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GUARD YOUR HEART, “BY FORCE, IF NECESSARY”: FAITH, VIRGINITY, AND
SHAME IN THE EVANGELICAL PURITY MOVEMENT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Kelley Gillis
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Accepted by:
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Abstract

In the 1990s and 2000s, American evangelical church culture experienced a shift in its sex education methodology. Known as the purity movement, or purity culture, teachings about sex and dating became inextricably linked to fear and shame. Emerging from this movement in 1997 was a 21-year-old named Joshua Harris. According to Harris, it was not enough to declare a life of abstinence if true holiness were to be achieved. As he declared in his purity manifesto *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, one needed to completely renounce dating altogether. The book outlines what a pure life looks like for Christian youth with its many rules and accompanying hypothetical scenarios illustrating these rules as though they were parables of the New Testament. Rather than reiterating the message of his contemporaries that dating was to be done carefully, Harris declares that dating itself is the problem and goes so far as to present relationships as irremovable stains on the individual's heart. In 2004, Brian Dannelly's film *Saved!* portrays the same extreme culture surrounding sexuality and faith through archetypal characters and their varied experiences. Some of the teenagers are on the receiving end of shame, others are participating in cultivating a shame culture.

The film and Harris's book share a common thread in that both tell stories about the ethics of purity culture by incorporating its power to generate great shame. Sara Ahmed defines shame as a failure to adhere to the ideal behavior in the presence of a witness that is either a real or imaginary other. Within a Christian context, this shame is easy to generate; God is always watching, therefore the imagined (as in, not physically present) other is the most important other, the other that supposedly determined the ideal

in the first place. My project aims to answer the following: How did teenagers become so easy to mobilize as warriors in the purity movement? What brought Joshua Harris to write such an extremist text at the young age of 21? How does *Saved!* offer a different way to participate in the conversation around sexuality, particularly within a movement that eliminates LGBTQ+ people? What role does American identity play in purity culture, from the national sex education curriculum to the inseparable identities of “American” and “Christian”? How does the intensified responsibility placed on young women as opposed to young men enable a violent, patriarchal culture? Finally, has this movement ended, or has it simply found a new method of performance?

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I. Everyone's Not Doing It

“Like sleeping beauty, my prince will come for me
No more dating, I’m just waiting
‘Cause God is writing my love story”
—BarlowGirl, “Average Girl”

Wait for your prince, says BarlowGirl, a girl group that consisted of the Barlow sisters, one of many Christian artists at the time singing the same message: no more dating. The idea was that it was revolutionary to reject the ways of American culture in favor of God’s ways, and that meant dressing modestly, wearing a purity ring, and kissing dating goodbye. Before BarlowGirl released “Average Girl” on their debut self-titled album, another popular Christian band called Superchick wrote a song about the sisters after learning of their outspoken stance on sexual purity. The song, called “Barlow Girls,” praises the sisters for their refusal to “flaunt what the boys want” and says that “boys think they’re the bomb ’cause they remind them of their mom.” The song compares the sisters to the other girls around them who are “hooking up” and insisting that “it’s never popular to be pure,” but these girls are not like those girls. These girls do not date, and these girls remind boys of their mom—and that’s the bomb.

The culture of American evangelicalism in the 1990s and 2000s marked a shift toward a cooler version of Christianity so that teenagers would participate more enthusiastically. By mirroring the sounds and aesthetics of secular pop culture but with a faith-based message, American evangelicals showed their children that it can be cool to be a Christian and evangelize to their peers. Where secular media was characterized as having a laissez-faire attitude that told teenagers to do whatever they want, Christian

media told them to do what God wants. In order for teenagers to follow the ways of God and not the ways of the world, it was imperative that they maintain and promote a lifestyle of abstinence. Like BarlowGirl, other notable Christian artists and leaders spoke out against the modern dating culture in favor of traditional courtship. Where culture tells young people to hook up, Christian singer Rebecca St. James tells them that true love waits. Such leaders insisted that abstinence not only guaranteed young people satisfying marriages, it was also the will of God. “Only the pure may see His face. Only the pure may be vessels of His Holy Spirit” (Harris 108). This quotation is from the 1997 book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris, a classic text in the American evangelical church. The book would go on to sell over one million copies until its discontinuation in 2018. It was a popular youth group book club selection, a gift parents gave to their teenagers, and in the words of writer Elizabeth Esther, a “weapon” wielded against young people, both a threat of and a punishment for impurity. “Purity culture” is an umbrella term for the shared chastity rhetoric and sexual ethic created by the 1990s-2000s evangelical Christian abstinence movement that conflated one’s sexuality, personal morality, and relationship with God.

Due to increased rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases in the 1980s, the purity movement of the 1990s established itself within evangelical church culture and in American public schools by advocating for abstinence-only sex education. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, “abstinence only until marriage (AOUM) sex education was adopted by the U.S. government as a singular approach to adolescent sexual and reproductive health,” with funding still increasing for

AOUM sex education to this day. This 1996 welfare reform addendum came just three years after the formation of True Love Waits and one year after the founding of Silver Ring Thing, two evangelical abstinence programs that distributed abstinence literature and traveled the United States to give sermons, worship concerts, and collect signed chastity pledges from teenagers and young adults. On July 29, 1994, True Love Waits held a rally on the National Mall, calling for young Americans to sign purity pledge cards glued on small wooden stakes and hammer them into the grass. 210,000 pledges were collected, stating:

Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, those I date, my future mate and my future children to be sexually pure until the day I enter a covenant marriage relationship.

