

# Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?

*Carolyn McCulley*

*Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?* by Carolyn McCulley...this was the book that was suggested for any woman (or anyone raised/socialized as a woman in purity culture) who was older than her early-20's and still single. The title, a spin-off of the previously published "I Kissed Dating Goodbye", was both catchy and like a gut punch. It implied that if we were in our mid-20's or older (sometimes younger!) and weren't married there just may be something that you had done or some part(s) of your character that were not in alignment with what was required to be a godly woman to whom a godly man would be attracted to. This book offered a step-by-step guide of who you needed to become in order to be the right kind of woman that the right kind of man would be drawn to. This book is a bit different than other purity culture books in that rather than focusing on relationship rules or not having sex before you are married, it focuses specifically on how a woman needs to be in regard to character, activities, speech, emotions, and presentation. This further reiterates that purity culture is all-encompassing and far more than simply not having sex before you're married.

## **My story with this book**

This book was one of the most influential books I read (multiple times) as I got older and remained single. The first time I read it was after I broke up with a boyfriend—I was absolutely terrified that I had done something in the relationship that had jeopardized my chances of getting married. It wasn't that we were physically impure (we were...the furthest we went physically was that he kissed me on the forehead a couple times)...I "messed up" because the church leadership was adamantly opposed to the relationship—to the point that I was considered to be dangerous, was removed from all leadership positions, nearly lost my job (I would have lost it but I quit before I was fired) and did lose many friends as well as respect and my reputation. I was convinced that disobeying the church leadership was disobeying god and was learning to grapple with the fact that this sin of disobedience may cost me my dreams to get married. The initial and subsequent times I read this book, I was looking for the ways to both repair my reputation and become a more submissive woman so that, despite my sinfulness with my boyfriend, I may get back to a place where someone would find me a good option for marriage.

Truth be told, it's painful to write these words and share that story. I can see clearly the spiritual and psychological abuse that was happening. I grieve for the young adult-me that was both terrified and trying so hard to make up for so much. Reading this book again, even just to review, has brought up a lot of old, painful memories and embodied memories I've had to work through. It's taken me a long time to get through this book because it felt overwhelming at times to understand the damage that this book's words and messages (both overt and covert) taught.

So, as you flip through the next set of slides, check in with yourself. If you notice overwhelm or panic...or anything else that feels intolerable, please give yourself to take a break, come back

later or skip over them altogether. This stuff is not easy to read, it's not easy to think about and remember. Please use the caution and care that you need.

### **Overviewing themes of the book:**

The author uses the infamous “Proverbs 31 Woman” as her template for teaching how a woman needs to shape herself. This is a common biblical passage to use as scholars say that this passage was a poem to a young king from his mother as she taught him the qualities to look for in a wife. Purity culture jumped on these qualities and expanded on them in a myriad of jacked up ways to determine how a woman needed to live, act, think, feel, and relate.

This book, like we have seen with many others, comes from a reformed theology perspective (also called Calvinism) which, at its foundation teaches that we are born as worthless individuals who have no ability to choose good on your own. We are in need of someone to save us (and that person is Jesus). Its important to recognize that foundation in this book as many of the principles may not make sense otherwise.

However, it's also important to note that because this is the foundation the book has been written from, it then becomes appropriate to taute the “company line” of: “you're a sinner, you don't deserve the air you breathe, so you need to do what god said. Obviously this is problematic for MANY reasons (as we will explore) but it's important to note that this line of thought is what allows for much abuse, power, and control dynamics to be prevalent in these systems but no permission to call them that; instead this is called LOVE (and this, my friends, is why purity culture is a grooming process).

### **Page 20**

Purity culture promotes young marriages—like very young marriages. It's not uncommon for people to get married around the ages of 18-20; subsequently, for women especially, if you are single and heading into your mid-20's there is a sort of franticness that you live with because you fear that you have missed your chance at getting married and maybe even done something that would have caused god to not give you a husband. The author of this book, at the time of writing, is 40 years old—typically thought to be well past the marrying age in purity culture. As we will see throughout the book, the author promotes the theme of “I know you want to get married, I do too...but god is in control and you need to stop worrying”. A major problem here is that many women in purity culture are taught that their main purpose in life is to be a wife and mother—continuing education, establishing a career, traveling, etc., is not prioritized and often times discouraged and frowned upon. So not only does a woman fear that she will not find someone to marry, she is left at the mercies of others to provide for her because she has not been able to prioritize an independent life.

