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Life Course and Emerging Adulthood: Protestant Women's Views on Intimate Partner Violence and Divorce

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Abstract: There are inconsistent findings on the relationship between intimate partner violence (IPV) and religiosity or Biblical inerrancy. The Biblical text accepts divorce in cases of infidelity and desertion—but does not specify abuse or IPV as legitimate reasons. In this study, I interviewed twenty White Protestant women (ages 18–22) at a large southern university. In emerging adulthood, a critical period for young adults (ages 18–29), I examined their current levels of religious participation, beliefs in Biblical inerrancy, and their perceptions of IPV as a legitimate reason for divorce. During this process of identity formation as emerging adults, they may reevaluate their religious socialization and parents' values as well as engage in various social relationships, including romantic ones. Emerging adult women are also at the highest risk for IPV. The findings suggest Protestant women in emerging adulthood reevaluated their religious socialization to formulate a more adaptive worldview. Their religious participation and belief in Biblical inerrancy declined during emerging adulthood and they all accepted divorce as acceptable in cases of IPV. It is an important finding because they are in a key period of potential IPV exposure in their life course.

Keywords: emerging adulthood; intimate partner violence (IPV); life course theory; divorce; Protestantism; religion



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Within the United States, Christianity dominates as a major religion, with Protestantism being the most prominent (Gallup 2022). Some protestant denominations tend to prefer traditional gender roles, and believe in Biblical inerrancy, or the belief that the Bible is true and should be understood literally (Chaves 2011; Ellison et al. 1999; Ellison and Anderson 2001; Moore and Vanneman 2003; Peek et al. 1991). They are also more likely to be against secularism and progressive social issues such as gay marriage, abortion, and even divorce (Ammerman 1987; Cooper-White 2011; Sharp 2009). In the Bible, Jesus condemns divorce and remarriage¹ with the exception of divorce in cases of infidelity² or desertion³ (Wilcox 2004). Abuse, or intimate partner violence, is not listed as a justifiable means of divorce in the Bible (Cooper-White 2011). Research also suggests that with higher educational attainment, the belief in Biblical inerrancy declines (Chaves 2011).

Protestant college women have to negotiate their religious socialization while simultaneously entering emerging adulthood. Some of their conservative religious upbringings would expect them to believe in Biblical inerrancy, maintain traditional gender roles in motherhood and marriage, as well as keep the sanctity of marriage by prohibiting divorce not deemed as acceptable in the Biblical text. Furthermore, some research suggests that these strict beliefs could interfere with the acceptance of divorce in cases of intimate partner violence (Ammerman 1987; Gillett 1996; Haaken et al. 2007; Sharp 2009; Wang et al. 2009). If that is the case, it is important to investigate if, and how, Protestant women in emerging adulthood identify abuse and whether they support divorce for victims of intimate partner violence despite it being contradictory to Biblical and religious teachings.

To my knowledge, there is not any research discussing the beliefs of Protestant women in emerging adulthood on intimate partner violence (IPV) as a legitimate reason for divorce.

By integrating theoretical perspectives of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000) and life course theory (Elder 1998), I investigate the following: (1) How has Protestant women's religious participation changed since their entry to emerging adulthood? (2) Do Protestant emerging adult women believe in Biblical inerrancy? (3) Will Protestant emerging adult women approve of divorce for women experiencing intimate partner violence?

1. Literature Review

1.1. Biblical Inerrancy and Religiosity in Emerging Adulthood

According to Fitzgerald and Glass (2008), the exposure to different worldviews in college is part of the explanation as to why Conservative Protestants tend to have lower educational attainment. Most higher education institutions are secular and parents fear the different values will impact their children's beliefs, but attending college is more prevalent now than it was in previous generations (Arnett 2000). Increased rates of higher education could explain in part why older generations have stricter interpretations of the Bible than younger generations (Chaves 2011). Moreover, college students are in emerging adulthood, in which they explore their independence and identity, which often leads to the creation of their own worldview, regardless of previous religious socialization (Arnett 2000; Arnett and Jensen 2002; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). As Arnett (2000, p. 474) states, "A college education leads to exposure to a variety of different worldviews, and in the course of this exposure college students often find themselves questioning the worldview they brought in".

College students, or emerging adults (18–29 years old), live in a period of semiautonomy—they begin "accepting responsibility for one's self", "making independent decisions", and "becoming financially independent", but are still somewhat dependent on parents and college authorities (Arnett 2000, p. 473; Arnett 2007). They are in an "in-between" transitional period distinct from adolescence and younger adulthood where they tend to have fewer social roles and obligations (Arnett 2015; Spišáková and Ráčová 2020). In emerging adulthood, young adults can have a broad range of life experiences before they settle into full-fledged adulthood. Emerging adulthood offers the most opportunity for identity explorations, specifically regarding career choices, love, religious beliefs, and worldviews—especially if they are full-time college students (Arnett 2007). They have more time to engage in individual activities, contemplate their beliefs, and are exposed to a large number of diverse people allowing them the opportunity to question their own religious socialization and their parents' values (Erikson 1963; Walker 2019).