By signing this purity pledge, the individual is making a promise to the most important people in their life; it is no longer a commitment to the self and God, but the entire community in which they live. What distinguishes abstinence from purity culture is the progression of each movement. Abstinence as a movement progressed in public schools with government funding, where purity progressed by recruiting teenagers to declare it as their identity, morality, and spirituality. By making sexual purity an essential component of faith, evangelical teenagers were compelled to spread the purity gospel as they would the gospel of Christ. Staying pure until marriage became just as important to salvation as believing in God. Purity culture acknowledged even premarital desire for sexual activity as impure. A teaching that relies on the natural being unnatural teaches people to distrust their own bodies and in turn, distrust themselves.

In 2004, Heather Hendershot argued that evangelical media was created by American Christians to connect popular media to the evangelical church—for teenagers, Christian media provided an alternative to secular philosophies, particularly sexual ethics. Media certainly played an important role in the mobilization of the purity movement, but I am arguing that media commissioned by adults but made by young people resonated more with its audience, furthering the evolution of purity culture. *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* functioned within the purity movement as a manifesto reiterating distrust and shame, but due to his young age, Harris participated in a culture of purity peer pressure. Sara Moslener argued in 2015 that the politicization of abstinence in the American education system fostered a movement of pride, nationalism, and violence in purity rhetoric. The demonstrations at youth events documented in her book *Virgin Nation* exemplify the objectification of bodies as pure or impure objects. What I am arguing, however, is that the objectification of the bodies of young people is not just a political threat but a threat to their sense of belonging and community. In Brian Dannelly's 2004 film *Saved!*, Christian teenagers are categorized by one another, policing their own peers until they all come to individual realizations that the pressure of purity culture is too much to bear. Because parents, youth pastors, and other influential adults in the evangelical community encouraged the purity movement, young people like Joshua Harris and the teenagers in *Saved!* were given a sense of importance and validation when they advocated for accountability, making individual purity a requirement to stay in the evangelical community. When one's sense of belonging, security, and spirituality can be

taken away if their purity is violated, they will live in fear, creating a sense of shame that any compromising circumstance that could bring forth their exile.

Silver Ring Thing's methodology focused on radicalizing the individual on their own turf by traveling to different churches across the country and performing live events complete with music, sermons, and interactive audience participation sketches. Where True Love Waits called for legislative change and held events akin to political protests, Silver Ring Thing ingrained a sense of political fear into their audiences of young people, combining national pride with a sense of moral pride. At a live event documented by Sara Moslener in her book *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*, the following portion is part of song played along with a lyric video:

The world says use a condom
If we told you you'd be fine
We'd be lying to your face
It's like playing with a nuclear bomb
You could wipe out the whole human race (2)

If True Love Waits politicized abstinence in televised optics by collecting enough pledges to fill the National Mall, Silver Ring Thing aimed to radicalize abstinence as not only a Christian value, but a measure of protection against violence. By equating condoms and nuclear bombs, Silver Ring Thing conflated protected sex with war violence to its American audience, insinuating that protected sex is an act of violence. A good American Christian, then, does not wipe out the population by having nonprocreative sex; a good American Christian waits until marriage, has children, and does not act in a way that poses a nuclear threat to the self and others they care about. Having sex, even safe sex, is going against God, the self, the imagined future mate,

family, friends, and the community—being impure is a threat to a trusted and needed sense of community. In order to protect that community, these organizations seek to turn abstinence from a concept to a pursuit, a virtue to a mission. Christine J. Gardner states that this rhetorical shift tropes “the behavior of waiting [as] passive,” and therefore that the “shift from abstinence to purity provides a positive and active behavior for youth to pursue” (19). Not only does purity provide a set of actions and guidelines to ensure the maintenance of one’s own chastity, the communal acts of abstinence and purity campaigns create a structure of accountability amongst young people, a culture in which the peer pressure is to abstain from sex and outwardly promote a lifestyle of purity.

II. Imagine Your Wedding Day

In the form of pledges, songs, and chants, the purity script was given to young people to repeat to other young people—friends, classmates, dates, siblings—to foster within the evangelical community a shared enthusiasm for chastity. In 1997, purity advocate Joshua Harris published his bestselling manifesto *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* at just twenty-one years old, claiming that in order to eliminate sexual temptation, dating must be eliminated. Despite his little dating relationship experience, no sexual experience, and a homeschooled education by his evangelical family, Harris believed that he had found the solution: to kiss dating goodbye until marriage, replacing it with courtship, a practice in which two young people decide to move from friendship to engagement after praying and consulting their parents. The book opens with a story of a young couple on their wedding day. After they join hands at the altar, the story takes a turn:

As the minister began to lead Anna and David through their vows, the unthinkable happened. A girl stood up in the middle of the congregation, walked quietly to the altar, and took David's other hand. Another girl approached and stood next to the first, followed by another. Soon, a chain of six girls stood by him as he repeated his vows to Anna.

Anna felt her lip beginning to quiver as tears welled up in her eyes. "Is this some kind of joke?" she whispered to David.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Anna," he said, staring at the floor.

"Who are these girls, David, What is going on?" she gasped.

"They're girls from my past," he answered sadly. "Anna, they don't mean anything to me now...but I've given part of my heart to each of them."

"I thought your heart was mine," she said.

"It is, it is," he pleaded. Everything that's left is yours." (14-15)

The story, it turns out, is a nightmare—Anna, a supposedly real person, wrote her nightmare in a letter to Harris, claiming she felt betrayed and sick. "How many men

could line up next to me on my wedding day? How many times have I given my heart away in short term relationships? Will I have anything left to give to my husband?" Anna asks, noting the incompleteness of David's heart and questioning the fragmentation of her own. In her nightmare, she asks if the women joining David are "some kind of joke," and through hurt and disappointment, reveals the true source of her incredulity: "I thought your heart was mine." This parable is an extension of the True Love Waits pledge—David's failure to stay pure has broken a promise to his future mate, which catches up to him as the women join him at the altar one by one. It is not specified that David had sexual relationships with these women, only that he had given parts of his heart to each of them. Once given, he cannot get them back; he cannot have his whole heart anymore, disqualifying him from giving it in marriage. David's heart, and therefore David, is broken.

