Westmont College

Romantic Relationships in the Evangelical Mind:

A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Christian Dating Books

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Introduction

Within the auditorium, hundreds of Christian young adults gather for their weekly service. As friend greets friend, laughter and chatter abound, and quick greetings interrupt a few deeper conversations. Amidst the noise, one college-age man says to another, "I just feel like I'm ready for my season of singleness to be over, you know?" Nearby, a young woman sighs to her sister, murmuring, "I just wish he would stop playing around and take me seriously." Comments such as these may seem personal or even trivial, pertaining only to the individuals who speak them, but their expression in fact serves to reinforce shared understandings in the wider community. In particular, such comments contribute to conceptions of love, dating, and relationships within evangelical Christianity. These conceptions are expressed, reinforced, and internalized in realms of discourse including sermons, Bible studies, conversations, magazines, and books, constructing understandings of romantic relationships in evangelical minds that are shared by other members of the community.

In American Christian communities, particularly ones characterized by evangelicalism, a pervasive construction of dating, sexuality, and relationships called purity culture emerged by the 1990s. This subculture of evangelicalism, despite significant criticism, still informs the lives and relationships of adolescent and adult Christians. Through the lens of symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis, this paper examines a sample of evangelical dating literature for emergent themes adhering to and departing from purity culture's notions. While fantasy themes reminiscent of purity culture, including marriage as a reward and individual impotence, do exist within the literature, fantasy themes of marriage as sacred and individual agency also emerge, suggesting a shift in evangelical constructions of romantic relationships away from purity culture ideas and toward notions of empowerment. The presence of these inconsistent

themes within the discourse results in a complex evangelical rhetorical vision concerning dating and romantic relationships.

A History of American Dating

From Courtship to the Sexual Revolution

To understand present understandings of romantic relationships, it is imperative to understand the trajectory of dating in America. American dating originated in courtship, a process in which men and women could evaluate potential marriage partners. Courtship was the primary method of matchmaking in the middle to late 1800s, usually entailing a young man visiting a young woman's home (Hunter 169). These visits, known as "calls," involved the man sitting, talking, and sometimes eating with members of the woman's family to signify his interest in her. Should the family approve of the young man, and should the woman be interested in him, the couple would transition from calling to "keeping company," a more exclusive form of visitation that preceded engagement (Hunter 169). The courtship process–encompassing calling, keeping company, and engagement– was focused entirely on the marriage union.

Further, courtship was largely conducted in the private sphere, almost entirely within the woman's home. For this reason, as the historian Beth Bailey notes, courtship "was not a practical system for young people whose families lived crowded into one or two rooms" (17). Some families had no parlor or visiting area and thus no place to entertain their daughters' suitors. Rather than conduct their visitations in the privacy of the home, then, young couples in such situations began to spend time out of the house and on the town, transitioning from meeting in "family parlors and community events" to going on dates at "restaurants, theaters, and dance halls" (13). This shift began in the early 1900s, and soon couples of greater privilege began to follow suit, desiring the apparent freedom available outside of the house. In this way, courtship

began to morph into a more "social and recreational process," one known today as dating (13). Dating "removed couples from the implied supervision of the private sphere […] to the anonymity of the public sphere" (13). This process was aided in large part by automobiles, which made the public realm more accessible to adolescents; with cars, young couples could wander further out into town and further away from the family home.

By the mid-20th century, courtship had diminished in popularity, and dating rose to take its place. Unlike courtship, dating often had little to do with an intention or expectation to marry. At this time, "few steady couples expected to marry each other […] but, for the duration [of their relationship] they acted *as if* they were married. Going steady had become a sort of play-marriage" (49). This phase involved high levels of commitment previously associated with keeping company and engagement, including relational exclusivity, increased time spent together, reduced time with friends and family, and higher levels of physicality than were expected with the courtship standard. Indeed, without the watchful eyes of parents and family, couples began to engage in "the romantic and sexual explorations that had characterized the final stages of courtship in the previous century" (10), including public handholding, hugs, and kisses.

Even as the standards for physicality began to change, sex generally remained a private matter until the 1960s. In this decade, scholar Rebecca Sheehan argues,

> "Landmark court cases that overturned nineteenth-century obscenity laws enabled the rise of sexual content in the public realm; advocates from a variety of social groups pushed for sexual liberation as a means to individual and cultural freedom; and the birth control pill ushered in widespread behavioral changes by freeing sex from reproduction" (3).

These developments ushered in a new era of Sexual Revolution through the 1960's and 70's, followed by a progressive, sexualized culture. While this culture was welcomed and praised by many secular citizens, some Christians were also able to apply the culture's emphasis on sexuality to subvert traditional sex roles and female subordination. Women like Marabel Morgan, who detailed a healthy marital sex life in her book *Total Woman,* revolutionized "evangelical marriage through separating sex from sin and liberating their own sexual pleasure" (5-6). However, many other evangelicals opposed the Sexual Revolution because it appeared to threaten "the family unit" as well as traditional gender and sex roles (6).

American Evangelical Christianity

In order to understand evangelical opposition to the Sexual Revolution, one must understand the fundamental aspects of American Christian evangelicalism. Evangelical Christians comprise a significant portion of the American populace; about 25% of American citizens identify as evangelical Christians ("Religious Landscape Study"). Evangelicals are not bound to any particular denomination of Christianity but take part in the broader Protestant tradition (Larsen and Treier 2). Their belief system is characterized by four fundamental qualities: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism (Bebbington 3), which is to say they "emphasize conversion experiences; an active laity sharing the gospel and engaged in good works; the Bible; and salvation through the work of Christ on the cross" (Larsen and Treier 1). As a function of their activism in particular, evangelicals are outspoken socially and politically. Evangelical Protestant groups comprise 18% of religious activism organizations in Washington D.C. ("Lobbying for the Faithful"), and six evangelical Protestant activist groups are among the top 40 groups of highest annual advocacy spending in the nation ("Major Characteristics of Religious Advocacy Groups"). Evangelicals are especially "passionate about issues of sexuality"

(Reinis 9), including issues of the Sexual Revolution like abortion and homosexuality (Sheehan 6). Evangelical views on these matters stem primarily from their beliefs concerning marriage and family. Focus on the Family, an organization intimately connected with American evangelicalism, outlines such beliefs:

> "The institution of marriage is a sacred covenant designed by God to model the love of Christ for His people and to serve both the public and private good as the basic building block of human civilization. Marriage is intended by God to be a thriving, lifelong relationship between a man and a woman [...] Children are a heritage from God and a blessing from His hand. Parents are therefore accountable to Him for raising, shaping and preparing them for a life of service to His Kingdom and to humanity [...] Human beings are created by God in His image. Therefore every person, from conception to natural death, possesses inherent dignity and immeasurable worth—including preborn children [...] Christians, then, are called to defend, protect, and value all human life." ("Foundational Values")

Because of their convictions that God created marriage to exist between one man and one woman and that all human life, including that of the unborn, is sacred, evangelicals generally oppose homosexuality and abortion. As the Sexual Revolution championed these topics and challenged traditional evangelical beliefs, the evangelical community began to rally in countermovements.

The Rise of Abstinence Movements and Purity Culture

In the wake of the Sexual Revolution, and in the face of a sexualized culture, both evangelical and secular Americans were concerned by the rise in HIV, AIDS, and teenage

pregnancy. This concern led some to launch abstinence-only campaigns, noting that sexual abstinence is helpful in preventing such problems. Indeed, both secular and religious lobbyists advocated for state- and federally-sponsored abstinence education programs, resulting in the passage of federal legislation that required "sexual abstinence education in U.S. public schools" (Gardner 2) in the 1980s (Santelli et al. 75). In public schools, abstinence education marketed sexual abstinence as the solution for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, increased rates of teenage pregnancy, and increased rates of abortion without explicit references to religion or faith systems.