**Personal Story:** Several months before I turned 30—and shortly after the very last time I read this book—I decided to reach out to the author, Carolyn McCully. I was really having a hard time being single. I was hanging by a thread with my faith and participating in church and I needed some sort of encouragement—someone to let me know I was not alone and to stay the course. So I reached out to the author, figuring that she may be able to offer that (Sidenote: I do

realize now that she did not owe me anything...this was also before social media was really a big thing so I don't know that she was fielding hundreds of DM's...because that didn't exist!) When I received a response back from her I excitedly opened it only to be dismayed and discouraged by what she wrote. In no uncertain terms she told me that because she was older than me (almost 50 at that point) I really had nothing to complain about and I needed to pray more, read my bible more, and trust god more. She ended saying that if she could be single this long, so could I. It felt like a punch in the gut. And yet, this type of spiritual bypassing is so common. Rather than questioning how "doing all the right things" is not getting you what you've wanted and what god has promised, you are taught to silence your doubts and questions and lean more into god.

## Page 21

The question of "what is god doing with my singleness?" (rather than "why am I single?") was so hard to wrestle with. Purity culture (and fundamentalism in general) taught that you were not allowed to question god. You had to set your doubts aside and trust that god knew better than you. It was all about shaving off pieces of yourself, including your mind, wisdom, insight, and body, and fully lean into a prescribed way of living.

## Page 28

Purity culture, which teaches specific ways to prepare for marriage—seemingly elevating marriage above all other things—also teaches that singleness is a gift. (As I am sure you can tell, one of the total mindf\*cks of purity culture is that it claims the expert role on everything: how to be married and how to be single, how to prepare and how to wait...how to prioritize marriage and how to not make it an idol...). But here we see that we are to view singleness as a gift. And further, it's a gift we not only don't have a choice of receiving, it's a gift that we are not allowed to not want. The essence of a gift is that it should be freely given and freely received—so to promote singleness as a gift (that you must be content with over marriage) promotes a ton of shame and fear that if you do not accept this gift that was given to you, you are sinning. Yes, this is gaslighting.

## Page 30

Here the idea of god giving you the gift of singleness is expanded on, but there is a particular sentence that sticks out...and that is that being single is not "wholly because of past failures or sin tendencies". This was one of my greatest fears as I aged still being single. That my past "sins" had disqualified me from being married—that no god-fearing man would ever find me attractive. Interestingly, as other books have shown as well, this plays off the idea that sexual sin is somehow more grave and deserving of life long and eternal consequences that you will endure. Have sex with your boyfriend? That will cost you in this life and in eternity. This naturally leads one to conclude that being single is then a punishment (not a gift)—and yet we are taught to continue viewing it as a gift. Again, this is psychological and spiritual abuse.

## Page 31

There is a strong theme throughout this book of all the things a woman must do and be in order to be marriage material and it starts early on in the book. There is a huge emphasis on volunteering at your church and spending any extra time, energy, and resources “building god’s kingdom”. This will be expanded on later in the book. Interestingly, even though the author does say, at one point, something to the effect of “we can’t say yes to everything, even ministry opportunities”, this is buried under endless tasks and attitudes that must be adopted to be the right kind of woman.

**Personal Story:** In my early 20’s I worked at a church as a paid staff member. I remember several conversations with my boss who told me that in addition to the 45 hours that I was required to work for my paycheck, I also needed to donate at least another 20% of hours for free (so about 10 hours)—actively engaged in outreach/ministry that was not a part of the youth department. But I was also expected to lead a small group of young women and do other mentoring things that were not a part of my job description. For years I ran myself ragged—spending even my days off reading books, preparing curriculum and going to coffee with countless individuals to mentor them. In my later 20’s it meant that I quit paid jobs (that paid my bills) in favor of volunteering with the young adult group—so much so that I couldn’t afford my bills and went into extreme debt, multiple times. This idea of sacrificing yourself for the church and for ministry is really hammered into single people...since they don’t have a spouse and family to care for and therefore have nothing else to do.