Anna's letter is the first of many parables in the book used to teach a lesson about purity, followed by Anna's own fear of how many men might join her marriage one day. Harris questions his own potential group of women, considering a few relationships he "can only look back on in regret...I know God has forgiven me because I've asked him to...But I still feel the ache of having given my heart away to too many girls in my past" (cite). Harris's experiences and the parable of Anna and David are the first of many examples of purity culture eliminating the alternative—despite insisting that Harris, Anna, and David have given their hearts away, Harris does not consider the possibility of a relationship that does not result in marriage in which the heart is kept intact. Moreover, the heart in this parable is considered a thing, a piece of a person that is not ever fully

their own. The objectification of the heart is a tenant of purity culture, as is a lack of ownership of the body. In Chapter 6: The Direction of Purity, Harris distinguishes who has and does not have the right to their partner's body: "A husband and wife may enjoy each other's bodies because they in essence belong to each other. But if you're not married to someone, you have no claim on that person's body, no right to sexual intimacy" (100). The purity movement, then, is not one that encourages chastity on the basis of self-preservation and self-respect but rather respecting property that belongs to someone else. Damage to both the heart and body is damage made not primarily to the self, but to the future owner.

Similar stories used throughout the book, varying in content but all sharing the same ending, are fear-based tactics designed to instill in the individual a fear of sex. The purity movement depends on fear—fear of failure, fear of becoming damaged, fear of betraying God and others—creating a culture that without fear, cannot exist. Sara Ahmed refers to this kind of culture as "the economy of fear," stating that it "works to contain the bodies of others, a containment whose 'success' relies on its failure, as it must keep open the very grounds of fear" (67). Harris's contradictory rules add to the ways in which young people can fail, adding more ways one can become afraid of their own feelings and desires. Premarital emotional intimacy and romance are considered by Harris to be direct violations of purity, stating that "intimacy without commitment is defrauding" (34). Yet when he introduces courtship as the correct model, he states that "purposeful intimacy" is required before engagement (224). Jessica, the protagonist of a parable in Chapter 10: Guard Your Heart, went into her Christian college with a mindset that she would not

date. She had a list of rules about dating and courtship, she mocked her friends with “pointless relationships,” and told any guy that he “would first have to talk to her parents” before considering her for courtship (146). Jessica’s principles mirror the thesis of Harris’s manifesto, but she still manages to fail because her rules “were just rules—they hadn’t come to life in her heart” (147). Even the rule-following Jessica falls short of succeeding in her purity because she starts having crushes on the guys in her classes. “Her standards and rules seemed worthless,” Harris writes after admonishing Jessica for considering if any of the young men around her might be the one for her (148). Ahmed defines shame as “exposing to myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other,” stating that “we feel shame because we failed to approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love” (106). The individual would, then, feel shame if they failed to avoid romantic desire in the gaze of the ideal other, real or imagined. For evangelical Christians who believe that God is always watching, fear creates a constant state of performing in the gaze of the ideal other, as God is considered the ultimate ideal other. The imagined other, for example, is the youth pastor, parents, or Christian friends. The individual would be ashamed if the imagined other witnessed them having sex, kissing, dating, or even considering sex, kissing, or dating. If the failure has occurred, shame is experienced as God is witness to this failure; paranoia is the shape that impending shame of being found out by ideal others takes. When *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* became the new ideal, Joshua Harris became another ideal other to perform before. By eliminating dating and even crushes, as Harris cites them as dangerous, there are very few actions and feelings toward the opposite sex teenagers can experience

without feeling fearful of potential failure. What's more, there are more opportunities to fail according to Harris's manifesto than there are to succeed, resulting in shame becoming a familiar response to actions, impulses, and desires.

There are, then, many ways a young Christian can fail in their purity. In Chapter 3: 5 Attitude Changes to Help You Avoid Defective Dating, a girl named Bethany is used as an example of how flirting is defective. She is described as a "flirt," a "fake," and "invests more energy in getting a guy to like her than she does in spurring him toward godliness" (46). It is not explicitly stated what actions Bethany performs to have this reputation, or why she might behave the way she does other than "selfishness." Bethany is one of many female characters throughout that are characterized as flighty, selfish, and inconsiderate—this portrayal determines their failures not as actions but as personality traits that are inherently causing them to fail. Harris suggests that "Instead of viewing herself as the center of the universe with other people revolving around her, she can begin to look for ways to bless others" (46). There is no perspective on Bethany's end that tells the audience what her inner life and reasoning is like, yet Harris considers her flirtatiousness a symptom of selfishness without explaining why flirting is selfish at all. In the same chapter, Sarah and Philip are high schoolers in a serious relationship who "might as well be married," as they "monopolize each other's weekends, drive each other's cars, and know each other's families as well as their own" (49). Harris believes that they are "playing marriage" and that you "cannot 'own' someone outside of marriage" (49). The idea of "owning" someone at all traces back to what Anna said to David in her dream: "I thought your heart was mine." Throughout the book, Harris

objectifies the premarital heart, claiming that it belongs to God and the individual's parents, but never the individual themselves. The heart is the site of damage resulting from the actions of the body—conflating the heart and the body communicates that the two are interchangeable, therefore neither heart nor body belongs to the individual in the purity model. Not only is Harris's idea rescinding the individual's autonomy, it raises the stakes for any damage done to the heart and body—the individual is damaging something that does not belong to them, wronging another, and thus should feel ashamed.

