



Global

News

Analysis

Opinion

Curated

DONATIONS

Storytelling

SUBSCRIBE

More

SEARCH 

‘Please, think of the kittens’ and other scary things I learned from purity culture

OPINION AMY HAYES | NOVEMBER 16, 2021



“Every time you masturbate, God kills a kitten.”

Ah yes, the threat of divine felicide, God’s one weapon in the fight against sexual deviancy. Unfamiliar with God’s displeasure at self-pleasure? You must not have grown up evangelical in the ’90s and early aughts like I did. Let me explain.

I was first encouraged to “please, think of the kittens” by my college small group leader who had the meme as her laptop background. Kyla, as I’ll call her, was pretty well known at my campus ministry for her openness about sexuality, including her own crimes against feline kind. A woman who masturbated and openly admitted it? Unheard of in my Christian circles.

On the one hand, Kyla’s nonchalance and edgy humor was incredibly refreshing. Up until her small group, only my journals had born witness to my deep shame over



Get  BNG headlines in your inbox

email address

SUBSCRIBE

masturbation, a sin boys alone were supposed to struggle with. In my mind, masturbation marked me as hypersexual and, worse, *masculine*. But Kyla was neither a nymphomaniac nor mannish — if she could forgive herself for masturbation then I could too. My secret sin was no longer secret, and that, in and of itself, was liberating.



Amy Hayes

But, on the other hand, Kyla's relative sex positivity still restricted all orgasms to the confines of heterosexual marriage. Not that I questioned that at the time. Long after our small group dissolved, I considered every self-pleasure session a failure to live up to God's best for me. No one, not even Kyla, could imagine a theology that allowed me to be single *and* sexual. So I lived divorced from myself, forced to persevere until marriage. That's when I could be whole again, not because a man was completing me, but because I could reunite with my sexuality without risking my salvation. Because sexual purity is the one true measure of a person's Christianity, as anyone who grew up in evangelicalism can attest.

Sexually active outside of marriage? You must not love Jesus. Not really.

Meet Brenda Marie Davies

"I was conditioned to believe that sex outside of marriage was a grave offense. Although we were told all sin is forgivable, premarital or gay sex seemed completely, utterly and totally unforgivable. ... sex felt unforgivable because our pastors said sex, masturbation, and even desire would separate us from God," writes Brenda Marie Davies in her book *On Her Knees: Memoir of a Prayerful Jezebel*.

Davies, a popular YouTuber known as God is Grey, published this autobiographical account of her journey from purity culture princess to sex-positive Christian earlier this year. The book opens with her unfavorably comparing a pastor from her

FEATURED



BNG's November webinar will feature John Pavlovitz in dialogue with Mark Wingfield

NEWS



Putting the white in witness since the 1940s

ANALYSIS



What do our actions since Jan. 6 say to the people who pledged their lives to support and defend the Constitution of the United States?

OPINION



The church cannot speak against sex trafficking until it admits its own abuse problems, author says

NEWS

CURATED



Muhammad

New biography offers novel approach to life of



German Museum Acquires 15,000 Artifacts

Documenting the History of Anti-Semitism



scandals and deficit

Vatican financial reform efforts continue amid



order

Liberty responds to ex-spokesman's suit, seeks gag



youth to Marilyn Manson and closes with, well, you'll just have to read it for yourself.

In between are scenes from the Playboy Mansion — yes, including the infamous grotto! — New York Fashion

Week, Hollywood parties with Kanye and Katy Perry, movie sets and modeling shoots galore. Mostly set in L.A., *On Her Knees* belies the notion that the city strips the faithful of their faith. The only thing Davies loses is her evangelical cognitive dissonance. It's The Liturgists podcast but make it fashion.

These days everyone is deconstructing, especially around purity culture. Even Joshua Harris, author of the movement's seminal text *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, has recanted (then turned around and written the foreword for *On Her Knees*). And Davies' dismantling does follow the same broad contours as others' processes, weaving in and out of Fowler's stages of faith and Kübler-Ross's stages of grief, but it's her enduring connection with God that truly sets her story apart.

At one point, Davies sums up the tension thus: "To have God, I must forfeit sex; to have sex, I must forfeit God." But Davies ultimately refuses. She simply stops surrendering God *and herself* to the purveyors of purity culture. Because it was a false dichotomy all along.

Purity culture and disembodiment

For me, this is the real sin of purity culture. It prescribes disembodiment, denigrating the body, its needs and limitations, as the prerequisite to communion with God. And Davies agrees.

"The true evil is dividing people from their bodies. Any time we ask someone to divide themselves, to disembody and go somewhere else, we are in the wrong," she told me in a phone interview.

Purity culture casts this kind of disembodiment as Christlike when in reality it is violence masquerading as salvation. And I do mean violence. Research around the effects of purity culture support this conclusion, with experts reporting that indoctrinated persons suffer from erectile dysfunction, vaginismus, and a whole host of symptoms typically associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Pretty rotten fruit, yet purity proponents continue to feed it to their flocks.

This is pastoral negligence at best, pastoral deception at worst. And it produces lasting consequences that marriage itself does not cure. “In evangelical churches across America, pastors promise singles a massive ‘payoff’ for waiting while simultaneously counseling married couples through a myriad of sexual dysfunction,” Davies writes.

We need a new term

Purity involves so much more than keeping our hands to ourselves (or not, as it were). At this point, however, evangelicals have so contaminated the term as to render it useless for productive discussions about Christian sexual ethics. We need a new term to rally around.

Davies, along with many others, proposes integrity as the new paradigm. This isn’t the free love of the sixties or the mindless hookup culture of present day, although purity proponents will likely characterize it as such. Easier to dismiss that way.