## Page 40

One of my final straws in any sort of religion was the recognition that I was supposed to give god tons of passes that, in human relationships would have been considered toxic, unhealthy and abusive. In human relationships when words and actions don’t line up time after time, you redefine the relationship, you set boundaries, you may even have to go no contact. In human relationships when someone constantly tells you you are unworthy and despicable and don’t even deserve the air you breathe, **YOU LEAVE THAT RELATIONSHIP**. And yet with god, not only were these given “passes”, they were billed as evidence of gods love.

In this passage here we see this playing out...if we don’t have the thing that god promised us (like a marriage relationship), instead of questioning god, you need to trust god more. You need to dive even deeper into what he SAYS versus what he DOES. And if you can’t wrap your mind around that, it’s definitely your own problem, and it’s a sin problem, no less. This book talks over and over about how trustworthy god is, despite any tangible action and evidence to back that up. Again, this is gaslighting.

## Page 41

Here we see a bit of a “recipe” for how to trust god:

1. Disparage myself
2. Silence your urges and needs—even basic needs
3. Remember to not lean into any self-insight or self-wisdom (because remember, we are evil and cannot trust ourselves, our desires, or our motivations).

## Page 44

Another theme we see in this book is that anything—literally anything can be and is considered sinful. If you have questions about god...that’s a sin. If you doubt something about god...that’s a sin. If you wish you were not single but you are...it’s heading towards sin. It’s important to note this because unlike what some people say purity culture is (“don’t have sex before you get married”) that is in fact the tip of the ice berg. Books like this have the aim of complete infiltration into your life with very specific details directing every move...and, oh yeah, don’t have sex before you’re married (because...SIN!)

## Page 49

I remember this particular section being so difficult for me back in the day. It was one of those “speaking out of both sides of your mouth” situations. As women we were encouraged to prioritize being a wife and mother which often came at the expense of furthering education and a career (and many other things). YET there was an air of punishment and shame for expecting that god would give you a husband and therefore you have now wasted your time and can’t complain if you don’t have a career or education. So while you are taught what the pinnacle of your life is, you are also shamed for simply waiting for this to happen.

## Page 62

Since marriage was considered the high honor to strive for, there was an expectation that when you got married, you transitioned your life into only doing married things (e.g. spending time with your partner, other married couples) and essentially forgetting about your single friends. As a single woman you were supposed to understand this, celebrate this and look for ways to continue pursuing the one-sided relationship with your married friends. There was no room to fault them for not engaging with you or not being a friend to you, it is a part of your ministry to pursue these relationships.

**Personal Story:** Prior to moving to Nashville I went through two rounds of every single one of my friends getting married—except me. The first round were people that were my age and a little older...I was hopeful that I would have found someone as I graduated from high school and then community college...but I remained single. Though I tried desperately to maintain the relationships, I was regularly excluded from these relationships and events because I wasn’t married. Slowly I started to gain an additional group of friends...this time they were all anywhere from 5-10 years younger than me—and they started getting married too. This time there was even more responsibility I had to pursue and maintain these relationships because not

only was I single, I was older and needed to set an example. I constantly gave of myself to people who had no interest in ever having an equitable relationship and yet when I expressed any sort of frustration (usually to married friends), my sinfulness and lack of grace was the focus versus recognizing that they were one-sided relationships.

## Page 70

This is one of the scariest parts of purity culture teaching: the idea that your future spouse could be watching how you interact with the opposite gender (in PC there are only 2 genders and all relationships are heterosexual) and evaluating you—how you act, respond and, for women, if you are demonstrating the qualities of a Proverbs 31 woman. Therefore women are taught that they need to be on their “A-game” at all times because you just never knew who was looking. For men this also meant that they were able to judge and dismiss women based off of only external observations rather than getting to know the woman (but it always remained the woman’s fault because if they hadn’t acted in a certain way, they wouldn’t have been judged accordingly).