By the 1990s, an evangelical expression of the abstinence movement manifested itself in a phenomenon called "purity culture," which constructs abstinence as a moral and spiritual issue. Beyond championing abstinence as a means to physical and sexual health, purity culture "link[ed] abstinence to evangelical Christian morality, sexual purity, and heterosexual marriage" (Williams 21). Drawing from biblical texts, this vein of evangelicals cast sexual purity as an indicator of holiness and sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3[1]), a marker of one's standing before God and before the Christian community. With such holiness as motivation, purity culture encouraged "young people to pledge their commitment to wait to have sex until marriage" (Gardner 3). By 1993, this movement included large gatherings such as True Love Waits rallies, each rally resulting in hundreds of teenagers pledging to save their virginity for their spouse (6).

Joshua Harris

One teenager participating in the evangelical abstinence movement was Joshua Harris. Influenced by its tenets, he believed that Christians had to radically change their approach to dating in order for teenagers to successfully save sex for marriage. In 1997, at age 21, he released

[1] "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality."

a book encapsulating his thoughts on the issue. This release was *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships*, within which Harris advocated for a norm of courtship instead of dating, a reversal of the 20th century shift. His book became an iconic publication, influencing the lives and romantic relationships of Christian adolescents across America.

In his personal experience, Harris found that contemporary dating practices were innately self-centered, leading to sinful acts and the objectification of others. He believed that courtship, a way of approaching relationships with the priority of "pleasing God and blessing others," would lead to "true peace and joy" (*I Kissed Dating Goodbye* 21). In his work, he explains that striving to please God and bless others in such a way necessarily involves pursuing "purity and blamelessness in our motives, our minds, and our emotions" (22), extending the concept of purity beyond sexual acts to issues of the will, the mind, and the heart.

Harris's ideas spread rapidly and were well-received by many members of the Christian community. By 2001, Harris sold 714,000 copies of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye,* and he sold over a million by 2005, receiving along the way the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association Gold Book Award and Platinum Book Award (Challies). The book's spread and positive reception reflect its tremendous influence, and Harris's promotion of courtship as an alternative to dating became a popular topic discussed in small groups, families, and churches across the nation. Many readers considered him to be "a guy who just wanted to put God first" (*I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye* 10:57) and his work to be "a breath of fresh air" (11:05). Similarly, reviewers like Rebekah St. James and Sam Torode praised his honesty, vulnerability, and emphasis on "following Christ" (*I Kissed Dating Goodbye* cover copy, 8), and prominent Christians like Elisabeth Elliot considered the message of his book to be "desperately needed" (cover copy).

Such reviewers found his arguments to be a healthy challenge to the norm of casual dating in wider culture. In a culture in which "dating can often become manipulative, confusing, and even abusive," Harris was inspiring and relevant to many (Marus 47).

Critique of Harris, Purity Culture, and the Abstinence Movement

Despite the initial success and wide spread of Harris's book in the late 90's and early 2000's, considerable backlash to his ideas appeared around the same time. In 2000, for instance, notable Christian authors Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend described Harris's premise– that dating should be avoided–as illogical. Cloud and Townsend argued that failures of dating are caused by a lack of maturity and boundaries within a dating relationship, not by the system of dating itself, as Harris suggests; they likened Harris's argument to the illogical analogy "because there are car accidents, no one should drive" (Cloud and Townsend 16). While their critique was mild, more pointed criticism came in the following years from dissatisfied readers. Some anonymous readers called Harris's work "insane," "filled with legalism," and "about control [...] about fear" (*I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye* 10:44, 10:46, 13:56), while others left public reviews describing his book as "damaging," "a scam," "problematic," and "very extreme" (Amazon). Some readers even argued that the book "contributed to and suggested a rigidity of interaction and relationship that eventually had to be cast aside," had a "lack of grace," and functioned as " brainwashing propaganda" that "is super unhealthy and a setup for failure" (Goodreads).

The critique of Harris's book is a microcosm of the backlash purity culture has received. Scholarly research on purity culture in the past decade has elucidated problematic elements within the movement, including sexism, the dehumanization of men and women, and the acceptance of rape myths. Scholars argue that the form of sexism most frequently expressed in

purity culture literature is benevolent sexism, which articulates that women are weaker than men and thus require male protection (Klement and Sagarin 208). This concept reinforces patriarchal structures while portraying a male-dominated system as beneficial for women (Moon and Reger 58, 61). Scholars note benevolent sexism primarily in discussions of biblical gender roles, where women are called to submit under their husband's leadership for their own good (63). Sexist expressions relate to dehumanizing language in purity culture literature, primarily in the objectification of women and the animalization of men. Sexually pure women are often described as treasures or gemstones (64), signifying great value, whereas impure women are considered to be disposable styrofoam cups, chipped china, or other damaged goods (Gish 16). Metaphors such as these describe a woman's worth as conditional; she is desirable and thus valuable to a consumer only if she maintains sexual purity. Men, too, are not exempt from dehumanization in purity culture; they are animalized, described as beasts ruled by a biological impulse to procreate (Klement and Sagarin 209, Moon and Reger 64). Controlled by their desires, they are without agency or choice. Further, the notion that men are ruled by lust contributes to a common rape myth, which contends that rape is a natural consequence of the male sex drive. That is, this rape myth articulates that if a man is truly overcome by lust, he is unable to stop himself from assaulting or raping another person (Klement and Sagarin 215). This perspective lends itself to victim-blaming; if an assault is not the fault of the perpetrator, who is overcome by sexual desire, then blame falls to the victim.

Purity culture has also been criticized over the past decade for its constructions of virginity, sex, and marriage. In particular, the objectification of women described above results in a fear-based construction of virginity. Purity culture (implicitly and explicitly) equates a woman's virginity with her very self, articulating that women not only damage their sexual

purity but also diminish their value as human beings through extramarital sexual activity. It is thus out of fear of losing their worth as individuals that women are encouraged to remain abstinent, not out of a value for virginity itself. A second "carrot dangled as motivation for pursuing sexual abstinence [is] the promise of heterosexual marriage [and] sex" (Welcher 79). That is, evangelicals in purity culture assert that individuals will receive ecstatic sex within marriage as a reward for their premarital abstinence and purity. In this way, evangelicals used the promise of sex to encourage chastity (Gardner 19). This strategy elevates marriage, placing it "on a pedestal" (Welcher 7). Indeed, in purity culture, marital sex is glorified to the extent that that adolescents informed by the movement believe that the consummation of their future marriage will "complete" them (7). However, even in this elevation and glorification, marriage is devalued within purity culture. It is constructed as a means to an end; it is desired because it is a conduit for sex, not because it has any inherent value.

About twenty years after such criticisms aired, Joshua Harris, the icon of evangelical purity culture, released a public apology for the damage caused by his book (Picheta). In doing so, he indicated that members of the evangelical community can change their minds and their narratives about dating. Indeed, since *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* was originally published in 1997, evangelical Christian dating literature has seen a shift in constructions of romantic relationships; as some metaphors and narratives present within the literature contribute to fantasy themes reminiscent of purity culture, authors in recent years have adjusted their language to form fantasy themes departing from purity culture's problematic notions.