An important element of identity development for emerging adults is "forming positions regarding existential questions and values, including religion" (Bartoszuk and Deal 2016, p. 142). Although emerging adults may enter college with the worldview their parents had instilled in them throughout their childhood and adolescence (Perry 1999), there is evidence that by the end of their college experience, they have reconsidered their beliefs (Arnett 2000; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). High exposure to religious socialization as children did not predict their religious attendance or beliefs in emerging adulthood (Arnett and Jensen 2002). Instead, emerging adults often created their own beliefs through a combination of different religious and nonreligious practices and concepts (Arnett and Jensen 2002). Their unique worldview had very little resemblance to their parents' beliefs, what they were taught to believe, and the beliefs of their religious institutions (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Côté 2000, 2006; Hoge et al. 1993). Similarly, numerous studies indicate a general decline of religiosity and religious beliefs during emerging adulthood (Desmond et al. 2010; Koenig et al. 2008; Koenig 2015; Pearce and Denton 2011; Uecker et al. 2007; Willits and Crider 1989). Haney and Rollock (2020) cite two Pew Research Center U.S. studies that show emerging adults have the greatest decline in religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2012; Eagan 2016) as well as higher levels of religious doubt than previous generations (Pew Research Center 2010).

However, other research has found that emerging adults report the same beliefs as their parents, and their beliefs are strongest when "both parents adhere to the same

religious denomination, and express that religion is high in importance” and were “highly religious” (Denton 2012; Smith and Snell 2009; Spilman et al. 2013; Walker 2019, p. 2). Koenig (2015) conducted a study to settle the discrepancy, but her findings showed a more multifaceted outcome. She concludes that “religiosity and spirituality are both stable and changing during emerging adulthood, creating a more complex picture of development” while also noting that the measurements of religiosity are complicated because an emerging adult could decrease their religious behavior, but not their religious beliefs (Koenig 2015, p. 383). Nevertheless, regardless of their religiosity level, emerging adults are engaging in identity exploration and re-examining their worldviews during this transitional period into adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a time in which both romantic relationships and religious beliefs are explored. If emerging adults maintain conservatism and high religiosity as part of the literature suggests, some Protestant emerging adult women could be especially vulnerable to intimate partner violence.

1.2. Religiosity and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in Emerging Adulthood

Intimate partner violence (IPV) includes threats, coercion, stalking, as well as physical, sexual, and psychological abuse committed by a current or former partner (Alvarez-Lizotte et al. 2020; Black et al. 2011; Kennedy et al. 2018; Renzetti et al. 2017; Saltzman et al. 1999). Emerging adulthood is a crucial developmental stage for dating and sexual relationships, but young women are also at heightened risk to be victims of intimate partner violence compared to other demographic groups (Manning et al. 2018; Policastro and Daigle 2019; Rodenhizer et al. 2021; Simonič 2021). Dating violence among college students is estimated to range from 10% to 50% (Kaukinen et al. 2012; Paat and Markham 2019) and 70% of women reported that their first victimization occurred before age 24 (Black et al. 2011; Kennedy et al. 2018; Paat and Markham 2019). Moreover, being a victim of intimate partner violence has physical and psychological consequences (Rizo 2016). It could lead to depression and anxiety, social isolation from friends and family, medical health problems, and poor academic performance (Rodenhizer et al. 2021). Victims of abuse are often afraid to report it out of fear, embarrassment, or distrust in the justice system (La Ferle and Muralidharan 2019). If women in emerging adulthood are at the highest risk for intimate partner violence, does a belief in conservative religious ideology increase the existing risk?

Berkel et al. (2004) examined whether gender role attitudes, spirituality, and religion could be predictors of attitudes towards violence against women. They found students with more traditional gender role attitudes and higher levels of extrinsic religiosity were less likely to empathize with battered women, whereas those with either higher levels of intrinsic religiosity, or higher levels of spirituality, were more likely to be egalitarian and empathize more with battered women. In other words, gender role egalitarianism was the best predictor of empathetic attitudes towards violence against women (Berkel et al. 2004). Koch and Ramirez (2010) also examined the relationship between religiosity and violence approval in college students in the United States. Their study of 626 undergraduate students found that Christian fundamentalism was positively associated with violence approval and physical aggression (Koch and Ramirez 2010). They defined Christian fundamentalism as “a system of beliefs and practices rooted in a literal interpretation of the Bible . . . and the belief that adherence to strict behavioral and social norms through a Christian fellowship are precursors to eternal life” (Koch and Ramirez 2010, p. 403; Ammerman 1987). As Christian fundamentalism increased, so did the violence approval of participants, especially in male participants (Koch and Ramirez 2010). They explain, “This conservative religious subculture that supports the use of corporal punishment and also uses Biblically based family life education may also create a context conducive to hierarchical, if not overtly abusive family dynamics” (Koch and Ramirez 2010, p. 403). Interestingly, their analysis indicates that while fundamentalism is positively associated with violence approval, religious beliefs and practices, or religiosity is not (Koch and Ramirez 2010), which is contrary to most findings that suggest aspects of religiosity are related to intimate partner violence (Higginbotham et al. 2007; Westenberg 2017; Perales and Bouma 2019).