Shame does not, by Ahmed's definition, require a tangible consequence—the feeling of shame is, itself, the consequence. The “other” in this instance is always both real and imagined to the individual, and there are multiple real and imagined others to bear witness. Performing according to the ideal of purity is not limited to abstaining from premarital sex—Harris's book is both a manifesto and a warning, containing all the ways a young person can fail to live a pure life and considering each action a failure to be pure, despite actions being of varying severity from having a crush to having sex. The other, then, includes Harris among the imagined, as the rules are his interpretation of a Biblical and cultural morality. The real other is any person bearing physical witness to the failure in question—the romantic or sexual partner of the individual, a friend, parents, and strangers are of the many that fall into this category—and in order to cause shame, the actor must hold the perception that the observing other holds the same moral code, thus viewing the actor as failing to uphold their shared code. Likewise, those mentioned in the True Love Waits pledge are ever-present others; because the actor pledged to stay pure to their parents, future mate, future children, friends, and God, each failure is an affront to

those pledged. Failure is not limited to actions of sexual impurity but also breaking promises and disappointing loved ones. Moreover, God operates as both real and imagined in the sense that the actor believes God is real and omnipresent but not a visible body—therefore, to feel ashamed of their performance, the actor believes that God is physically witnessing their actions while they imagine God’s presence. Because shame requires the real or imagined audience, Christian teenagers will always have an audience for their failures in the form of the most important audience member—as belief in God means God is always watching, every action has an audience, making shame unavoidable.

It often falls on girls to prevent boys from experiencing temptation, as Harris believes that “girls do not struggle with sexual temptation” (105). Protecting girls’ purity is what Harris determines to be boys’ responsibility, avoiding tempting them with romance and emotional connection. Modesty is only a girl’s responsibility because boys cannot help but look at a girl’s body if it is attractive. Boys are characterized as “visual creatures” and “slaves to depravity,” which is why girls must cover themselves and wear loose-fitting clothing. Where boys must control their wandering eyes, it is a girl’s duty to give them nothing to look at. “Yes, guys are responsible for maintaining self-control, but you can help by refusing to wear clothing designed to attract attention to your body,” Harris writes. “It’s time to start seeing other people’s purity as our responsibility” (107). Rather than just instructing his fellow men to have self-control regardless of what others wear—after all, not every woman they see is a Christian woman aiming to be modest—he instructs young women that their dress code could be causing men to stumble. This

sentiment, while being patriarchal, reinforces rape culture language towards young women, similar to rape accusations being met with, “*Well, what was she wearing?*” Because girls are acknowledged more for their romantic longings, there is no instruction for boys to dress modestly as a favor to girls. Harris only acknowledges girls’ desires as desires for romance and weddings, suggesting that girls “should stop reading romance novels and watching soap operas because they encourage ungodly longings within you” (125). Even girls who are characterized as temptresses in the book are not doing so in a sexual manner—they only wish to flirt, manipulate, and romance boys. This belief is often what leads to sexual disorders in married Christian women; because they have never been allowed to acknowledge themselves sexually and only received abstinence education, they often do not recognize that something is wrong once they are married and feel ashamed of themselves for being unable to please their husbands.

Shame, like trauma, can live in the body. Dr. Tina Sellers, a sex therapist and professor focused on religious sexual trauma, defines sexual shame as “a visceral feeling of humiliation and disgust toward one’s own body and identity as a sexual being and a belief of being abnormal, inferior and unworthy” (Sellers 2020). When I reached out to Dr. Sellers and asked how shame lives in the body, she cited Dr. Noel Clark’s 2017 research on sexual disorders resulting from religious trauma. Dr. Clark states:

We have seen an inordinate amount of women with pelvic floor disorders and men with erectile disorders in their twenties who have come out of conservative purity culture communities and homes. They manifest symptoms of someone who has experienced severe sexual trauma. The body keeps score (Clark 2017).

It is all too common, in fact, for evangelicals to experience physical responses to sexual shame. For women, a common physiological result is vaginismus, a condition of

“complete inability to have intercourse, resulting from a limbic system response toward penetration, a protection mechanism that signals to the body to brace and protect against potential harm” (Hope & Her 2019). It is often caused by trauma, anxiety, sexual abuse, and issues with sexual partners, commonly as a result of religious sexual trauma. In Dr. Sellers’ graduate family therapy course, her students are required to write their sexual autobiography. Far too often, women raised in the evangelical church report in their autobiography feelings of embarrassment, fear, and pain due to their inability to have sex, even with their husbands. One student wrote that she felt like a “freak” for being unable to have sex. She and her husband had done everything right—she had not dated anyone until she met her husband, followed Harris’s model of courtship, and had “accountability partners to help them with their sexual desire during their courtship,” and yet she still felt fear and pain three years into their marriage (Sellers 2019).

Stories like these contradict the main promise of the purity movement, as well as *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*: a successful and happy marriage. Harris urges his readers to not “allow impatience now to rob you of an undefiled, passionate sexual relationship in marriage” (244). In the epilogue, he states that “Someday I’ll have a [love] story to tell. So will you” (252). This is a common sentiment in purity culture: mistakes now lead to an unhappy and unsuccessful marriage, but purity now leads to a happy, sexy, and successful marriage. This promise is similar to the prosperity gospel—teachings that promise congregants that pleasing God will result in financial and material prosperity—in that Harris, *True Love Waits*, and *Silver Ring Thing* promise a prosperous sexual life in covenant marriage in exchange for a life committed to purity. In an interview with NPR,

author Linda Kay Klein breaks down how the logic of the sexual prosperity gospel affects sexual dysfunction:

“If A, then B,” is what we’re taught... The reality that I’ve learned from my interviews in particular is that, “If A, then A.” If you learn to shut down your sexuality, if you learn to train your body to experience shame to protect you from the consequences of your sexuality, in your community, “then A”—after you get married you often still struggle with turning your sexuality on. (Gross & Klein 2018)

Purity, then, is a bargain struck with God—as long as the individual does everything right, everything they are avoiding will be their reward. While this is the encouraging factor for teenagers to participate in purity culture, it is also a source of trauma later on when the promise is left unfulfilled. Those who are unhappy in their marriages may wonder where they failed, and those who are still single long after their peers may feel frustration or resentment—if they held up their end of the deal, why didn’t God? When the women joined David at the altar on their wedding day, Anna asks if it is some kind of joke—she did everything right, yet she is being plagued with the women of David’s past, who now own pieces of his fragmented heart, now unable to be hers. If she kept her heart pure, she is on the receiving end of the unfair bargain.

