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Teaching 1990s Christian Youth: The *Teen Study Bible* as Christian Fundamentalist Curriculum

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Introduction

Niche Bibles, including the *Teen Study Bible*,[1] have been used to provide tailored, spiritual, context-specific messaging for 1990s Christian youth.[2] However, as I reveal through my analysis, its messages became increasingly conservative between 1993 and 1998, leaving less and less room for youth to interpret or think critically about how they will navigate their world. Using Martin's critical theory of religion[3] as a theoretical framework, in this paper I analyze as cultural and historical objects two 1990s editions of the *Teen Study Bible* in order to illustrate how the Bibles' authors prioritize and push their own interpretations and applications of isolated Biblical text to promote Fundamentalist religious and social conservatism. In doing so, the authors' Biblical commentary becomes an informal educational tool meant to teach Christian teens morality through a particular social and political lens using decontextualized, cherry-picked Bible quotations. Three research questions guide my content analysis: 1) In what ways did these authors employ language on the *Teen Study Bible*'s feature pages?; 2) What are the educational implications of their language choices?; and 3) How did editorial changes made between the 1993 and 1998 editions, if any, reflect the authors' messaging? I begin this paper with a vignette, a personal account of the *Teen Study Bible* in my own life, which I utilize to show the influence of this particular Bible in 1990s teens' religious education. I then define my theoretical framework, a critical theory of religion, and justify its value for this particular content analysis. Next, I provide brief context of U.S. Fundamentalist Christian culture and associated trends through the 1990s which give way to the publication and use of the *Teen Study Bible* as an educational document. I then provide an overview of *Teen Study Bible*s published in 1993 and 1998, followed by a content analysis of the authors' choice and commentary on topics deemed relevant to teens which appear on feature pages, the majority of which teach teens moral issues by employing a politically and socially conservative framework.

The Teen Study Bible as Youth Group Companion: A Vignette

I sit in the front row of the gray youth room under the blue glow of track lights, tuning out the youth pastor as he shares yet another story about Jesus and his many miracles. The small over-sugared cup of coffee I poured before heading to Sunday School sits empty at my feet. Although I care about my faith, no sermon can keep me engaged, no matter how young and hip the speaker is or how much coffee I drink. I look down at my Bible, a hand-me-down from my older sister, which was brand new in 1998. Even though it is now the early 2000s, this Bible is cool, with bright green letters against a purple backdrop. I hold a large section of the pages in my hand and let the pages slowly glide over the tip of my thumb, hoping to appear studious rather than bored. The steady stream of thin, partially transparent pages suddenly stop as my thumb reaches a stiff, glossy page. In large letters, the page reads "dating" and I pause to study it. Even though I am not allowed to date yet, or perhaps because of that, I am obsessed with the idea. I notice a Bible verse on the page and some advice that sounds like it is coming from my youth pastor, reminding me that avoiding kissing is a good way to stay pure. It reminds me of the books my sister reads like I Kissed Dating Goodbye *and* Passion and Purity*, or all the times my friends and I remind each other that "modest is hottest," or the purity retreat I went to last week where I wrote down all of the qualities I wanted in a husband and promised to avoid sex until I found him.*

Unraveling

In the early 2000s, I still carried the 1998 edition of the *Teen Study Bible* to church and turned to the author commentary for instruction when I wanted guidance on a specific issue, or simply to distract myself and pass the time during a boring sermon. I absorbed its teachings and out-of-context topical Bible passages as the one true interpretation and application of the Bible in my life. Because the commentary was in the Bible, among the canonical text, I automatically deemed the *Teen Study Bible* trustworthy. The vignette I offer is not specific to one particular memory of mine in relation to my religious experiences, but it offers a glimpse into my layered experiences growing up as a Christian teen in the 1990s and early 2000s. In particular, it highlights the central role of the *Teen Study Bible* in my life at the time. Although I studied the Bible occasionally during the week, my hands and eyes were often drawn to these thick "feature" pages scattered throughout my *Teen Study Bible*. I cannot claim that all '90s Christian kids had similar experiences, but my own narrative reveals how the design of the *Teen Study Bible* prioritizes modern issues and content, such as dating and relationships, over Biblical text in context. At best, this content communicates to youth that the Bible requires some frills in order to be interesting, relevant, meaningful, or engaging to youth. At worst, such commentary suggests it is not the Bible that should matter to youth, but rather what adults say about the Bible and how they apply scripture in ways that address adults' agendas for impressionable youth. Further, my vignette prompts one at least to question the lasting effects of Fundamentalist Christian discourse embedded in religious educational materials.

