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*Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality*. Rachel Joy Welcher. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020. Pp. 204.

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In *Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality*, Rachel Joy Welcher crafts a sympathetic but firm critique of the messages encoded within the evangelical purity movement, a movement which defines purity as abstinence before heterosexual marriage. The book, a result of her graduate research on purity literature from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, addresses the lack of alternative resources to help evangelicals discuss sexuality. Welcher's professed goal is to provide a resource for anyone "trying to sort out what sexual purity means and how to talk about it" by analyzing purity literature and its unintended consequences (9). Her hope is to spark conversation about purity and sexuality within the evangelical world, and, to that end, every chapter includes discussion questions and suggested activities. "People *want* to talk about this subject," she says, "but it's difficult to start the conversation" (17).

While Welcher does include quotes from conversations or seminars and personal experiences (including her own divorce), the greatest strength in her work is her thorough analysis of purity literature from within the evangelical movement. This makes her response to purity culture unique among recent books which have either been academic studies about the spread and ideology of purity culture (e.g., Sarah Moslener's *Virgin Nation* or Christine Gardner's *Making Chastity Sexy*) or ex-evangelical critiques that focus on people's experiences of purity culture (e.g., *Pure* by Linda Kay Klein

or *#Churchtoo* by Emily Joy Allison).<sup>1</sup> The combination of this unique perspective and method makes her work an invaluable contribution to the contentious and significant conversation currently surrounding the modern evangelical purity movement.

Welcher's book can be divided into two parts: chapters two to seven analyze the messaging of the purity movement, while chapters eight to ten explore how to apply Welcher's interventions. After her introductory chapters, her first substantive chapter is on the idolization of virginity in chapter two. There she argues that virginity is not well defined, that it is conflated with worth and identity, and that it eclipses the source of all purity (Jesus).

Chapters three and four concern themselves with gendered expectations, with chapter three focusing on "Female Responsibilities" and chapter four considering "Male Purity and the Rhetoric of Lust." In chapter three, Welcher considers how female sexuality has been downplayed. She also considers the damage that was wrought by the movement placing so much responsibility on women for guarding everyone's hearts, minds, and bodies. She also considers modesty and its link with how women must prepare to satisfy their spouses. Chapter four looks at the myths about male sexuality in the purity movement – specifically, the way men are taught that they are brave knights, and constantly at war with their raging sex drive. They are also taught that "women are often depicted as damsels in distress but also damsels causing distress" (60).

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1. Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*, First Touchstone hardcover edition (New York ; London: Touchstone, 2018); Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

Chapters five and six are a pair, both analyzing the promises of the purity movement and elaborating on the claim that “in purity culture, there are three main promises for those who practice abstinence: marriage, sex, and children” (67). In chapter five, “First Comes Live, then Comes Marriage,” Welcher examines the neglected realities of singleness, infertility, “same sex attraction,” and the ways that many Christians must live with longing (79). Chapter six turns its attention to the problems with the promise of sex. Sex, she argues with some bitterness, was presented as an award in purity culture for abstinence that frequently does not pan out. Many women end up single, childless, or settling. Further, quoting Lauren Winner, she argues that just because sex outside of marriage is a sin, this does not mean it has negative (earthly) consequences – sex becomes here an idol and a right in a way that distorts the gospel.

Chapter seven was, in my opinion, Welcher’s strongest chapter. Many other books have tried with varying levels of success to articulate how purity culture interacts with abuse. Welcher, however, is less interested in trying to prove a causative relationship between purity culture and abuse, and more interested in purity messaging around abuse – a focus which leads to quite a few astute and eye-opening conclusions. First, she notes that purity authors lump “the sexually immoral and the sexually abused together,” and that, “likewise, the call for women to guard themselves – mind, body, and soul, is communicated as a way to guard against sexual sin *and* sexual abuse” (50). All this, she argues, leads to the victim-blaming that other scholars in this field have also noticed: “In all of this advice about sexual boundaries, modest dress, and making men feel respected, Christian women are told that it is within their control to be treated with dignity and attract a quality mate, which also means that if a man mistreats them or if they are unable to find a suitable

mate, they share part of the blame” (51).<sup>2</sup> Welcher’s attention to purity literature’s presentation of these issues is thus invaluable, as not all purity authors approach this issue in the same manner.

Finally, in what I am labeling the second part of her book, Welcher addresses what modern evangelicals should teach about sexual purity. Her theology is summarized in chapter eight, entitled “Submitting to God’s Sexual Ethic as Embodied Souls.” This chapter, similar to Lauren Winner’s *Real Sex*, centers on her reading of the Genesis story.<sup>3</sup> I think this chapter is Welcher’s weakest, in part because she engages with non-evangelical Christian ideas about sexuality in a cursory manner and therefore leaves the rebuttals of those ideas feeling thin. It would have been stronger to either leave progressive Christian claims out or to engage them more thoroughly. Chapter nine addresses the question, “What Will We Tell our Children?” She says that parents should emphasize and highlight the full character of God, including God’s grace and mercy. She also tries to encourage people to remove taboos around discussing subjects like sex, pornography, and masturbation. Her bottom line is “somehow – and the balance is difficult to strike – we need to help adolescents understand that their sexuality is good but also that expressing it in a God-honoring, neighbor-loving way will be difficult” (170). In this way, once again, she is reminiscent of Winner and sets herself firmly within the evangelical world. She continues this conversation in chapter ten, “Purity Culture Moving Forward.”

Welcher does not make many original arguments, nor is that her goal. Instead, she marshals in a clear and approachable manner many already existing critiques of purity culture. She also

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2. For more on this, see Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, 1st ed. (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 277–278; Klein, *Pure*, 92.

3. Lauren F. Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, Paperback edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), 29–42.

summarizes an alternative yet still evangelical approach to sexuality. This comes together to create a resource that is useful both to academics studying purity ideology, and pastors/parents in a confessional context. As such, her work is a gem that should not be overlooked, especially as a tool for those wishing to either converse within an evangelical context or understand evangelical purity ideology.