Happily Ever After: Gender, Romance and Relationships in the Christian Courtship Movement

Dissertation

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By

Elizabeth Lauren Shively, M.A.

Department of Comparative Studies

The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:

Tanya Erzen, Advisor

Mary Thomas, Advisor

Hugh B. Urban
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Abstract

Courtship, the practice of forgoing traditional dating in favor of trusting God to choose your mate, has been gaining ground among conservative Christians in the U.S. since the early 1990s, but it has received little attention in scholarship or popular media. It emerged among Christian homeschooling families who were looking for an alternative to traditional dating, which they feared would bring sexual and romantic temptations into the lives of their children. The movement gained widespread appeal with the 1997 publication of Joshua Harris’ courtship confessional I Kissed Dating Goodbye, which went on to sell nearly a million copies. Combining ethnographic fieldwork, including interviews with courtship participants, and analysis of courtship media, including the movement’s popular self-help books, this dissertation is the first to examine the courtship movement comprehensively, including its authors and proponents, media, theology, discourses and participants.

This dissertation traces the growth of courtship alongside the Christian homeschool movement, arguing that the movement owes its growth to the proclivity of homeschool students to be both enterprising and voracious readers. Despite participants’ reluctance to embrace the ‘courtship’ label or endorse a particular Christian denomination, I identify courtship’s ties to Christian Reconstructionist theology, and I argue that courtship authors’ reluctance to enforce a courtship formula has actually
contributed to the successful spread of courtship principles, including parental involvement, physical and emotional purity, and dating only with the purpose of marriage in mind.

It also identifies characteristics I call luminous femininity and radiant modesty. Girls in the courtship movement strive to exude a mix of warm nurturing, service, hospitality and radiant modesty, a glowing purity. Contrary to critiques that equate traditional femininity with passivity, I find that girls in the courtship movement actively embrace traditionally feminine characteristics as part of a bargain in which they trade nurturing care for financial security.

The Christian courtship movement defines romance as a mix of emotional intimacy and carefully orchestrated gestures of love, and advocates encourage Christian singles to save romance for engagement and marriage with one person. What courtship participant miss out on in quantity of romantic partners, they hope to make up in for in the quality of a beautiful “God-written” romance. This understanding of romance is consistent with messages of love and intimacy in the broader culture, which suggests that rather than sex, romance is the real prize worth waiting for.

This dissertation also explores the relation of courtship to the institutions of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family. By prioritizing family relationships, familiarizing potentially romantic relationships, practicing for future families, surveilling the courtship process in the context of the family home and moving directly from one nuclear family structure to the next, courtship attempts to recuperate what courtship proponents understand as God’s plan for romance and family, including young marriage, early parenthood and large families.
Dedication

For Jon and Jack
Acknowledgments

On the mantle above the fireplace in my living room is a handmade card, covered with the bright crayon drawings of the little girl whose family I stayed with briefly during my dissertation research. The card reminds of the short time I spent immersed in a small community of courtship families, of long days at a local church, of riding past Iowa cornfields under a big blue summer sky with her big sister. It reminds me that, truly, the best part of my seven-year graduate school journey was the time I spent getting to know the people whose stories make up this dissertation. I thank them for their participation, their interest and their hospitality. Beyond these participants, my work was made possible by grants from the Stella Hiltner Fund for Comparative Religious Studies and the Arts & Humanities Graduate Research Small Grants Program.

I thank my dissertation committee, not only for providing insightful feedback, but for serving as models of the kind of scholar I hope one day to be. I feel fortunate to have been paired with an advisor, Tanya Erzen, whose work shares not only an interest in the same topics I find compelling, but also a commitment to engage with audiences both inside and outside the academy. My advisor Mary Thomas helped me navigate the rough waters of graduate school with a mix of warmth and practicality, serving as both a cheerleader and the kindest of deadline enforcers. I thank Hugh Urban for his comments on this project and for serving as a teaching mentor. I would not have made it this far
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Most importantly, I thank family—my mom, who never gets tired of answering my distressed phone calls and my dad, whose passion I have inherited, my brothers, and their wives, who have become my best friends as we’ve made our way in the “real world,” building families and careers, my husband, Jon, who has seen me through the worst and celebrated with me the best moments for a decade, and our son Jack, who reminds me every day what it’s all about.
Vita

2004............................................B.A. Journalism, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

2007............................................M.A. Women’s Studies, The George Washington University

2008 to present..............................Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Comparative Studies, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Comparative Studies

Other Fields: Women's and Gender Studies; Sexuality Studies; American Studies; Religious Studies
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Introduction: A Textbook Courtship

Even through grainy home video footage, the sense of anticipation is palpable. The last strains of a processional hymn that accompanied the bridal party down the long aisle fade out, and there is a moment of stillness in the church before the sanctuary swells with the opening chords of Wagner’s “Bridal Chorus.” The large crowd, filling row after row of crowded pews, stands to greet the bride. The double doors open wide, and Lindsay, linking arms with her father, begins her long-anticipated walk down the aisle.

It had been two years since Lindsay, 23, watched 23 year-old David’s hero on-screen role in a locally-produced Christian film, and her feelings for her longtime acquaintance deepened.¹ When she saw the film, she says, “My heart turned toward David. And I couldn’t bear the thought of him being with someone else.”² But because Lindsay was committed to the tenets of Christian courtship, she could not make the first move. Courtship is the practice of eschewing dating in favor of trusting God to choose your mate. Christian singles committed to courtship principles avoid romantic relationships until they feel that God has revealed to them that they are in the “season of

¹ I have changed the names and identifying details of the courtship participants I met and interviewed to protect their anonymity. I refer to courtship authors and other public figures by their actual names. Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted material is taken from fieldnotes and interviewed transcripts I collected from 2010 to 2012.
² David and Lindsay’s story is taken from my interview with the couple, as well as the DVD they produced for guests at their wedding.
marriage.” Young men initiate the courtship process, and fathers grant final permission for a daughter to pursue a relationship.

Before, and in the early stages of courtship, couples attempt to “guard their hearts” from emotional intimacy, which they believe should be saved for engagement and marriage. Sexual abstinence before marriage is presumed. Many couples refrain from sharing physical intimacy beyond hand holding during courtship, and instead “save their first kiss” for the wedding day. While they are single, Christian young people committed to courtship should practice relationship skills with siblings, parents and Christian friends and devote their single years to service and ministry, such as overseas mission trips.

Why Courtship?

I will explore in detail some of the key dynamics of the Christian courtship movement in later chapters, but David and Lindsay’s story conveys the basic principles of the Christian courtship movement, including dating with the purpose of marriage in mind, parental involvement and physical and emotional purity. Courtship, the practice of forgoing traditional dating in favor of trusting God to choose your mate, has been gaining ground among conservative Christians in the U.S. since the 1990s, but it has received little attention in scholarship or popular media. Courtship is mostly practiced by Christian homeschool graduates, an admittedly isolated subgroup, but the movement’s currency is much more far-reaching and enduring.

When I was a college student, my best friend told me about a popular Christian guy she knew who staved off girls’ romantic overtures with the explanation that he wanted to “guard their hearts.” If he didn’t think the girl was marriage material, he didn’t want to lead her on by dating her casually. Ten years later, I teach college courses on
religion at a large research university, and my Christian students often say that they don’t want to just “date for the sake of dating.” Instead, they practice “dating with a purpose” with the purpose being marriage. This intense focus on marriage resonates with the courtship movement, which promises to guide Christian adolescents and young adults through the often stormy seas of singlehood to the safe harbor of a happy marriage.

