

Church Activities and Sexual Behaviors among Christian Youths^{*}

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ABSTRACT

This study examined religious attendance, religiosity, and performance of religiosity factors as a predictor of sexual experience among Christian youth, using the National Study of Youth and Religion(NSYR), Wave 3 in which included national representatives aged 14 to 24. Compared to young people with no religion, Christian youth tended to experience less sexual activities.

The data analysis indicated the importance of enhancing the religiosity to refrain Christian youth from sexual behaviors. The Results also suggested the importance of the role of individual performance of religiosity to avoid sexual activities among Christian young people and how they associate to decreasing sexual experiences can help a Christian leader when delivering a Church activity. The implications for Church activities and programs that provide spiritual guide for Christian young people were further discussed.

Key Words: youth, sexual behavior, church attendance, confession of faith, individual performance of faith

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I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescent sexual behaviors and its negative effects are a significant public health problem that frequently draws the interest of researchers and health practitioners, as adolescence is often characterized by sexually experimental period. Sexual activity among young people has been identified as an increased risk factor for teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Abma et al. 2010). According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the year 2010, 46.0% of US high school students (female 45.7%, male 46.1%, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2009, 98: Table 6.1) reported that they had ever had sexual intercourse, while Korean adolescents reported only 3.8% (female 2.4%, male 5.2%; 43% among adolescents at risk, Korean Ministry of Gender Equality & Family, 2010, 56). There was an increasing tendency toward the early initiation of sex in many countries (Sieving et al. 2002). In 2006, 13% of females and 15% of males ages fifteen to nineteen reported having had sex before age fifteen in USA (Caminis et al. 2007), where as 7.5% of high school students reported having had sex at age 15.2 years in Korea (Medical Today, 2007). Risk factors that contribute to adolescent sexual behaviors have been documented such as poverty, familial conflict, low school achievement, substance use, dropping out of school, and association with delinquent peers (Halpern-Felsher et al. 1996; Santelli et al. 1999; Santelli et al. 2004; Mmari & Blum, 2009). Protective factors include close attachment with families, affiliation with pro-social peers, high levels of school performance, and attending church (Blum & Ireland, 2004; Yang, et al. 2006; Crawford et al. 2011). In addition, religiosity likely delay the onset of sexual activity, and may reduce sexual activity related problems; While young people with no religion take a liberal stance toward sexuality, however, youth with religiosity likely remain abstinent sexual activity until marriage. Thus religiosity could influence sexual behavior, as Christian faith and individual performance provides motivation for confirmity to their faith (Youniss et al. 1999). However very limited studies have empirically explored this

possibility and it seems that the available research findings only report the linkage between higher levels of religiosity and less likelihood of teen sexual involvement. Hence, there is a need to advance our understanding of not only the importance of religiosity but also the Church activity factors abstaining Christian from sexually misguided behaviors until marriage.

The purpose of this current study was to examine significant religiosity related factors predicting sexual behavior among Christian youth. Based on prior research, three hypotheses were formulated. First, it was hypothesized that Christian youth who reported higher religious attendance would be less likely to show sexual experience than those who reported lower levels of attendance. Second, it was hypothesized that Christian youth who reported higher levels of religiosity would be less likely to show sexual experience than those who reported lower levels of religiosity. Third, it was also hypothesized that Christian youth who reported higher levels of individual performance of religiosity would be less likely to show sexual experience than those who reported lower levels of individual performance of religiosity. Gender and age were additionally included to examine the demographic effects on sexuality among Christian youth as control variables.

The available literature on religion and sexual behavior among youth can be categorized as three major themes: attendance, confession of faith, and individual performance.

(1) Church attendance and sexually healthy behavior¹⁾

Christian faith among young people in USA continue to have impact on the lives of young people, although they are less religious than older people and are not active church participants (Figure 1 & 2).

1) Sexually healthy behavior signifies abstinence until marriage according to Biblical teachings, whereas sexually risky behavior signifies sexual experience before marriage which cause various problematic behaviors and consequent risks.