Rarely did the studies on religiosity also include factors such as low education levels, low income, substance use, unemployment, worldviews on male dominance, and intimate partner violence (Simonič 2021). Taking these social and situational factors into consideration would give us a better understanding of not just its relationship with IPV, but also the life course of both the perpetrators and the victims of intimate partner violence. One study did consider this relationship and suggested when patriarchal households break traditional breadwinner/homemaker gender norms, women's risk of experiencing intimate partner violence increases, especially when the men are unemployed (Macmillan and Gartner 1999). There are combinations of factors that lead to the potential of intimate partner violence within Christian families. Life course theory considers these social and situational factors as well as their effect on a life course.

1.3. Life Course Theory

The life course approach pays particular attention to the personal and socio-historical conditions of an individual's life, focusing on the sequence of events, transitions and trajectories, relationships with others, and timing (Elder 1998; Elder et al. 2003; MacCharles and Melton 2021). Specifically, Elder et al. (2003) focuses on five⁴ main principles of the life course developmental process, but "human agency," "timing", and "linked lives" are the most relevant in understanding the relationship between emerging adulthood and intimate partner violence.

Researchers have used the life course approach across various fields and topics, including intimate partner violence (Jones et al. 2018; Kaufman-Parks et al. 2018; Krigel and Benjamin 2020; Roberto and McCann 2021; Umberson et al. 2016). Social and situational factors related to the life course, such as lower socio-economic status and poverty, abusive first relationships, gender norms, childhood exposure to violence, and family characteristics, have been linked to intimate partner violence victimization and/or perpetration (Alvarez-Lizotte et al. 2020; Etherington and Baker 2016; Kennedy et al. 2018; Kennedy et al. 2021; Tenkorang and Owusu 2018). Although the life course framework has been applied widely, hardly any literature has connected it to emerging adulthood outside of the field of criminology (Salvatore 2017) and yet, emerging adulthood is a distinct period in the life course (Arnett 2000). Emerging adulthood (age 18–29) is theoretically and empirically distinct from adolescence and adulthood, not just in timing but also in meaning (Arnett 2000; Spišáková and Ráczová 2020).

It is socially acceptable, maybe even expected now that college education has become more standardized, for emerging adults to experience feeling in-between for years before reaching full-fledged adulthood. Many emerging adults are transitioning into college life, in which they have more independence from their parents but do not have the full expectations of adulthood responsibilities. Transitions, which refer to a change in an individual's status that leads to new or changed behaviors, are an essential component of a life course (Dumont and Lessard 2020; Elder et al. 2003). Human agency gives emerging adults the opportunity to construct their own life course based on their identity formation and the choices they make as emerging adults. The linked lives principle is especially evident at this stage since emerging adults are exploring a variety of relationships, such as friendships, roommate and romantic relationships, as well as those with classmates, co-workers and with their faith communities (Spišáková and Ráczová 2020). College environments can provide the opportunity to meet and be exposed to different social relationships. Unfortunately, it is also during this life course that emerging adult women are at the highest risk for intimate partner violence (Carbone-Lopez et al. 2012; Kennedy et al. 2021), and some Christian women may be especially vulnerable (Ammerman 1987; Haaken et al. 2007; Sharp 2009; Wang et al. 2009).

2. Methods

Participants: The voluntary sample consisted of ($n = 20$) White American, unmarried women undergraduate students who self-identified as Protestant. They are classified as

emerging adults since their ages range between 18 and 22 years old, with the average age = 20.5. The sample demographics were representative of the larger student population where the study was conducted—a large public southwestern university, a predominately White institution (PWI).

Procedure: Participants were recruited from their classrooms through volunteer sign-up sheets. These sheets asked students to self-identify their religion, race, and gender. If they identified as Protestant, White American, and female, they were contacted by phone to schedule a face-to-face interview with a follow-up email. The targeted group was selected due to a large population of White, female, Protestants. The author was most interested in women's experiences as they navigated emerging adulthood and religious beliefs, particularly on gendered expectations and roles. Out of the many volunteers, none were screened as they all identified as Protestant, White, and female. The selected 20 participants were based on their quick response to participate in the study. The IRB-approved study consisted of a one-time, face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interview with the author (a White-passing Mexican American 27-year-old woman) in a university private laboratory with a duration of 32 to 72 min. The duration length of the interviews depended on how much detailed information respondents provided as well as how long it took for them to answer the questions. The average interview time was 50 min. Participants were given a \$10 Barnes and Noble gift card for their participation.

The interview questionnaire sought to assess a broad understanding of the participants' beliefs in gender role conformity and included in depth questions regarding their childhood, the gender roles their parents engaged in during their upbringing, their gender roles/norms desired in a marital relationship, future career goals and desire for motherhood, as well as their views on secular topics. In addition, I gathered demographic information, religious identification by denomination, including their religion's core values, level of church participation over time, their current family structures, their beliefs in Biblical inerrancy, and views on divorce; however, the questionnaire did not directly ask if participants had personally experienced intimate partner violence and none of the participants mentioned that they had experienced or witnessed intimate partner violence.

