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REDISCOVERING FAITHFUL
CHRISTIAN SEXUALITY



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FROM RINGS AND PLEDGES TO CONVERSATION IN COMMUNITY

I recently spoke at a conference on sexuality at a church in North Tulsa. At every plenary session, workshop, and panel, I heard people address topics out loud that most of us deal with in private. A young woman shared about the years she spent being sex-trafficked by her own father, and how Jesus transformed her life and gave her hope. There was a panel discussion about same-sex attraction, one about singleness, and another about how the church responds to sexual assault. Words like *masturbation* were spoken aloud instead of being merely hinted at, and in all of this there was no intent to titillate or create shock value or cause nervous laughter. The mood was one of contrition and compassion.

Alongside conviction, I felt years of sexual shame sliding off my shoulders. As I looked around, I saw tear-streaked faces. A hush bathed the room not because of guilt but because dark things were coming to light. Burdens, lies, questions, and struggles were being brought from the chill of isolation into the warmth of community. I have never experienced anything quite like it.

MODERN EVANGELICAL PURITY CULTURE

The Christian community I was raised in, in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America, tried to tame teenage sexuality by promoting an “evangelical Christian purity culture”—a movement that utilized pledges, books, and events to promote sexual abstinence outside of marriage.¹ Although the idea of a purity culture certainly exists in other places besides America, and in other religious contexts, Christine Gardner, author of *Making Chastity Sexy*, sees American evangelical Christians “at the center of the promotion of sexual abstinence.”²

In her book *The Scarlett Virgins: When Sex Replaces Salvation*, Rebecca Lemke points out that purity culture “allowed many [parents] to skirt the responsibility of discussing sex with their child while simultaneously believing that the issue was being addressed through ‘role models’ and purity events”—and, I would add, through *books*.³ Our choice to detach the topic of sexual purity from regular conversation has isolated it from the whole of Scripture and life, turning questions that are meant to press us further into prayer, the church, and God’s Word, into books, conferences, and websites. But the subject of sexual purity is too nuanced to squeeze into one book or conference. It must be integrated into our regular conversations.

THE BOOKS THAT MADE US

Too many of us are weighed down by sexual expectations, pressures, and shame. I interviewed a woman who lost her husband to cancer when their first child was just two years old and she was pregnant with their second. She told me that she has spent more time in counseling working through damaging purity culture teachings than she has dealing with the pain of widowhood. How is that possible?

The answer is nuanced. There were conferences. Camps. Youth group messages. True Love Waits rallies. Stories and

songs. Purity rings. But for many of us, we need look no further than the teetering stack of purity-themed books on our childhood nightstand. Books. We read about it in books.

One year, I put a quote by Francis Bacon on my classroom wall that said: “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.” Books that were meant to be tasted began filling the shelves in Christian bookstores, and parents bought them for their teenagers, who swallowed them whole. There was an assumption that anything about purity written by a Christian would be not only safe but helpful.

But we didn’t read these books the way we were forced to read *Hamlet* or *The Grapes of Wrath* in English class, laboring over themes and analyzing worldviews. Instead, we picked up *Wild at Heart* and *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, never bothering to chew a word before we made it part of ourselves. We read *Every Man’s Battle* and *For Young Women Only* by ourselves, interpreting and internalizing messages in isolation from community, without any discussion or debate. We carried them like Bibles.

During my graduate research, I studied those popular Christian books on gender and purity written in the late 1990s and early 2000s—books like *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, *And the Bride Wore White*, *Every Man’s Battle*, *Romance God’s Way*, and *Wild at Heart*. Some of you are familiar with these books. Maybe you wore a “purity ring” or remember hearing Rebecca St. James sing “Wait for Me” on the radio. Maybe there’s a True Love Waits pledge card tucked into your Bible from junior high. Or maybe you didn’t grow up in the church during this time and your exposure to purity culture has come from little snippets you’ve heard from other Christians or those who have left the church, complaining or rejoicing about how the movement affected them.

I posed this question to my Twitter followers not too long ago: What do you think of when you hear the term “purity culture”? Here are some of the responses I got.

