

EXCERPT



Talking Back to Purity Culture Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality

November 10, 2020 | \$17, 222 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4816-4

"Rachel Welcher writes with biblical clarity and Jesus-centering grace as she probes the smoldering ashes of purity culture. For those who grew up under its teaching, for those who propagated it in good faith, and even for strangers to it like me, she offers a gift: not just a critique, but a vision for something better. She gently shows that taking God at his Word—not adding to it or subtracting from it—is that better way and invites us to walk in it." Rachel Gilson, author of Born Again This Way: Coming Out, Coming to Faith, and What Comes Next

A Desire to See the Church Do Better

I was in high school when Joshua Harris's book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* captured the attention of the evangelical world. It kicked off a movement and inspired countless other books on dating and sexual purity. I read many of these, internalizing messages about my responsibility as a female to keep men from lusting, the value of my virginity, and how sexual sin could destroy my future marriage. I often finished one of these books more ashamed of my sexuality than when I had started it. Marriage and sex were placed on a pedestal, and they quickly became an idol: something I thought would one day complete me.

With my first serious relationship, I tried to follow all I'd been told in the books. We were friends first. We dated for years before getting engaged, and were engaged for six months before getting married. My father officiated the ceremony. My best friend made the cake. I even saved my first kiss for him. But before our fifth wedding anniversary, he had a crisis of faith and walked away from God and our marriage. The books I had read promised that premarital purity would result in a flourishing marriage. They told me that sexual obedience would secure a specific blessing. When the reward didn't come, I was left to wonder what I had done wrong and whether others, who had grown up reading the same books and hearing the same messages, were wrestling with similar questions.

I taught English in private Christian high schools for a decade. Studying literature with teenagers creates a depth of conversation that small talk never could. As a class, we would reflect over the joys and struggles different characters faced, and this naturally led my students to open up about their own stories: what they feared, what was going on at home, and their hopes for the future. This dialogue also created space for students to share about sexuality. Over the years, I have talked with students who were sexually abused, addicted to pornography, wrestling with same-sex attraction, worried about sex, excited about sex, sexually abstinent, and sexually active. What I noticed was how many were living in shame, afraid to talk about their God-given sexuality in anything above a whisper.

The classroom isn't the only place I heard these confessions. I grew up in a pastor's home and I watched my parents love the vulnerable. There were often people heavy with the trials of life in our living room or at the kitchen table. My parents would feed them, listen to them, and pray over them. And as I grew into adulthood in the church, I began a similar ministry to the hurting. People sought me out for prayer, counsel, and friendship. Their stories in relation to sexuality were just as complicated as my students'—filled with guilt, abuse, fear, and hope. And when my peers and I were honest with one another, we shared similar stories.

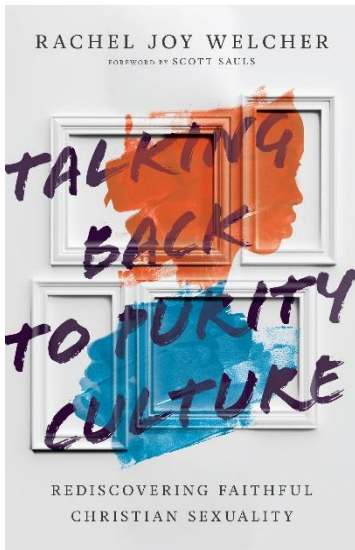


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"This book is a must-read for anyone who is looking for a thoughtful and thoroughly researched reconsideration of purity culture teachings. Rachel has done a masterful job of synthesizing decades of Christian literature on the subject into a sincere biblical critique of purity culture. But most importantly, Rachel casts a vision for the reader to move forward with compassionate yet faithful teaching on the subject, and she gives practical application for parents, leaders, teens, and singles alike." **Jessica**

Van Der Wyngaard, director of *I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and cohost of the *Where Do We Go from Here?* podcast

So when it came time to pick a dissertation topic for my master's thesis in Divinity at the University of St. Andrews, I thought about these questions and struggles. I wondered how teachings I'd internalized, such as the idea that women are responsible for the purity of men, or that you can earn a perfect marriage by practicing chastity, held up next to Scripture, and I decided to wade back into the purity teachings of my youth to find out.

This book isn't a new *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, nor is it meant to be the ultimate source or guide for sexual purity. My hope is that it will push Christians to engage with these topics together, in community. This book is for anyone trying to sort out what sexual purity means and how to talk about it—youth leaders, pastors, parents, teenagers, and those who grew up in church during the high tide of purity culture. It is for those who want to reevaluate what they were taught (or have taught others). It is for the hopeful and the bitter; those who underlined every other line in *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and those who burned the book in college. It is for Christians who want to honor God and want to see the church do better.

As I wrote this book, I found myself filled with a righteous anger at a Christian subculture that, for years, has made false promises and worshiped the idol of chastity rather than the Lord Jesus Christ. We have so much to uproot. We have so much to talk about. But I need you to know something before I go any further: I love the church. If I critique her, it is as a member of the body of Christ and a fellow sinner-saint. I pray for her flourishing. My desire to reevaluate purity culture teachings is out of love for the church, not a vendetta against her.

I will not be proposing a new sexual ethic for Christians or calling into question the validity of Scripture. God is above critique. But we are not. And I believe that humility demands regular reflection of our spiritual practices and biblical interpretation. This is not wishy-washy, but rather a recognition of our proneness to wander, that we all have a human weakness and fallibility, and that everyone is susceptible to getting so caught up in something that we forget to tether ourselves to God's Word.