Texts

To engage with this topic, I selected a purposive sample of Christian books on relationships, dating, and sexuality published from 1997, the year *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* was

originally published, to 2020. Further criteria for selection included evangelical Christian affiliation and popularity, with the understanding that popularity suggests influence in the Christian community. The criterion for evangelical Christian affiliation was met if a book explicitly mentioned God, Christianity, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit and if the author's biographical statements confirmed their adherence to the faith at the time of writing. The criterion for popularity was met if a book had at least 20,000 copies sold and was featured on Amazon best-seller lists in categories related to Christianity, dating, relationships, and sexuality. The final sample of books analyzed includes *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships* and *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship* by Joshua Harris, *I Gave Dating a Chance: A Biblical Perspective to Balance the Extremes* by Jeramy Clark, *And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity* by Dannah Gresh, *Loveology: God. Love. Marriage. Sex. And the Never-Ending Story of Male and Female.* by John Mark Comer, *Single, Dating, Engaged, Married: Navigating Life and Love in the Modern Age* by Ben Stuart, and *Relationship Goals: How to Win at Dating, Marriage, and Sex* by Michael Todd.

Methodology

Symbolic Convergence Theory and Fantasy Theme Analysis

To examine these dating books and elucidate themes, this project draws on Ernest Bormann's symbolic convergence theory. This theory considers "communication as a means to seek common grounds among discourse participants" and focuses on social realities shared by group members (Kafle 18).

Central to symbolic convergence theory are the concepts of fantasy themes and rhetorical visions. Fantasy themes are "imaginative and creative interpretation[s] of events" (Bormann, "The Symbolic Convergence Theory of Communication" 52) that develop through the sharing of

symbols (i.e., verbal language) in discourse. That is, as group members incorporate narratives, metaphors, analogies, and other figures of speech to interpret events, their language yields emergent themes that represent their perceptions of reality. As different themes are shared and invoked, they "chain out," linking group members together and ultimately resulting in "the construction of a set of shared beliefs called a rhetorical vision" (Kafle 18). Rhetorical visions allow members of a group to "sympathize, empathize, and identify with one another" and provide a framework for interpreting future events (Bormann, "The Symbolic Convergence Theory of Communication" 51).

Such fantasy themes appear in discourse in various ways. They might "be expressed in a single phrase, sentence, or a whole paragraph" (Benoit et al. 380), and sometimes are represented by symbolic cues. A symbolic cue functions as "shorthand for a fantasy theme," encapsulating key thematic elements in a word or short phrase (380). Metaphors, analogies, or other figures of speech might serve as symbolic cues for participants as they invoke shared constructions of reality by referencing established patterns of discourse.

Fantasy theme analysis is the primary method associated with convergence theory. It is used to discern how fantasy themes form rhetorical visions. In describing the method, Bormann writes,

> "The critic begins by collecting evidence related to the manifest content of the communication [...] using manuscripts [... He] discovers and describes the narrative and dramatic materials [i.e. fantasy themes] that have chained out for those who participate in the rhetorical vision. When a critic has gathered a number of dramatic incidents he can look for patterns of characterizations [... and]

> creatively reconstruct the rhetorical vision from the representative fantasy chains." ("Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 401)

That is, the fantasy theme critic examines the text of the discourse in question, elucidates and characterizes fantasy themes chaining out in the discourse, and articulates the rhetorical vision emerging from the fantasy themes.

Symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis have informed communications research for decades (Bormann, "In Defense of Symbolic Convergence Theory" 259). Researchers conducted an analysis of memes concerning the 2015 Duggar family scandal, noting emergent fantasy themes of religious hypocrisy, media intrusion, and God's judgment upon critics that emerged through image and text pairings (Perreault and Perreault 89). These fantasies combined into a single rhetorical vision, one that depicts the Duggars as a pious family that still fell victim to scandal (95). Another fantasy theme analysis was conducted on memes concerning the NFL Deflategate controversy in 2015, revealing fantasy themes of Tom Brady as an underdog, Brady as a redeemed innocent, corporate mistrust, and relishing in Brady's punishment (Perreault and Ferucci 153). In this analysis, the emergent rhetorical vision had two components, a desire for closure and a tendency to link the scandal to other aspects of pop culture (165). These two examples helpfully contribute to existing fantasy theme literature as they both illustrate the possibility for contrasting fantasy themes to exist simultaneously within one community. These analyses note that, even as community members construct contradictory fantasy themes, their themes contribute to a single rhetorical vision. Such analyses thus demonstrate the possibility for one highly complex rhetorical vision to exist in a community, encapsulating varying and inconsistent aspects of the group's social reality.

In this study, I incorporate symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis to identify symbolic cues within evangelical dating literature, examine emergent themes, and characterize the evangelical group consciousness as it pertains to romantic relationships. To assist in this venture, I also analyze metaphors and narratives as both can represent and allude to fantasy themes within discourse.

Metaphor Analysis

Metaphors are implicit comparisons that allow an individual to conceptualize and experience one thing in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson 7). They "prime how [people] think and act," providing frameworks for thought and behavior that align with perceptions of reality (Geary 100). In terms of symbolic convergence theory, metaphors serve as symbolic cues for fantasy themes; invocations of familiar metaphors in the discourse of a particular social context symbolize, indicate, and represent shared perceptions of reality. In this way, analysis of a group's metaphors provides key insight into its shared perceptions, fantasy themes, and rhetorical visions.

Metaphor analysis, put simply, is "a method for understanding how metaphors shape meaning, appeal to audiences, and influence the decisions of a community" (Kornfield 110). In assessing how metaphors function within a text, a metaphor critic must examine the text for a general sense of its context and isolate the metaphors within it (Foss 272). From here, the critic should sort the metaphors into groups according to the referent (the object described) or the metaphor itself and then explain the function of the metaphor within the text (273). In short, the critic must categorize and interpret the metaphors, identifying how each metaphor represents understandings of reality in the given text or discourse.

Prior research has examined metaphors through the lens of fantasy theme analysis. For instance, scholars Stephen Perry and Amanda Roesch conducted a fantasy theme analysis of tributes posted after the death of Mister Rogers, noting the function of religious metaphor in the construction of fans' shared themes and rhetorical visions (1). In this study, some emergent fantasy themes were characterized entirely by their metaphorical content (e.g. fantasy themes of Rogers as an angel and a saint), indicating the possibility for a metaphor to function exactly as a fantasy theme. Another fantasy theme analysis, one examining political cartoons concerning the Clinton-Lewinksy affair, indicated how metaphors (e.g. Starr's leaks as a tsunami, Lewinsky as a tornado) contributed to a fantasy theme of a threat to the White House (Benoit et al. 390). This study, rather than presenting metaphors as fantasy themes, presented them as building blocks used to construct a fantasy theme. Thus, these studies indicate multiple functions of metaphor within fantasy theme analysis, and both emphasize the usefulness of metaphors in constructing a group's rhetorical vision.

Narrative Analysis

Like metaphor, narratives also serve to represent or develop fantasy themes within discourse. In communication studies, narrative is understood to be the foundation of human communication and a primary mode through which humans construct meaning within their lives (Fisher 4). That is, narratives are "stories constituting the fabric of social reality for those who compose them" (7). As "humans think in narratives, speak in narratives, interpret events through narratives, and assume our world will conform to expectations established through narratives" (Kornfield 47), they incorporate storytelling in order to make sense of their perceptions and contribute to their group's understanding of reality.

To elucidate such understandings, one must conduct the process of narrative criticism. This process is a form of communication analysis that demonstrates "how narratives influence particular audiences and larger cultures" (46). Narrative criticism is done by "examining the story, the combination of the plot, characters, and settings" of a particular text or discourse and focusing on the function of characters, events, and themes present within the narrative (52). Once these aspects and their functions are identified, the critic is able to make inferences about the speaker or author's perceptions of reality, what he or she believes to be true.