I am now an adult, but I am still unraveling some of these messages I learned growing up in the church, many of which I found scattered among Biblical texts that were a core part of my religious and moral education during adolescence. A quick glance at my Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok feeds shows that this unraveling, this deconstruction of dominant messages surrounding sexuality, purity, and particular moral codes is a shared experience among evangelical and ex-evangelical adults in the U.S., with trending hashtags like #exvangelical, #exfundie, and #purityculture. In the following sections, I provide context for the historical, political, and religious conditions that made way for the *Teen Study Bible* as an educational tool designed to promote religious and social conservatism. Analyzing religious educational texts and cultural artifacts of my youth, such as the *Teen Study Bible*, is part of this deconstructive work. In the remainder of my paper, I continue the unraveling as I critique the authors' use of language and manipulation of scripture to fit their particular moral agenda. In the following section, I define the theoretical framework I use for my analysis, a framework useful for understanding religion and religious tools as mechanisms of power.

Theoretical Framework

I chose Martin's critical theory of religion as the theoretical framework for this study because of its usefulness when considering the role of religious artifacts and objects in shaping religious and moral education in particular social, historical, and political contexts. Using Martin's critical theory of religion, I analyze the *Teen Study Bible* as a cultural and historical document by placing it in historical context. Martin's theory applies critical theory to the ways religions "create, shape, or modify societies or social groups."[4] There are three major tenets: authority, authenticity, and legitimation. Interpreting how religious power is exercised and religious privilege is granted according to these tenets can be helpful in understanding the role of religion in the formation or perpetuation of social organizations and religious moral teachings.

The first tenet, authority, suggests that dominant religions rely on "absent authority figures" or "texts with missing authors," such as Jesus or the Bible.[5] This phenomenon has two major implications. First, it creates a reliance on interpretation of the text rather than the text itself, which may shift according to the social, historical, and political contexts when interpretations are made. Next, authority might also facilitate "projection," or using an absent authority figure or missing author as justification for a particular action or value.

The second tenet is authenticity, which functions as a rhetorical tool used to emphasize differences between right and wrong, moral and evil, or true and false. Setting up such sets of dichotomies creates a reductive evaluative structure to be used by people practicing a particular religion to

judge society. Martin suggests that authenticity has two major implications. First, religious figures use authenticity to identify their own group as good and moral and the other as the complete opposite: as immoral, "corrupted, fallen, and false."[6] Too, authenticity can create and facilitate distance between the *moral* and the *other*. Individuals or groups who utilize authenticity in this way do so in an attempt to label themselves as authentically religious and to label others they disagree with as inauthentic.

The third and final tenet is legitimation, which is the process of using religious tools and discourse for a particular aim, often to identify insiders and outsiders of a particular religious community. Martin suggests that rather than focusing on the *meaning* of words in critical religious study, inquirers should instead ask about the *implication* of words: how religious words are used, who the intended audience is, and what the outcomes of discourse might be. Martin clearly states that "while legitimations might seem like intentional manipulations, this is not necessarily the case."[7] Rather, legitimation defines the tools required for religious conformity and the reinforcement of conformity through the use of symbols, rituals, and language particular to the religious culture.

Context

In this section, I discuss a brief history of the rise of U.S. Christian Fundamentalism through the 1990s, when the *Teen Study Bible* was originally published. I then highlight trends in Bible publishing in the 1990s to provide some additional context about this particular Bible edition.

The Rise of Christian Fundamentalism

While Christians have sought to influence social and political issues in North America since the arrival of the Puritans, Christian Fundamentalist involvement in politics and legislative power began much later.[8] In *The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook*, the authors provide a chronology of specific milestones in the formation of the Religious Right.[9] Such records date back to 1835 and include book publications, the founding of religious organizations and schools, and even heresy charges of notable Christian leaders. The evidence illustrates the level of power Christian Fundamentalist religious individuals and organizations gained over time, as well as this group's interpretation of religious texts used to justify their actions.