Christian abstinence campaigns have been the subject of much recent media attention. From examining the rituals and discourse of purity rings and purity balls to critiquing the failure rate of purity pledges to exploring the politics of teaching abstinence in schools, Christian kids’ attempts at purity have been a sexy topic among researchers and journalists. The courtship movement and its cultural significance, meanwhile, have been largely unexamined.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

My first chapter establishes a history of the Christian courtship movement and its ties to American homeschooling. I argue that the movement, which emerged as the first generation of Christian homeschool kids was coming of age, has grown largely through

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popular books like *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, and owes its growth to the proclivity of homeschool students to be both enterprising and voracious readers. Many participants are wary of using words like “courtship” or even “Christian” for fear of being perceived as legalistic, so instead they use phrases like “dating with a purpose” or “Christ follower.” While participants are wary of labeling their relationship to God or to each other, I find that there are intimate ties between the courtship movement, Christian homeschooling, and strains of Christian Reconstructionist theology.

In Chapter Two, I identify characteristics I call luminous femininity and radiant modesty. Girls in the courtship movement strive to exude a mix of warm nurturing, service, hospitality and a glowing modesty. Contrary to critiques that equate traditional femininity with passivity, I find that girls in the courtship movement actively embrace traditionally feminine characteristics as part of a bargain that in which the trade nurturing care for financial security.

In Chapter Three, I examine the role of romance in the Christian courtship movement. The movement defines romance as a mix of emotional intimacy and carefully orchestrated gestures of love, and advocates encourage Christian singles to save romance for engagement and marriage with one person. What courtship participants miss out on in quantity of romantic partners, they hope to make up for in the quality of a beautiful “God-written” romance. This understanding of romance is consistent with messages of love and intimacy in the broader culture, which suggests that rather than sex, romance is the real prize worth waiting for.

Finally, in Chapter Four I explore the relation of courtship to the institutions of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family. By prioritizing family relationships,
familiarizing potentially romantic relationships, practicing for future families, surveilling the courtship process in the context of the family home and moving directly from one nuclear family structure to the next, courtship attempts to recuperate what courtship proponents understand as God’s plan for romance and family.

While sexual abstinence campaigns encourage teens to save sex for marriage, they do not advise singles on how to manage sexual desire in the meantime, and the average age of first marriage is on the rise. Courtship addresses this dynamic by encouraging younger marriage. Because of its connections to Reconstructionist and Quiverfull theology, courtship is also associated with instances of young parenthood and large families. In this chapter, I argue that conservative Christian trends like courtship and covenant marriage can be seen as efforts to shore up the institution of heterosexual marriage in response to the growing success of the Marriage Equality movement.

The Season of Marriage

Lindsay, the bride who fell in love with her on-screen hero, shares her love story on a DVD the couple produced to share at their wedding. She talks about the moment her “heart turned” toward him. “As a girl, I needed to let David be the initiator,” she explains. Still, Lindsay could not deny her growing feelings for David, so she talked with her parents about her desire. With a belief that prematurely indulging in romantic feelings is harmful to a believer’s future marriage and that crushes and daydreams flourish in the privacy of one’s heart, the courtship movement advocates that Christian singles disclose
their crushes to their parents. Lindsay’s parents assured her that they thought highly of David as a potential suitor, but that she had to wait for him to pursue her.

**Abstinence Campaigns**

Media studies and religious studies analyses like Heather Hendershot’s “Virgins for Jesus” and Sara J. Moslener’s “By God’s Design” suggest that Christian abstinence campaigns employ therapeutic discourse to compel Christian teens to commit to abstinence. Specifically, Moslener finds, therapeutic discourse cultivates a desire for Christian teens to enter their marriages free from emotional struggle. Like Moslener, Dagmar Herzog, in her book *Sex in Crisis* finds that abstinence movements “blame emotional ambivalences and complexities” of marital sex as well as “incomplete satisfaction” in marriage on premarital sexual experiences. This dissertation finds that courtship discourse takes the therapeutic message of abstinence campaigns one step further. As we will see in Chapter Three, courtship self-help books teach that not only is physical intimacy before marriage dangerous, but that premature emotional intimacy will also have lasting negative consequences in marriage.

Beyond this analysis of therapeutic language, studies of sex, religion and youth like Christine J. Gardner’s *Making Chastity Sexy* and Mark D. Regnerus’ *Forbidden Fruit* critique abstinence education for failing to acknowledge the needs of single young

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adults. This project suggests that the courtship movement addresses this problem. In Chapter Two, we will see how courtship responds to anxieties about “prolonged singlehood,” and provides young women with a purpose for their single years, and as I find in Chapter Four, courtship also provides a structure for facilitating young marriage.

**Her Hand in Marriage**

At the same time that Lindsay was divulging her crush to her parents, David, unbeknownst to her, was seriously contemplating beginning a courtship with the woman he one day hoped to marry. He just didn’t yet know that woman was Lindsay. It had been several months since he had told his own parents that he felt he was ready to begin a courtship. He asked them what steps he should take to be prepared for courtship and marriage, and they instructed him to share with them a list of attributes he hoped to find in his future wife. They thought Lindsay fit the bill, but David didn’t immediately sense the connection. He struggled for a while to reconcile their recommendation with his own thoughts and feelings. “I really doubted that there could be someone who was right for me,” he says.

In the meantime, Lindsay, discouraged by David’s lack of interest, was still trying to relinquish her romantic interest in him. She confesses, “After David graduated and got a good job, I hoped that he would talk to my dad about starting a courtship relationship.” After consulting again with her parents, Lindsay decided to take drastic measures to quell her feelings. In order to avoid more hurt, she says, she decided to avoid seeing David and

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to “kill” her dream of courting and marrying him. But she didn’t kill her dream of marriage altogether. She trusted that God would bring her future husband into her life when the time was right. There came a time, she says, when “All the men I thought could be prospects were taken away. God was doing this. I really felt it was not a coincidence, and that I just needed to wait on his timing.”

David was also attempting to surrender his love life to God’s hand. “I continued to pray for wisdom and seek after God’s plan,” he said. Then, suddenly, everything changed. David remembers the exact day that his love story took a dramatic turn. “There was one morning—April 20, 2008—that I felt like I woke up and all of a sudden had a lot of peace that Lindsay was the person that I was supposed to pursue and court,” he says. “It was miraculous. I felt a lot of peace about it.” David wasted no time putting into action what he believed was God’s plan for his love life. At lunchtime that same day, he announced to his parents and nine siblings that he intended to ask Lindsay’s father for permission to court his daughter.

The two arranged to meet several days later for a late lunch at a local Mediterranean restaurant. David chose the time and location with the hopes that the restaurant would not be too crowded. David says he planned to open with small talk and ease into the courtship conversation, but his nerves got the best of him. He stared at the pita bread and olive oil dip and he says, “I wasn’t going to be able to eat a bite until I told [Lindsay’s father] why I was there. So, I just went ahead and jumped right in.” He told her father that he had prayed about the decision to court Lindsay, and that he felt like God was leading him in that direction. He said that he had also asked his parents for input and that his intention was to marry Lindsay if both families agreed. In turn, Lindsay’s father
inquired about David’s financial situation and whether he would be able to buy a home and support his daughter. David, who runs a software writing company with his father, assured him that he was, and Lindsay’s father said he was in favor of the relationship. But, ultimately, it was up to Lindsay to decide.

**Dating With a Purpose**

David and Lindsay, who were 23 when they married, call their relationship a textbook courtship, and with good reason. Their eight-month romance and engagement reflects all of the major tenets of the courtship movement. David waited to pursue a romantic relationship until he felt he was in the season of marriage, meaning he felt emotionally and spiritually ready to be married within the year and, more practically, he was prepared to financially care for a wife and future children. In accord with the evangelical belief that men are designed by God to be the spiritual head of their families, Lindsay, for her part, let David initiate the relationship.