There is no explanation of *how* these women will join David in his marriage, or why, only that they *do*. Harris continually uses the idiom of giving the heart away—each time he or any speaker in the purity movement uses this idiom, there is never any indication that the action of giving away the heart is inseparable from dating and sexual activity. Sara Moslener describes a live Silver Ring Thing event in which a young man from the audience is given a wooden board with a heart while three young women from the audience stand on stage with him. After placing the board in a vise, the event speaker

Matt Webster goes backstage and returns with a chainsaw in which he hacks the board to bits. “Matt explains once again that due to the young man’s intimate relationships with each of these young women, they will now carry a piece of him for the rest of their lives,” Moslener states. As Webster gives the rest of the hacked board to the young man, he says, ““This is what you will take with you when you get married”” (122). Webster then promises to give young people “the chance to start over” and that he is “gonna give you a whole new heart,” calling them to remake their souls, once again not specifying how the soul can fracture and congeal (122). This form of the altar call “offers both personal salvation and sexual purification,” as if the individual were not only renewing their purity but their faith as well. This is the caveat to the fragmented heart: a Christian who has premarital sex is no longer whole, unless they ask God to be made whole again. Once again, as the heart is portrayed as a breakable and damageable object, the heart and body are objects of currency—only the pure and whole body and heart can be exchanged for a successful marriage and favor from God.

III. *Saved!* and Archetypal Evangelical Teenagers

How does God remake the heart after one has had sex? Does this, in turn, remove the shame felt by the individual who has failed? Ahmed writes of shame being restorative “only when the shamed other can ‘show’ that its failure to measure up to a social ideal is temporary.” In purity culture, the altar call offers confirmation that the shame is temporary as long as admission of guilt occurs, and as Ahmed states, “allowing us to re-enter the family or community” (107). During a scene in Brian Dannelly’s 2004 film *Saved!*, a film set in a Christian high school called American Eagle, the pastor who is also the principal holds an assembly calling for anyone who has “backslid” over the summer to come to the stage and “rededicate” their lives at the end. Pastor Skip provides a literal stage on which to perform failure—while it appears to be the students reentering the community and family, it exponentially increases the gaze of the ideal other, increasing felt shame. The shame felt in the altar call can be defined by Ahmed as “the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence,” as “backsliding” means that the students have failed to uphold the script of normative purity (107). The altar call was often the finale at Silver Ring Thing events and the True Love Waits pledge signings. It is a way for individuals to publicly pronounce their shame while the leaders publicly forgive their failures, framed as an action of love—the reentry to the community in this way shows that the community offers love but only to those who perform the script by asking for that love while denouncing themselves and their misdeeds.

Early in the film, protagonist Mary and her best friend Hilary Faye practice target shooting at the local range called Emmanuel Shooting Range: An Eye for an Eye.

“Christian girls have got to know how to protect themselves,” she tells Mary in between shots. “I mean, sure, Jesus could restore my physical and spiritual virginity, especially if I lost it to some rapist, but who wants that? I’m saving myself for marriage, and I’ll use force if necessary.” While to anyone outside of evangelical culture might think it absurd, Hilary Faye’s idea of the virginal heart was a popular altar calling for Silver Ring Thing events. “With sex as a sin and purity as salvation, audiences are offered the gift of new birth,” writes Sara Moslener, describing virginity renewal as a “narrative formula of conversion testimony” (124). After Mary’s perfect Christian boyfriend Dean tells her that he’s gay, Mary hits her head and has a vision of Jesus telling her to do everything she can to help fix his “spiritually toxic affliction.” After what she was told by Hilary Faye, Mary decides to have sex with Dean, believing that she is doing this to save him, as Jesus asked of her. Not long after, Dean is sent to conversion therapy and Mary discovers she’s pregnant. Despite praying for her virginity to be restored, Mary is still unsure—during the altar call, she remains seated and asks God, “You did restore me, right?” While Mary lacks certainty that God restored her virginity, she maintains hope that it is possible; even though she believes she had sex with Dean to save him, she also believes in the importance of virginity enough to want to keep it rather than donate it to a worthy cause. She is unsure if she should feel shame because she is unsure if she is still measuring up to the ideal—if virginity restoration, let alone virginity itself, is not real and Hilary Faye was wrong, Mary has failed God, herself, and Dean. This failure is not only followed by consequential shame but disqualification from a godly marriage. In the epilogue of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Harris asks his readers what their love story will look like: “Will

it be a story of purity, faith, and selfless love? Or will it be a story of impatience, selfishness, and compromise?" (252). Once Mary discovers that she's pregnant, the option to keep her attempt to save Dean between them and God dissipates. Mary's pregnancy will be the evidence that she failed to "guard her heart," that she was impatient, selfish, and compromised.