The function of narratives in discourse is similar to the function of fantasy themes according to symbolic convergence theory; both are employed in constructing perceptions of reality. Thus, fantasy theme analysis can be conducted upon a group's narratives in order to understand that group's rhetorical visions. For instance, in previous literature, scholars have employed fantasy theme analysis and symbolic convergence theory to examine ex-Christians' post-conversion narratives (Simmons 117). This study emphasized the function of narrative components, especially characters and plot, in constructing fantasy themes. Individuals often cast themselves as victims or heroes relentlessly pursuing truth and cast believers (and God himself) as villains. From such narratives, fantasies of victimization, enlightenment, a cruel God, and religious hypocrisy emerged, reflecting a wider rhetorical vision that considers de-conversion as an exodus from oppression to enlightenment (117, 133). In a similar vein, I examine several types of narratives, including biblical stories, fairy-tales, and testimonies, and include elements of narrative analysis within this study in order to elucidate fantasy themes present within evangelical dating discourse.

Emergent Fantasy Themes

A fantasy theme analysis of the sample, with the assistance of metaphor analysis and narrative analysis processes, reveals four fantasy themes present within evangelical dating literature. These fantasy themes are marriage as reward, marriage as sacred, individual impotence, and individual agency. Each one has chained out over the past 25 years, solidifying in the evangelical social reality and rhetorical vision through repeated invocation.

Marriage as a Reward

First, a fantasy theme of marriage as a reward develops in evangelical dating books through the authors' use of biblical and fairy-tale narratives.

This theme is often constructed by reference to the story of Isaac and Rebekah, a narrative that appears in evangelical dating literature to describe what "should" be done in one's time of singleness. For example, in *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Harris recounts, "In the Old Testament, Rebekah is a young woman who 'redeemed the time [of singleness]' by faithfully fulfilling her current obligations," including drawing water for her family and serving strangers she encountered on her way (155). The diction of "redeeming" connotes singleness as something imperfect, inadequate, or incomplete that must be compensated for in order to be made good. In Harris's mind, Rebekah redeems her singleness through her work. Jeramy Clark relays similar ideas in *I Gave Dating a Chance*, writing, "The story of Rebekah illustrates how the best things come to those who build character instead of just sitting around" (Clark 57); here, the best things are, of course, husbands. Clark praises Rebekah because she "had not been running around trying to find her prince. Instead, she had busied herself with service and character development, actively preparing herself for whatever God had planned" (58). Clark presents character development alongside hard work as a means to redeem singleness, but even this emphasis suggests that Rebekah received a husband as a reward for fulfilling her obligations and building

character; here, Clark implies that an individual is sure to attract a spouse if he is hard-working enough or has developed adequate moral character. This concept is problematic for two reasons. On one hand, for single readers, this narrative could easily read, "You're still single because you haven't worked hard enough" or "You're not married because you're not a good enough person." On the other hand, constructing marriage as a reward devalues the actions taken to achieve that reward. That is, when work and character development are presented as stepping-stones used to earn marriage, it is unlikely that an individual will take those steps for the sake of the work or character development itself. Instead, such things become a means to an end, and the individual engages them only in the hope of earning a spouse.

The theme of marriage as a reward develops further through invocations of fairy-tales in evangelical dating discourse. In *I Gave Dating a Chance,* Jeramy Clark details a complete fairy-tale which he titles "Beauty and the Barbarian" (53). Within this story, a barbarian falls in love with a "pure and noble" princess; when he offers her the "pleasure" of being his wife, she rejects him for his unattractive appearance, home, and behaviors (53). The princess tells the barbarian she wants "someone honorable like her father, the king" (53). In order to win her, the barbarian watches the conduct of her father and changes to become like him, learning to truly desire nobility and goodness in the process. Thus, he makes himself princely, worthy of the princess's affections. Impressed, she marries him, and the two live "happily ever after" (54). Implicit within this story are Clark's ideals for how a young man and young woman should engage in relationships. A man, even a barbarian, should be captivated by a woman's purity and initiate a relationship with her. If the woman finds him unsuitable and unlike her Heavenly Father–which is to say, God–she should reject him, maintaining high standards and choosing singleness over an inadequate partnership. In the face of rejection, the man should turn to character development,

striving to become like her Heavenly Father; when he has become good enough, the princess should accept and marry him. In this way, a man endeavors to prove himself worthy of a pure wife, marriage becomes the reward for developing his character; in Clark's fairy-tale presentation, the man's works have earned him an intimate relationship. For the woman, on the other hand, marriage is a reward for maintaining her standards and waiting for a prince rather than compromising her virtue and settling for a barbarian. In presenting marriage in such a way, Clark contributes to the fantasy theme of marriage as a reward.

This fantasy theme is reminiscent of purity culture's notions. Namely, while purity culture portrays marriage as a reward for abstinence, these authors portray it as a reward for good behavior and hard work. The similarity of these two concepts suggests an influence of purity culture upon evangelical dating literature, especially upon authors Harris and Clark.

Marriage as Sacred

Inconsistent with (and yet not entirely antithetical to) the first theme, a fantasy theme of marriage as sacred also emerges in evangelical dating discourse. This fantasy theme develops through evangelical authors' use of metaphors to describe sex, singleness, dating, and marriage itself; these metaphors portray a high value for marriage and ultimately attribute this value to marriage's depiction of God and his church.

On Sex

Within evangelical dating literature, sex is often described with nature metaphors, particularly concerning fire and water. In Joshua Harris's second publication, *Boy Meets Girl: An Introduction to Courtship*, he writes that God "was the one who invented marriage so that the blazing fire of romantic love could become something even more beautiful—a pulsing, red-hot ember of covenant love in marriage" (35). He continues to reference the "fires of romantic zeal"

throughout the book (85). Emphasizing fire's beauty and heat, Harris's metaphor implies that sex is likewise desirable, beautiful, and sensual. Ben Stuart incorporates this same metaphor in *Single, Dating, Engaged, Married*, writing that "fire can be a lot of fun, but outside of its proper boundaries, it can do serious damage. When contained, fire can be a source of great warmth and life […] Sex is the same way" (Stuart 114). Unlike Harris, Stuart also uses the fire metaphor to explicitly address sex's bend toward destruction. He invokes "serious damage" and the need for "contain[ment]" as a warning to his readers. For him, sex isn't just warm and playful; it's dangerous. If people engage in sex in the wrong context, he argues, they'll get burned.

To argue the same notion, Michael Todd compares sex to water. In *Relationship Goals*, he writes,

> "When water is properly contained and channeled, it can turn electrical turbines and provide light and power for an entire city [...] What is water when its full power is uncontained and on the loose? Hurricanes, floods. It's destruction. Or it leaks into where it's not supposed to be and causes rust, mildew, and rot […] What does it look like when we're having sex outside of marriage? It looks like destruction." (Todd 103)

Like Harris, Todd recognizes that sex can be good, and yet like Stuart, Todd describes the irrevocable damage wreaked by extramarital sex, warning his readers to avoid such a danger. Destruction and flourishing are both possible with sex, but proper containment and context allow the latter.

These metaphors call to mind elements of the evangelical abstinence movement. At its inception and in response to the Sexual Revolution, evangelicals feared increases in premarital sex because of corresponding rates of abortion, teenage pregnancy, and sexually transmitted

diseases. This anxiety is still evident as authors include fear-based appeals in their arguments against extramarital sex. Sex is described as good only when it is contained; outside of proper containment—which is to say, outside of marriage—evangelicals consider sex a disaster waiting to happen.