## Page 73

Here we see the notion that we have seen in other purity culture books: that you are to guard your heart and not give it away to too many people because it is a finite entity and if you have too many relationships or give yourself away emotionally or physically, you are robbing your future spouse of what is rightfully theirs. This, alone, promotes a sense of ownership (as opposed to autonomy) as well as an incorrect assumption that somehow the love you have to give will eventually run out.

## Page 78

Because of the way purity culture worked and the expectations of how a relationship was supposed to begin and carry on, there were also strict rules in regard to how we thought about dating and relationships—both in our minds and in our actions. In this passage we see rules around ensuring that you do not think about a particular man too much, talk about him too much or even spend too much time with a particular man. In the author’s words, this is considered “dating in your mind”—essentially meaning that if you don’t give equal time and treatment to every man in your vicinity, you are likely crossing into dangerous territory in which you might be idolizing a particular man, setting yourself up to be let down, and appearing to be attached to a particular man that, if your future husband would be watching and evaluating you, may not feel like you are prioritizing him. While the author does not outright state that men and women cannot be friends (in fact there is a strong emphasis on how women can serve their male friends) there are many rules around what is permissible (and not) in these relationships.

**Personal story:** I grew up with three brothers and due to such, I had a pretty good idea not only how to interact with men but it felt very natural. However, I also knew that I didn’t want to be “one of the guys”, so I really bought into the author’s ideas in regard to not only becoming a biblical woman but really leaning into the whole learning how to serve the men in your life.

*(Sidenote:* this was often taken to the extreme as I also was told by many that were “older and wiser” than me that I also needed to practice submission and could do that by submitting to my male friends as well as ministry leaders.) To this end, I made my house welcoming, I cooked meals, I hosted gatherings, I paid attention to what my male friends would talk about and look for creative ways to support them. And I got in trouble ALL THE TIME. The men in my life regularly “reported me” to other women who were either “older and wiser” or married (which was synonymous with wiser) so that they could set me straight. I received many phone calls and invitations to coffee from these women who would admonish me and accuse me of overstepping my role as a woman, elevating particular men in my life and remind me that I was not, in fact, dating them. These were truly heartbreaking experiences.

### Page 93

This passage goes in tandem with the previous slide: the idea that not only are we supposed to equally encourage and spend time with all men, so as not to either lead a man on or date someone in our mind...this also went further to suggest that women primarily needed to listen and stay silent in order to give men time to step up to the plate and share their thoughts and observations. The author goes on to talk about the importance of women not being “too loud” which was not at all in reference to volume. Instead it was in reference to speaking at all. Women were encouraged to stay silent whenever possible in order to give men the opportunity to lead and share insight. In the book we see the author glorifying this action by saying that when she stayed silent instead of sharing what was on her mind in a particular situation, it gave the men around her the opportunity to divulge wisdom—often times saying the exact thing that she was going to say but because it was coming from a man, this showed god’s unique purpose for men.

### Page 94

Many times throughout the book the author mentions stories of others where the emphasis is placed on the necessity of a woman needing to check with her husband in order to make a decision. While I am certainly not suggesting that it’s bad or wrong to check with your partner about decisions (and is quite important to do so when those decisions have impact on your partner!), this passage/book is not discussing an equitable checking in. It instead emphasizes the necessity of women making decisions with her husband because she cannot make them herself OR in some cases/teachings it is believed that the woman is incapable of making positive choices if a man does not weigh in on them. As we see further in this chapter, when a woman is unmarried and does not have a husband to give the final word on decisions, she is to look to other men in her life to be the voice of reason and wisdom. In the author’s case, this was her boss. Her decisions were filtered through the lens of “how will this choice/decision help my boss?” Later on in the book (pg. 138) the author fleshes this out even more, giving specific examples of how she submits to him (as a way to submit to god) and completely bypasses the amount of power and control this is in a relationship.