The current Christian Fundamentalist movement originated in the 1920s, when religious leaders used political power "to restore the nation's Christian identity."[10] In the 1940s, U.S. politicians supported the bipartisan claim that "Christian devotion and Christian mission work could be key weapons in the struggle against communism."[11] After the formation of the lobbyist group National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, Republican politicians and evangelical leaders began to align anticommunist statements so that it became "sometimes difficult to distinguish" between the two

groups.[12] Evangelicals and conservative politicians again aligned in the the late 1960s through the 1970s during the "culture wars" or "antisecularism" period launched by U.S. Supreme Court rulings against organized prayer in public schools.[13] This marks the beginning of a "fundamentalist civil war" among American Evangelicals over the appropriate "degree to which one should practice separation" from mainstream U.S. culture.[14] In 1976, Evangelical leader Jerry Falwell had a "political awakening" and preached that Christians had a moral duty not only to be involved in politics, but to embed their religion into U.S. politics.[15] Shortly after, Ronald Reagan aligned himself with evangelical leaders, a sign of the Religious Right's growing political influence in the 1980s.

By the 1990s, the U.S. was "in the midst of a spiritual renewal"[16] marked by "baby boomers…crying out for spiritual answers."[17] Parents and churches began to encourage youth to take abstinence pledges through programs such as the Promise Keepers[18] and the True Love Waits movement.[19] Beyond an emphasis on purity, these movements were founded upon patriarchal ideals and most often placed the burden of purity on women by asking them to dress and behave modestly and prudently.[20] By this time, evangelicalism and U.S. politics were closely intertwined. In 1996, in response to emerging interest in teen abstinence, President Bill Clinton created "a nationwide registry for the youth who pledge and remain celibate until after they're married"[21] (the irony of this action would not become public until 1998, when news spread of Clinton's extramarital affair[22]). The same year, the U.S. government directed a staggering $50 million to develop "abstinence-only education" as part of the welfare reform bill.[23] Although the public mood surrounding the specific messaging of abstinence education was mixed at the time, conservative groups "believe[d] that supporting both abstinence and birth control [was] hypocritical and undermine[d] the forcefulness of a pure abstinence message."[24] The two 1990s editions of the *Teen Study Bible* were published at the height of the abstinence movement, and some changes between the 1993 and 1998 editions reflect the increasing power of conservatism.

Bible Publishing

Echoing broader trends of U.S. consumerism in the 1970s and 1980s and the availability of a wide range of products, Bible retailers expanded their offerings.[25] In the 1980s, computer-aided translation and formatting increased the rate of publishing, and new Bible edition numbers increased, and technological improvements made way for the introduction of "specialty niche Bible" editions in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s.[26] Christian publishers tailored these Bibles to specific demographic groups such as women or teens, encouraging readers "to 'take ownership' of the Bible"[27] in order to apply its words to their unique circumstances. Combined with "a strong translation," the appeal to certain aspects of identity such as age

or gender appeared to be "the most successful formula" to promote Bible sales during the 1990s.[28] Additionally, "virtually every Bible publisher [rode] the wave of niche editions that started in the early 1990s" throughout the decade until sales began to wane in 1998.[29]

In 1997, a nationwide movement began in which teens donned bracelets marked "WWJD" an acronym for "What Would Jesus Do?" The WWJD adage first appeared in an 1896 novel in which a homeless man, overlooked by society, challenged a group of churchgoers to "live out the words they speak each Sunday morning" by asking, "what would Jesus do?," of their actions.[30] A youth minister created about 20 WWJD bracelets in the 1980s, and they gained widespread popularity by 1997. The movement's success "signal[ed] youth's role in [spiritual] renewal" in the U.S.[31] Furthermore, Christian retailers and publishers recognized the importance of targeting teens in specialized products and marketing. They, too, were a consumer group that required innovation in the Bible market.

The success of niche Bibles and merchandise trends among Christian teens paved the way for *Teen Study Bible* editions in 1993 and 1998. Additionally, the increased Christian influence on political conservatism in the mid-to-late 1990s might have fostered shifts in language between the 1993 and 1998 editions, which I analyze in a later section. In the following section, I describe the *Teen Study Bible* in further detail, which I then utilize in my content analysis.