On Singleness

Nature metaphors also appear in evangelical descriptions of singleness. Primarily, evangelicals use the metaphor of a season to describe this status. Seasonal language is familiar in the Christian tradition (e.g., Ecclesiastes 3:1[2]), as the religion stemmed from a primarily agrarian culture that relied upon seasonal transitions to plant and harvest crops. In evangelical dating literature, nature metaphors compare the passage of time to a person's life and experiences, indicating that events, states of being, and understandings shift and change just as winter turns to spring.

Evangelical authors incorporate seasonal metaphors to argue that singleness is a passing phase in one's life. For example, Joshua Harris writes that "any season of singleness is a gift from God [...] I think that we should view our singleness as a special season of our lives" (*I Kissed Dating Goodbye* 79). Likewise, Ben Stuart references walking "through [a] season of singleness" (54). Comparing singleness to the natural seasons in this way implies a finite duration, as if singleness will not last forever but will eventually transition into a new and different phase. However, this may not be the case; singleness might not actually lead into a season of marriage. For some, singleness is lifelong, and the notion that singleness should be temporary can cause immense disappointment and insecurity in the mind and heart of a long-term single person (Marus 48). As evangelicals primarily "create space for [singleness] only as a

[2] "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

season, not as a legitimate, lifelong calling," (Welcher 7), they marginalize single people within and without their community (Marus 48).

In other areas of evangelical dating literature, singleness is euphemistically referred to as a gift. In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye,* Harris writes, "dating can cause discontentment with God's gift of singleness" (Harris 44) and continues to reflect that "unmarried years are a gift from God" (50). He says, "Until you realize God's gift of your singleness, you'll probably miss out on the incredible opportunities it holds" (51). John Mark Comer in *Loveology* agrees that "singleness is a gift," but qualifies it as "the gift that nobody wants" (Comer 195-196) (Stuart softens this view, stating instead that "singleness is a gift that the vast majority of us don't want" (21-22)). The reason that singleness isn't desirable, these authors claim, is because "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18, Comer 52). Evangelicals believe that people were created by God with a desire for relationships, and because singleness seems to oppose that desire, it appears as unnatural or wrong. In this way, singleness is not presented as ideal in evangelical dating literature.

Through the use of both of these metaphors, evangelical authors portray singleness as undesirable and unfulfilling. However, the metaphor of a gift does acknowledge some sense of singleness's worth, implying that singleness is something God intends for his people to use and enjoy. This promotes a more positive view of singleness than the metaphor of a season allows, as the latter cultivates only a longing for the next phase in one's life.

On Dating

Like such metaphors for singleness, metaphors concerning dating also emphasize what comes "next." Common constructions of dating and courtship within evangelical dating books liken such processes to travel, a means to get from one place to another. As dating and courtship

are described in this way, the desirable destination of marriage is highlighted. For instance, in *Boy Meets Girl*, Joshua Harris writes that courtship, his alternative to dating, is "a pathway that [...] starts with 'I'd like to get to know you' and ends [...] with 'I'd like to marry you'" (29). Later, he describes it as a "high wire," a narrow, treacherous path from singleness to marriage (77). Ben Stuart incorporates a different version of this metaphor, stating, "you have been sailing the seas of singleness, and now you have finally found your port of call" (Stuart 172); for him, dating is the ocean adventure that brings a person safely across the sea of singleness to the port of marriage. Michael Todd echoes this idea, arguing, "dating is transportation to a relational target. This dating thing is not supposed to be the place where we stay. It's supposed to be the place that takes us to marriage" (Todd 66).

As such travel metaphors recur in the literature, they solidify the understanding that marriage is the end goal of dating. This understanding is common in Christian dating discourse, but the travel metaphor in particular devalues singleness and pressurizes dating relationships. First, the notion that the sole purpose of dating is marriage isolates those who are single long-term, who have thus far been unable to reach that end. In Stuart's commentary, for instance, he suggests that marriage, a port, is a safe destination, whereas singleness, a sea, is vast, lonely, and potentially dangerous. Such a notion implies that singles, individuals who have yet to sail into port, are lost at sea, off track, or otherwise on the wrong path. That is, while travel metaphors ignore the possibility for a path to lead anywhere but marriage, individuals' failure to reach marriage suggests that they have lost their way. Second, this metaphor pressures those participating in dating relationships by championing marriage as the destination the couple is supposedly traveling to. With an understanding that dating is only for marriage, the couple might become too committed too quickly, clinging to the idea of engagement without adequately

understanding the person they're involved with or understanding the true commitment that marriage is. In these ways, this metaphor is limiting.

On Marriage

Despite their limitations, the metaphors for sex, singleness, and dating in the evangelical literature clearly illustrate an evangelical understanding that marriage is of high value. That is, as authors describe marriage as the only proper context for sex, the desirable subsequent of singleness, and the purpose and destination of dating, they construct it to be of immense significance in the evangelical mind.

That significance is due to the metaphorical understanding that marriage is a picture. Ben Stuart says, "As we step into this marriage bond, we become a living picture of God's wonderful union with his people" (206). Michael Todd concurs, writing, "A marriage between a man and a woman who have godly relationship goals offers the best picture we have to understand the relationship between God and his beloved people" (42). Both of these authors understand the marriage of a man and a woman to reflect the relationship God has with his people, and they thus describe marriage as something that portrays and encapsulates this relationship. Conceptualizing marriage as a picture in this way results in an understanding that it is holy, a representative of a relationship that transcends any earthly one.

While metaphors concerning sex, singleness, and dating contribute to a high value of marriage within the evangelical community, the metaphor of marriage as a picture solidifies an understanding of marital holiness and transcendence in the evangelical social reality. The combination and repetition of these metaphors throughout evangelical dating literature allows a fantasy theme depicting marriage as sacred to form and chain out, contrasting with the fantasy theme depicting marriage as a reward.

Individual Impotence

Along with themes concerning marriage, evangelical rhetoric harbors fantasy themes considering individuals. Through the circulation of objectifying metaphors and victim-blaming narratives, concepts reminiscent of purity culture, individuals are presented as powerless or less than human in some evangelical dating books. Such presentations of individuals contribute to a third fantasy theme, a theme of individual impotence.

Objectification appears in evangelical metaphors concerning dating and marriage. In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye,* Harris implements a metaphor comparing dating to shopping, particularly as he discusses when an individual should enter a dating relationship. He writes, "If I'm not in a position to pay in the cold, hard cash of commitment, I have no business going shopping for my future mate" (Harris 78). Here, Harris's basic claim is that people shouldn't date unless they are willing and able to commit fully to their partner; essentially, he argues that "you don't need to shop for what you can't afford" (78). However, his use of metaphor implies more. As he describes commitment as "cold, hard cash" instead of a down payment or a swipe of a credit card, he signifies that commitment must be up-front and tangible before the relationship should take place. In doing so, he suggests that relationships are inherently transactional, drawing parallels to a market economy; without some form of payment, his potential romantic partner should not exchange her goods, whether physical or emotional. As Harris continues to describe dating as "shopping for my future mate," his language objectifies any potential romantic partner (78). When one goes shopping, he examines the features of a good, tries it on, or takes it for a test run. If he doesn't like the goods available at one place, he can go to another store in search of a different one, for goods are exchangeable, interchangeable, and ultimately designed to please the consumer. This depiction strips Harris's "future mate" of agency, value, and

humanity (Harris 78); if she is a good, she must not have needs or wants of her own. If she is a good, she is interchangeable with every other woman. If she is a good, she is an object: replaceable and disposable, kept only as long as she meets the desires of her consumer. To internalize that dating is simply shopping for a mate, then, is to objectify any potential romantic partner one might encounter and to approach romantic relationships with a dehumanizing consumerist approach.