They also agree that a young man should ask a girl’s father for permission to begin a courtship. Often, as was the case with Lindsay, a father will give his blessing for the relationship, but leave the decision up to his daughter. It is common for the families of courting couples to know one another, or at least know of one another through church or homeschool networks. This was true for David and Lindsay, and when David asked his parents for advice about courting, they thought Lindsay would be a good match. It is also common for courtship authors to suggest that a couple seek confirmation about their
relationship from family members and spiritual mentors, as David and Lindsay did with her uncle and pastor. But courtship marriages are not arranged marriages.

A Courtship Begins

Lindsay, who had long been struggling with her romantic attraction for David, could hardly believe this turn of events. She told her father to deliver her answer to David—she would be honored to begin a courtship with him. The families decided to meet the following weekend to share their expectations for how the courtship would progress. David and Lindsay’s parents would weigh in on questions like whether the couple would go out on unsupervised dates and what level of physical intimacy would be appropriate during the courtship. It would also be the first time David and Lindsay would be seeing each other since their courtship had begun.

“It seemed like Saturday would never come,” Lindsay remembers. “I couldn’t sleep at night. When David walked through the door, what would it be like?” They’d met years ago in a speech class organized by their local homeschooling collective, and growing up they had spent many Friday afternoons together playing sports and games in each other’s backyards. But they had never spent time alone together. Courtship advocates discourage Christian singles from forming intimate friendships with members of the other gender, and David and Lindsay were no exception, so their first meeting as a courting couple held special significance for them.

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9 Sarah Mally, Before You Meet Prince Charming, 50.
Events like these that mark a couple’s courtship are also significant because what single Christians miss out on in quantity of dates or length or engagement, they hope to make up for in the romantic, sentimental quality of their brief courtship. Many couples carefully orchestrate each step of their courtship, engagement and wedding and take great care to remember every detail. In David and Lindsay’s case, the couple produced a DVD that pairs a recording of their wedding ceremony with a homemade documentary detailing their courtship and marriage.

On the DVD, David speaks excitedly about that first meeting at Lindsay’s family home. “I can remember the first moment when my parents and I walked in the door, and she was just radiant,” he says. “She was glowing.” David’s description of Lindsay as “radiant” and “glowing” is reflective of the ideals of courtship culture. By cultivating characteristics like hospitality, nurturing, kindness and warmth, girls are supposed to emit an active, radiant wholesome purity, one that will be attractive to a future husband. Not only was Lindsay beautifully radiant, but David says that from that first meeting, she demonstrated that she was a good fit to fill the supportive role that a wife plays in Christian marriages. David, who was a little nervous about sharing a meal with his future in-laws, was attempting to play it safe by talking shop, but his technical jargon was going over the head of his dinner companions. Lindsay stepped in to interpret his complicated thoughts. “She was already playing a really neat role in being my helper,” David says.

**Girl Power and Girls’ Agency**

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Education scholar Marnina Gonick and sociologist Anita Harris argue that sociological, psychological and education studies of girlhood tend to categorize girls as “at-risk,” “victims,” in “crisis” or “Ophelias,” after Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia*. Alternatively, they are defined in opposition to these at-risk girls as “can-do” girls or girls with “girl power.” Both approaches tend over simplify the complexities of girls’ experience, painting them as either fully succumbing to or fully resisting social pressure.

According to Anita Harris in *Future Girl*, categories like can-do and at-risk also place undue emphasis on a girl’s ability to choose success without recognizing the obstacles presented by race, class and other systemic oppressions. Gonick writes, “One the one hand, ‘Girl Power’ represents a ‘new girl,’ assertive, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of femininity. On the other hand, ‘Reviving Ophelia’ presents girls as vulnerable, passive, voiceless, and fragile.”

In addition to reinforcing categories like can-do and at-risk, some feminist studies of girlhood define can-do girls as being in opposition to traditional performativity of femininity. Pomerantz, Currie and Kelly’s “Sk8er girls: Skateboarders, girlhood and feminism in motion” and Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz’s “The geeks shall inherit the earth: Girls’ Agency, Subjectivity and Empowerment” evaluate agency in terms of “resistance” to “emphasized femininity.” Authors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards challenge feminists’ association of agency with resistance. In *Manifesta: Young*...

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Women, Feminism, and the Future, the authors specifically challenge the notion that girls who find pleasure in traditionally “feminine” dress or play are necessarily anti-feminist. In contrast to the “geeks” and “Sk8er Girls,” who were seen to have agency when they performed “transgressive identities” against “emphasized femininity,” Baumgardner and Richards argue that “believing that feminine things are weak means that we’re believing our own bad press.” In Chapter Two, this dissertation introduces the concept of luminous femininity, which also challenges the equation of agency with resistance. I find that girls who embrace luminous femininity, a warm mix of nurturing, hospitality, grace and elegance, are striving to embody traditional femininity, but are also actively engaging in a bargain to ensure their successful futures.

Sweethearts

After dinner, the pair memorialized their first meeting as an official couple by posing together for pictures on the porch swing. Over the next few months, David and Lindsay documented every step of their eight-month courtship. Their courtship DVD features photos of the summer vacations they shared with each other’s families, one in the verdant mountains of Canada and another on a white-sand Florida beach. These photos are overlaid with a narrative that details each phase of their relationship. Lindsay talks about going with family members to see a local musical, which was the first time they sat together in a public setting and identified as a couple. “That was really awesome,” she says. David remembers the first time he introduced Lindsay as someone he was courting. “I told my grandpa she was my sweetheart,” he says.

Religious histories suggest that engagement with popular media and culture have always been critical to American evangelicalism and that evangelicals have consistently been at the leading edge of media use, even as believers and Christian institutions hold fast to their salvation theology and perceived trusteeship of American culture and values. The courtship movement reflects this dynamic, and this project demonstrates the degree to which Christian Reconstructionist values like patriarchal authority and the centrality of the nuclear family home have permeated mainstream evangelicalism through the successful use of media like courtship literature.

Randall Balmer’s *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America* and Balmer and Lauren F. Winner’s *Protestantism in America* document the beginning of evangelicalism’s tradition of savvy engagement with popular culture and media during the First Great Awakening. A message of personal conversion and affective piety was spread in the early eighteenth century by itinerant preachers, the most famous of whom was George Whitfield, who used his training in theater to perfect his open-air, revivalist sermons. Balmer and Winner also identify evangelical engagement with media in the powerful preaching and singing practiced in the open air revivals of the Second Great Awakening, where leading figures of the era were also noted for their ability to draw people into these meetings and keep their attention by using creative measures. These measures included “protracted meetings, allowing women to pray or exhort in public, and the ‘anxious bench’ for wavering auditors, who could come forward and contemplate the

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choice between heaven and hell.” Histories of American Christianity suggest that all of these technologies helped evangelicalism thrive in the competitive atmosphere of the free market enabled by the disestablishment of religion in the First Amendment.

In the middle and late nineteenth century, evangelicals demonstrated innovation in their approach to evangelizing in the urban spaces. John M. Gigge and Diane Winston argue that the “success of evangelical Christianity found in growing urban religious movements is directly related to the creative ability of its leaders to develop spiritual practices based on popular entertainment and to challenge traditional gender roles.”

Some evangelists adapted the techniques of popular vaudeville entertainers, while organizations such as the Salvation Army drew attention because many of them were women operating in a traditionally male urban space. Christian Smith’s American Evangelicalism finds that during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, liberal theology began to challenge the importance of “individual conversion to Christ in favor of structural reforms,” and Darwinian evolution began to challenge the traditional evangelical worldview. The Fundamentals were published between 1910 and 1915 and

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16 Randall Balmer and Lauren F. Winner, Protestantism in America, 225
19 Christian Smith, American Evangelicalism, 5.
became a symbolic reference point for the “fundamentalist” movement. In keeping with evangelical tradition, these theological statements embraced contemporary media and were mass published in pamphlet form.