Due to the major scope of religious affiliation among young people in USA, the scope of church attendance and its impact in a young person’s life becomes an interesting topic for non-Christian researchers as well as Christian society. Empirical studies have documented a close relation between religious attendance and improvement in poor health behaviors, including a analysis of a protective effect of close associations on pro-social behaviors and health enhancing behaviors (Silver & DiGiuseppe, 2001; Lujan & Campbell, 2006; Shinha, Cnaan, & Gelles, 2007). Religious attendances offer a positive influence on health life style such as a abstinence from drinking, smoking, and sexual behaviors among young people, depending on the attending frequency. The more attending at church services, the more having opportunities to pro-social behaviors; many people who attend church regularly might be exposed to have a sense of purpose in life. A sense of meaning and purpose in life has been shown to be positively related to avoidance of antisocial behaviors (Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, & Kaplan, 2001; Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003). Thus religious affiliation can work as buffers to risky sexual behavior (Benda, 1995; Crepez & Marks, 2001).

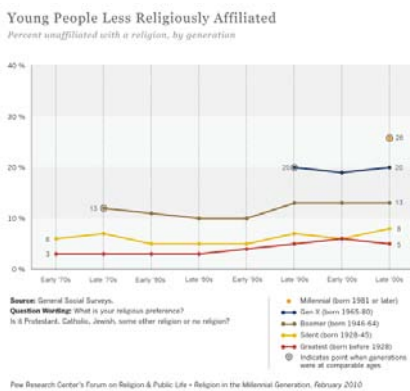


Figure 1: Young people with religious affiliation, by generation

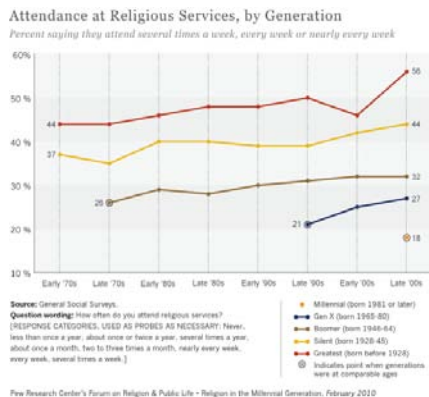


Figure 2: Attendance at religious services, by generation

(2) Confession of faith and sexually healthy behavior

Behavioral intention models, which emphasize the behavioral intention to perform a behavior, suggest that actual behavior is determined by a person's beliefs about behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Adolescent behavior is guided by their beliefs about what they think. For Christian youth, then, heightened knowledge resulting from exposure to Christian education can be found to affect behavior beliefs about the importance of abstinence until marriage. In the context of free sexual attitudes among young people, a behavior drive towards deviance can be restrained by Christian faith including expectation of faithful life style about sexual activity (Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003). O'Connor et al. (2002) found that adolescents who had more religious beliefs were less likely to be involved in sexually risky behaviors. This finding portionally supports the current study's hypothesis that confession of faith is associated with postponed sexual activities for young people, indicating the linkage between the levels of belief and lower likelihood of sexual experience.

(3) Individual performance of faith and sexually healthy behavior

Performance of faith such as Involvement in Bible study or prayer group, practicing individual prayer and reading Bible might influence motives for abstinence from sexual behavior until marriage (Cnaan, Gelles, & Sinha, 2004). Accumulated individual commitments in those church networks and personal attachments to God might provide rational choices Christian young people make weighing the pleasure and guilt of sexual activity for his or her Christian faith. For instance, those commitment may foster faithful behavior style through increasing a sense of responsibility to his or her faith. A faithful attachment to church and performance of faith is the nature of spiritual growth in Christian faith (Acts 2:46; Hebrews 10:25). It is expected that intrinsically religious people tend to be more involved in religious activities such as Bible study or prayer group, practicing individual prayer

and reading Bible (Cnaan, Gelles, & Sinha, 2004). Involving in Bible study or prayer group as a social network may also influence sexual abstinence through the affiliation with pro-social church peers (Acts 2:46; Hebrews 10:25). For example, a youth involved in Bible study or prayer group may have a sense of spiritual attachment to those of the same faith and those spiritual ties to church members would let him or her have pro-social behaviors rather than unacceptable sexual behaviors. Practicing individual prayers and reading Bible frequently may also increase one's opportunities of involving in church activities and programs designed for spiritual growth and helping people in needs (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates 1999), fostering moral frameworks to curb sexual activity (Smith, 2003).