Another metaphor, one describing marriage as ownership, also contributes to the concept of objectification. In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye,* Harris writes, "I cannot 'own' someone outside of marriage" (52). The implication, of course, is that he can own someone within it. Jeramy Clark also incorporates this metaphor in *I Gave Dating a Chance*, arguing that "married people own each other to a certain extent" (Clark 91). Harris and Clark likely employ this metaphor to represent the unique claim a married person has on his or her spouse's body and sexual activity, but the connotation of these comments goes beyond this claim to imply possession and control. In marriage, possession and control can look like one spouse dominating the other, dictating what is and isn't allowed without compromise or dialogue. In the traditional evangelical family structure, this concept most probably serves to promote a patriarchal society and family dynamic in which the husband dominates the submissive wife.

Extending the notion of domination and submission, the narrative of David and Bathsheba also plays into objectification and impotence in evangelical dating rhetoric. Joshua Harris references this narrative as he focuses on the characterization of and the plot surrounding King David. In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Harris writes, "Few stories in the Bible fill me with as much dread as the story of David's fall into sin with Bathsheba. If a righteous man like David could fall into adultery and murder, who on earth can claim to be safe from temptation?" (88).

Here, Harris immediately casts David as a good guy in an unfortunate circumstance, a righteous man who simply happened to fall into sin. He continues, describing David's lust for the bathing Bathsheba: "David desired that which did not belong to him [and] he allowed lust to take control. David acted on his wicked imaginings, sent for Bathsheba, and slept with her" (89-90). In Harris's description of David, he removes some of the king's agency; he writes that David did not choose sin but fell into it, that he did not choose lust but was taken over by it. This characterization attempts to mitigate David's responsibility for his actions; since David was not a conscious actor but a man controlled by lust, he cannot be blamed as severely as he would be if he were governed by self-control. This concept is reminiscent of myths that construct rape to be the natural consequence of the male sexual desire (Klement and Sagarin 209, Moon and Reger 64). Further, in introducing a new character, Bathsheba, Harris uses an impersonal pronoun ("that") and describes her in terms of possession ("that which did not belong to [David]"). As he, like King David, objectifies Bathsheba, Harris strips her of agency and renders her powerless, unable to protect herself or choose her fate.

Author Dannah Gresh also references the story of David and Bathsheba. In *And the Bride Wore White*, a book specifically written for young women on the topic of sexual purity, she writes,

> "King David truly sinned–he had sex with another man's wife (Bathsheba). Then, because he got her pregnant, he ended up killing her husband to hide his sin [...] There's an illegitimate baby on the way and blood on David's hands [...] I can picture Bathsheba greatly mourning the loss of her husband's life because, in a way, it was her fault." (Gresh 37)

In this retelling, Gresh clearly casts David as an actor, yet, like Harris, she characterizes Bathsheba in terms of her relationship to men. Where Bathsheba is simply "another man's wife," known only by her connection to her husband, David is an active character who "got her pregnant" and "kill[ed] her husband" (37). However, even as Gresh assigns the events within this story to David, she still argues that the death of Batsheba's husband is "her fault" (37). That is, she blames Bathsheba for the affair, holding a passive character, constructed as powerless, responsible for the actions of an active and powerful king. This narrative functions as an example of victim-blaming. Gresh argues that unwarranted and unwanted sexual encounters, as well as their consequences, are in some way the victim's fault, even if the victim, like Bathsheba, appears powerless to resist the assault.

These metaphors and narratives develop a theme of impotence in romantic relationships. First, as authors compare dating to shopping and marriage to ownership, they construct romantic partners as replaceable objects for possession, thus objectifying and dehumanizing individuals within relationships. This objectification continues in narrative representation of Bathsheba, who is described with impersonal pronouns or in terms of her relationship with men; she is not depicted as an individual with agency but an object defined by those who desire her. Second, authors contribute to rape myths, constructing David as passive and blaming Bathsheba for the assault upon her. Language depicting David as a man who "f[e]ll into sin" and "allowed lust" to overcome of him constructs him as powerless (Harris 88-90); in reality, he was a king, a powerful man who made a conscious choice to call for Bathsheba. Attempts to reduce his agency in this way are attempts to diminish his responsibility for the affair, and such attempts align with a rape myth that portrays men as ruled by natural biological impulses and thus portrays rape as a natural consequence (Klement and Sagarin 215). Further, as some evangelical literature puts

Bathsheba at fault for the affair, a sense of victim-blaming is purported, even as Bathsheba is constructed to be powerless throughout the affair. In all these ways–as humans are constructed as objects, as perpetrators are absolved, as victims are blamed–impotence becomes an apparent theme in evangelical dating discourse. That is, as evangelical literature contributes to the dehumanization of romantic partners and various rape myths, the literature removes individuals from power in their relationships. Objectified individuals have no agency or innate worth within their relationship, assaulters are constructed as powerless when they are powerful, and victims are blamed even when they have no responsibility over their situation.

Individual Agency

Even as notions of impotence lurk in evangelical dating literature, a conflicting fantasy theme of individual agency also lingers within the texts. This theme, emerging through biblical, fairy-tale, and testimonial narratives, indicates the individual's power to choose, to act, and to thus dictate the outcome of his or her life and relationships.

Beyond contributing to the theme of marriage as a reward, the narrative of Isaac and Rebekah also functions to construct this fantasy theme. Ben Stuart's approach to this narrative centers not on Rebekah, who busies herself while waiting for a spouse to come along, but on Isaac (rather, the servant sent on behalf of Isaac) who actively searches for a spouse. Stuart presents the narrative as "a dating case study" (131), articulating several steps to spouse-hunting derived from the narrative's plot line. He writes, "Go to the right place […] go where the workers are [...] surrender the search [to God…] look for a gracious person [... and] look for someone who is ready to live by faith" (138-148). Stuart gleans these steps from the servant's decisions to wait by a well, to pray, and to test Rebekah's character to see if she was suitable to marry Isaac. As he highlights the servant's actions and decisions in searching for Isaac's spouse,

Stuart encourages his readers to act in a similar way, recognizing that his readers' decisions and actions can lead them, too, to a suitable spouse. Stuart considers spouse-hunting to be an active process, not a simple reward; thus, he characterizes spouse-hunters as agentic, able to choose, act, and thus influence the outcome of their lives through their search for and discovery of a spouse. Further, Stuart's account of this biblical narrative also acknowledges that Rebekah made a conscious decision to marry Issac; "she [was] asked directly: Will you go?" (147). As she accepted the offer, she left her family and followed the servant to meet her betrothed. This question clearly expresses notions of agency; it was Rebekah who determined her own betrothal, it was Rebekah who chose to follow the servant. Her path was not made for her but by her.

The evangelical fairy-tale narrative also highlights personal agency in one's love story. In *And the Bride Wore White,* Dannah Gresh writes, "You are a princess. Your behavior and the choices you make must be governed by [the] value [of that identity] if you are aiming for the sunset ending in your love story" (Gresh 79). Here, Gresh characterizes the princess by her behavior, choices, and identity, arguing that the princess's actions make her happy ending possible and dictate her life's course and happiness. While this sentiment is overstated–failing to address the decisions and choices made by the prince, for instance–it does ascribe significant responsibility to the princess and emphasizes the importance of her decision-making. In Gresh's mind, the princess has the agency to choose how she will act; thus, she may determine how her life and love story will progress.

The fantasy theme of agency chains out further in evangelical authors' testimony narratives. Each of the following passages evidence traditional elements of a conversion testimonial; Harris, Stuart, and Todd each describe their sinful behavior as well as their conviction to change that behavior, noting the (implicit or explicit) appearance of God that

contributed to the change. However, their narratives focus not on a shift from secular to religious life but on a shift from problematic sexual or relational behavior to more virtuous and godly behavior, thus describing a relational conversion.

