discussed, not even the most serious of the day's world events, matters more than moving the program along so that it can keep viewers' interest and then break for commercials.

Luke Parker is hardly the first to be drawn by the allure of television as an evangelistic opportunity. Postman quotes Pat Robertson: "It would be folly for the Church not to get involved with the most formative force in America." Even Pope Paul VI, in his 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, noted that "the Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect."

But Postman and others have long cautioned us to consider all that is lost through the lens of television. Ultimately it exists to promote itself and its advertisers. "All that is historic, profound and sacred as a human activity is stripped away," writes Postman.

This season of *The Bachelorette* has confirmed McLuhan's and Postman's long-ago assertions in textbook fashion. The argument that takes place between Hannah and Luke is ostensibly about sin and sex. Luke quotes Hebrews 13, claiming that the marriage bed is to be kept "pure." Hannah, in response, notes that Jesus doesn't judge the woman caught in adultery and Luke shouldn't judge her. Advocates of sex positivity cheered as Hannah sent Luke home with these quotable words: "I've had sex, and Jesus still loves me."

Conservative Christians criticized Hannah for her casual approach to sin and faith. On left-leaning secular talk shows and podcasts, other Christian voices were invited to speak up in solidarity with Hannah, noting that Luke is not representative of our faith tradition and that sex positivity and faith are not mutually exclusive.

What nobody seemed to recognize, neither on the show nor in the response to it, is what was absent: any discussion about what a healthy and faithful sexuality might actually look like. There is a lot of talk of sin and grace, but nothing about how the gospel invites repentance (turning) and why this repentance can be so liberating—our lives called out of their isolation and self-involvement and into

community, compassion, and care for the vulnerable.

Toward the end of the season, Luke is brought out to “the hot seat” to discuss his season with host Chris Harrison—and to face Hannah one last time. Chris, Hannah, and the other contestants pile on Luke, accusing him of hypocrisy, lies, and manipulation. Hannah, now completely free of the feelings she once had for him, calls him out for slut-shaming her and for being sinful in ways that are far worse than her sexual dalliances in the “fantasy suite.”

What I saw in Luke in this episode was not a villain but rather a very young man who has been indoctrinated in certain teachings around sex and gender roles. I saw a young man who hoped that he could go on the show to share his faith and win a Christian wife, and who has been blindsided by his discovery that faith and love might be more complex than saying you love Jesus on national TV and then winning a prize.

Luke tries to answer the questions fired at him, looking surprised, lost, and confused. Only one person rises to his defense, and none seems to imagine that their collective attack on him in this most public way might also be considered in the realm of sin. No one suggests that TV and social media might actually be terrible places to get at the truth of what went on in a relationship and who is or isn't being faithful. Nobody notices that both Luke and Hannah are betraying their one-time feelings for one another by subjecting each other to hateful and judgmental comments by reams of complete strangers, and that of all of the sins of the season, this treatment of each other as so much less than human is the worst of all.

At *Christian Today*, [David Robertson takes Hannah to task](#) for her faith statements. He presents three mistakes in her approach to following Jesus, culminating in this one:

Hannah declares, “My faith has grown so much and I realize what the relationship with the Lord is really about.” But she clearly doesn't. She thinks that relationship is all about her – who she is and what she wants. The faith she has is in herself and her own personal Jesus – someone to hear her prayers and gives her what she wants.

In fact Robertson's criticism of Hannah gets at the heart of the limitations of the show itself as a platform for Christian conversation. It's not just that the medium is

the message. The *financial engine of the medium* becomes the message. If television exists to deliver audiences to advertisers, then the paradigm of the me-centered universe will always dominate. My 10-year-old son wandered into the room as *The Bachelorette* was on and immediately commented, “all they ever talk about is themselves.”

Sin thus gets boiled down to a set of rules that people either do or don’t follow. Hannah and Luke seem to agree that sex before marriage is sinful, but Hannah also believes that her sin is one of many and that Jesus guarantees the “washing” of them all. Meanwhile, the true promiscuity at work in the show never gets called into question: the use of one’s own body and one’s relationship with another to gain attention and popularity. On *The Bachelorette*, performing those relationships well for the cameras can be quite lucrative. But even in normal, non-TV lives, the pressure to perform—say, for likes on social media—starts young and dictates our lives and relationships to an astonishing extent.

Jesus asks, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3). We tend to hear this admonition very much as *The Bachelorette* presents it: don’t judge others. But there is also a deeper freedom being offered here: stop performing and start living.

Luke appeals to Paul’s image of the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). It’s a verse that’s been used for ages to condemn everything from sex outside marriage to tobacco and drugs. In fact Paul’s words offer not instruction but promise—promise that we cannot be separated from the resurrected body of Jesus. Wounds and all, Jesus’ body is raised by God to reveal the indwelling of the Most High. So our bodies—sexual and searching and desiring love—are loved and held, beautiful and sacred in the eyes of God.

This truth has implications both for the respect we pay our own bodies and our dealings with other bodies. Paul’s words are intimately linked to the Christian baptismal covenant, which (in the *Book of Common Prayer*) invites us “to strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being” as well as to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.” 1 Corinthians 6:19 offers an important corrective to the individualism that permeates the television format and so sharply limits all the conversation *The Bachelorette* has sparked.

We progressive Christians tend to assume that purity culture is all about controlling women. But as I have watched *The Bachelorette* this season and followed the conversation around it, I have begun to wonder whether purity culture thrives primarily because of the appeal of clear-cut rules. Questions about faithful and loving sex outside the purity culture's framework can make for murky waters. Discovering how to offer and receive our flawed and fragile selves might be life-giving and transformative, but it is also complex and risky and demanding.

It is so much simpler to either accept or reject Jesus based on whether or not you choose to have sex before marriage.

In Matthew 13:44-46 Jesus tells two brief parables about searching for treasure and finding it. In a recent Bible study at my church, the participants heard in these words not that the kingdom of heaven is a treasure to be found but rather that it is found in the act of searching. My wise colleague Alan then noted that this searching activity has been entrusted, through Jesus, to the community of faith. This summer *The Bachelorette* has shone a light on important conversations—while also revealing our most popular platforms for modern conversation as largely incapable of hosting them effectively. Maybe our Christian communities can do better, taking up more faithful, life-giving conversations about the treasure of this embodied life we share.