While a lack of formal institutions, a retreat from the public sphere, and a reputation for being anti-intellectual might have indicated that fundamentalism was fading from relevance in the early twentieth century, historian Joel A. Carpenter argues in Revive Us Again that it was these very characteristics that allowed fundamentalism to regroup and re-emerge in the 1950s as a “neo-fundamentalism” or “new evangelicalism.” Fundamentalists may have lacked formal institutions, but Carpenter argues that they effectively built a network of more informal ones, such as publishing, radio broadcasting and conferencing, and “each kind of collective undertaking gave fundamentalism another layer of infrastructure as a movement.” Despite success with media and infrastructure building, there grew to be dissent amongst fundamentalists. A group of more moderate believers formed the National Association of Evangelicals in the early 1940s. The denominational pattern of religious organizations was decreasing, and the NAE represented this change by offering membership to congregations, individuals, independent ministries and even publishing houses and radio programs. Another significant evangelical phenomenon born in the early 1940s was Youth for Christ. Youth for Christ rallies were the latest revision of the open-air evangelical revivals of the great

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23 Ibid, 154.
awakenings. According to Carpenter, “From a fundamentalist perspective, the rally leaders were borrowing from the very dens of the devil—Hollywood and Radio City—to accomplish the Lord’s purposes.”

The decades that followed the emergence of new evangelicals are largely seen as “belonging” to the liberal, progressive forces of American culture which enabled the civil rights movement, the second wave of feminism and the anti-war and anti-materialist counter-culture. Historian Lisa McGirr complicates this narrative, arguing that during the 1960s and ‘70s evangelicals gathered political steam and solidified a “common sense” theology which combined economic liberalism with social and cultural conservatism. In keeping with the nineteenth century alignment of Christian and capitalist values, evangelicals in the 1960s and ‘70s reveled in consumer culture and emphasized the possibilities of individual success. Magnificent evangelical churches like Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral linked religion with consumer spectacle, and new Christian television networks like The Trinity Broadcasting Network and the Christian Broadcasting network took off.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, evangelicalism maintained a foothold in the marketplace among members of Generations X and Y by engaging with popular culture and media forms. *In Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth*

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24 Ibid, 162.
26 Ibid, 249 and 253.
27 Ibid, 255.
Culture, Eileen Luhr examines the growth of the Christian heavy metal genre.\textsuperscript{28} Lauren Sandler’s Righteous: Dispatches form the Evangelical Youth Movement and Flory and Miller’s volume Gen X Religion document the role that media and cultural expressions like tattoos, films, and Goth and Hipster subcultures play in evangelical youth communities.\textsuperscript{29} Sandler noted how one pastor used a clip from the film Braveheart to illustrate a sermon. As this example reinforces, the pop cultural media that generation X grew up on are especially visual, and the importance of this sense is embodied by, but not limited to, the phenomena of MTV and video games.\textsuperscript{30}

This review of evangelical history demonstrates the critical role that media have played in American evangelicalism. Formats like open-air revivals and youth rallies, media ranging from radio to television, and influences as diverse as vaudeville stages, skate parks and tattoo parlors, reflect how evangelicals have adapted to popular cultural influences and used popular media forms to spread the salvation message. This dissertation reveals how the Christian courtship movement, with its popular self-help books, conferences and retreats, continue this evangelical legacy of media and popular culture engagement. In Chapter One, we will explore the role that these media play in the movement. We will also examine the role that homeschool media like workshops and

\textsuperscript{28} Eileen Luhr, Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2009).
Building Up Intimacy

For David and Lindsay, the next phase of the relationship involved frequent letter writing. Soon after beginning their relationship, the couple had to be apart briefly when David went away for a business trip, and Lindsay left early for a family vacation. Courting couples often struggle with the temptation to become too close too fast, and courtship authors often blame social media and technology like cell phones, in part, for facilitating inappropriate emotional intimacy. David and Lindsay, like many courting couples, decided to slow things down by choosing old-fashioned letter writing over texting or e-mailing. When it was Lindsay’s turn to be away, David sent her with a bundle of letters – one for each day she would be gone. Before writing the letters, though, he checked with her father to make sure he approved of the gesture.

Beyond her parents’ approval, David and Lindsay sought the advice of other important family members and spiritual advisors. Lindsay’s uncle told them, “When you get married, you get married for life.” He made sure, David says, “We weren’t going to be getting divorced, no matter what happened.” Before they walked down the aisle, they completed premarital counseling with the pastor of Lindsay’s church. At their first dinner, gathered around the table with both sets of parents, the families talked about theological perspectives on questions like family planning and hashed out the details of the courtship. “It was important that our parents were there to talk about the relationship,” Lindsay said. ‘That way, we were all on the same page. Our parents were behind us one hundred percent.” Both families agreed that the courtship should not be an experiment or classroom curriculum play in circulating ideas about Christian courtship and Christian Reconstructionist values.
an effort to test the relationship waters, as a traditional dating relationship might be. Instead, they expected the courtship to end in marriage.

Many courtship families use this initial meeting as an opportunity to lay out what their expectations are for a courtship relationship, including how long it should last and even what level of physical intimacy is appropriate for each stage of a relationship. David knew he wanted to wait to have any physical contact until they were engaged. The families supported his goal, as well as his plan to gradually step up the physical intimacy as their engagement progressed. “There were certain things they said I could do,” Lindsay later said in an interview. “Like his arm around me, or I could put my head on his shoulder and different things. He was trying to make it so that everything that we did was special. And it was kind of a build-up thing.”

**Girls, Sex and Desire**

Studies of girlhood by sociologists, psychologists and feminist activists suggest that girls’ bodies become projects and become sexually objectified for others. In *The Body Project*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg argues that girls make the body into an all-consuming project with beauty and diet rituals. In *The Purity Myth*, Jessica Valenti argues that obsession with purity actually serves to fetishize girls’ virginity. She also identifies the prevalence of hypersexualized images of girls in media.

Paradoxically, while girls are increasingly associated with their bodies and with outward displays of sexiness, they are also assumed to be lacking sexual desire. In her

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article, “Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls’ Struggles for/with Sexuality,” Deborah L. Tolman argues, “Sex education curricula name male adolescent sexual desire; girls are taught to recognize and to keep a lid on the sexual desire of boys but not taught to acknowledge or even to recognize their own sexual feelings.” 33 Jessica Fields’s Risky Lessons: Sex Education and Social Inequality similarly finds that sex education in schools fails to address desire or pleasure in terms of girls’ sexuality.34 As I argue in Chapter Two, the courtship movement attempts to prevent girls from becoming sexually objectified by asking them to adhere to strict standards of modesty. However, the movement’s emphasis on modesty and purity intensify the male gaze and the fetishization of girls’ virginity.

**Dating with a Purpose**

Both Lindsay’s and David’s families were clear that, short of discovering some unexpected critical area of incompatibility, the relationship would end in marriage, and they were comfortable with David and Lindsay “going public” with their relationship. On this point, there is a difference of opinion amongst families who practice courtship. Some view courtship as a serious trial period to establish a couple’s compatibility, something they might call “dating with a purpose,” where the purpose is marriage. Courtship authors and participants on this side of the spectrum are likely to say that a courtship that doesn’t end in marriage is not necessarily a failed courtship. Others say that a young man should only initiate a courtship if he is certain that he has found the woman God wants him to

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marry, and the girl should only accept if she feels the same. From this perspective, a courtship that didn’t end with a walk down the aisle would be unexpected.\textsuperscript{35}

In either case, courtships are focused on the goal of marriage in a way that traditional dating relationships are not. Advocates say that one of the characteristics that make courtship superior to dating is that when people are dating, they might attempt to avoid serious or controversial topics, while courting couples try to establish their compatibility from the beginning, tackling issues like family planning, gender roles and theology.\textsuperscript{36} While couples tend to talk about this period of their courtship as a time of discussion and compromise, in practice it sometimes becomes a process of normalization where one partner, often the girl, has to change her stance on an important topic like birth control to match the conservative values associated with the movement. We will explore this process more in Chapter Four.