Analysis: I used ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti 2002–2013) for qualitative content analysis and STATA (StataCorp 2015) for descriptive statistics. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and then fully transcribed (Figure 1). The transcribed interviews were imported into ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti 2002–2013), where the participants' responses were systematically read multiple times, coded, and analyzed by the author. The codebook consisting of broad parent codes was developed prior to conducting the interviews based on research questions and the theoretical framework; however, after segregating themes specific to these research questions, emergent themes were coded as "child codes". To best interpret the data, the most effective way to code data is to use the line-by-line method (Emerson 2001). Each line of every interview was reviewed and the author created groups of codes through ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti 2002–2013). For this article, the parent codes included "Belief in Biblical inerrancy", "Beliefs on marriage", "Perceptions of divorce", and their rating of "religious participation" since entering emerging adulthood. Child codes were created to describe the emerging themes under the parent codes. For example, while all participants accepted divorce in cases of abuse, a few of them distinguished "physical abuse" as more harmful than "emotional abuse". Participants who were quoted in this article were given pseudonyms (See Table 1). Most participants' parents were still married, averaging 28 years of marriage; however, I did not find any patterns in participants' responses regarding their acceptance of divorce based on their parent's marital status. The results are organized by research question. The participants' religion, level of religious participation since entering emerging adulthood, and their belief in Biblical Inerrancy is also summarized in Table 1.

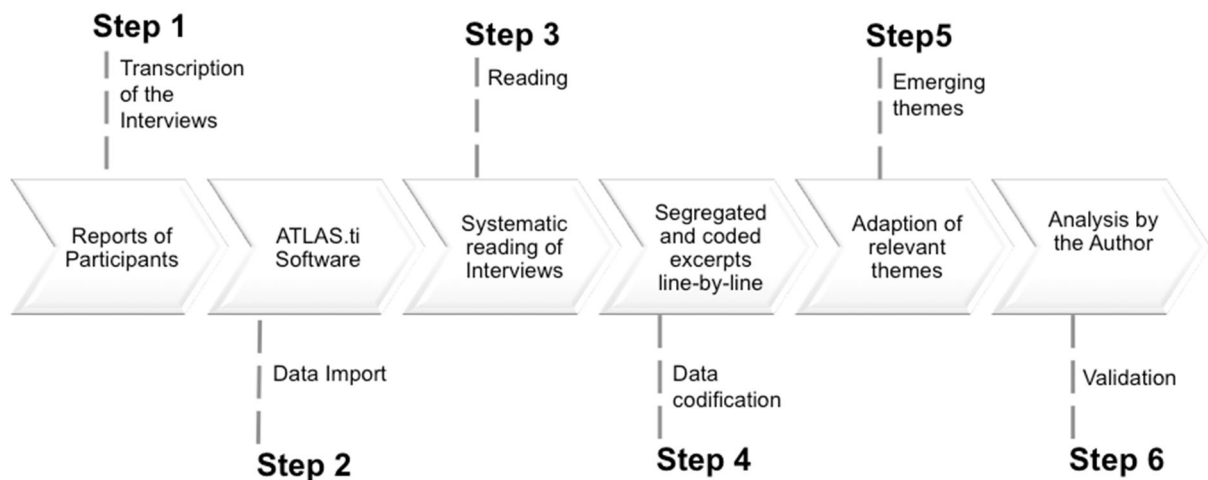


Figure 1. Graph adapted from discussions in (Silva et al. 2021) and (Smith et al. 2009).

Table 1. Participant Overview.

Participant	Pseudo-Name	Age	Relationship Status	Parents' Marital Status	Religion	Religious Participation	Belief in Biblical Inerrancy *
1	Ana	21	Single	Married	Baptist	Decreased	C
2	Susan	21	Single	Widowed	Methodist	Increased	B
3	-	20	Single	Married	Methodist	Decreased	B
4	-	20	Single	Married	United Methodist	Decreased	B
5	Katie	19	Single	Married	Baptist	Increased	B
6	Adriana	20	Single	Married	Episcopalian	Decreased	C
7	Ashley	21	Single	Married	NDC	Increased	B
8	-	20	Relationship	Divorced	NDC	Increased	B
9	Mary	22	Relationship	Married	Baptist	Increased	B
10	Joanna	21	Single	Separated	Lutheran	Decreased	B
11	Krystal	19	Relationship	Married	Episcopalian	Decreased	C
12	Chanel	22	Relationship	Married	Methodist	About the Same	B
13	Jenna	22	Single	Widowed	NDC	Decreased	A
14	Sarah	22	Single	Married	Methodist	Decreased	D
15	Julia	20	Relationship	Married	Lutheran	Decreased	B
16	-	19	Single	Divorced	NDC	Decreased	C
17	Emily	20	Single	Married	NDC	Decreased	B
18	Natalie	19	Single	Married	NDC	Increased	B
19	Tori	20	Single	Divorced	Presbyterian	Decreased	C
20	-	21	Single	Married	Baptist	Decreased	A

* Belief in Biblical Inerrancy. (A) The Bible is true in all ways, and to be read literally, word for word. (B) The Bible is true in all ways, but not always to be read literally. (C) The Bible is true primarily about religious matters, but may contain errors about other things. (D) I don't know. Adapted Source From: Religious Identity and Influence Survey, 1996 (Smith 1998, p. 264; Smith 2021; Gallagher 2003, p. 79).