**Personal Story:** I, of course, took this point and deeply internalized it. Because I worked at a church and my boss was a pastor, there was even more emphasis on the necessity of filtering things through this lens. My boss was not just my boss, he was my spiritual authority and believed he had a unique role in my life. He gave love and connection when I listened to him and

abided by what he wanted. He withdrew connection and relationship when I made a decision on my own. Whenever anyone came into my life that had the chance of taking away his position in my life he would either manipulate me into believing that this person was not a good choice or, if I didn't listen, he would attack and isolate me. Though I knew that this was wrong on a gut level, I didn't believe that I had any other choice but to follow every rule and decision he made for me. (And in case you are wondering, YES this is spiritual and psychological abuse. This is the epitome of power and control dynamics in a non-intimate relationship).

## Page 107

Moving forward, the remainder of this book (and critique) is discussing direct rules and habits of living for the right kind of woman...and it covers EVERYTHING. What you'll notice is that these are not mere suggestions...these rules are laced with an obligation and expectation that this is not only how things should be, but that anything less is either outright sinful or headed in that direction.

Don't believe me? Check out this passage here in regard to creating a hospitable and inviting home environment. The author suggests that if you use the microwave or order out for the majority of your meals this is not in accordance with how a biblical woman should be. Instead she needs to tenderly and intentionally plan her meals as this prepares her to one day plan and prepare meals for her future husband and family.

## Page 113

The book is very clear that a woman needs to be prioritizing her home environment—the author makes a broad claim that prior to her becoming a christian she did not prioritize her home, decorating it or making it an inviting place to be—she lived like a bachelor (which is considered an insult to a biblical woman). When she became a Christian and started interacting with other christian women she saw that they had things like matching dishes, candles and strove to create an inviting environment. This then becomes the expectation—that a woman who is interested in having a husband and family will prepare for such by making sure she is preparing her home as a single person.

*To be clear:* I am not suggesting that having your home decorated a specific way or matching dishes or whatever is a bad thing or is a dumb priority! I LOVE decorating my home and take pride in it being an inviting environment even if its only for me! The problem with this is not how you decorate your home (or not!)...the problem is the message that a biblical woman has a well-decorated and inviting home and to not prioritize this is reflective of your own heart. THAT is the problem.

## Page 118

Though the Proverbs 31 woman is financially smart and the author does encourage what she calls “smart investments” (like purchasing a home instead of renting) there is also an emphasis that every financial decision of an unmarried woman needs to be filtered through the lens of how

it might burden her husband in the future. For instance, in the opening to this chapter a young, single woman has been accepted to a prestigious college for her graduate degree...it is her dream BUT it would mean that she would accrue significant student loans (to be clear: this is definitely something to consider when going back to school...if you have the means or mental preparedness to pay off student loans...which raises many other topics/issues that are outside the scope of this conversation!) The author praises this woman for not only choosing to honor her future husband by not accruing the student loans but for also, instead, taking a part time position as a ministry assistant at a church (spoiler alert: churches do not pay women very much at all!) Simultaneously, women are also encouraged to not pursue career positions and instead pursue ministry positions or other part time work so that her career does not get in the way/become too much of a priority that would impede her ability to give her time/energy/efforts to her future husband. Later on (page 131) the author says that to be debt-free is the modern equivalent to a dowery. This is HIGHLY problematic...a dowery was something that made a woman more or less valuable. Essentially it was the price a woman's family paid to her husband to essentially transfer over the rights from her father to her husband. A dowery determined the worth and value that someone brought into a relationship (this is discussed on the newly released Netflix show, "Bridgerton", if you want to learn more about it).

**Personal Story:** when I graduated from high school I had my pick of colleges to choose from due to excelling in academics, athletics and the arts...and I ended up at a community college. This is not to diss community colleges as I think they offer incredible educations and experiences...rather, it's to note that the reason I "chose" the community college is that I couldn't justify going into that much debt if my entire purpose/goal in life was to be a wife and a stay at home mother. I reasoned, also, that I didn't need an education. And, I also received no support from my parents or community to encourage me to pursue these endeavors. Instead, I was praised for running myself ragged in volunteer ministry positions and told to trust god more with my measly part time salaries and that someday this would pay off because I would finally have a husband. (This is, in part, why I'm so proud of myself for owning my own business, buying a house this spring and being almost done with my PhD. Not only are these things that I wanted but they fly in the face of the expectations that I was supposed to follow.)