During a comical scene in a sex education class that came about after "a threatening letter from the State Board of Education," students are simply told not to have sex by a clearly uncomfortable teacher. He tells them not to "get jiggy with it" until they are married and that sex is for populating the planet. On the projector screen is two naked bodies, male and female, without genitals or nipples, resembling Barbie dolls. Mary asks if there can ever be an exception to abstinence. "Is it possible Jesus might need us to do his will by not waiting?" she asks, met with laughter from her classmates and her teacher. Hilary Faye looks at Mary and says, in a warning tone, "Of course he wants us to wait," leaving Mary embarrassed and ashamed. Like the health teacher, Harris depicts any premarital sexual activity as "violating each other's purity" and filled with "the poison of self-love," insisting that "God's true love pretty much nullifies dating as we know it" (70). What complicates the script is that Mary believed that having sex with Dean was what God wanted—she did not do it for her own pleasure or needs, and was heartbroken that he was sent to Mercy House despite her efforts to do what she believed was God's will.

If Harris teaches in the style of parables, Dannelly teaches in the style of a morality play, setting the stage of a teen romantic comedy with archetypal characters.

Mary is the good Christian girl who wants to do what's right until she realizes something in her world is not right, but no one will answer her questions. After speaking up one too many times and befriending the school's outcasts—Cass, the only Jewish student; and Roland, Hilary Faye's disabled brother—she becomes the film's fallen hero. Hilary Faye, Christian school queen bee and lead singer of the Christian Jewels, is the cool, righteous girl, loved by all adults and feared by her peers. When she raises her hands in worship, her classmates mimic her movements almost exactly. She's even portrayed by Mandy Moore, who audiences at the time would know from her role as pastor's daughter Jamie Sullivan in *A Walk to Remember*, a film that was popular among Christian audiences for its overtly Christian love story. Hilary Faye is both the popular girl and the warden, deciding who gets to be in her clique and who gets kicked out based on their faith. Pastor Skip calls on her to be a “warrior out there on the front lines for Jesus,” asking her to paint a statue of a white Jesus to stand in front of the school as well as perform an exorcism on Mary. She is adored by adults because she does the work of keeping her classmates in line by any means necessary, all while maintaining her self-proclaimed kindness despite treating her wheelchair-bound brother Roland like a chore. She drives a wheelchair-accessible van when she “could have had a Lexus,” prompting her friends to admire her selflessness, a trait Harris claimed that the flirtatious Bethany lacked in his book.

By the 2000s, evangelicals had created a pop culture empire of Christian music, movies, books, and literature. Often mirroring the sounds and aesthetics of secular pop culture, parents and youth pastors presented to teenagers faith-based alternatives to

popular media to make Christianity seem cool. Where the secular world had *Seventeen* magazine, the Christian world had Focus on the Family's *Brio* magazine. For every popular secular band, there was a Christian equivalent. Instead of A*Teens, there was Jump5; Jennifer Knapp was the Christian version of the Indigo Girls. Hilary Faye calls a fictitious Christian rock band on the radio "totally God-centric *and* gorgeous," and even later books them to perform at the prom. She's the conductor of the Christian pop culture current by being both the girl who has "a spiritual solution for every problem," as Mary describes her, while knowing all the latest trends and Christian bands. Following the mean girl trope, she provides the moments of contention and embarrassment for others, but her method is enforcing the rules for a holy cause rather than making fun of others. During a prayer circle at her house, she outs Dean to everyone under the guise of praying for his sins. After Mary is kicked out of the Christian Jewels, Hilary Faye kidnaps and tries to exorcise her, and ends her arc of the film with the Christian version of the "mean girl hissy fit at prom" trope, but not quite. When Pastor Skip is the one to escort her out of the prom, she is overcome with rage, yelling, "I was just doing this because Jesus told me to, He did!" While driving her van into the giant white Jesus statue she painted herself, she vents her frustrations—"Save the heathens, Hilary Faye, be a warrior, Hilary Faye, sacrifice everything, Hilary Faye!" she yells. She has done everything right, so why is she losing? Where is the validation that should come with following the rules and being a warrior? By driving straight into the white Jesus that she created, commissioned by her Christian school, she destroys the very totem she put in front of herself at the behest of her pastor and her peers. Hilary Faye is right; she did everything according to

the script. When she looks at Roland and asks, in complete earnest, “Do you think Jesus still loves me?” it becomes apparent that her outburst—one of several in the film—is not because she has “lost,” but because she is at a loss for understanding. This final act of aggression becomes one against herself and Jesus, who up until this point, is the reason for all her actions. Like Mary, Hilary Faye truly believed she was just doing God’s will.

Mary and Hilary Faye are both just trying to do the right thing from opposite sides of the battle. In an act of aggressive desperation, Hilary Faye kidnaps Mary on Halloween to perform an exorcism on her. Earlier that day, Pastor Skip had asked Hilary Faye to do something about Mary, telling her that he needs her “to be a warrior out there on the front lines for Jesus,” and that he “needs someone who’s spiritually armed to help guide her back to her faith,” prompting Hilary Faye and the Christian Jewels to grab Mary, hold her down in the van, and try to exorcise her as an act of love. When she escapes, Mary tells her that she doesn’t know the first thing about love, and turns to walk away only to be hit in the back by Hilary Faye’s Bible as she yells, “I am *filled* with Christ’s love! You are just jealous of my success in the Lord!” Mary picks up the Bible off the ground and hands it back to her, saying, “*this* is not a weapon, you idiot.” While Mary is the victim of Hilary Faye and her friends, Hilary Faye is, herself, used as a weapon by their pastor. Because the mean girl in teen movies usually has low self-esteem as the cause of her bullying, *Saved!* presents a bully whose desire for control is not manifested solely in humiliating others but pleasing the adults who act as moral authority figures, being admired by her peers, and doing what she thinks God wants her to do.