Courtships also tend to be shorter than dating relationships. Because they fear that prolonged courtships might lead to sexual temptation, most courtship authors advise that once a couple beings courting, they marry within the year. Most of the couples I interviewed followed this timeline and were married within a year of the start of this courtship. The amount of time a courting couple spends alone together differs based on a family’s values and a couple’s wishes. Like David and Lindsay, some couples are chaperoned everywhere they go, while others are comfortable going on dates alone. Those who choose to be accompanied by chaperones often do so not because they don’t

\textsuperscript{35} Anthony Padgett, \textit{Journey to Agape}, 133.
trust themselves to behave appropriately, but because they heed the caution to avoid the “appearance of evil,” an often quoted guideline that appears to be a loose interpretation of the New Testament scripture that advises, “Avoid every kind of evil.”

**Getting to Know You**

While the couple vowed to reserve all physical affection for engagement and marriage, their emotional intimacy sparked right away. Early in the courtship, David says he realized, “that I was past the point of return, and that I was desperate. And that if Lindsay decided that she didn’t think I was the one that I was in big trouble.” David realized that, despite the courtship mantra that Christian singles should guard their hearts from emotional intimacy until they are engaged, he had already fallen in love with Lindsay. Like most of the courtship couples I met, David and Lindsay said that it was impossible for them to get to know one another—with the goal of one day marrying—without becoming emotionally vulnerable and romantically invested.

David and Lindsay say that the family vacation they shared in Canada was an especially nurturing time for their budding romance. During the first week of the trip, before David joined her family, Lindsay and her father stole away together one afternoon for a special fishing tip. In their wedding DVD, as we watch a photo of Lindsay and her father in a side embrace dissolve to a photo of them walking down a gravel path, fishing poles in hand, Lindsay explains this ritual as an annual “date” she shared with her father each year before she married. The following week, David stepped in as her date, and the two spent evenings together reading their Bibles as the summer sun set over the nearby

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37 1 Thess. 5:22, NIV.
38 See Joshua Harris’s chapter “Guard Your Heart” in I Kissed Dating Goodbye, 137-149.
lake. A daytime canoe trip, Lindsay says, gave the couple “a chance to really be open and share our desire to be a part of each other’s lives.” Lindsay’s transition from dating her father one week to dating David the next is symbolic of the courtship principle that suggests a single young woman should pass from the authority and protection of her father to that of her husband.39

But not everything about their Canadian vacation was idyllic. The weather was colder and rainier than normal for July, and one day, after a rough night of little sleep, Lindsay said she was struggling to keep her attitude in check. “I had never been emotional around David before,” she says. “This was really challenging, because I wanted to be perfect, and at that moment, I was so vulnerable.” For his part, David says he could tell Lindsay was struggling, but, he says, “I felt like I couldn’t reach out to her the way I wanted to because all I had were words, and I couldn’t put my arm around her and tell her that it was going to be okay.” This brief rough patch came as a surprise to Lindsay. Because she had been committed to the path of courtship rather than traditional dating, she had no experience managing the emotional intricacies of romantic relationships. Still, she says both the highs and low points of the trip prepared her emotionally for the next step in their relationship. After a few short months, she was ready to be engaged. “When we got back, I was so ready for David to propose,” Lindsay says. As she had done a year earlier, when she felt herself falling for David, Lindsay resigned herself to waiting. “I was a little anxious about when it was going to happen, but I just needed to be patient and let him do the initiating.”

The Engagement

This time, David felt the same way. Following the family vacation, he said, “I wanted to propose as soon as I could.” In the weeks leading up to the proposal, David coordinated an elaborate plan to make the proposal as special as possible, while keeping his designs under wraps, in order to surprise Lindsay. On a Saturday afternoon in August, David invited Lindsay to join him at a local park with his parents. His sister, Ruth, came along with camera in tow under the guise of taking pictures of her parents for their wedding anniversary. But, as Lindsay would later discover, “it was a ploy.”

The couple walked through the park for a while, admiring a garden full of summer flowers with David’s parents before David suggested the two of them take a walk by themselves. Like many courting couples, David and Lindsay were careful about spending much time alone together, for fear nurturing premature emotional or physical intimacy or opening themselves up to speculation that they might be doing so. “I thought it was strange to go off on our own,” Lindsay said. “But I trusted David.”

Because there are photos documenting each stage of the proposal, it seems David’s sister must have accompanied them, as well, though she likely trailed them without Lindsay’s knowledge. David had mapped out the ideal spot for the big moment, but when they arrived it turned out that corner of the park was full of visitors. “So I improvised,” he said, “and found a nice shady spot down by the creek.” And he told Lindsay he had something he wanted to share with her.

“At that moment, my stomach dropped,” Lindsay said. David told Lindsay that he loved her. It was the first time in their relationship that either had made such a confession. In another effort to guard their hearts, couples like David and Lindsay often
reserve this sentiment for engagement. “Next,” Lindsay says, “David got down on one knee and held my hand and looked into my eyes and proposed, and I said yes. And then he sang me a wonderful song.” As the couple narrate the details of their fairy tale engagement for their DVD, we see photos documenting each step of the proposal, including a close-up of the ring. David says that as he gave the ring to Lindsay, he explained the significance of its careful design. For the center stone, he says he picked a peridot because the intense green “matches the color of her eyes.” And because it is his birthstone. “And I had them shape it like a heart, and I told Lindsay when I gave it to her that she would know whenever she wears it that she has my heart.”

After the proposal, the two walked hand in hand, for the first time, through the park. Fulfilling a long-held dream of Lindsay’s, David had arranged for a tandem bicycle, adorned with a garland of purple flowers and a cardboard heart on the handlebars, for them to ride. “I always thought it would be neat to ride a bicycle built for two with the guy that I was going to marry,” Lindsay says. As the two rode around the park, with David in front steering the bike, they immediately began talking about their wedding plans. While courting couples often talk about critical compatibility questions like finances, family planning and gender roles for marriage, they are supposed to avoid indulging in romantic fantasies about their life together, including the wedding day. Now that they were officially engaged, David and Lindsay were free to hold hands, say I love you and make concrete wedding plans.

Their special day wasn’t over just yet. David had also arranged for his father to bring his grandfather’s red Mustang convertible to the park. They drove to David’s family home with the top down on the sunny summer evening, changed into more formal
attire and drove to dinner to celebrate. Though they’d stepped up the romance in their relationship with hand-holding and confessions of love, the couple still chose to be accompanied by chaperones for their date, so their mothers rode in the backseat of the convertible and their fathers joined the group for dinner at the local Olive Garden. “It was just so special holding hands, since we had waited so long to do that,” Josh said. “And it was also really neat, because it was like a triple date. Just Lindsay and I and her parents and my parents—the three of us being couples together.”