Evangelical purity culture was not a wicked movement, but rather an earnest response to the age-old problem of immorality and the modern crises of STDs and teenage pregnancy. As with most earnest, human responses, we didn't get everything right. Surprised? I'm not. I won't get everything right in this book either. But it's time to step back and look at the movement that shaped so many of us—our relationships, our self-image, and our Christian faith.

—Taken from the Introduction, "It's Time to Talk Back"



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Q & A



Talking Back to Purity Culture *Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality*

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Rachel Joy Welcher (MLit, University of St. Andrews) is a columnist and editor at *Fathom* magazine. She is the author of two books of poetry: *Blue Tarp* and *Two Funerals, Then Easter*. Her writing has appeared in *Fathom Magazine*, *The Gospel Coalition*, *Mere Orthodoxy*, *Relevant*, and *The Englewood Review of Books*. She lives in Glenwood, Iowa, with her husband, Evan.

What motivated you to write this book?

Rachel Welcher: I grew up reading *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and *When God Writes Your Love Story*. I put marriage on a pedestal, internalized purity culture messages that told me that virginity was a prize for my future spouse, and that maintaining sexual purity would be rewarded with marriage, great sex, and children. I was devastated by the metaphors—crinkled rose petals, half-eaten cake, chewed-up gum—determined to maintain my purity because it seemed like my worth depended upon it. When, after following all the purity culture rules, my first marriage ended, I was left with broken promises.

As I entered graduate school, newly divorced, I decided to revisit the books of my youth to see how they spoke specifically to female victims of sexual abuse. After completing my research and my degree, I decided to keep on going. I studied the subject even more and went on to interview those who grew up in purity culture, trying to understand where our purity rhetoric veered from biblical truth, causing damage to precious image-bearers of God. Ultimately, I wanted to argue against unbiblical teachings and present healthier, more biblical ways of addressing the topic of sexuality in the church.

Would you say the teachings of Christian purity culture align with or depart from Biblical truths?

Rachel: Christian purity culture made promises it couldn't keep—promises that the Bible never made. It set up generations to idolize sex and marriage, and to find their worth in their ability to "stay pure." When sexual abuse, divorce, perpetual singleness, same-sex attraction, and infertility arose in people's lives, the promises of purity culture crumbled around them, leaving them to question not only the Christian subculture but also the church itself.

In my book I explore the books we read and the rhetoric we internalized, and point out where the teachings of Christian purity culture depart from Biblical truth. Then I present an alternative, a way forward, for the church's approach to the topic of sexuality. My book is distinctive in that while I critique many aspects of Christian purity culture, my goal is not to create a new sexual ethic but to help the church return to a more faithful, orthodox understanding of what the Bible says about sexuality and the grace and forgiveness we have through Jesus Christ.

In what context should the discussion of sexuality occur?

Rachel: Moving forward, we have to learn to remove shame from the discussion of sexuality, which is a God-created good that existed before the fall. Instead of sliding a book under our teenager's door, our conversations about sexuality need to take place in community and in the context of the whole of Scripture.

Within purity culture, are the messages for men and women different? What do you hope both sexes will glean about purity culture from this book?

Rachel: In purity culture, women are often tasked with the responsibility of preserving the purity of both genders. This places unfair blame on women, to the point where purity rhetoric can start to mirror the language found in rape culture.

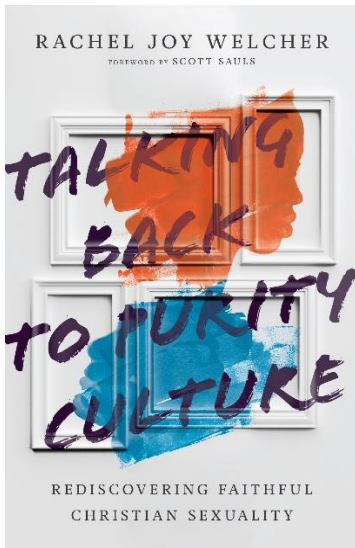


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"Talking Back to Purity Culture is saturated with gospel truth and clarity that confronts the overwhelmingly legalistic, shaming, and hopeless rubric of purity culture—especially the ways in which it blames young women for the sins of their brothers and fathers. Parents, and especially you moms, it's time to speak the truth to your children about sexuality and to assure your daughters of their worth as created in God's image. I'm thrilled to recommend this wonderful book." **Elyse Fitzpatrick**, author of *Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women*

In the Bible, individuals are held accountable before God for their own actions. Because Christians have been freed from slavery to sin, they are able to say no to lust—men and women alike. Recognizing that we are accountable as individuals before God for our own actions is vital to the discussion of sexual purity. When men are taught that they are lust-machines, and women are depicted as stumbling blocks, both genders are dehumanized. Instead, we ought to teach men and women to view themselves as image-bearers of God and one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, and coheirs of the kingdom.

When the readers get to the end of your book, what lessons do you hope they will have learned about sexual purity?

Rachel: Your worth is not defined by your virginity or sexual purity, but by the unchangeable *imago Dei*. You have worth no matter what you have done or what has been done to you. God instills us with worth, and nothing can alter our value as image-bearers of God.

For the Christian, pursuing sexual purity should be motivated by a desire to worship God, not to ensure the promise of marriage, sex, and children. These purity culture promises are not in Scripture. Joy as well as suffering are part of the Christian life, and marriage, sex, and children are not a reward for good sexual behavior. When we preach this false narrative, we neglect the reality of same-sex attraction, perpetual singleness, divorce, painful sex in marriage, and infertility. We must recognize that our churches are full of individuals who struggle with unmet desires and are wrestling with the disappointment of these purity promises. We need compassion, empathy, and grace in our churches.



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