What Mary and Hilary Faye both experience is the revelation that doing everything right might not be possible. When Hilary Faye believes that Cass and Mary need to be removed from their Christian school, she frames them for vandalizing the campus; the stunt follows the structure of a mean girl story arc, but Hilary Faye does believe that she is being a warrior, fighting to maintain order in her world. When the adults in her life, particularly Pastor Skip, encourage her to extremism and treat it like wisdom, she only gets more extreme. She is doing everything to maintain approval and, in turn, her place in the community. Because she is supposed to be the warrior on the front lines, she cannot afford to fail. Mary's failure also comes at the cost of doing what she believes is God's will, yet her failure removes her from her place in the community. Her refusal to let Hilary Faye exorcise her confirms her excommunication. For both, the consequence of straying from the script is their comfortable place in their community.

Heather Hendershot explains why young people fight to keep that place:

Given the torturous isolation and feelings of helplessness and despair that many teenagers endure, it is not difficult to see why an ordered belief system and a community of fellow believers would be appealing. The evangelical belief system, which to outsiders may seem to be all rules and prohibition, offers structure, stability, and community to youth. (102-3)

In both *Saved!* and *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, families are seen as the primary source of spiritual connection. Roland only admits to Cass that he's not a Christian, and Harris instructs young men to get permission from the father and mother before courting a girl, assuming she has a Christian family or even a decent relationship with her parents. This further solidifies teenagers' will to be part of this community—if they aren't, where else can they go?

The prom scene gathers those who are not supposed to be there. Mary, nine months pregnant, sees that Dean and the kids from Mercy House, including his roommate-turned-boyfriend, broke out to go to the prom. As Pastor Skip asks them to leave, Dean says, “We’ve been kicked out of our homes and our schools, and now we’re going to be kicked out of Mercy House. There’s nowhere left for us to go.” Even as Pastor Skip quietly warns them about there being “no room for moral ambiguity” and that “the Bible is very clear about this,” they refuse to leave. While looking him in the eye, Dean declares: “I know in my heart that Jesus still loves me.” Rather than choosing Christianity or his sexuality, Dean rejects that he has to decide; he insists that whether or not people can deal with it, he is still here, refusing to be turned away. He is still here because he knows that Jesus still loves him. In this, *Saved!* is a film ahead of its time by offering a way to make space for those pushed out—the LGBTQ+ individuals, the pregnant teenagers, the disabled, the heathens—and make room for them at the table. In other words, the film refuses to consider fundamentalism and rejecting the faith entirely as the only options for those who fail.

IV. What About Us? The Rejects, Failures, and #ChurchToo Movement

The purity movement, on the other hand, often does not acknowledge the alternatives—Harris never considers that a Christian can stay a Christian without following the courtship model of marriage, True Love Waits incorporates every relationship a person could have to their purity pledge—muddying the waters for Christians who have already failed in purity or Christians who are unsure that courtship is the ideal. In Chapter 15: Principled Romance, Harris introduces the model of courtship, a replacement for dating that results in marriage. The parable of courtship stars Jason and Shelly, two friends who become engaged without dating. The two met in a college Bible study. Jason observes Shelly without asking her out and discovers that she is the ideal Christian girl. Shelly is “quiet,” always serving at church in the nursery, and “in the college group, many girls sought out Shelly for advice” (223). Jason is Shelly’s perfect Christian guy, and she is “impressed with his authentic relationship with God” and she “liked the fact that they could relate to each other as brother and sister” (223). But where do they go from there, if dating is problematic? While Harris states that “the Bible doesn’t provide a one-size-fits-all program for moving from friendship to marriage,” he gives one anyway. While he is correct—the Bible does not give a model for moving from friendship to marriage—the Bible also does not depict friendship between the opposite sex leading to marriage, either. Harris equates dating relationships that do not result in marriage to wrecking a car, stating that “you would be responsible for the life of the person strapped in the seat next to you” as though the relationship can only end in damage (225). This is stage one of courtship: be responsible and do not wreck the car.

Shelly and Jason become friends, entering stage two: forming a deeper friendship, but without emotions. “Remember, as soon as we unleash our emotions in romantic love, our objectivity begins to fade,” Harris warns his readers (229). Stage three is to “watch, wait, and pray,” a rule that is followed by a montage of Shelly and Jason talking to their parents and writing letters to family members seeking advice. Stage three ends in defining the relationship, or pursuing marriage. This is followed by the man asking the woman’s parents for permission to marry her—“A young man ought to show respect for the person responsible for the girl” (237). This models a patriarchal standard of belonging; the girl is not instructed to seek permission from the man’s parents to marry him, and the girl is presumably old enough to marry yet not old enough to not be called “the girl” and not to be considered responsible for herself. Once permission is granted, “you have no reason to delay getting engaged and planning your wedding” (242). This model of courtship became the new standard for purity, calling for people to truly eliminate dating and marry based on friendship, group dates, and conversations with parents. Courtship promises the “undefiled, passionate sexual relationship in marriage” that the purity movement promised, and young people bought into it. They signed the pledges, they wore silver rings on their left hands, they waited, and they told others to wait, too.

For some, the promise was fulfilled. There are numerous positive reviews of the book on Goodreads and Amazon to this day, even having a 77% 5-star rating on Amazon. One anonymous reviewer writes, “This book is worth a read if you struggle with selfishness, vanity, and worldliness.” Several evangelical Christians still recommend the

book as an alternative to hookup culture for teenagers. Not everyone can say the same. In a round table discussion posted by The Toast between women who read the book as teenagers, an anonymous woman who goes by Sarah says:

IKDG is revealing a method that cedes self-autonomy for what God and your parents want...it makes me angry at how dating or relationships without marriage as a pre-determined point, let alone sex or any kind of physical affection, were robbed of any joy for me. It's like a low level noise of distrust and anxiety that some would probably call the conviction of the Holy Spirit. I once called it that, but no more.