## Page 124

This book does not talk much about sex (in the way that other purity culture books do)—however, it does talk about the woman's role in making sex outside of marriage a possibility. It boils down to deceptive charm that all women possess and must keep at bay lest they use it to manipulate men—especially married men. The author even goes so far to say that one of the reasons women should not work in corporate America is because of the temptations of sinning sexually—noting that it's a likely assumption that a woman would engage in promiscuous behavior with her male coworkers simply because she has the opportunity to. As you can see in the passage here, the author, in no uncertain terms, says that [physical] attraction to someone is the top of a slippery slope that leads to sexual sin. It was teachings like this that taught women that a man being attracted to her was not only because of something that she did but that she was causing him to sin—and that it was her responsibility.

## Page 125

This is an extension of the previous slide—tips for how to evaluate if you are being deceptively harmful and how to maintain your biblical womanhood in the workplace. What this suggests is that being attracted to OR being attractive to someone is a weakness and the devil uses this to gain control in your life. Therefore, any attraction to someone (or them towards you) must be deeply scrutinized. (And yes, this absolutely begs the logical question of how one would even consider getting married to someone if even being attracted to someone is a sin. I don't have an answer for that...because none of this is logical or makes sense. I suppose the author might say something like “you need to be attracted to who christ is in that person”...something very spiritual by-passy like that.)

## Page 128

Here we see the idea of protection for a woman, like so many other purity culture books have. In other books there is promotion of parents as protectors (especially of women/daughters) but here there is an emphasis, again, on husbands being the protectors—except that protectors in this situation are actually decision makers. They are external sources that you must rely on because you cannot make choices for yourself. Here we see that since the author is not married, she enlists the support of an older, married woman through whom she filters all of her choices. In this particular scenario, the person is supposed to help her determine how to spend her time and energy since churches pounce on single people and see them as the perfect unpaid servant. (Side note: this is very true...single people in the church are hot commodities because they don't have time constraints and commitments to spouses and children. There is an expectation, often unspoken, that single people need to say “yes” to everything, because what else are they going to do? So while I do appreciate the author's recognition that this is not only a dynamic in churches but that it's ok to not say “yes” to everything, the idea that someone cannot decide for themselves or must say yes to anything is troubling.

## Page 148

Children. So I want to start off by saying that if you want to have children (or perhaps you already do have them), that is TOTALLY fine. This is not about believing that not having children should be glorified. Having children or not is a personal choice that each person must make for themselves. The biblical woman, though, has children. And if she is unmarried, she must look for ways to invest into younger generations (as this will help prepare her to be a mother someday). The author goes so far as to say it is wired into women to want to nurture other people. I cannot say for sure if there is science to back this up, but the author uses this as a way to suggest that a biblical woman—a woman worth marrying—will need to spend time learning to nurture others and not only that but to LOVE nurturing others.

**Personal Story:** growing up I did not know that I had an option to choose if I wanted to have children or not. There were a few children whom I babysat (and very much love to this day) that I interacted with and I was a “hot commodity” in the church in terms of baby-sitting but it generally annoyed me. The kids were fine...but taking care of them was not something that I found great joy in. Often times I would watch someone like my mother play with the kids I baby-

sat (we were close as families) and I would think there was something wrong with me for not wanting to get down on the floor and play—she was always so good at it and seemed to love it (she still is this way with her grandchildren). I thought it was something wrong with me though--that I needed to work harder at being more nurturing rather than considering that perhaps having my own children from my body wasn't something that was in the cards for me.

### Page 163

As is true with other purity culture books, there is this weird teaching that you need to be attractive as a woman but also you can't be too attractive. Like I said a few slides ago, there was a "slippery slope" that you could go down that started with attraction, so you had to be careful. And yet, we were told over and over that men want a woman that they find attractive. This constant back and forth not only was confusing but it always resulted in the woman being to blame if anything went wrong.