3. Results

(1). *How has Protestant women's religious participation changed since entering emerging adulthood?*

Emerging adults are not only exploring their identities by reevaluating their religious socialization, but some research indicates that their religious participation can decline during this period as well. Out of the twenty emerging adult women, less than half stated that their religious participation has stayed the same or increased since attending college whereas the majority admitted their religious participation had significantly declined for various reasons: Less time to attend church because of a busy schedule, did not find the right church to join, parents were not present to push their church attendance,

and/or questioning religious beliefs/did not like the views or felt more spiritual. Their independence as emerging adults is apparent in that they decide whether to participate in a religious organization, church, or youth group. A few participants admit their parents forced church attendance when they lived at home and because they no longer had that enforcement, they did not attend church. In line with the emerging adulthood literature, some participants were in the process of questioning their worldviews and beliefs and re-examining how they fit into previous religious socialization. A few of these “actively questioning and exploring” participants indicated a fluctuation of church attendance before they made the decision to not attend at all anymore.

Sarah was more religious her freshman and sophomore years of college, but then became skeptical by her senior year. She states:

“I still kind of identified as being Christian . . . I just didn’t participate in it anymore. When I first got here [to college], I went to church some and then, um, I don’t know. I didn’t really like the church, it wasn’t really my thing . . . I would rather just go and hike up a mountain and just sit there and contemplate my existence.” (Sarah)

Adriana and Tori also attended church when they first arrived to college, but then stopped going. Adriana explicitly expressed the identity exploration within religious worldviews and “questions” the validity of denominations and people’s beliefs:

“I believe there is a God, but I question the denominations . . . like there was a church that I went to here [in college] and I just did not like it at all. I felt like every time I went to church, I would go out feeling like an awful, horrible person and I was like, I am not. I am a good person . . . everyone sins and I feel like there are so many hypocritical Christians . . . I just think its one of those things where like I have questions that aren’t being answered and just like the experiences I have been through . . . I could easily get back into it, but I just would rather not.” (Adriana)

In addition to attending church during her freshman year, Tori joined a Christian group for college women to build community, but she did not like it. She, too, felt that their religious worldviews were hypocritical and extreme. She explains:

“They had polarizing views that I did not agree with...they had people [religious speakers] come and talk to us about saving ourselves for marriage . . . and one thing that I heard people say a lot was “it’s the devil” . . . like they didn’t do well on their test because the devil made them watch Netflix, so in that talk she [the religious speaker] said: ‘The devil gets in your lives in and out of marriage. Outside of marriage, the devil wants you to have sex, but in marriage, the devil does everything to keep you from having sex.’ I was like, ‘that doesn’t sound right, honey!’” (She laughs) (Tori)

Sarah, Adriana, and Tori began their emerging adulthood by keeping up with their church attendance, similar to how they were raised, but they stopped going completely and began to question organized religion. Similarly, Julia had only ever attended Catholic schools prior to college, but as an emerging adult, she now does “church” on her own. She clarifies: “I guess I see more division between myself and the church. I see the spirit in myself and no longer feel like I have to go to the building to get it...” These women expressed spirituality as more important than attending or belonging to a religious organization; however, also in line with some of the literature regarding parents’ religious socialization and church attendance, a few of the emerging adult women increased or maintained their religious participation.

Chanel’s religious participation continued and maintained throughout emerging adulthood. Church attendance was required in her family unless a family member was sick. Likewise, Susan discusses going through a lot of “tough” times and strongly believes that God brought her through it bringing her “closer and stronger towards God”. Similarly,

Mary states that her religious participation has not changed either. She continues to attend church weekly and is involved with their community.

When Katie was a high school student, her church was mostly older people and it did not have a youth group, but when she arrived to college, she found people her age involved in the church. She states: "I go to breakaway [a meeting comprised of a group of Christian college students discussing religious beliefs, Jesus, and the Bible], so I am more involved and if I am not able to go to church, I am still talking to friends about God and spreading His message". While a few participants admitted that their church attendance had declined because their parents were not holding them accountable, a few others continued their religious socialization taught from home. Natalie stated she was able to be *more* involved because of her independence from her parents. She states:

"I am just more involved with the church and I feel like I just know God more because of the years. I am a life group leader and lead on Sunday mornings. I think it's easier to do because I am living on my own and I don't have the control of my parents here." (Natalie)

Although a few of the participants' religious participation stayed the same or increased, my sample was consistent with the majority of the literature on emerging adulthood and religious socialization. Most of the participants spent less time in church settings than prior to attending college and entering the emerging adulthood life course.