As the authors describe their relational conversion stories, they cast themselves as primary characters and God as a secondary character within their narratives, indicating an understanding that individuals are the main actors and agents of change in their own lives. In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye,* Joshua Harris recounts his own conversion story, saying,

> "My own self-centered approach to romance started young [...] by the time I reached junior high I had embraced a very ungodly attitude toward relationships [...] I was enslaved to lust, and girls were nothing more than objects to satisfy my desire [...] The fact that I remained a virgin during those years is, to be honest, a miracle. It had everything to do with God's mercy and nothing to do with any self-control or virtue on my part [...] God convicted me of my disobedience through a message given [...] at a retreat I attended my freshman year in high school [...] I repented of my sin right then [...] but I still had a lot to learn" (15).

In his recollection, Harris connects the change in his life to "God's mercy," noting that "God convicted [him]" at the high school retreat. This conviction apparently catalyzed the change in Harris's behavior, yet Harris portrays himself as the primary actor in the narrative. Throughout his testimony, he describes himself with action and agency, writing, "I had embraced a very ungodly attitude toward relationships," "I repented of my sin right then," and, after his conversion, "I still had a lot to learn." While God inspired change in Harris's life, the change itself depended upon Harris's choice to enact it. A similar notion appears in *Single, Dating, Engaged, Married*, where Ben Stuart writes,

> "I remember sitting in the lunchroom one afternoon and some guys began to joke about how they were going to try to date my sister [...] I told them there was absolutely no way they would ever get anywhere near dating my little sister. One of them laughed, "Ben, is anyone going to be good enough?" [...] I pondered that question: *What would I want a guy to do if he had a chance to date my sister?* The answer sprang to my mind immediately: [...] I would want him to [help] her be all she is meant to be under God. Then the thought entered my mind, *Ben, do you treat girls this way?* And I began to cry. I realized I didn't. [...] From that day forward I made a vow to myself: *If I ever date a girl, regardless of whether or not we marry, I want her to be able to say, 'I am a better person for having spent time in proximity to that man*'" (106-107) (italics in original).

In this testimony, Stuart casts himself as the main character, articulating his action throughout the narrative. In his description, he characterizes God as a secondary character, appearing only to convict Stuart through his thoughts. Even after this conviction, though, Stuart depicts himself as the primary agent of change; when Stuart realized that he was not treating women the way he wanted his younger sister to be treated, he made the vow to change his behavior. God is not depicted in this resolution; Stuart holds himself responsible for this conversion. Michael Todd illustrates a similar concept in *Relationship Goals*, relaying the story of his marriage and his conversion from sexual sin:

> "I was fifteen and Natalie was fourteen when we started dating [...] When we were young adults, Natalie wanted to get more serious about our relationship. She started talking about marriage. I wasn't ready for that. I guess I got scared or

> selfish [...] So, I told Natalie, 'I want to take a break from seeing you and spend some time with God.' [...] We both became sexually active with other people and so we couldn't give our virginity to each other when we got married. Finally, we both came to our senses and God brought us back together. But the consequences continued–ten months of insanity led to ten years of insecurity" (60-61).

Throughout this narrative, Natalie and Todd function as main characters, driving the action and plot through their choices and behaviors. Even as Todd notes one instance of God's action, he portrays God as a secondary character; as he writes that "God brought us back together," he acknowledges that this was only possible because of his and Natalie's action. That is, it was only when he and Natalie came to their senses that God was able to repair the relationship. In this way, Todd portrays himself and his wife as their own saviors; they rescued themselves from their old ways. As God functions as a limited actor, a supporting character, Todd and Natalie are constructed as totally responsible for the changes in their lives and the consequences for their actions.

In each of these examples, while the presence and action of God is either apparent or assumed, God is constructed as a secondary character in the authors' testimony narratives. The authors present themselves as the primary characters, actors, and agents within their lives. They alone are able to enact change; their choices and behaviors dictate outcomes and consequences. Thus, as they ascribe themselves with choice and power, these authors contribute to the fantasy theme of agency through their testimonies. Biblical retellings and fairy-tale stories add dimension to this fantasy theme; Stuart's emphasis on one's ability to control their search for a spouse and their ability to choose their marriage partner, as seen in his retelling of Isaac and Rebekah, and Gresh's focus on behavior and choices in her description of a fairy-tale princess

highlight agency not only in one's relational conversion but also in one's pursuit of marriage. Thus, through testimonies, biblical retellings, and fairy-tale stories, the fantasy theme of individual agency chains out throughout evangelical dating discourse.

Implications of Fantasy Themes

Fantasy theme analysis, drawing from metaphor and narrative analysis, reveals four emergent fantasy themes that have chained out within evangelical dating discourse. These are themes of marriage as a reward, marriage as sacred, individual impotence, and individual agency, each of which carries a distinct set of implications that bear on the evangelical social reality.

The fantasy theme of marriage as a reward is reminiscent of purity culture, particularly as the culture constructs marriage to be a reward for abstinence (Welcher 79). The notion of a reward is inherently transactional, indicating that a person can earn marriage by engaging in or abstaining from certain behaviors. In this way, the fantasy theme contributes to a works-based view of relationships, drawing from broader works-based theology. This type of theology holds that individuals may achieve their own salvation through their actions. While this theology is generally opposed in evangelical circles, as evangelicals definitionally believe that salvation is conducted by God through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and not through personal achievement (Larsen and Treier 1), accepting marriage as a reward subversively promotes a focus on works. That is, if an individual is able to earn marriage through adequate character development, hard work, and abstinence, should she not be able to earn salvation through similar achievement? Rather, if an individual is unable to experience salvation except by the grace and blessing of God, as evangelicals believe, it should also be true that individuals should not be able to experience marriage, nor singleness, nor even life itself but by similar grace and blessing. In this

way, the fantasy theme portraying marriage as a reward is theologically inconsistent with traditional evangelicalism.

Along with this, constructing marriage primarily as a reward devalues the steps taken to earn marriage. That is, as an individual recognizes his need to be good enough or do enough in order to achieve marriage, the virtuous pursuits of character development, hard work, and abstinence become simply stepping-stones or items on a to-do list, and it is unlikely that he will engage such things for their own sakes. No longer does the individual do these things in order to please or glorify God; he does them out of a value for marriage.

On the other hand, the fantasy theme of sacred marriage hearkens back to traditional Christian conceptualizations of marriage and suggests a shift away from purity culture's constructions. While sex was overemphasized in purity culture, reducing marriage to a means to sexual intimacy and to a reward for abstinence, evangelical authors in recent years have emphasized a portrayal of marriage as an image of their beloved God and his beloved church. This view is historically and biblically accurate to the Christian tradition (e.g. Ephesians 5:22-25[3]), and it articulates the significance and holiness evangelicals ascribe to marriage.

Implications of this view include a high value for both members of the married couple and a focus on God within the married relationship. First, as evangelicals construct marriage to be sacred, they do so because they consider it to represent God's eternal, covenantal love for his people and Jesus Christ's relationship with the church. Obviously, evangelicals hold a tremendously high value for God, for they consider God to be the creator of all things (Genesis

[3] "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

1:1[4]) and his son to be the savior of the world (John 3:17[5]); thus, to compare one member of the marriage relationship to God is to attribute that member with significant value. Further, as evangelicals believe that God sacrificed his son for his chosen people out of love (John 3:16[6]), to compare the other member of the marriage relationship to those chosen people suggests that the member is worthy of a similar love and commitment. This emphasis, too, demonstrates a high value for that member of the marriage relationship. Beyond ascribing immense value to both marriage partners, the comparison of a marriage to God's relationship with the church serves to focus the marriage on God. Where considering marriage as a reward necessarily focuses on the individual, who is or is not doing enough to earn a marriage, a sacred marriage centers on the nature of God that is made known through the relationship. The marriage thus becomes about God, not only about the individuals within it.