Teen Study Bible

Origins

At the height of interest in niche Bible editions, Christian media and publishing group Zondervan published their first edition of the *Teen Study Bible* in 1993, shortly followed by a second edition in 1998. Still in print, the publishers boast the *Teen Study Bible* is "the best-selling Bible for teens ages 12–15."[32] Zondervan's text is considered a "value added" Bible, with "abundant use of neon colours, diagrams, pictures, short Bible studies, and background information," deemed necessary due to "modern people's incessant need for visual stimulation and alternative new mediums of communication, and also modern readers' increasing inability to comprehend the nature and content of the Bible."[33] Such ornamentation is aligned with youth Bible trends of the day which "combine[d] features and notes intended to speak to 'hot-button' issues."[34]

Authors Larry and Sue Richards wrote their own commentary in the form of topical feature pages and notes scattered through the text of both the 1993 and 1998 editions. Larry Richards is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, worked at Wheaton Bible College, and has written over 200 Christian books and study aids.[35] One of his books, *Creative Bible Teaching*, "emphasize[s] the need for students to be actively involved in the

search of the meaning of the Bible and to respond to that meaning in everyday experience."[36] With this in mind, the content additions throughout the *Teen Study Bible* align with such an educational philosophy. However, Richards has also been criticized as being "not theological enough" while at the same time being "too theoretical."[37] These critiques conflict, particularly when considering Richards's work on the *Teen Study Bible* and the interpretive and practical messages he authored. Sue Richards, Larry's wife, is a retired English teacher and licensed therapist.[38] Their project appears to be her first contribution to Christian writing or research.

This particular teen Bible is written in the New International Version (NIV) translation, recognized as "the most popular translation for Evangelical protestants" and the "best-selling English-language version of the Bible" since the 1980s.[39] Its publisher, Zondervan, has been "the sole North American licensee" for the NIV since 1971.[40] In 1997, Zondervan announced a gender-inclusive version of the NIV, which "drops the use of masculine generic nouns and pronouns."[41] However, the publisher quickly suspended the project in the U.S. after "pressure from hyperconservative elements of Evangelicalism, who claimed the new translation was a feminist plot (ignoring the long history of gender-inclusive translations stretching back to William Tyndale's 16th-century version)."[42] The same year, Zondervan published its new translation in the U.K.[43] Both 1993 and 1998 editions of the *Teen Study Bible* draw from the 1984 revision of the NIV, the most recent translation at the time and which omits gender-inclusive language.[44] This decision is significant when considered within context of the fundamentalist culture wars mentioned previously.

Features

There are 10 different featured commentaries in the *Teen Study Bible*. Common to study Bibles, commentary is meant to provide deeper understanding for the reader of Biblical text. In this particular Bible, featured commentary aims to provide insight relevant for teens. Introduction pages for each of the 66 books of the Bible highlight the relevance of the text, "telling you just what the book has to say to you, teenager of the '90s"[45] (or "teenager heading toward the 21st century"[46]). Most commentaries are scattered among the margins of the text, summarizing and interpreting certain text and attempting to draw connections between Biblical history and 1990s teens' issues. Reminiscent of "Dear Abby," one commentary answers questions to common problems teens might face. Finally, there are colored, glossy inserts, or feature pages, that "help [teens] look for answers to some of life's most difficult problems."[47] While each of these features may provide insight into evangelical teens' education in the 1990s, I primarily focus my analysis on the brightly colored feature pages scattered throughout the 1993 and 1998 editions of the *Teen Study Bible*.

Methodology

I analyzed the *Teen Study Bible*'s feature pages using traditional, qualitative, content analysis.[48] In traditional content analysis, themes are first identified "based on how different codes are related and linked."[49] One challenge to this method of content analysis is a potential lack of context, meaning data becomes difficult fully to understand once the data is removed from its larger context. Because of this, it is important to consider how text is positioned. According to Janks, "[language] selections are motivated: they are designed to convey particular meanings in particular ways to have particular effects."[50] This methodological tenet led me to pose my first two guiding questions, which ask for specific language used on the feature pages and their educational implications.

Content Analysis

In the following sections, I first describe the format of the feature page and its implications. I then describe three significant themes identified in the data, before conducting analysis using tenets from Martin's critical theory of religion. I then follow with a discussion of the underlying educational messages given my analysis.