(2). *Do Protestant emerging adult women believe in Biblical inerrancy?*

Research indicates that the belief in Biblical inerrancy declines with higher education attainment and with younger generations, so I asked participants to identify with one of the following four statements adapted from previous research studies: (A) The Bible is true in all ways, and to be read literally, word for word; (B) The Bible is true in all ways, but not always to be read literally; (C) The Bible is true primarily about religious matters, but may contain errors about other things; (D) I don't know. The majority believed "the Bible is true in all ways, but not always to be read literally" with the exception of a couple who believed the "the Bible is true in all ways, and to be read literally, word for word". A few participants believed "the Bible is true primarily about religious matters, but may contain errors about other things". The declining belief in Biblical inerrancy amongst these self-identified Protestant women may be due to a combination of higher education, generational turnover, and the identity formation processes in emerging adulthood.

Ana indicated a contradiction between her religion's views on Biblical inerrancy and her own personal beliefs. She states, "For the Baptist, the first one (complete Biblical inerrancy), but for me personally, the third one". She believed the Bible to contain errors. Similarly, Ashley also showed some inconsistency between her religious teachings and her personal views. She states. "The Bible to me is the absolute truth, but it is very old and I think sometimes the Bible can use the story as an example, more like a picture. Like we aren't going to cut off our left hand, it's more of an example".

Krystal believed the Bible was true primarily about religious matters, but might contain errors about other things. She explained, "I think that [the Bible] expresses the teachings of God, but it was written by men. It is a reflection of the cultural times in which it was written". However, Sarah was conflicted about the role the Bible had in religious teachings and chose the "I don't know" option. Her religious participation had declined as she started identifying more as "spiritual", but it was clear her religious upbringing and socialization played into her contradictory worldviews. She is exploring religious worldviews by reevaluating what she had been previously taught. Sarah states her confusion:

"See this is where it gets hard, because I am kind of on the fence about it. I don't know. We are not always meant to know this stuff. I feel like a lot of religion was created as a way of a guideline, a sort of rules, so you wouldn't just have chaos, so . . . I am not really sure. I don't know. It could be. I will go with no [the Bible is not the inspired word of God]." (Sarah)

Overall, the majority of participants did not believe in Biblical inerrancy. My sample supports the literature suggesting emerging adulthood is a time of exploration and contemplating worldviews, including religious beliefs. In addition to their life course, these emerging adult women could be indicating a generational gap in which the belief in Biblical inerrancy declines. Their declining belief in Biblical inerrancy could also indicate a wider acceptance for divorce in cases not listed in the Bible, such as intimate partner violence and abuse.

(3). *Will Protestant emerging adult women approve of divorce for women experiencing intimate partner violence?*

The participants in the study were asked to provide legitimate reasons, if any, for divorce to see if they cited more reasons than just those that are deemed as acceptable Biblically, which are infidelity and desertion. The majority of participants said there were legitimate reasons to end a marriage in divorce and of those, most of them stated infidelity as one of the primary reasons. A few participants initially claimed that there were no good reasons for divorce, but after the interviewer probed, the participants also cited cheating/infidelity and abuse as valid reasons for divorce. All participants personally viewed divorce as acceptable in cases of abuse. A couple of participants emphasized physical abuse over emotional abuse.

Ana's religious community would not encourage a couple to get a divorce; however, she separates herself from them by stating that she personally believes that divorce is acceptable in cases of infidelity. Even though the Bible accepts divorce in cases of infidelity, Ana indicates that her fellow Baptists in her religious community might still not accept divorce under those circumstances; however, she does believe that the community would accept divorce in cases of abuse otherwise they could feel guilty for encouraging the victim of intimate partner violence to stay in an abusive relationship if she was killed.

"I would say that the majority of Baptists would say you shouldn't get divorced. Ya know like in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, until death do us part. It's a vow, you know, and I don't think they think it should be broken, but I personally believe, for instance, that if someone committed adultery . . . I mean like not only let's say the wife cheated on the husband, but like, I mean, it's affecting the family in a bad way . . . the husband is probably, potentially is never going to get over that and it affects other aspects of their marriage. So something like that, I would think if it ruined the marriage, because someone committed adultery then that's a good reason to get divorce." (Ana)

Ana also states that an "empty and unfulfilling marriage" shouldn't end in divorce unless the couple tried everything to salvage the marriage after "years and years and years" of trying.

When the interviewer probes her about abuse, she thinks it is "definitely a good reason" and shares whether her religious community would also agree that divorce is an option in cases of abuse:

"I would say if a woman or male was getting abused by their partner, that the Baptist people would say they should get a divorce. My dad is a marriage counselor and so, I've heard a lot of stories . . . my dad is an epitome. He lives and breathes the Bible and I see it every day. And um, every little decision and aspect, he relates to the Bible. I remember he mentioned one time that this lady was getting abused and like, he mentioned he thought that they should get a divorce and he wouldn't have said that if he didn't think it was a good reason biblically. So I use him for a lot of reference a lot. But yeah, I think that 99% of Baptists would say, 's/he should get out, because he could kill her.' It can go too far one time and then they would be at fault for telling her to stay if she wanted to leave, they would kind of be to blame for that." (Ana)

Susan instantly mentioned abuse as a primary reason for divorce, and was accepting of a divorce if the couple had tried to keep the marriage:

“If the marriage becomes abusive, is harmful to any of the spouses, and if it seems like they have literally tried everything to make it work and it’s not working, then it should end.” (Susan)

Similarly, Adriana and others mention infidelity first, but also mention physical abuse, substance abuse, toxic environment, deception, and sexual abuse as good reasons to get a divorce. The majority of the sample indicated abuse was a good reason to get a divorce, even if the Bible did not recognize abuse as acceptable for divorce; however, not all participants agreed that all types of abuse were equally weighted as legitimate reasons for obtaining a divorce. Two participants emphasized physical abuse as more reasonable than emotional abuse.