After dinner, the three couples returned to David’s family home to enjoy a dessert that his sister had prepared for them. This moment, too, was captured by the camera, and we see pictures of the happy couple nestled on the sofa amongst David’s many younger siblings, his baby sister curled up in this lap. Later that evening, Lindsay had returned to her parents’ home. She thought the day’s excitement was over, and she was going over the day’s events with her mother. “I was just exhausted, but so happy,” she said. “I remember being sprawled out on my parents’ bed and my mom being there, and there was a knock at the front door.” As it turned out, David had planned one final special event to complete their memorable day. He handed Lindsay a bundle of love letters that he had begun writing for his future wife long before his interest in Lindsay had sparked. Now, Lindsay could savor the letters and the romantic affection she had longed for as a teenager, when she wondered if a guy would ever like her. “This day was just an amazing day that I will always treasure in my heart,” Lindsay says.

_Brothers and Sisters in Christ_

From the moment David consulted his parents for advice about whom he should court until Lindsay’s father gave his blessing—and his thoughts on submission and
authority—at the altar on their wedding day, the couple’s families were very involved in the courtship process. Courtship, which overlaps with family-centric institutions like Christian homeschooling, reinforces the idea of the heterosexual, nuclear family as the primary social organization of conservative Christianity. Courtship is marriage-focused. Advocates emphasize that in a courtship, in contrast to traditional dating, the couple get to know one another in the context of family.\(^4\) During their courtship, David and Lindsay shared family vacations, and they celebrated their engagement at David’s home, surrounded by his younger siblings.

In the courtship movement, family relationships are charged with romance, and potentially romantic relationships are reframed as familial ones. We will examine these familial relationships in greater detail in later chapters. Courtship authors often advise young Christians to spend their single years practicing for marriage and parenthood by spending time with and caring for their siblings. Like Lindsay, many girls share a tradition of going on “dates” with their fathers, and until they begin a courtship Christian singles are supposed to view other-gender friends as “brothers and sisters” in Christ.

The struggle to keep friendships platonic, like Lindsay’s attempt to “kill her dreams” of marriage to David, are examples of efforts to guard your heart, a common courtship phrase made popular by the success of Harris’ *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. In courtship, the goal is for couples to not only remain sexually abstinent until marriage, but also to avoid romantic, emotional intimacy outside of engagement and marriage. Many—though not all—of the couples I met kept their goal of saving their first kiss for marriage,

but they found that avoiding emotional intimacy was not possible, or even desirable. Like David, they fell in love quickly and said if the courtship hadn’t worked out, they would have been heartbroken.

**Wedding Planning**

Now that they were officially engaged, David and Lindsay relished the excitement of their newfound physical closeness. Even handholding, because it had previously been verboten, was thrilling. “Our worlds revolved around each other,” Lindsay said. “Whenever we were together, it was easy to lose sight of everything else, so it was hard to balance other relationships during this time.” It was also an effort, David said, to keep God at the center of their relationship. And on top of the effort it took to stay connected to the outside world, the couple had a wedding to plan in just four short months. Typical of courtship relationships, their engagement lasted only as long as it took to organize the big day. Once engaged, couples are usually in a hurry to walk down the aisle, and planning a big wedding in a short time frame is often stressful. “When I was in the courtship phase, I was always looking forward to getting married,” Lindsay said. “But once you get engaged…it’s just so consuming.”

David and Lindsay, who lived at home with their families until they married, also had to find a home in which to start their lives together. On top of wedding planning, the pair condensed the search, inspection and home buying process so that they had the keys to their new home in hand by the time they married. Because both had worked full-time and lived at home before marrying, they were able put almost half down for the modest split level they bought in their hometown. In fact, they credit the courtship system, which advocates that Christian singles live at home with parents, with helping them accomplish
this milestone. “Waiting to start a relationship was really worth it,” Daid said. “It helped us grow spiritually in waiting on God’s timing. It also allowed us to build financial stability, because we were able to save more money while we were single.”

And, Lindsay adds, “We were able to trust each other more, because we hadn’t been hurt in other relationships.” These comments, which accompany the last minutes of David and Lindsay’s DVD, reflect the couple’s courtship motto, which they hope will serve as an example to young Christian singles. “The good things in life are worth waiting for,” they say. And the couple hopes their courtship, which they describe as “textbook,” is proof of this maxim. These closing sentiments also reflect some of the key cultural dynamics that the courtship movement draws from and amplifies: the desire for security and permanency in relationships and the tendency to view important life choices, including choices about marriage and family, as investment decisions wherein the goal is to minimize risk and maximize emotional fulfillment. We will explore these dynamics further in Chapter Three.

**The Wedding Day**

Though they found it challenging to attend to the details of wedding planning and home buying while the strong pull of romantic intimacy tempted them, David and Lindsay managed to pull their plans together in time for the big day. They didn’t want to turn away anyone, so they didn’t ask for RSVPs, but the couple estimates they had more than four hundred guests for the wedding and cake and punch reception, including family, friends and members of both of their home churches. Even though the crowd was unusually large, all was silent as Lindsay’s father walked her down the long aisle of the church. David stood anxiously at the altar as Lindsay made her way to meet him, dressed
in a medieval inspired gown with long, draping sleeves, a lacey veil and loose, curled locks. The large sanctuary was decorated for Christmas with ropes of green garland and white twinkle lights.

The first members of the large bridal party had entered to a piano version of “Great Is They Faithfulness,” a hymn that echoed the hopes and promise of many courting couples who relinquish their romantic dreams to God and in hopes that he will write them a beautiful love story. At the end of the aisle, Lindsay’s father doesn’t give her away with a nod and a quick kiss, but instead lingers for the first fifteen minutes of the forty-five minute service. Her father, who is several inches taller than Lindsay’s groom, is an imposing third presence at the altar. The pastor opens by reminding the couple and their guests that they are not merely making vows to one another, but that they are also making a covenant with God. He then addresses the audience, asking them to support the couple to keep their promises to God and one another. “Make sure they tow the line and stay true to the covenants they made.”

Sex, Religion and Politics

In *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life*, religious studies scholar Kathleen M. Sands asks why sex and reproduction are the central concerns of religion, and why “family values” comprise the entire political agenda of religious conservatives.\(^4^1\) Recent scholarship in sociology and religious studies attempt to address this question through studies on the intersections of religion, sexuality and politics. They find that questions of sex and policy take on such importance in the American political

landscape because these issues represent much more than the regulation of sexual relations. In Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance, Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini argue that “by regulating sex, the state attempts to regulate family life and American social relations more broadly.”

Others argue that issues related to sexuality resonate with and amplify other anxieties. In her study, which examines questions related to homosexuality in two Christian congregations, Dawne Moon found that “homosexuality touches on issues of contemporary concern: struggles between science and morality, changing family patterns, identity politics.” In Shameless: Sexual Dissidence in American Culture and in The Stranger Next Door, the story of a small town’s battle over the status of gay men and lesbians as a minority group, Arlene Stein argues that in times of uncertainty, sexuality becomes a symbol upon which citizens project anxieties about the changing world around them. In Talk About Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States, Janice M. Irvine argues that opposition to sex education is powerful because it “fuses cultural anxiety about sexuality with panic about childhood sexuality.” This research suggests that for American Christians, issues related to sex also signify questions about family life and social institutions, and they resonate with far reaching anxieties related to social change. In a similar way this study suggests that the phenomenon of courtship signifies

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more than just a path for sexual purity. In Chapter Four, I suggest that, like covenant marriage practices, courtship functions to reinforce the institutions of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family.

**Authority and Submission**

In the next step of their wedding ceremony, Lindsay’s father addresses the sanctuary of friends and family. David and Lindsay want to use their courtship and marriage as an example to others of the benefits of saving sex and intimacy for marriage, so her father shares some of the details of the couple’s commitment. “She’s never dated and never kissed anyone,” he announces. “And neither has David.” He continues, his hand placed on Lindsay’s arm. “Since I’m placed in somewhat of authority over her, I want to give her a blessing.” He begins with an anecdote from her childhood illustrating the themes of authority and submission that run through his blessing. “Many times when you were little we had to spank you,” he says. “That isn’t political. You were a rebellious little girl, but look how you turned out—so great.” Eventually, Lindsay reformed her precocious ways. “Under our authority, you were submissive,” her father announces. “Do the same for David. Be under his authority.”