II. METHODS

(1) Participants

This present study used the sample from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), Wave 3 (collected September 24, 2007 through April 21, 2008), USA where the respondents were aged 14 to 24. The first NSYR study employed a random-digit-dial telephone survey method in order to sample nationally-representative households with young ages. The Howard W. Odum Institute for Research in Social Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill re-contacted and re-surveyed all original National Study of Youth and Religion respondents, on September 24, 2007 through April 21, 2008. Total cases were 2,532 including Christian and non-Christian young people.

For the purpose of this study, the selected total Christian sample consisted of a convenience sample of 1,183 (male 542, female 641) aged 14 to 24 years, who were in the National Study of Youth and Religion(NSYR), Wave 3. About 50 % of respondents had attended church approximately at least 2-3 times a month. Only

32% of participants were attending Sunday school on a weekly basis. Majority of participants believed in God, Jesus as a Christ, and life after death, whereas only a small portion of them were practicing involvement in Bible study or prayer group, personal pray, and reading Bible.

Table 1. Characteristics of research participants (N = 1,183)

Variables	N	%
Gender	Male	45.80%
	Female	54.20%
Age	14	1.70%
	15	2.40%
	16	11.90%
	17	36.60%
	18	1.30%
	19	0.60%
	20	0.30%
	21	15.70%
	22	16.00%
	23	8.90%
24	4.60%	
Numbers of attending religious services	A few times a year	27.60%
	Many times a year	10.30%
	Once a month	11.00%
	2-3 times a month	17.10%
	Once a week	20.40%
	More than once a week	13.50%
Numbers of attending Sunday school	Never	27.30%
	A few times a year	27.00%
	Once a month	7.40%
	A few times a month	11.20%
	Almost every week	9.50%
	Once a week	11.10%
Belief in God	More than once a week	6.70%
	Yes	94.00%
	No	0.30%
	Unsure/Don't know	5.70%

Variables	N	%	
Belief in Jesus Christ as a Savior	Jesus was the Son of God who was raised from the dead	1047	88.50%
	Jesus was an important human teacher, but was not the Son of God	40	3.40%
	Jesus never really existed	0	
	Believe something else	16	1.40%
	Unsure what you believe about Jesus/Don't know	80	6.90%
Belief in life after death	No	56	4.70%
	Yes	1127	95.30%
Involvement in Bible study or prayer group	No	856	72.40%
	Yes	327	27.60%
Numbers of praying time	Never	55	4.60%
	Less than once a month	83	7.00%
	One to two times a month	143	12.10%
	About once a week	138	11.70%
	A few times a week	214	18.10%
	About once a day	261	22.10%
	Many times a day	289	24.40%
Numbers of reading Bible	Never	301	25.40%
	Less than once a month	241	20.40%
	One to two times a month	230	19.40%
	About once a week	142	12.00%
	A few times a week	134	11.30%
	About once a day	97	8.20%
	Many times a day	45	3.20%

Table 2 shows numbers of prior sexual experiences according to religion types. Only 29.6% of Christian adolescents reported no sexual experience, whereas over 70% of them told of frequent sexual experiences. Catholic and Buddhist/Hindu adolescents showed similar sexual experiences with Christian adolescents but Jewish and Islamic/Muslim adolescents spoke of 34.7% and 50% sexual experiences. Respondents with no religion reported only 17% of no sexual experience.

Table 2. Numbers of sexual experience according to religion of adolescents

		Religion type					No Religion
		Christianity	Catholic	Jewish	Islamic & Muslim	Buddhist & Hindu	
Numbers of Sexual experience	Never had sex	350(29.60%)	88(25.20%)	17(34.70%)	2(50.00%)	2(22.20%)	161(17.03%)
	Once	14(1.20%)	8(2.30%)	1(2.00%)	0(0.00%)	0(0.00%)	11(1.16%)
	A few times	122(10.30%)	27(7.90%)	3(6.10%)	0(0.00%)	0(0.00%)	65(6.876%)
	Several times	150(12.70%)	64(18.70%)	7(14.30%)	0(0.00%)	2(22.20%)	139(14.70%)
	Many times	547(46.20%)	155(45.30%)	21(42.90%)	2(50.00%)	5(55.60%)	569(60.2%)
	Total	1183(100%)	342(100%)	49(100%)	4(100%)	9(100%)	945(100%)

(2) Measurements

Numbers of attending religious services are measured with a six-point scale ranging from “a few times a year” to “more than once a week”. Numbers of attending Sunday school are measured with a six-point scale ranging from “never” to “more than once a week”.