Ashley references the Bible’s acceptability of divorcing on the grounds of infidelity, but she states that even if cheating were to happen in the marriage, the couple should continue to work on staying married. She eventually states that abuse is also a reason to get a divorce only if the abuser has tried to make a change and could not change, especially if there are children involved. She states:

“Well the only Biblical reason to end marriage is adultery. Now, that is the exception that God has given, but that doesn’t mean that just because adultery happens, he wants you to get a divorce. Like I said, I think marriage is a once in a lifetime thing and I think no matter what happens, you should do whatever it takes to salvage that relationship even if that means being separated for awhile, so not living together. The only time that I think to get a divorce is if you tried everything and it’s still not getting better, is in abusive relationship, but that’s still even knowing that, you know, whoever is abusive is still trying to work it through with them, but if they absolutely cannot, there is no changing, then I believe you should get a divorce and especially if you have children . . . but I am going to put more weight on the physically abusive rather than the emotionally abusive.” (Ashley)

Natalie was not a huge supporter of divorce, but felt that there were circumstances that would make it okay. Though, she admittedly said she was still working out her opinions on divorce. The interviewer probes about cheating. Natalie responds:

“I have seen lots of testimonies of couples that have gone through that and the Lord was able to restore those, and so I feel like there is still restoration possible with like those really tough situations and so, I think, I don’t know. I am just not a big fan of divorce at all. I think it’s just caused a lot of destruction.” (Natalie)

After being probed as to whether divorce would be acceptable in circumstances of physical and emotional abuse. Natalie states:

“I would say probably that’s okay. I don’t really know. This is so hard without actually having an opinion about this. I would say yeah, like in most of those situations, I feel like that’s a kind of a good reason to get yourself out of that because then it becomes really unsafe . . . and so I would say if there was a situation where there was physical abuse, then . . . yes. Like, emotional abuse, though, not so much. I feel like that is something you can work through.” (Natalie)

Although some of them were probed, all of the participants stated abuse was a significant reason to end a marriage in divorce. What is incredibly intriguing about this result is that the overwhelming majority said divorce should not be an option to end a marriage if it became “empty and unfulfilling”. For example, Emily did not hesitate to state that divorce is not an option when the marriage becomes “empty and unfulfilling”, but then also claims “abuse and cheating” as legitimate reasons to divorce without being prompted. Similarly, Katie responds to the question of whether couples should divorce if they are unhappy:

“I don’t know, I think . . . if you want your marriage to last, you need to work for it. If you both put enough effort, it should last. I don’t think its fair to just

get tired of a person . . . you know if you've been married 25 years and then you get tired of them and cheat on them, I don't think that's fair. I think you already owe that person so much more, and you owe them an effort for it to work. I don't think cheating is right at all." (Katie)

However, without being prompted, Katie states the accepted reasons in the Biblical text, which are desertion and infidelity for divorce, but also listed and *prioritized* abuse as a legitimate reason to divorce. She states:

"Abuse. If you are getting physically abused, verbally abused. Um I think also if that person, if they are not even providing anything for you and helping with the children. Cheating is also another reason." (Katie)

Like Katie, Joanna felt that marriage was forever and thought of her own parents' marriage. After a long pause, Joanna states:

"Um, no. Because I think it becomes empty and unfulfilling based on society's—on things going on in the world and that if you go back to the basics of your marriage, you find where it started and you fall back in love. I have witnessed it with my parents the last three years—it's, I mean, my dad took on . . . he went from a firefighter to a police officer, and I think the outside influence affected him and pulled him away from his marriage and that's where the problems started . . . I think if he were to come back and really work on their marriage, like he would realize where it started and why he fell in love with her in the first place, and I mean that is why my parents are still married. She refuses to sign the divorce papers, because she said 'til death do us part' and so like that is what I have definitely grown up with . . . that when you say "I do" that it is forever, divorce isn't an option . . . I mean work is placed so high and the outside influence of the demands of the job affects the marriage and because it becomes so common, it's like well we aren't happy and we haven't been happy for a whole month, so lets just get divorced . . . that being said, a marriage that was started in the right ways, not I met you, we had a one night stand, I got pregnant so we got married! (laughs) (Joanna)

Despite her value on marriage, Joanna also stated abuse or any unsafe situation to be a justified reason for divorce without being prompted.