In comments she recorded in advance of the ceremony and now plays over the sanctuary’s sound system, Lindsay shares her commitment to purity and to her parents’ authority. She describes a heart-shaped locket she received when, as a teenager, she pledged to abstain from physical and emotional intimacy until she met her future husband. She also pledged to be submissive to her parents and, she says, “to allow my father to direct my decisions.” The locket’s blue color, she says, represents her virginity. Like the hinge that holds the token together, , “My family is the glue that keeps my heart
together.” She recites the words from her long-ago pledge. “Until I reach a marriageable age and my heart is pledged to my future husband,” she says, “I must guard it well.” She concludes by saying she has the heart with her—we can read this both literally and figuratively—to give to her husband.

Her father takes the floor again and shares how David won his daughter’s heart. He starts by saying, “You make a lot of money. You have a savings. You bought a house.” He also shares that David comes from a wonderful family and that his daughter is in love with David. But, he says, those reasons were not enough to give his blessing on the marriage. “The main reason I’m giving you this heart is because you humbled yourself before me,” he says, describing how David asked for his permission to court his daughter and for her hand in marriage. David’s father also speaks, reinforcing the couple’s desire to serve as models of successful courtship. “I hope I can point to you guys and say, ‘You want to see it done right? Look at David and Lindsay.’”

After reminding them, once again, that God will hold them accountable for the covenant they are making, the pastor leads the couple through their vows. David promises to be Lindsay’s leader, her provider, her protector and her confidante. He also vows to serve her, to cherish her and to lay down his life for her. Lindsay, in turn, promises to submit, respect and follow David and to be his helper and his best friend. Finally, the long-awaited moment arrives. The pastor grants permission for David and Lindsay to seal their vows with a kiss. The pair, like many courting couples have vowed to save their first kiss for the wedding day, and they share this first intimate exchange in front of family and friends. The kiss is brief and less dramatic than might be expected for all the anticipation that courtship participants place on this moment. The long ceremony
winds quickly to an end as the pastor proudly announces, for the first time, the new Mr. and Mrs. The dream that was born years earlier, when she first watched David in his heroic on-screen role, came to life that day for Lindsay.

**God-Written Love Stories**

Eric and Leslie Ludy, two of the most famous figures in the Christian courtship movement, have penned several books about romance, purity and relationships, including *When Dreams Come True*, a book that chronicles their own courtship and engagement. The call their relationship a “God-written” romance. Josh Harris followed his super successful *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* with *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship*, which shares details of his romance with his wife, Shannon. Their stories serve not only as examples of romance to which Christian singles aspire, but they have also created a model for young couples to emulate. The Ludys describe each step of their courtship, including Eric’s carefully orchestrated proposal, complete with a soundtrack and a surprise appearance by Eric, who was supposed to be far away in another state. Harris feigns masculine ignorance about the details of his wedding, but still describes his gorgeous bride coming down the aisle with a smile peeking out under her veil.

They write about the dramatic moments in their relationship—when they feared they might be alone forever, when one pined for the other but feared unrequited love, when he wasn’t sure how he’d pay for a diamond ring—and how God faithfully intervened in each situation. In *Boy Meets Girl*, Harris shares a quote, borrowed from the book *The Mystery of Marriage* that he and his wife included on their wedding invitations.

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“Real love is always fated. It has been arranged before time. It is the most meticulously prepared of coincidences. And fate, of course, is simply a secular term of the will of God, and coincidence for His grace.”^48 Christian singles in the movement learn to expect that God will write them a love story, complete with dramatic surprises and romance.

Paradoxically, like David and Lindsay, courtship couples also see their relationships as elaborate productions. David orchestrated a day-long engagement event when he proposed to Lindsay, and the couple documented their relationship with hundreds of photos and produced a video to tell their love story with the hope that it would serve as an example to other Christian singles. As is typical in courtship weddings, the couple incorporated elaborate symbolic rituals—like the fathers’ blessings and Lindsay ritual giving of her heart—into their wedding ceremony. The name “courtship” suggests that the movement is marked by a sense of nostalgia for an era that never really was, a time when romance was pure and the family home was always a place of warm nurturing.^49 The movement’s penchant for old-fashioned letter-writing plays to this nostalgia.

This sense of misplaced nostalgia extends to literature, as well. Courtship authors laud Jane Austen characters and other 19th century literary heroines as models of comportment, modesty and purity, while ignoring the complex social milieu these

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characters inhabited. Like other Christian media promoting purity, courtship books are saturated with fairy tale imagery of fair maidens and heroic knights on white horses. Books written for girls are often covered in pink and floral images. And like the kiss that wakes a princess from a long slumber or turns the frog into a handsome prince, kisses and other special firsts are afforded great significance. David and Lindsay speak excitedly about their first meeting as a courting couple, their first public outing together, their first “I love you” and their first kiss, and they made sure to document each of these firsts with photos.

**Happily Ever After**

At their very first meeting as an official couple, David identified Lindsay as a good “helper.” During her father’s blessing, Lindsay was publicly chastised for her struggle against authority as a little girl and warned of her duty to come under her husband’s authority. When they exchanged wedding vows, he promised to lead, protect, and provide while she promised to submit, respect, and follow. As their pastor reminded them, these words weren’t just promises to each other, but the sealing of a covenant with God. Both David and Lindsay were twenty-four when they married, making her four years older and him one year younger than the average age of married couples I interviewed. Lindsay, who was one of three women I interviewed who had completed college degrees, left her job as a math teacher months before the big day in order to devote herself to wedding planning full time.

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50 Leslie Ludy frequently refers to Jane Austen heroines in her books like Leslie Ludy, *Set-Apart Femininity: God’s Sacred Intent for Every Young Woman* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2008) and in her online magazine, *Set-Apartgirl.*
When I interviewed her and David two years after their wedding, David still worked with his father and their software company, Lindsay was a full-time at-home mother to their nine-month old baby, and the couple was expecting a second baby soon. David and Lindsay’s marriage illustrates many of the demographic trends of the courtship movement. While Lindsay did earn a college degree and work for a few years as a teacher, the courtship movement does not endorse college or careers for young women, but tends to encourage them to aspire to being wives and at-home mothers. Girls in the courtship movement also tend to marry at a younger age than the national average.

**Evangelicalism and Gender**

Studies of American evangelicalism have explored the ways that gender, agency and submission function among older, married couples. Like the women in Brenda Brasher’s *Godly Women* and Marie Griffith’s *God’s Daughters*, my research suggests that, while not contributing a progressive feminist politics, young women in the courtship movement find a sense of personal peace and purpose by actively embracing conservative ideals. However, my research demonstrates that the ideals of evangelical womanhood are often established long before marriage, when girls learn to embody what I call luminous femininity, a mix of warm nurturing, and radiant modesty. John Bartkowski finds in his *Remaking the Godly Marriage* that, in practice, married evangelicals embrace more egalitarian values than marriage discourse advocates. Similarly, participants in the

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51 Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin, *So Much More*.
courtship movement report that they fail to practice emotional purity as successfully as courtship literature advocates.

**Home and Family**

Like David and Lindsay, courtship couples, once married, are not likely to use birth control. All of the couples I interviewed were expecting, or had welcomed, their first baby by the time of their first wedding anniversary. Like many in the movement, the couple strives for debt-free living. They paid for half of their first home in cash, and they carefully budget expenses in order to afford Lindsay’s role as an at-home mother. They expect to have a large family, and Lindsay expects to homeschool them, as both her mother and David’s mother did before her. And they hope that, one day, their own children will choose courtship themselves.