The Texts: Feature Pages

In the *Teen Study Bible*, there are 16 feature pages in all, each covering issues that the authors deem relevant to teens. These pages are printed on glossy cardstock, making them stand out and easily accessed, since they are scattered among the typically thin Bible pages. The placement of feature pages highlights their value. The thick pages, as stark contrast to thin Bible pages, serve to draw immediate attention and then amplify author commentary above the Biblical text. While interpretation is necessary to understand an ancient text, the physical attributes of the feature pages represent the authors' interpretations, wherein the authors claim they alone have the authority to understand how scripture might be applied to modern issues that affect teens.

Each feature page has a bold header announcing the topic, followed by the authors' discussion, relevant Bible verses, and the authors' interpretation of the Bible's application to the topic. There is also a dictionary definition of each term and an author-provided alternate definition, meant to make the definition more accessible for teens. The Bible verses on each page are completely removed from the context of the ancient Biblical authors, isolating specific quotations in order to suggest such verses are directly applicable to modern life and inferring that the quotations' original context is unnecessary or superfluous. The way the topics are organized also suggest the Bible is to be used much like a rulebook or a guidebook for moral living, easily applied to modern life by removing Bible verses from their historical, literary, and religious contexts.

The major difference between the 1993 and 1998 versions of feature pages is in their design. The 1993 feature pages utilize bold colors and shapes, while the 1998 design is more modernized. Between 1993 and 1998, the authors altered some language. It is worth noting that the final four feature pages (on dating, friends, parents, and siblings) are located at the very back of the Bible, right before the back cover. It is interesting that these four pages are similar in theme, as they each discuss different types of relationships common in teens' lives. Again, this design suggests to teens that the Bible has clear guidelines about modern relationships such as dating.

I concentrate on three major data themes, including updates between editions: humor and relevance to teens, increasing conservatism, and (lack of) advice. In the following paragraphs, I define each theme and provide examples from the text along with my analysis.

Humor and Teen Relevance

This theme refers to the ways authors set out to appeal to teenagers specifically by attempting to make Biblical text and interpretation seamlessly relevant to issues teens might face. The commentary often includes humor, sometimes utilizing a satirical tone. By using humor and highlighting relevant topics, the authors reveal their assumptions about teenage life in the '90s. For example, on the feature page labeled "sex," the authors provide this alternate definition for sex: "another fun thing adults tell teenagers to keep away from."[51] This attempt at humorous content with regard to sex serves two main purposes. First, it assumes teenagers minimize sex to a recreational activity void of any meaning or purpose. Next, the authors' alternative definition shows how the authors attempt to communicate distance between themselves and other Fundamentalist adults by seeming to put themselves on the same level as and sympathetic to their audience. This is a unique manifestation of authenticity. In pretending to distance themselves from other adults, the authors mean to position themselves as a trustworthy and relatable authority on Biblical interpretation, while still providing a clear roadmap or rule-book for teens on what is and is not appropriate moral behavior.

Similarly, on the entertainment feature page, the authors attempt to empathize with teens whose parents restrict them from engaging with popular entertainment, such as TV, movies, or music. Authors' commentary tries disingenuously to align with teens again in the feature page on parents by commiserating with teens who do not get along with their parents or who are frustrated by doing chores. Other teen-specific challenges the authors introduce are mall shopping, studying for tests, watching younger siblings, and developing acne. These are all highly specific and modern situations, yet the authors reference broad, out-of-context Bible verses to support

their claims about how God might want teens to behave in each situation. The authors project their own views about an absent authority figure or text by removing the Bible verses from their original, ancient context. Rather than providing a foundation of understanding for what Bible verses might have meant to ancient readers and drawing connections between historical meanings and a modern teen context, the authors directly apply out-of-context Bible verses to modern contexts. This teaches teen readers to see the Bible as full of direct answers to modern life's problems and conflicts, assuring teens that they can easily pick and choose verses and understand their meanings and the rules being given without first understanding either their context or ancient meanings.