No, integrity requires much more than purity ever could dream. Integrity operates on the principle of alignment: spirit *and* body. And that means having deep awareness of both. Perhaps that’s part of purity culture’s appeal: simplicity. Your sexuality

“This is the real sin of purity culture. It prescribes disembodiment, denigrating the body, its needs and limitations, as the prerequisite to communion with God.”

has one very clear on switch, heterosexual marriage, and until then, you just keep it in the off position.

But integrity acknowledges complexity. It invites an ongoing conversation between you, your body, your spirit and *the* Spirit. In a word, it requires relationship. Doesn't that sound familiar?

**“Integrity
requires much
more than
purity ever
could dream.”**

Evangelicalism's central claim is that Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship. Yet, at least right now, its most (in)famous doctrine sabotages that relationship by turning people against their own bodies, other people and, ultimately, God. This is the tragedy of disembodiment.

Practicing sexual integrity initiates a redemptive reversal. It reconnects us with our bodies, it enables healthy relationships romantic and otherwise, and it brings us into deeper communion with God. It sounds like good news and feels like freedom.

And by no means does sexual integrity require sexual activity. Because it's about alignment, integrity could look like waiting until marriage or practicing lifelong celibacy. As long as those choices find resonance in your body as well as your spirit, which includes your relationship with God, then you are in alignment.

For those of us who grew up in purity culture, trusting our bodies sounds downright dangerous. After all, the heart is above all things deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9). But what then of the incarnation?

If nothing else, the Word becoming flesh should teach us that our bodies are inherently good. And that God goes out of God's way to meet us in our bodies.

Or, as Davies put it in a *God is Grey* episode from 2018: “God does not hate us for our humanity (as we often do). And we were put on this earth to draw closer to the Divine.”

Amen.

Amy Hayes currently serves a Clemons Fellow with BNG. She is a master of divinity student at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology.

Related articles:

From purity pledges to the Equality Act: How evangelical concern about sex has shifted and what it has to do with creation | Analysis by Rick Pidcock

How the SBC employs the Sodom Strategy to avoid talking about real sexual abuse | Analysis by Amy Hayes

My journey through purity culture and Christian worship music | Analysis by Rick Pidcock

They grew up in purity culture, then taught it and now want to help others recover from it

OPINION: VIEWS EXPRESSED IN BAPTIST NEWS GLOBAL COLUMNS AND COMMENTARIES ARE SOLELY THOSE OF THE AUTHORS.

TAGS: Sexuality Sex purity culture deconstruction disembodiment Amy Hayes masturbation Brenda Marie Davies sexual integrity



MORE BY
AMY HAYES »

READ NEXT:

To imply that our public schools are centers of pornography and our educators purveyors of smut is a



devil's lie

OPINION CHARLES FOSTER JOHNSON

More Articles

ALL | NEWS | OPINION | CURATED



Tips for having a Thanksgiving Dinner conversation about immigrants without choking

NEWS JEFF BRUMLEY



'Please, think of the kittens' and other scary things I learned from purity culture

OPINION AMY HAYES



I didn't have to be here and other existential truths

OPINION BRETT YOUNGER



World magazine editor quits as Mohler takes lead on adding opinion content to a uniquely reporting-centric publication

ANALYSIS MARK WINGFIELD



The white evangelical war on truth

ANALYSIS JOEL BOWMAN SR.



In Brunswick, Ga., a storm is brewing

OPINION MAINA MWAURA



To imply that our public schools are centers of pornography and our educators purveyors of smut is a devil's lie

OPINION CHARLES FOSTER JOHNSON



The church cannot speak against sex trafficking until it admits its own abuse problems, author says

NEWS JEFF BRUMLEY



A conservative resurgence in U.S. Catholicism?

OPINION DAVID GUSHEE, SENIOR COLUMNIST



One of America's favorite Christian authors finally tells his own story

NEWS MAINA MWAURA



Putting the white in witness since the 1940s

ANALYSIS JACOB ALAN COOK



What do our actions since Jan. 6 say to the people who pledged their lives to support and defend the Constitution of the United States?

OPINION WENDELL GRIFFEN



Michael Flynn says America needs 'one religion under God'

NEWS BRAD BULL



7 dos and don'ts when considering the redevelopment of church property

OPINION RICK REINHARD



Ending capital punishment in Ohio should be a 'pro-life' ideal, evangelical speakers declare

NEWS JEFF BRUMLEY



On All Saints Day and Thanksgiving: 'Hey, ... me too!'

OPINION CHARLES QUALLS



Most comprehensive study yet of COVID's impact on churches finds uneven results

NEWS MARK WINGFIELD



The five pillars of conservative evangelical Calvinism that are incompatible with love

OPINION RICK PIDCOCK



Belief that America has divine favor with God is on the decline

NEWS JEFF BRUMLEY



How does the period before the Civil War resemble our current social climate?

ANALYSIS ANDREW GARDNER



10 things men can do to support women in the church

OPINION SUSAN M. SHAW, SENIOR COLUMNIST



Transitions for the week of 11-12-21

NEWS BARBARA FRANCIS



Women need more than your affirmation

OPINION LAURA ELLIS



After the storm, a lull of information from the SBC Executive Committee

NEWS MARK WINGFIELD



For Godself's sake, stop picking on the small church where Beth Allison Barr's husband serves as pastor

OPINION MARK WINGFIELD



CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER.

© 2021 BAPTIST NEWS GLOBAL. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Want to share a story? We hope you will! Read our republishing, terms of use and privacy policies [here](#).

