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Deconstructing Purity Culture: A Review of Pure

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Deconstructing Purity Culture: A Review of Pure

Abstract

"So how can we teach kids to respect and protect and value their sexuality without leading to feelings of shame and guilt around their normal urges and impulses?"

Posting about the book *Pure* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/deconstructing-purity-culture-a-review-of-pure/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, Pure, evangelicalism, shame, women, Linda Kay Klein

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.



June 6, 2019

Deconstructing Purity Culture: A Review of *Pure*

Erin Olson

Title: *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*

Author: Linda Kay Klein

Publisher: Atria Books

Publishing Date: September 4, 2018

Pages: 352 (Hardcover)

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During most my elementary and middle school summers, I spent a week at a Baptist summer camp in Minnesota. I have some great memories from camp, but I was recently reminded of one memory as I was reading Linda Kay Klein's book *Pure*. One summer when I was probably twelve or thirteen, I was listening to the camp pastor talk about dating and relationships as he told us girls in the group to make a list of the non-negotiable characteristics we wanted in a spouse. We were to use these as a ruler when deciding whom to date or not to date. Since girls weren't guided merely by hormones or sexual desire like boys, it was up to us to be the relationship gatekeepers and make rational decisions about whom we dated and what happened within the confines of those dating relationships.

Later, as a high school junior or senior, I read Joshua Harris's *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and swallowed its premise hook, line, and sinker. It quickly became one of the most influential books on the way I viewed dating and romantic relationships. I wasn't dating anyway, so this book really just became my "holier-than-thou" justification for why I didn't have a boyfriend. I never received a purity ring and didn't take a purity pledge, per se, but I was wholeheartedly committed to this new way of thinking about

dating and courtship and, eventually, marriage. I believed that girls were the keepers of both male and female purity and boys couldn't be trusted to control their hormones or desires. Girls needed to guard their virginity and the virginity of their male peers, which meant always being conscious of what you were wearing or how you were behaving and how you might be tempting your "brother" to sin.

Caught up in the sexual counter-revolution of the 1980's, the evangelical church at this time developed programs for their youth that emphasized purity and abstinence which intentionally excluded any type of comprehensive sex education. Linda Kay Klein grew up in the throes of purity culture, and in her book *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*, she tells of her own journey to understanding sexual purity through the evangelical lens of a teen in the 90's. Based on her own experience of shame and confusion, Klein went on to interview over 80 other women who had experienced the purity culture movement and found that a common theme for many of these women was shame, experienced as they struggled with their own sexual identity and desires but were told that these instincts and impulses were sinful and dirty. Klein identified both in her own experience and the experiences of those she interviewed how sexual purity was over-emphasized to the point that girls and young women especially began to feel like their salvation was hinging on it.

The messages of purity culture have been clear and strong since the 90's, Klein explains and her interviewees affirm. Sex before marriage is wrong and therefore anything sexual is also wrong, and boys can't be trusted to guard their own sexuality so girls must take up that responsibility as well. Girls are taught their purity is a gift they should hold to tightly, so on their wedding night they can offer it to their husband as a symbol of their faith to him and to God. Girls are even warned to keep the number of boys they've kissed to a minimum, or often encouraged to save their first kiss for their husbands at the marriage altar. The result of this message is women who feel shameful of their own sexuality and desires because it is expected in boys and men, but is seen as abnormal in girls and women. Once married, however, Christian virgin women are to become the "tigress" of marital sex. Their husband introduces them to the act of marriage and, like a light switch, all of their sexual desires come pouring out and are fulfilled in the marital relationship. Klein's interviewees, however, tell a different story. The shame and fear around sex and sexuality does not just go away as soon as you enter the marital relationship. You cannot simply flip a switch and feel okay about what's been shameful for most of your past. What is supposed to be natural and normal now, continues to feel clumsy and dirty even after you've been given the green light of marriage.

Many of the participants in Klein's study also talked about a deconstruction of faith and religion in their own lives and how they had to walk away from evangelicalism in order

to feel less shame about their sexuality. For some that meant walking away from God altogether, but for others it meant a closer relationship with God and less affiliation with organized religion or church. Many of them talked about a sort of de-conversion experience where, because of their sexual shame, they began to question all aspects of the church and eventually walked away from the church altogether. Others, however, found churches and religion that helped them heal and also develop a relationship with God again.

So how can we teach kids to respect and protect and value their sexuality without leading to feelings of shame and guilt around their normal urges and impulses? Whose responsibility is it to teach kids about our God-given gift of sex and sexuality or to correct the narratives of shame and guilt we learned as children and adolescents? As we hear from Klein, the church historically hasn't done a good job with this. Many would argue it isn't the role of the school either. Yet, if we rely on families, who ensures that it actually gets done and to what extent? Is this a place of shared [sphere sovereignty](#)? These questions of responsibility seem to have led us to a state where everyone's scratching their heads recognizing that things aren't as they should be, but not quite knowing what to do about it. Klein's book should give us reasons to look at this again. In her own story and in the stories of the women she interviewed, we can hear what happens when this topic isn't handled intentionally and done well. Sex and sexuality shouldn't be shameful, and virginity and purity shouldn't be lauded as the way for girls to earn their way into heaven. Christians and non-Christians alike need a healthy view of sex and sexuality; still it seems like this is one topic where family, church, and school are all looking at one another wondering who's going to take the lead.

Pure provides an eye-opening perspective on how our best intentions as the church can go painfully wrong. In an attempt to help young people see the value of sex and sexuality, purity culture has shamed and damaged many of those it intended to help. Rather than opening the dialogue around the beauty of sex and sexuality, purity culture leads to more confusion, questions, and often a disordered view of ourselves and the place of sex in God's kingdom. Linda Kay Klein's book provides an excellent starting point for us as the church to re-think how we talk about purity and abstinence. Throughout the book, Klein tells story after story of women who, in adulthood, feel fear and shame. Church, school, and family, recognizing their spheres of responsibility, should take this book's message and develop creative and healthy ways to share the duty of walking alongside young people, helping them grow in respect and knowledge about their individual sexuality and sexual behavior.