Finally, the authors alternatively and humorously define siblings as "monsters."[52] There is a Biblical reference on this page about dealing with enemies and overcoming evil. Rather than suggesting siblings are not and should not be enemies, the authors' verse selection on this feature page shows the authors' prioritization of making the Bible relevant to teens over understanding the Bible's teachings in order to shift teens' mindsets. The authors' voices again seek to forge an in-group connection with their reader, suggesting the authors alone are morally just, and others, including the readers' relatives, for example, may not have the same moral fortitude or understand and empathize with teens as the authors do.

Increased Conservatism

Data from this theme is consistent with conservative and Fundamentalist Christian political views of the 1990s. While much of the commentary is conservative in the 1993 edition, some of the 1998 edits reflect increasingly conservative interpretations. The timing of this shift is significant in context, since federal support of abstinence education became prevalent in 1996. These editorial changes utilize Martin's tenet of legitimation, meaning authors use teen-relevant language in order to reinforce their conservative moral code.

As discussed previously, the first feature-page topic is sex, unsurprising given the emphasis on abstinence education in the 1990s. In the 1998 edition of the *Teen Study Bible*, the alternate definition changed from an emphasis on fun and restrictions to "a three-letter word with some really l-o-n-g range consequences."[53] This shift not only removes the idea of fun from sex completely, but also reflects common moralistic teachings in sex education. However, the authors do not provide any details about what the specific consequences might be and offer abstinence as the only way to avoid these mystery consequences. Reflecting the day's dominant discourse surrounding abstinence-only sex education, this suggests all that Christian teens need to know about sex is how to avoid it, and that any interest in sex is outside God's intention for young people.

Remaining content on this page emphasizes heterosexual sex between two adults within the confines of legal marriage and only for the purpose of procreation. The authors similarly discuss dating as a heterosexual activity for the sole purpose of finding a spouse. In such heterosexual relationships, there are clearly defined roles: boys pay for dates and girls set physical boundaries. This echoes Fundamentalist discourse on abstinence and purity of the time. Interestingly, the authors also portray God's intentional design for sexual desire and pleasure, suggesting that sex is both physical and spiritual. Again, the authors define abstinence and heterosexuality as right and moral, creating a dichotomy which clearly defines "appropriate" sex and gender roles and also what might be considered deviant, despite their otherwise clear messaging that sex is in part for pleasure and to fulfil desire.

When discussing addiction, the authors dedicate most of this feature page's content to alcohol and drugs. The authors briefly state that other types of addictions are possible, all of which have negative consequences. Names of drugs are emblazoned on the background of this feature page, however, in the 1998 edition the color contrast between the text and the background is reduced, making it more difficult to read the background drug names. Like their commentary on sex, their commentary on addiction may suggest the authors wanted to discuss addiction and drugs without revealing too many details, as if doing so will encourage or provide a roadmap for addictive behavior. Completely missing is any empathy for the struggle of addiction and addictive behavior. The strict dichotomy the authors set up deems alcohol and drugs as synonymous with addiction, as sinful or corrupt, without leaving any room for healthy relationships with alcohol or for the utility of the addiction-recovery process.

Next, the authors encourage public and loud boasting of teens' Christianity as well as proselytizing. They highlight the legality of prayer in the U.S., sharing that private prayer and being publicly Christian are both legal in public schools. The authors also encourage witnessing, or sharing one's own story of faith, by coaching teens on how to talk to their friends about God. In a small but significant shift from 1993 to 1998, the authors change the alternate definition of witnessing from "a way to get friends to laugh at you by telling them about God"[54] to "telling your friends about God and sometimes having them laugh at you."[55] The new word arrangement separates the act of witnessing from friends laughing. While both sentences acknowledge that teens might be nervous to talk about Christianity in front of their friends, the shift clarifies the meaning to ensure the audience still takes witnessing seriously despite any hesitation or potential for backlash. While the authors emphasize that evangelism is a moral responsibility, it is worth noting that readers are encouraged to talk to their own friends rather than strangers. However, discussion about private prayer and public religiosity in public school takes a different tone, suggesting teens' Christianity should be outwardly noticeable and publicly

discussed, rather than something to discuss among close friends. The authors assume again that the world beyond the teen reader is corrupt and in need of Christian morality in the form of performing Christianity in visible ways and proselytizing.