### Page 165

To take the previous slide's information one step further, the author teaches that when a single woman is attractive (and knows it) she will specifically target married men to manipulate and "pull down" into sin. AND even if the men aren't married, because they will be married (likely) some day, it is wrong to try and get their attention too because they are someone else's husbands. (face palm)

**Personal story:** In my early 20's I fluctuated in my weight quite a bit. I recognize now that it wasn't because of diet or exercise, it was due to the expectations I had placed upon me, especially in regard to how men viewed me. I truly believed that if I was skinny, my natural inclination would be to manipulate and seduce men (especially married men). I couldn't recognize my own self-confidence and instead viewed any sense of feeling good in my body as a temptation from the devil. I remember confiding in a mentor of mine, after having lost a significant amount of weight and feeling really good about myself and in my body, that I was terrified that I would start using my body to manipulate men and flirt in inappropriate ways. Her response was something to the effect of how wonderful it was that I would know how easy it is for me to sin and cause others to sin and that she would hold me accountable.

### Page 175

We are now into the chapter that talks about wise speech—essentially the notion that women, or rather, biblical women, need to be incredibly mindful of their speech. And while I am a huge fan of being respectful, kind, and compassionate in the way that we speak to others, this, again, is an entirely different level. Most notably, purity culture in this sense teaches that anything outside of the most kind, compassionate, and respectful response is...SINFUL. This was a prevalent theme in the book "For Women Only" which I reviewed several weeks ago—the notion that women bear a responsibility to men especially to ensure that anything they say to a man could not be interpreted as disrespectful. Here the author takes it a step further and tells us it is sinful. This leads though to a greater theme within this book and purity culture and that is that anything less

than perfection (which is subjective in this context, I might add) is sin. Of course, this makes sense when you start from a foundation that as a human you were born a worthless, evil sinner (which the author is clear, is the case). However, to consider things like having a bad day, wanting reciprocity in a relationship, or feeling too exhausted to cook that you order a pizza as evidence of sinfulness and not being a biblical woman seems not only asinine but deeply harmful.

**Personal anecdote:** I now remember why my anxiety was astronomically high being in this religious culture. It seemed that the very act of breathing, if done incorrectly, would be a sin.

## Page 179

At the beginning of the chapter on wise speech, the author tells a story in which her boss asks her what her schedule is and she responds with something to the effect of how overworked she is, her stress level and frustration with a specific person. As I read what she said, it sounded to me like someone who was overworked (and probably underpaid) just having a very human moment—I've had plenty of those myself just today. So I wanted to show this page as well—her evaluation of the thing that she said that indicate multiple areas of sin (her words and interpretation, not mine). As you can see from her evaluation, the amount of shame that is present at all times for being human and having human responses, is overwhelming.

## Page 182

A common justification for all things purity culture related is “god’s word says so”. You don’t like what you can and cannot do...don’t shoot the messenger. As I’ve talked about in other book reviews, one of the main problems with this is that the very foundations the purity culture is built on actually cannot be found in the bible. There are loose references and proof-texts in order to make various passages of scripture fit, but no where in the bible are there “rules” for dating/courting, a wife needing to be a certain body size for her husband, or that microwaving food is a reflection of being an inept homemaker. In fact, it can be argued that the bible doesn’t even teach that it’s wrong to have sex outside of marriage (though it does talk about fidelity within marriage)...if you want a quick overview of what the bible does say about sex, check out the Dismantle Podcast, episode from January 17, 2021.

The reason that explanation was necessary is because many purity culture book authors will make statements like “it’s not the husband’s job to tell the wife to submit...god tells you to submit”. Sure, ok...fine. The problem is, however, that this verse is used against women BY men, under the authority of god. So while the man can theoretically say it’s not him telling his wife to submit, he is using scriptures against his wife in order to get her to do what he wants. This is the very definition of spiritual power and control.

## Page 194

I wanted to share this part of the book because it says, in no uncertain terms, that the temptation of singleness is to be self-focused. While I am not advocating that people live selfish and

inconsiderate lives, purity culture and fundamentalism teaches that focus on self at all is sinful. This is why I never had a day off of work (and worked 12-15 hour days) for nearly 5 years when I was working at the church. From every side I heard the message that I needed to do more, give of myself...and eventually I would be rewarded. There is a common theme too, in this and other purity culture books, that if you are lonely, you just need to serve in the church more. Emotional bypassing is absolutely crucial...every emotion can be explained away by just focusing on god rather than allowing yourself to feel anything. Essentially, if you just focus on others, everything will be fine.