Religiosity consists of 3 items (3 point scales ①Yes ②No ③Unsure or don't know and 5 point scales ①Jesus was the Son of God who was raised from the dead ② Jesus was an important human teacher, but was not the Son of God ③Jesus never really existed ④Believe something else ⑤Unsure what you believe about Jesus/Don't know)($\rho = .78$).

Performance of religiosity are measured with three items (2 point scales ①Yes ② No) asked about involvement in Bible study or prayer group, with two other items (7 point scales ①Never ②Less than once a month ③One to two times a month ④ About once a week ⑤About a few times a week ⑥Once a day ⑦Many times a day) ($\rho = .78$)

Table 3. Measurement methods

Variables	Measurement
Gender	Male=0, female=1
Age	
Religion type	1=Christianity, 2=Catholic, 3=Jewish, 4=Islam & Muslim, 5=Buddhist & Hindu, 6=No religion
Numbers of attending religious services	①A few times a year, ②Many times a year, ③Once a month, ④2-3 times a month, ⑤Once a week, ⑥More than once a week
Numbers of attending Sunday school	①Never ②A few times a year, ③Once a month, ④2-3 times a month, ⑤Almost every week, ⑥Once a week, ⑦More than once a week
Belief in God	(Question) Do you believe in God, or not, or are you unsure? ①Yes ②No ③Unsure or don't know
Belief in Jesus Christ as a Savior	(Question) Which of the following comes closest to your beliefs about Jesus Christ? ①Jesus was the Son of God who was raised from the dead ②Jesus was an important human teacher, but was not the Son of God ③Jesus never really existed ④Believe something else ⑤Unsure what you believe about Jesus/Don't know
Belief in life after death	(Question) Do you have a belief in life after death? ①No ②Yes ③Unsure or don't know
Involvement in Bible study or prayer group	①No ②Yes
Numbers of praying time	(Question) How often, if ever, do you pray yourself alone? ①Never ②Less than once a month ③One to two times a month ④About once a week ⑤About a few times a week ⑥Once a day ⑦Many times a day
Numbers of reading Bible	(Question) How often, do you read from Bible to yourself alone? ①Never ②Less than once a month ③One to two times a month ④About once a week ⑤About a few times a week ⑥Once a day ⑦Many times a day

(3) Statistical Analysis

The data were analysed by means of the PASW Statistical package 18 using the reliability, correlation, multiple regression analysis procedures.

To assess multicollinearity in regression, first examined the correlations and associations between independent variables. High bivariate correlations over 0.8 were 'Reading Bible' and 'Numbers of praying time'. Those variables were excluded in the regression analyses. Second, as a result of examining tolerance and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), the tolerance values were under 10 except 'Reading Bible' and 'Numbers of praying time'. Therefore those variables exceeding the tolerance values 10.

III. FINDINGS

(1) Correlations between selected religious activity variables and sexual experiences among Christian adolescents

Pearson correlations between selected religious activity variables and sexual experiences among Christian adolescents are displayed in Table 4. These bivariate analyses showed that number of sexual behavior had higher correlations with performance of religiosity such as involvement in Bible study or pray group, numbers of praying time, and numbers of reading Bible than religious service/education attendance or religiosity variables. The standardized coefficients indicated that the performance of religiosity variables had the strongest relationship to sexual experiences among Christian adolescents (Involvement in Bible study/ $r=.084$, $p<.01$; Numbers of praying time/ $r=.087$, $p<.01$; Numbers of reading Bible/ $r=.100$, $p<.01$), whereas religious service attendance (Religion type/ $r=-.137$, $p<.01$, Numbers of attending religious services/ $r=-.136$, $p<.01$; Numbers of attending

