

# The Black Pentecostal Movement, Sex, and Sexuality: A Personal Experience

WRITTEN BY

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Raised in the conservative Black Pentecostal movement, the author reflects on a childhood marred by a stigmatized view of sex and sexuality, which greatly influenced their personal and sexual development within a familial and community context steeped in traditional religious norms.



Amidst a backdrop of tradition and scrutiny, a young couple navigates the complexities of their sexual identity within the confines of the Black Pentecostal movement.

The Black Pentecostal movement is a movement that is very proud of its history, staunch in its stand on its doctrine, and willing to help those who enter the doors of its churches. However, the Black Pentecostal movement is still very old-fashioned in its thoughts on sex and sexuality. I am a product of the Black Pentecostal movement, and the thoughts on the sexuality of the movement colored my sexual development.

Gayle Rubin writes, “The realm of sexuality also has its internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behavior, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity” (2377). This statement embodies my sexual development. My grandmother was a Black Pentecostal and raised her children in the Black Pentecostal church. My grandmother had children by two or three different men. I have an uncle who had children by three other women. I have an aunt who has children by two different men. My mother conceived me before she was married to my father, and because of her pregnancy, they were married. In the words of my father, “I couldn’t let my child be born a bastard.” My parents are no longer married. These “sexual sins” by my family members influenced the way I was taught about sexuality.

It was hard for a young girl growing up in the Black Pentecostal church in the 1970s and 1980s. I did not know anything about sex. I had not been told anything about sexuality and the nature of sex. The most I knew about sex was that it was something that a man and a woman did when they were married. The teachings that I received from the church and my mother (who primarily raised me) were to “keep your dress down and your legs closed.” I was a victim of sex-negativity. “Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force. Most Christian tradition, following Paul, holds that sex is inherently sinful” (Rubin 2388). I was a part of that tradition. Sex was an immoral thing, and it would send you to hell. This theory caused me to fear anything of a sexual nature. I saw people kissing on television and often thought, “That’s so nasty,” when it was a beautiful expression of love and affection. I would see couples holding hands and think, “They are sinning.” My view of sexuality was negative and flawed.

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What I was taught about being and becoming a woman was corrupted. I remember watching an episode of “The Cosby Show” where Rudy had her “woman’s day” (the day that she got her first menstrual cycle) and the fuss the whole family made over her; it was not an enjoyable episode for

me. I became outraged, jealous, and insulted. My woman's day did not occur in that manner. No, my discovery of a young girl's journey into womanhood was far more traumatic. The only thing my mother told me about my cycle and how it affected my sexuality was, "Keep your dress down and your legs closed. If you don't get your period, you're pregnant." That led to all kinds of issues. I was 12, a month from turning 13 when I got my "Woman's Day." There was no eloquent conversation filled with love and comforting words. There were no hugs and congratulations. There was only a hateful look and a reminder not to get pregnant. I did not get my next cycle until two months before I turned fourteen, so I went ten months without a cycle. One day during this time, I became distraught because I thought I was pregnant because I had not gotten my cycle. I felt dirty. I felt as if I had committed some significant sin, but I had not had sex. When my mother learned of my thinking that I was pregnant, she did not take the opportunity to have a decent talk with me about sex, and she just impatiently told me that I was not pregnant. I felt no better at that time; I felt something was wrong with me.

The Black Pentecostal movement "treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges almost any sexual practice in terms of the worst possible expression" (2388). This treatment of sex led to me being criticized when I told everyone that I was going to go live with my father to get my college education. A month before I was about to graduate from high school, my Sunday School teacher stood me up in front of the whole class of teenagers and said, "You are going to go down there with your Daddy and get pregnant." I was mortified, embarrassed, and hurt. This statement would influence my sexual development for the next few years. As a college student, I was scared to interact socially with my fellow college students, especially the boys. From what I had been taught, they were heathens who only wanted to have sex and corrupt me. I went to school and went home.

I would be attracted to boys occasionally, but would feel guilty when I felt that attraction. I would see young couples holding hands and want to experience that, but I would immediately feel guilty and dirty for having those thoughts. "Extreme and punitive stigma maintains some sexual behaviors as low status and is an effective sanction against those who engage in them. The intensity of this stigma is rooted in Western religious traditions" (2389). My thoughts on sex and sexuality were deep-rooted in Western religious tradition, and the sanctions I placed on myself were often horrendous. I am still baffled as to why I did not fall into the pattern of random sex as many of my Black Pentecostal counterparts fell into as a result of the teachings or lack of teachings on sex and sexuality.

I was so afraid of getting pregnant that I allowed myself not to experience any of the fun parts of college life. It did not help that I went to a small-town college, and my father happened to be the pastor at the biggest Black Baptist church in the city. Everyone knew my father, and everyone knew me, so I was essentially off-limits to any of the boys at the school. My father's view on sex was not as bad as my mother's, but it was saturated with Western religious traditions. My father never told me about the positive aspects of sex and sexuality. He did not explain that sex was an expression of love between a man and a woman. He told me not to get pregnant and that if I did get pregnant, I would

have to drop out of school, get a job, and take care of the baby myself. I had no idea about the beauty of sex.

I once told my father that I had a dream with sexual overtones. He told me that it was nasty to have dreams like that and never to do it again. My father's view of sex and sexuality was filled with sex-negativity as well. "Virtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction, and love" (2388). Sex has been relegated to making babies, in my view.

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My sexual awakening occurred when I was 23 years old. A member of my father's church, who happened to have grown up in the Black Pentecostal movement and was Baptist as well, took me under her wing and began to nurture my view of sex and sexuality. She explained to me that sex was a beautiful act between a married man and a woman who wanted to express their love to each other. It was also a means of producing children as well. Her view of sex was still rooted in the Western religious tradition, but it was not so pessimistic. I learned to view sex positively over the next few years. Ultimately, this guided me to a positive way of thinking about sex beautifully.

"The time has come to think about sex" (2377). This statement by Gayle Rubin rings true of the Black Pentecostal movement. It still holds fast to the outdated view of sex and sexuality. The people's personal views have changed about sex and the sex hierarchy. However, these people speak their thoughts quietly to those in their inner circles. Sex is not talked about openly and freely. Sex is not talked about at all other than to say, "Do not have sex before marriage," or pontificate doctrinal rhetoric and personal vile towards "sexual sins."

"To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation. But it is precisely at times like these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality" (2377).

The Black Pentecostal movement as a whole needs to talk about sex and sexuality. The sex talk should be more than a referendum on sex between married couples to procreate or to vilify whatever sexual perversion is the topic of the moment. The lines of communication need to be opened, and the leaders of the movement need to speak frankly about sex and sexuality without feeling as if it is a dirty subject that should be kept behind closed doors.

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### Works Cited

Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality". *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. 2377-2402. Print.