A fantasy theme of impotence within romantic relationships also chains out within evangelical dating books. This theme, like that of marriage as a reward, aligns with problematic notions within purity culture, particularly the objectification and dehumanization of individuals and the contribution to rape myths. Implications of this fantasy theme and its attendant notions are significant. Primarily, as they include objectifying language and invoke rape myths within their dating books, evangelical authors reinforce such issues within relationship contexts. That is, as some readers look toward evangelical dating books for advice on relationships, they might internalize fantasy themes that construct romantic partners as objects consumed for pleasure or normalize sexual aggression. This fantasy theme could thus perpetuate consumerist approaches

[4] "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."
[5] "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."
[6] "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

to relationships, sexually aggressive behavior, and even rape. Further, other readers might internalize notions of their own objectification, thus giving up their own agency, their own ability to choose, act, or resist such problematic behaviors.

Directly opposing the notion of impotence, a fantasy theme of agency also chains out within evangelical dating discourse. This theme emphasizes an individual's choice, power, and ability to act, drawing from prevalent concepts within the Protestant Bible. Passages such as Ezekiel 18:20[7] and 2 Corinthians 5:10[8] indicate a common Christian notion that personal decisions and actions are significant and consequential and will one day be judged. Considering that evangelicals are definitionally bibliocentric, it is no surprise that members of that community have accepted and internalized such a message. The fantasy theme of personal responsibility in romantic relationships, then, is an expression of a deep, fundamental evangelical belief.

Implications of this view are considerably more positive than implications of the theme of impotence. Where impotence divorces an individual from choice, will, and power, agency restores such things. When both members of a romantic relationship have agency, both are empowered to decide who they want to be, how they want to act, and what they will accept while recognizing the ability of their partner to do the same. Within the fantasy theme of agency, relationships are not a dynamic of ownership and property but a dynamic of mutual empowerment. Mutual empowerment contributes to a high view of both members of the relationship, as neither is more powerful or more valuable than the other. Further, notions of

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[7] **"**The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself."

[8] "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

empowerment could prevent instances of sexual violence perpetuated by purity culture's notions, instead promoting visions of healthy and respectful romantic relationships.

Emergence of a Rhetorical Vision

Clearly, these four fantasy themes are inconsistent. Considering marriage as sacred is to consider it transcendent, holy, and a picture of God's relationship with His people. While this view is reverent, the fantasy theme presenting marriage as a reward is transactional, implying that marriage can be earned or won based on achievement. Further, a fantasy theme presenting agency in relationships empowers individuals, where a theme of impotence dehumanizes people, divorces them from power, will, and choice, and subjects them to their own impulses and the impulses of others. As the fantasy themes of marriage as a reward and of impotence chain out, appearing in and consumed through modes of evangelical dating discourse, they solidify in the community's rhetorical vision to create a formidable and potentially dangerous social reality. In contrast, as the fantasy themes of sacred marriage and agency chain out, they construct God as the focus of romantic relationships and empower individuals. Thus, the evangelical rhetorical vision concerning dating is complex, encompassing multiple perspectives on marriage and the individual.

This complex rhetorical vision is characterized by two factors, the first being a longing for marriage. As marriage is considered sacred and holy, it is depicted as something desirable to a pious evangelical. As marriage is also constructed as a reward, an evangelical who yearns for sex (or other forms of marital intimacy) might also yearn for marriage, sex's conduit. In both cases, marriage becomes highly attractive within evangelicalism. The second factor of the rhetorical vision reflects inconsistencies in evangelical perceptions of individual power. While some narratives and metaphors depict individuals as agentic, able to act, choose, and control the

outcomes of their lives, others depict them as impotent, diminishing not only an individual's power but also one's identity as a person. The existence of both of these fantasy themes–agency and impotence– reflects contrasting and inconsistent opinions within the evangelical community.

It is impossible to reconcile these contradictory fantasy themes, yet all exist simultaneously within the evangelical rhetorical vision concerning dating and romantic relationships. However, if one pair of themes was to be privileged above the other, the construction of marriage as sacred and individuals as agentic would take precedence over the other themes. Fantasy themes of sacred marriage and agency were apparent in all books sampled within this paper, books that were published between 1997 (*I Kissed Dating Goodbye*) and 2020 (*Relationship Goals*). Because these themes have chained out across the literature and over a period of twenty-three years, it appears that they have sustained prominence and remain relevant in the evangelical rhetorical vision today. However, the pair of fantasy themes characterized by marriage as a reward and individual impotence has not chained out so thoroughly; these themes appear in three books within the sample, published in 1997 (*I Kissed Dating Goodbye*), 2000 (*I Gave Dating a Chance*), and 2012 (*And the Bride Wore White*). Due to the limited scope of these two themes, and because they have not been invoked consistently in the past decade, they appear to have a looser hold on the evangelical community.

The fading of these two fantasy themes–marriage as a reward and individual impotence– throughout the 2010s suggests a shift away from notions reminiscent of purity culture. Multiple factors may be at work in driving this shift. First, evangelical authors might be wary of incorporating purity culture's more problematic concepts. Purity culture has been criticized extensively over the past decade (e.g. Moon and Reger in 2014, Klement and Sagarin in 2017, and Welcher in 2020), so authors, perhaps fearing that their work will be criticized and their

messages thus discounted or ignored, might avoid invoking such contentious and controversial themes. Second, authors might consciously recognize that purity culture was flawed. Thus, instead of emphasizing the movement's notions of rewards, objectification, and rape myths, the authors might choose to emphasize the sacredness of marriage and the agency of individuals because they believe such ideas align with the heart of evangelical Christianity. Whether due to one of these reasons, or to another entirely, a shift is present in the evangelical rhetorical vision of dating and romantic relationships. Perhaps this shift will continue over the next decade, further distancing evangelicals and their dating literature from the significant issues of purity culture.

Conclusion

Limitations within this research do exist. Primarily, the sample used for this study included seven evangelical dating books; including more books within the research may have revealed other fantasy themes or further developed fantasy themes noted within this paper. Further research may conduct a similar study with a greater scope of literature. Likewise, a fantasy theme analysis could be conducted with different mediums of evangelical discourse, such as sermons, blog posts, magazine articles, or podcasts, or with survey or interview responses in order to glean further perspectives on dating and romantic relationships within the evangelical community.

Despite these limitations, this paper has elucidated four fantasy themes and a rhetorical vision concerning romantic relationships within evangelical Christianity. This research is significant on one hand because evangelical Protestants comprise about a quarter of the American population ("Religious Landscape Study"); thus, this paper provides insight into the rhetorical visions and social realities that inform the attitudes and behaviors of a substantial

percentage of the American populace. If a quarter of the nation's population is accepting particular messages about singleness, sex, dating, marriage, and agency, understanding the content and implications of these messages sheds light on the ways in which a significant amount of Americans consider and engage in romantic relationships.

Along with this, such insights may contribute to deeper understandings of motivation within evangelical activism groups, particularly activism surrounding issues of sexuality. For instance, understanding the evangelical conceptions of marriage allows insight into the community's treatment and activism concerning homosexual practices, unions, and marriages. Likewise, understanding the community's conceptions of individual agency allows insight into their treatment of and activism concerning abortion, an issue commonly seen as related to an individual's ability to make decisions on behalf of her own body. Such topics may also be avenues for future research.

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