



BOOK REVIEW

Welcher, Rachel Joy. *Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020.) 978-0-8308-4816-4 PBk £11.99

Reviewed by Eric Stoddart

“My goal on Sunday mornings is simple: hug as many widows as I can” (p. 68). This statement of intent by Rachel Welcher occurs not quite at the centre of this book if you count the pages of her text (being 185). However, in divulging this to her reader, Welcher is revealing the heart of this book; and the spirit in which she writes. Welcher appreciates embodied love in practice and within her own conservative evangelical tradition. This is a text written to acknowledge and confront the harm done by well-intentioned, and not so well-intentioned, Christians who have promoted a particular sexual ethic known as “purity culture.”

This term may be less familiar to international readers than those steeped in a North American Christian sub-culture. Purity culture is a theological ethic that sexual obedience will secure a specific blessing from God. Welcher ably describes this framework of books, media, and teaching events aimed predominantly at adolescents, teens, and young single people in Protestant Evangelical churches. Keeping oneself pure, here meaning chastity and abstinence from sexual activity prior to marriage, is rewarded by God granting a couple a trouble-free and unremittingly fulfilling sex life in the marriage for which they have kept themselves pure.

Welcher confronts the idolization of virginity and the manner in which it is deployed to construct the identity of Christian young, and not so young, people. Her response is not to dismiss sexual self-control but to reposition virginity and chastity within a lifelong pursuit of commitment to following Christ. Purity culture, Welcher contends, misdirects the motivation for self-control by turning it into a bargain with God, in exchange for the gift of glorious sex in marriage. She shares personal anecdotes and the accounts of others who have found purity

culture to offer a naïvely false promise that can lead to crippling disappointment and life-long shame.

Welcher engages with the highly gendered features of purity culture that not only downplay female sexuality but place an inordinate responsibility upon young women to act modestly lest *they* become responsible for the sexual sins of men. The burden is placed upon women to avoid “causing” a man to lust and fall into pre-marital or extra-marital sex. This weight is compounded by the expectations placed upon a married woman to ensure she meets her husband’s needs.

Such a gendered rhetoric of lust is, finds Welcher, both fantastical and demeaning of men, as they are given the impression that sexual self-control is beyond them. Furthermore, purity culture neglects to view singleness positively and has little place in its scheme for the pain of infertility. Whether intended or not, the rhetoric shames those who have been subjected to sexual abuse. Welcher re-reads the story of Bathsheba as a victim of sexual abuse by powerful King David.

Her constructive proposal lies in understanding that ‘it is Jesus who makes us pure’ (p. 137) – not following rules about chastity, abstinence, or in fact any other aspect of self-control. This, in Welcher’s view, is the key hermeneutical principle that then admits discussion of sex and responsibility in a holistic, non-shaming and non-threatening recognition of embodied love. The goal of purity is, for Welcher, God’s glory, not a great sex life within marriage or any other transacted ‘blessing’ in exchange for obedience.

Welcher is writing to those within, or formerly within, Evangelical churches and, accordingly she endorses a conservative sexual ethic whilst vigorously “talking back” to its excesses and distortions. Looking into that world from the outside I offer some observations which I hope Welcher will consider in developing her vital work in this area. A more critical reading of the Genesis creation texts, particularly in terms of the genre of myth would help lessen the weight that seems to be placed on a literal hermeneutic of the creation of, and relationship between, men and women. The power of those particular texts appears so strong within purity culture that robust exegetical scholarship that honours the text without taking it literally could be of considerable service within that corner of Evangelicalism.

“Talking back” to the Christian concept of marriage as it has developed over time would also be a constructive step in these debates. A tendency to take the concept at face-value rather too-readily makes a broadly 18th/19th century Euro-centric point in the development of marriage normative. Likewise, more engagement with critiques of patriarchy in the Bible and in its interpretations would be a welcome enhancement to Welcher’s challenge. An

international audience would appreciate some help in being oriented to the peculiarities of North American (perhaps specifically US) dating culture. The term is not used in exactly the same way in other contexts.

This is a book for Evangelical Christian young people and their parents, the non-Christian parents of Evangelical Christian youngsters, pastors and lay leaders (especially those who hire, and fire, youth pastors). It is also a text for someone of any Christian theological outlook who is concerned to engage with contemporary Christian sexual ethics. Progressive, liberal Christians will find much in Welcher's book with which they will disagree but working out quite why one disagrees with her will be a rewarding journey. LGBTQI+ Christians might balk at reading this book but possibly come away envisioned to articulate a more robust theological sexual ethic from a standpoint that admits the validity of equal marriage.

Whether readers agree or not with Welcher's theology, this is a book that deserves to be read in order to be schooled in what compassionate discussion can look like in a field that has the potential to be painful to so many.

Reviewed by Eric Stoddart, St Mary's College, University of St Andrews, Scotland. He declares an interest in this book having been the author's academic supervisor whilst she wrote her MLitt dissertation in which some of these ideas were initially developed. Rachel Joy Welcher graduated MLitt in 2018.