Only a few participants agreed that unhappiness was a legitimate reason to divorce, and a couple mentioned that it depended if children were involved and their ages. Tori thought about her own parents' marriage and was unsure if couples should stay together despite being unhappy. She recollects:

"That depends, I think. Um, on the kids. Well, I don't know. See my parents were like . . . it worked, but it wasn't happy, you know? So that's kind of what I was used to, I don't know. Yeah, I don't know . . . I don't know how much harm it did having them together and not happy as opposed to them getting a divorce and . . . I mean, they are both pretty happy right now [divorced after being married for 22 years], um, I think it was harder for my brother. He had to live with my mom another two years, but now he is out of the house. Um, but I don't know . . . that's a hard question. Yeah, I mean, yeah I guess it was good that they were together for that long, but also no, because they weren't happy and it was kind of hard on all of us because they would argue and stuff . . . Yeah, I don't know if there is a right answer for me. (Tori)

Tori is unsure of whether her parents staying married during their childhood was better or worse for not only them as a married couple, but for the family as a unit. Despite that uncertainty, she still believed that infidelity, drug addiction, and abuse were legitimate reasons for divorce.

Even though the majority of the participants believed that marriage is forever in the sense that couples should not divorce if the marriage becomes "empty and unfulfilling", all of the participants agreed "abuse" was a legitimate reason for divorce even though it

was not stated in the Bible. The Biblical text states that divorce is an abomination and only acceptable in cases of infidelity or desertion, but these Protestant women accepted divorce in cases of spousal abuse, drug abuse, and for a few, unhappiness.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The results from my sample indicate that White Protestant women in emerging adulthood are changing their worldview to some extent when it comes to participating in religious organizations, believing in Biblical inerrancy, and accepting non-Biblical reasons for a divorce, such as abuse. The findings support research suggesting the belief in Biblical inerrancy is gradually declining in younger generations, particularly those with higher educational attainments (Chaves 2011; Glass and Jacobs 2005); however, their declining belief in Biblical inerrancy could result from a combination of higher education, generational differences, and the identity formation process in emerging adulthood. In emerging adulthood, White Protestant women adjust their worldviews to fit their newfound identity, even if they had strong religious upbringings (Arnett 2000; Arnett and Jensen 2002; Côté 2000, 2006). The participants in the study did have differing beliefs and behaviors from religious socialization and teachings regarding the Bible's inerrancy (Arnett 2000; Arnett and Jensen 2002). In addition to participants' decline in their belief in Biblical inerrancy, they also decreased their participation in their religious organization or church, and some questioned the validity of religion compared to spirituality. Although most of the participants still believed in marriage as permanent and lifelong, these new worldviews and a decrease in religious beliefs may be contributing factors to their acceptance of "abuse" and sometimes "unhappiness" as reasons for divorce. It is also possible that the awareness of intimate partner violence and abuse is heightened at the university level with mandated training programs on sexual harassment and accessible counseling services provided for victims of abuse.

The participants in the study were in favor of divorce in cases of abuse and indicated disdain for spousal abuse. Whether their conclusions are due to their enrollment in higher education (Chaves 2011; Fitzgerald and Glass 2008), being part of a new generation with slightly more progressive beliefs (Chaves 2011), or simply because they are in the crucial developmental stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett 1997, 2000, 2007; Arnett and Jensen 2002), the women in the study had more complex responses than expected. The emerging adulthood period in their life course is especially important, because their worldviews developed during this stage are likely to have some permanence in full-fledged adulthood. In addition, emerging adults create and develop significant relationships and friendships that may continue after their university graduation. These friends are likely to maintain similar worldviews or perspectives. The Protestant women participants revealed that despite living in traditional homes and attending church regularly before attending college, they do not fully "submit" to Biblical teachings, but instead navigate their religious socialization with their identity exploration process as emerging adults. The participants are at the age of heightened risk to experience intimate partner violence or abuse, so it is important that even those that were raised in religiously conservative homes recognize abuse and view it as a legitimate reason to leave a relationship, even in a marriage.

5. Limitations

The study provided intriguing results, but also had its limitations. First, the sample was small as it only included twenty participants. Second, the study was conducted at a public institution. Although the public institution is located in a religiously conservative state and in the "Bible belt" region of the United States, results could have differed had the participants been from a Christian university/church-affiliated school. Third, the participants were not asked directly about their personal experiences with intimate partner violence and their attitudes towards IPV, or abuse in general. The information was obtained in coherence with the question regarding divorce.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The American Sociological Association (ASA) does not have a written policy on making sociological data available at this time. Transcriptions can be made available upon request to the author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ “I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery” (Matthew 19: 9 from [World Bible Publishing St 1987](#), p. 1040); “He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery’” (Mark 10: 11–12 from [World Bible Publishing St 1987](#), p. 1079).
- ² “unless the marriage is unlawful” (Matthew 19: 9 from [World Bible Publishing St 1987](#), p. 1040)
- ³ “If the unbeliever separates, however, let him separate. The brother or sister is not bound in such cases” (1 Corinthians 7: 15 from [World Bible Publishing St 1987](#), p. 1237).
- ⁴ (1) life-span development (significant developmental changes take place after 18 years old), (2) human agency (an individual’s choices directly affect their life direction), (3) time and place (the socio-historical context impacts an individual’s worldview and experiences), (4) timing (the impact a series of events and transitions is dependent on when they occur), and (5) linked lives (an individual’s experiences are interdependent on their social relationships).

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