(Lack of) Advice

In most cases, the authors use feature pages to present advice to teens. Those feature pages with advice include being kind to siblings, finding ways to earn parents' trust, and taking control of what they are able. At times, the authors provide a guarantee for following advice. For example, if teens confess their failures or wrongdoings to God, God will not only forgive them, but will also remove their feelings of guilt. Their advice is paired with Biblical references about God's forgiveness, but does not offer any support for how teens do and should feel. The authors provide stepped, oversimplified processes, such as when one asks for God's forgiveness teens' bad feelings will go away. Their words suggest that moral living, when lived according to the authors' advice, will provide simple solutions and salvation for teens.

Many pages lack advice but have prompts for teens to interpret the authors' questions on their own. In one example, the authors encourage, "you decide," following a string of questions.[56] In the feature page on dating, the authors list advice that teens might typically receive from adults, then quizzing teen readers, "which do you think is good advice?"[57] Perhaps it is a good exercise for teens to learn how to discern good advice from bad, but this text hardly provides critical thinking instruction necessary to learn to discern the two. While this prompt contrasts with other pages that provide clear and strict advice on moral issues, the questions still suggest there is a clear dichotomy between moral or right actions and evil or wrongdoing.

Discussion

These three themes underscore several key educational messages common across the *Teen Study Bible*. The first is a prescriptive attitude toward behavior with an emphasis on a strong good/bad dichotomy and a clear division between secular and religious activity. The authors provide guidelines for appropriate Christian teen living, such as abstaining from pre-marital sex, avoiding drugs and alcohol, and sharing the Christian message with friends. The authors use authority to create reader reliance on their Biblical interpretation reflective of 1990s evangelical politics. Additionally, the authors use authenticity to introduce moral dichotomies. Teaching moral codes creates legitimation, influencing teens that they must follow particular moral codes in order to be seen as good Christians.

The second educational message is gendered. References to traditional marriage between one man and one woman are prevalent throughout the text. Additionally, the authors outline examples of traditional gender roles

in dating relationships. Again, the authors utilize authority, authenticity, and legitimation to put boundaries on sex and gender by defining what is appropriate or desirable for Christian teens. Furthermore, these pages lay blame on young women for premarital sex rather than on both young men and women engaging in sex, and also pathologize biological processes and sexual urges of teens.

The third is religious devotion. The authors set up the text so that teens will unquestioningly believe the Bible contains all answers to modern life's questions no matter how specific. The authors repeatedly overstep their interpretive authority by communicating that their interpretations of the Bible establish moral guidelines for teens. With frequent references to prayer and obedience to God, author commentary implies obedience is key in being a good Christian, a tool of authenticity.

Conclusion

The 1993 and 1998 editions of the *Teen Study Bible* reveal the ways evangelical Christians taught youth during that time, emphasizing a strict moral code and rigidly defined gender roles. The 1998 edition illuminates an even more adamant effort to conservatize 1990s youth. Although a small glimpse into the niche Bible market of the 1990s, I highlight the role of Christian authors and publishers in educating youth through legalistic, gendered, and pious messages. Because the *Teen Study Bible* was heavily used in recent history, its impact proves to be not only current, but potentially still unfolding. Additionally, my study reveals how Biblical commentary works as an educational tool outside of formal education to promote conservative values, which have long-term social and political implications.

In this paper, while I provide some insight into the teachings of Fundamentalist Christians of the 1990s in general, I do not examine how teens might have responded to these messages. While this study might act as a benchmark for future studies on niche Bibles and author-provided commentary, future research on how teens respond to author commentary in the *Teen Study Bible*s would provide missing perspective on how such commentary affects youth. Additionally, a study in which adults reflect on their usage of the *Teen Study Bible* as 1990s youth could offer insight into the current and lasting impact of such evangelical messaging.

Endnotes

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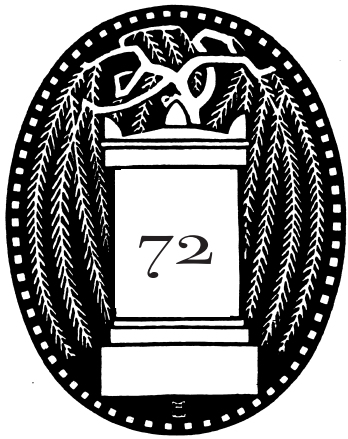

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