Sunday school=.050, $p<.05$) and religiosity variables (Belief in God/ $r=.76$, $p<.01$; Belief in Jesus/ $r=.68$, $p<.01$) showed a relatively small relationship to sexual experiences among Christian adolescents.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Gender	-										
Age	.099**	-									
Numbers of attending religious services	-.058**	-0.039	-								
Numbers of attending Sunday school	-0.033	-0.018	-.050*	-							
Belief in God	-0.024	-0.038	0.013	.259**	-						
Belief in Jesus Christ as a Savior	-0.004	-.046*	0.002	.223**	.650**	-					
Belief in life after death	-0.014	-0.032	0.039	.140**	.419**	.358**	-				
Involvement in Bible study or prayer group	-0.014	-0.025	-0.01	.211**	.615**	.526**	.337**	-			
Numbers of praying time	-0.008	-0.026	-0.025	.212**	.614**	.526**	.335**	.999**	-		
Numbers of reading Bible	-0.012	-0.027	-0.025	.198**	.576**	.492**	.314**	.936**	.937**	-	
Numbers of sexual experiences	-0.005	-0.033	-.136**	.050*	.076**	.068**	0.012	.084**	.087**	.100**	-

1=Gender, 2=Age, 3=Numbers of attending religious services, 4=Numbers of attending Sunday school, 5=Belief in God, 6=Belief in Jesus Christ as a Savior, 7=Belief in life after death, 8=Involvement in Bible study or prayer group, 9=Numbers of praying time, 10=Numbers of reading Bible, 11=Numbers of sexual experiences. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$

(2) Church Activities Predicting Sexual Experiences among Christian Adolescents

Table 5 showed that no demographic control variables did not make any significant differences for sexual experiences among Christian adolescents. When adding religious attendance variables, numbers of attending religious service and

Sunday school significantly predicted for sexual experiences among Christian adolescents, explaining 20% of the variance in the model. Numbers of attending services still remained when religiosity variables were added, and the variance explained improved by 27%. Adding the performance of religiosity variables improved R^2 by an additional 4%, showing that belief in God was positively related to sexual experiences among Christian adolescents ($\beta=2.259$, $p<.05$). With all the variables included (Model IV), involvement in Bible study and prayer group ($\beta=.053$, $p<.05$) were negatively related to sexual experiences among Christian adolescents.

Table 5. Regression Model Predicting Sexual Experience among Christian Adolescents (N=1,183)

	Model I		Model II		Model III		Model IV	
	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t
Demographic controls								
Gender	-.002	-.104	-.008	-.408	-.008	-.391	-.008	-.387
Age	-.033	-1.665	-.037	-1.877	-.035	-1.752	-.035	-1.763
Religious attendance								
Numbers of attending religious services			-.135	-6.853***	-.136	-6.900***	-.135	-6.857***
Numbers of attending Sunday school			.043	2.164*	.023	1.149	.021	1.044
Religiosity								
Belief in God					.061	2.259*	.038	1.285
Belief in Jesus Christ as a Savior					.030	1.137	.019	.707
Belief in life after death					-.023	-1.074	-.027	-1.251
Performance of Religiosity								
Involvement in Bible Study & prayer group							.053	2.081*
R^2		0.01		0.22		0.27		0.29
Adjusted R^2		0.00		0.20		0.2		0.26
R^2 change		0.01		0.02		0.02		0.03
F value		1.422		14.063***		10.095***		9.386***

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The rates of sexual experience, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases among adolescents are rapidly increasing among adolescents and even among Christian youths. Various factors that contribute to adolescent sexual activities have been reported such as familial conflicts, low family income, substance use, low performance in school, dropping out of school, and association with delinquent peers. However limited efforts and researches within Christian communities to guide church programs and activities leave unmet needs for helping Christian youths for resolving sexual problems. Therefore there is a need to explore programs and activities within and outside church, which make an effect on the sexually un-appropriate behaviors among Christian youths. The identification of factors that predict sexual activities among Christian young people is an important matter for the development of prevention and intervention programs with Christian youths at sexual risk.

Consistent with prior research, sexual experience is prevalent even among Christian youths aged 14-24 years in USA, although the rate of sexual experience was relatively low, compared to those of young people with no religious affiliations. The high numbers of sexual experiences among Christian youths indicate that sexual activity may be able to be working as a major risk factor for further negative health outcomes, including teenage childbearing and increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases as well breaking Christian ethics. The demographic variables such as gender or age did not make any significant differences for sexual experiences among Christian youths, consistent with description of diminishing gender differences (Koniak-Griffin, Lesser, Uman, & Nyamathi, 2003; Mmari & Blum, 2009).