Sarah is one of many who grew to distrust her body and desires by following these teachings, and though not all, most that share similar stories are women. Because the fear of failure was taught to girls differently than boys, shame manifests differently for women raised in purity culture. Elizabeth Esther posted to Twitter that the book was “used against [her] like a weapon.” Like Dr. Sellers’ graduate student suffering from vaginismus, some shame stories have painful consequences. In 2018, a story in *The New Yorker* called “Silence is Not Spiritual: The Evangelical #MeToo Movement” highlighted a social media movement known as #ChurchToo, a protest movement to call attention to sexual abuse in the evangelical church. The movement gained traction when abuse survivors began to publicly tell their stories of the church refusing to help them in the name of evangelical values like wives’ duty to “submit” to their husbands and women having a responsibility to manage men’s behavior:

In April [2018], the movement erupted in the Southern Baptist church, when eighteen-year-old recordings emerged of Paige Patterson, the president of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, counselling an abuse victim. Patterson told her to submit to her husband, and to pray for him at night. “Get ready, because he might get a little more violent,” he said. (cite)

Stories began pouring out—everything from marital abuse to sexual abuse within the church spread with the hashtag. The anonymous woman was given advice many others were given, because the purity movement was not limited to instructing unmarried Christians how to stay pure for their future spouse. The false promise of the perfect, loving, sexually gratifying spouse instills a new fear for the victim—a fear that somewhere along the way, they messed up and God must be punishing them. A fear that somehow, they deserved this.

Though movements like #ChurchToo and authors like Linda Kay Klein, Jamie Lee Finch, and Nadia Bolz-Weber bringing the conversation around sexual shame within evangelical culture to the surface, a name has been given to the familiar face of abstinence—when people claim it as “purity culture,” the power in naming allows a space for criticism. But is this movement in the past? Has the evangelical church moved beyond the patriarchal structure of the shame-based purity movement? Has Joshua Harris? In 2018, Harris began responding to his critics on Twitter. To some, he apologized and would later reach out to them when making a documentary called *I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. In the documentary, Harris admits that he feels differently about his book now than when he wrote it and had no idea how much its influence would hurt people. He even spoke with Elizabeth Esther in the documentary after their public exchange on Twitter where she told him that his book was “used like a weapon” against her and others. The documentary focused on Harris as he reconsidered the work and less on the survivors of the purity movement, despite the title’s suggestion to the contrary.

Esther herself regretted her participation in the documentary, sharing to her Twitter followers in a thread:

My takeaway is that nothing has changed for Josh Harris. He still believes the same things. He just doesn't like how he said it in a book he wrote. He's sorry he hurt people. But not enough to do the actual hard work of making amends. Instead, he made a movie centering...himself...The entire angle of the documentary seems to be: "I had good intentions. I need you to know how good my intentions were!" As if that heals the wounds. As if all we really needed in order to heal from purity culture was to *understand* HIM better (@elizabethesther).

In the summer of 2019, Joshua Harris announced that he was no longer a Christian. He is getting a divorce from his wife, whom he wrote a successful courtship book about following *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* called *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship*. In an Instagram caption, Harris stated that he experienced "a massive shift" in his faith, and that "by all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian" (@harrisjosh). But there is not any certainty what this means for those shamed by the purity movement, as Esther states, "as if that heals the wounds." It does, however, beg the question—if the man who became one of the many faces of the purity movement comes to denounce it over two decades later, ceasing publication of his books and no longer calling himself a Christian, is there a way to rhetorically engage with the purity movement in a way that cares for those hurt and appeases its most ardent supporters? When confronting Pastor Skip at the prom, Mary says that "it's just all too much to live up to; no one fits in 100% of the time, not even you." This sentiment is echoed by Esther, as well as many others, who eventually had to examine the shame ingrained in them by purity culture and teachers like Harris. It's just all too much to live up to.

Perhaps the most effective tactic of the purity movement was its infectious zeal for the young people participating in it; for teenagers who crave structure and approval, wearing the silver ring and kissing dating goodbye granted them just that. Hilary Faye got to be the pastor's favorite as long as she brought Mary back to the faith, by any means necessary. Those who devoured Harris's words and followed them like the Bible were given the structure they craved. Because of the validation it provided teenagers who wanted control, it propelled their enthusiasm for the lifestyle of purity enough to mobilize their efforts to spread the purity gospel to their peers. They can sign their pledges with pride, believing that they are pleasing God by fighting in the purity battle, being warriors on the front lines for Jesus. For others, a sort of purity peer pressure moved their pens across the pledge; surely their friends are right about this. Some grow up, get married, and stop thinking much of purity and waiting after exchanging their silver ring for a wedding band. Others are left with the nightmare of being joined at the altar by their mistakes with nothing but a fractured heart and used body to give.

Shame is, itself, the consequence of purity culture, but is it a lasting consequence? Is there a cure or a remedy? Ahmed states that "the difficulty of moving beyond shame is a sign of the power of the normative"—how does purity culture have such power, even over those who have left the church entirely? Because purity relies on one's standing with God and impurity is a direct insult to God, the power of the normative in purity culture is the power that it has to relate individual sexuality to the state of their soul, their place in their community, and the ownership, or lack thereof, of their body. In teaching that a lack of sexual purity affects one's place within their church community, a community that has

always loved them and promised to care for them, the fear of failure is a fear of being kicked out of their home. Instilling this fear in teenagers, who rely on their communities more than ever, creates a movement of shame that is based on a threat of life or death: stay pure or fend for yourself. Keep your body pure, or no one will want it. Don't give your heart away, or you won't have it for your future spouse. If moving beyond shame is difficult because of the power of the normative, then the normative must lose its power. To move beyond sexual shame, purity must lose its power.

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