If I follow a certain set of rules, most of which aren’t even Biblical, I’m guaranteed a wonderful marriage with a great sex life.⁴

His lust is your fault.⁵

The well-meaning desire for protection with a list of what-to-do’s buried among deficient whys.⁶

A culture of fear that doesn’t tell the truth about sex or the character of God.⁷

Preemptive punishment that follows from placing unfair and inappropriate responsibility on others.⁸

Fear and shame. It brought men’s struggles with lust to the forefront but offered no hope for women with similar struggles.⁹

It is safe to say that modern American evangelical purity culture is a trigger topic for many, and critique of the movement is gaining momentum. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, author of *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*, recently tweeted a call for women to send her their old purity rings so she could have them melted down and made into a “sculpture of a vagina.”¹⁰

Even former leaders of the movement, such as *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* author Josh Harris, are reevaluating the messages they made popular. Harris recently wrote a public statement saying: “While I stand by my book’s call to sincerely love others, my thinking has changed significantly in the past twenty years.” He went on to admit that he now thinks “dating can be a healthy part of a person developing relationally” and that his book “emphasized practices (not dating, not kissing

before marriage) and concepts (giving your heart away) that are not in the Bible.”¹¹

Harris’s book defined an era. What changed his mind? Listening to others. He began hearing stories from people who had been hurt by his book, and instead of ignoring the criticism, he leaned into it. In Jessica Van Der Wyngaard’s documentary *I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Harris says: “You can change your mind about things.” And while Harris went on to change his mind about more than just purity culture—recently announcing his divorce from his wife and his departure from the Christian faith—I believe that re-evaluation has value for the Christian.¹² It’s part of being human, and it’s necessary for our growth, which is what this book is about: leaning into tough questions together.

RETHINKING PURITY CULTURE

At the end of my seminar on purity culture myths at that conference in Tulsa, a father raised his hand and asked: “What books *can* you recommend?” He had a teenage daughter. And his question made sense. I had spent the majority of my lecture quoting from popular purity books, pointing out their damaging messages about sex, marriage, and gender. If not those books, which ones *could* he hand his daughter? Which were safe? I paused. And at that moment I realized the answer to sexual purity will never be found in a book slid under a teenager’s door.

So I told him: “There are good things in many of these books.” And I meant it. “But,” I said, “I can’t think of a single one that I would recommend reading in isolation. What we need more of is conversation. Instead of trying to find the perfect book, let’s keep talking about sexuality and purity out loud. Together. In community. Pick up any of these books, but read them with someone else and, whatever you do, keep the dialogue going.”

In the following chapters, I will ask you to join me in re-evaluating certain purity culture messages such as the idolization of virginity; marriage and sex as the reward for chastity; men as lust machines, and women as responsible for the purity of men. And I will ask you to consider ways we can move forward from these teachings as a church, specifically regarding how we talk about sex and sexuality; overcome unbiblical stereotypes about men and women; address the neglected realities of female sexuality, same-sex attraction, perpetual singleness, painful sex, and infertility; define sexual abuse and treat its victims; respond to sexual sin; talk to our children about their bodies, friendships, dating, masturbation, pornography, and so on; and move forward from hurtful purity culture messages into truth, grace, and community.

In the first few chapters, I lay a foundation of what purity culture taught us about these questions. Rather than merely *telling* you, I want to *show* you by drawing from some of the most popular Christian books of the late 1990s and early 2000s. This will involve some active reading and, I hope, plenty of conversation. I will add my own commentary and pushback as the chapters build, and I will eventually lay out for you what I believe to be a biblical sexual ethic and some practical ways we can faithfully and graciously live it out as a church.

I cannot stress enough the importance of taking any thoughts, confessions, or hurt that this book brings out into the light of community and God's grace. If you are reading alone right now, please make it a goal to bring at least one of these topics into real-life conversation with someone else. I can't promise it will always be comfortable, but we have to start somewhere. In writing this book, I have forced myself to have these conversations. In fact, I have interviewed over one hundred people at this point—formally and informally—asking about their experiences with purity teachings and how they feel about those messages now. I talked with some people

over coffee and others via email or video chat. Just last month, I talked to three young women for an hour in the kitchen during a baby shower. People *want* to talk about this subject, but it's difficult to start the conversation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were you taught about sex and marriage growing up?
2. What comes to your mind when you hear the term “purity culture”?
3. What connection (if any) do you have with the purity movement? How did it affect you?
4. Which teachings from purity culture do you appreciate and/or believe are biblical?
5. Which teachings from purity culture do you find troubling? Why?
6. What do you think of the ways people are critiquing/criticizing purity culture today?
7. What keeps us from having an open, honest dialogue about sexual purity?

ACTIVITY

One way to start this conversation is to get a group together to watch Jessica Van Der Wyngaard's documentary starring Joshua Harris called *I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye*.¹³ It's a good introduction to the topic of purity culture for those who didn't grow up in it, but it also holds meaning for those who did. The more diverse your group, the better. For example, if everyone is married, you'll miss out on the valuable perspective of singles and how purity culture has affected them and the way they view their singleness. Likewise, if your group is only made up of singles, you'll miss out on the perspective of those who are married, and how purity culture messages

line up with the reality of marriage. Invite widows and teenagers. Consider opening up your home for a viewing party and a discussion afterward.

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