There were strong associations of attending religious services or Sunday school, confession of faith and sexual experiences among Christian young people, while these factors were strongly predicted the numbers of sexual experiences among

them. associations accounting for 22% and 27% of the variances in the numbers of sexual experiences. This result suggests that young people with low levels of church attendance and confession of faith may be at increased risk for future involvement in sexual activities (Hardya, S. & MRaffaelli, 2003), functioning as strong level of risk factor to the development of sexual involvement. One important practice implication is that church leaders need to encourage young people to attend church services/Sunday schools and to have strong confession of faith guiding to forming Christian sexual ethics.

Performance dimension of religiosity such as involvement in Bible study and prayer group showed significant effects on sexual experience among Christian young people, explaining 26% of the variance. Young people exposed to reading Bible may feel obliged to have strong Christian ethics. Such obligation may manifest in choosing appropriate sexual behaviors in accordance with Christian social norms rather than showing socially unacceptable behaviors (King, 2003). Young people who regularly practice his or her faith through involvement in Bible study and prayer group may view sexual activities outside a marriage relationship as an inappropriate way for Christian life, which may lead to break his or her relationship with God (Francis & Lankshear, 1990, 1991). Francis & Lankshear (1990, 1991) found that confession of faith and participation in church activities significantly related to all dimensions of Christian life.

Thus far, little studies have focused on the impacts of church activities on youths' sexual behaviors and designing church activities to guide their sexual behaviors. Although the bulk of sexual experience among Christian youths in Korea has not been reported yet, the high prevalent rate of sexual experiences among Christian adolescents in USA warns the possibility of underestimated problems among Korean Christian youths. Therefore, church leaders should help to enhance Bible-driven sex education for young people within church, focusing on encouraging them active involvement in Bible study/prayer group, performing of individual prayer and reading Bible. How to work with Christian schools in

advocating appropriate sexual behaviors is also desirable (Francis, & Lankshear, 1990). In addition, integration of confession and church attendance into individual religiosity performance such as involvement in Bible study/prayer group, performing of individual prayer and reading Bible, is a crucial direction for church programs and activities that aim to help Christian youths behave as an healthy and mature Christian.

As one of the few studies that have explored the predicting factors of individual performance of religiosity on the sexual experience among Christian youths, the present study has its strength. Despite this strength, there are some limitations of this study that require some cautions in the interpretation of the study results. First, because the collecting data was relying on the self-report of adolescents about their sexual experiences, there is a possibility of inflated scores. Second, the current data is cross-sectional, and not proper for determining causal relations.

Overall, the findings support the urgent need for church programs and activities designed for preventive and interventive for young people with increased sexual experiences, who are at multiple other risk factors (Davidson, Moore, & Ullstrup, 2004; Crawford, Rawlins, McGrowder, & Adams, 2011). Programs and activities should put emphasis on active participation in Bible Study/prayer group, frequent praying time, or reading Bible. For further development of appropriate interventions, it is crucial that longitudinal research be conducted to enhance the understanding of the underlying multifaceted factors and longitudinal course of patterns that lead to risky sexual behaviors among young people in USA and Korea.

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논문초록

기독교청소년의 교회활동과 성행동

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본 연구는 14-24세 청소년 대표 샘플링을 한 ‘청소년과 종교 국가연구(NSYR)’ 통계자료를 사용하여 기독교청소년들 가운데 성적경험을 예측하는 요인으로 교회출석, 신앙심, 개인경건생활을 검증하였다. 분석결과는 종교가 없는 청소년들에 비하여 기독교 청소년의 성적행동이 덜 심각하게 나타났다. 성적행동으로부터 기독교청소년을 절제하도록 돕기 위하여 신앙심을 고양하는 것이 중요하다는 사실을 나타냈다. 또한 기독교청소년들 가운데 성적행동을 피하도록 경건생활을 가르치고 경건생활과 성적행동의 상관성을 교회사역시 전달하는 것도 중요하다는 점을 제안하였다. 나아가 본 연구결과를 기독교청소년을 위한 교회활동과 프로그램에 적용하는 문제도 제시되었다.

주제어: 청소년, 성적행동, 교회참석, 신앙고백, 개인경건생활