As it pertains to the biblical woman, focusing on how you feel in any given circumstance is proof that you are not trusting god and that is...you guessed it...a sin. Purity culture requires a divorce from self—body, mind, and spirit—in order to be able to live out your life under these very specific rules. And the consequences for not doing this are severe: no marriage, hell, or both.

### **Page 203**

The author moves on to the next part of the Proverbs 31 passage and that is to serve the poor and needy. On face value, I do not disagree at all. I think that there is something quite beautiful about being able to serve and care for our fellow humans—especially when we are afforded privileges that others may not have. Of course, the problem with this teaching in purity culture is that it's serving at the expense of yourself and with no regard to yourself. AND as it pertains to women in purity culture, there are specific stipulations in regard to serving the men around you—including men who are in need. Very clearly the author indicates that trying to serve or offer counsel to a man is both inappropriate as well as resulting in the man dismissing the thing you told him. Purity culture is very specific in its teachings that women are not to have any sort of an authority position over men—including helping them. Purity culture teaches that women need to step back, stay silent and create situations for men to shine. They must not take the lead in any situation (unless no man will) and must be very careful about the way they interact with men, lest the man feel inferior (which then means the woman is at fault). Pastor John Piper even said publicly that he did not believe women should be police officers because if a female police officer stops a man and gives him a ticket, she is in a position of authority which should never be her role (google his statement if you're looking to feel appalled for the rest of the day).

### **Page 205**

The final chapter in this book outlines the final part in Proverbs 31: to laugh at the days to come. She begins a story with a woman in her 50's sharing that she was angry at god for withholding marriage from her so she decided to withhold her affections from him (god)...and of course she eventually realized this was a sin. The reason I think it's important to highlight this story however is the recognition that the way we are to view a relationship with god, what we are to accept, what we are to not question and what we must only take at face value (never in actions) is unparalleled from any other human relationship. In purity culture and fundamentalism one is told to keep trusting god no matter what—even if his “promises” aren't kept. There are teachings where you are told you cannot trust yourself, only god. If we took god out of it and substituted god with any other human, it would clearly reflect toxic and unhealthy relational dynamics at best and abuse at worst. And yet we are given placating statements like “god's ways are higher

than our ways” that are supposed to be sufficient. This, I believe, is grooming behavior (like so many other aspects of purity culture). When we are used to believing and thinking a certain way about god, god’s words, and god’s actions, it is not a far jump to translate that to human relationships as well. Which means that when someone tells us they love us but then withhold and do things to actually harm you or cause you pain, that this is love and we should lean into trusting that relationship even more. This is very problematic and very much a dynamic of power and control.

## Summary

As you can tell from the many slides, this book hit quite close to home. As I said at the beginning, it was incredibly difficult to read and took me several weeks because my body had such extreme reactions. Truthfully, I’m glad to be done with it. Being done with it also allows me to reflect in a deeper way not only how damaging these teachings are but how my younger self suffered a great deal by these messages—I’ve worked really hard to identify where these things have lived (and in some cases, are still living) in my body and tried to resolve them. This book, perhaps more than any other purity culture book, did the most damage to me personally...and unfortunately I know too many others that were damaged by this book as well.

I think it’s important to note, also, that the author was a part of Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM)—led by CJ Mahaney, who has been in the news off and on over the last several years for many people speaking out about experiencing sexual assault at the hands of church volunteers as well as church staff silencing their accounts and not protecting the victims. (This is very easy to goggle, and I would encourage you to do so if you want more). SGM is known for its harsh and rigid requirements of what it means to be a christ-follower and it’s not surprising that many of the most prominent names in the purity culture movement came directly from SGM or were affiliated with it. Y’all, they are dangerous.

I’ll stop there for now...I welcome your thoughts about what you’ve just read. Let me know in the comment box what you learned, recognized or found to be interesting (or disgusting). Thanks for hanging with me, y’all. Feel free to take a shower and wash all this garbage off of you!