**Christian Youth**

Contemporary scholarship about Christian youth identifies them as soldiers in an army of God, and this project expands this argument beyond the realm of culture wars and movement politics. In her book *Righteous*, Sandler describes the “Disciple Generation” as a “Christian Army” fighting a culture war. In *God’s Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America* Hanna Rosin describes students who aspire to affect change by attaining high office in Washington. In *The New Faithful*, journalist Colleen Carroll writes about young Christians who participate in local and national politics, leading pro-life rallies across the country and interning on the Hill for

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conservative members of congress. But by marrying young and aspiring to have large families, courtship participants affect political change in a way that is consistent with the movement’s Reconstruction values—they attempt to change the nation one large family at a time. As we will examine in Chapter Four, the courtship movement make a political statement about the central importance of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family.

**Fairytales**

David and Lindsay call their courtship textbook, and from David’s first approach to the engagement to the wedding, it was. But the couple stop short of saying it was perfect. They found their feelings did not follow the predictable patterns that the courtship books outline. Despite their best efforts, they fell in love fast, and they realized quickly that following courtship guidelines did not free them from having bad days and ugly feelings. As we will discover in later chapters, David and Lindsay learned from friends the heartache that happens when a courtship fails, and they will share that even with a fairytale courtship, happily ever after comes with limits.

**Method**

My method was informed by the courtship movement itself—as we will see in Chapter One, media, especially how-to books like *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, have been integral to the growth of courtship, so it is important to look to these texts to understand the key tenets of the movement. However, when a movement exists to prescribe a kind of behavior, as courtship does, it is critical to consider how participants incorporate the

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movement’s discourse into their experience. So, in addition to analyzing the movement’s popular how-to books, I sought to discover how young women and couples experience courtship for themselves. Christine J. Gardner’s *Making Chastity Sexy* and Sara J. Moslener’s “By God’s Design?,” which examine Christian abstinence campaigns have used a similar mixed methodology of textual analysis and ethnography.\(^{57}\)

Over the period of a year, I interviewed twenty courtship participants, including married couples who had practiced courtship and Christian girls who hoped that courtship would someday help them meet and marry their future husbands. I also conducted ethnographic research at courtship and purity conferences and homeschool conventions, mostly in the Midwest. I started locally interviewing several courtship couples, including the husband and wife ministry team of Anthony and Kimberly Padgett. Anthony, who wrote and published a courtship book, *Journey to Agape*, runs Courtship in the Covenant Ministries with his wife. In addition to the ministry, Anthony works full-time outside of the home and Kimberly homeschools the couple’s two older children. In addition to producing a regular newsletter, on the weekends the couple occasionally hosts their Radical Royal Romance seminars at local churches. The Padgetts’ ministry goal is to spread the message of courtship to those outside Christian homeschool networks. In addition to interviewing the couple about their own courtship, I attended two of their weekend seminars.

I had been reading and tracking courtship media since the early stages of my graduate school career. I quickly learned that the courtship movement was intimately connecting with Christian homeschooling, so I attended several local homeschool conventions in order to observe and get a better sense for the dynamics of this subculture. I attended the Indiana Association of Home Educators (IAHE) Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana in January of 2010, the Midwest Homeschool Convention in Cincinnati in April 2010, and the Christian Home Educators of Ohio (CHEO) Convention in June 2010. I chose these conventions for their geographic proximity to my home. However, many of the vendors and speakers who attended these events (especially the large Midwest convention) also attend similar events across the country, so my experience at these conventions might have been very similar in another part of the country. I also used these conventions as networking opportunities to meet people who might be interested in sharing with me their courtship stories.

I met the “abstinence lady” Michelle, who we will learn about more in Chapter Two, at the Midwest convention, and I later interviewed her at the CHEO convention. I met courtship author Sarah Mally at the IAHE convention. I had first learned about her book, Before You Meet Prince Charming, while watching the TLC reality show 17 Kids and Counting about the Duggar family, whose older children are advocates of Christian courtship. When I learned Sarah would be attending a nearby homeschool convention, I contacted her, and we met to talk about courtship and about her ministry for Christian girls, Bright Lights. Sarah also agreed to let me attend a pair of her Bright Lights events in her hometown of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and she generously introduced me to several married couples who shared their courtship stories with me. I also attended a Do Hard
Things event hosted by Alex and Brett Harris, the younger brothers of the leading
courtship author, Joshua Harris, who wrote *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and *Boy Meets Girl*.
I ended my research with a weekend *Set-Apart Girl* retreat for Christian young women
hosted by Leslie and Eric Ludy, the husband and wife team behind some of the
movement’s most well-known titles, at their ministry’s campus in Windsor, Colorado.

Aside from the casual conversations I had with people at conventions and retreats,
I interviewed six married couples who had courted, six single young women and two
married women whose husbands were not available to participate in interviews.\(^{58}\) I
interviewed married couples together, and our conversations lasted, on average, two
hours. Because these interviews were so lengthy, it was not practically possible for
married couples to set aside additional time to be interviewed alone. I arranged my first
set of interviews (a series of three couples who lived in a small town in Ohio), by calling
a homeschool father who had published a list of courtship sources online. He put me in
contact with his married son, who introduced me to his brother and best friend, all of
whom had recently courted. The second large set of interviews (two married couples and
three single young women) were arranged with the help of Sarah Mally with friends of
hers in Iowa.

I found that this method of networking—starting with someone who had clear ties
to courtship and branching out from there—was effective, because interview participants
were recruited by people they knew and trusted. While this method did not draw from an
extremely diverse pool, I did find that by the end of my interviewing process, clear
themes were emerging amongst the participants, and I could begin to make claims based

\(^{58}\) For a chart of interview participants’ ages, marital status and hometown, see Appendix A.
on these themes. In addition, by getting to know two separate networks of courtship communities, I was able to compare and contrast to see what was similar and different about their approach to courtship. The couples in Ohio, for example, seemed to be more committed to the Quiverfull principle of eschewing birth control. However, all couples talked about the difficulty of “guarding your heart,” a concept we will explore in detail in Chapter Three, and almost everyone I met had read, at least in part, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. The single young women I interviewed were Michelle, Sarah and Grace Mally, several of Sarah’s volunteers at her Bright Lights event, and two other young women I met during my research year. In the highly gendered world of the courtship community, it was more difficult for me to gain access to single young men, so for this project I limited my scope to young women.

When I approached people for the first time, either at conferences, by phone, by e-mail or by mail, I generally had one of two distinct reactions. Either they were very interested in my research and excited to be a part of it, or they were wary, immediately questioned my motives and declined to participate. I was fortunate that many people had the former reaction (Sarah Mally, for example), and I understand why many had the latter reaction. For example, I tried contacting Joshua Harris through his church by e-mail, stopping by in person when I was in the D.C. area, and finally introducing myself and having a book signed at his brothers’ Rebelution event, where he politely told me he has too many such requests to respond to.

I suspect that, not only is Harris very busy, but that he is wary of being misrepresented or used. On his blog, Harris has shared a video where he talks about the
time he narrowly escaped being the victim of Sacha Baron Cohen’s deceptive comedy.\footnote{Joshua Harris. “Discernment and Ali G.” \textit{JoshHarris.com (blog)}. \url{http://www.joshharris.com/2007/07/discernment_and_ali_g.php}}

He also writes about Gina Welch’s \textit{In the Land of Believers: An Outsider’s Extraordinary Journey into the Heart of an Evangelical Church}.\footnote{Joshua Harris. “Gina Welch: In the Land of Believers.” \textit{JoshHarris.com (blog)}. \url{http://www.joshharris.com/2010/03/gina_welch_in_the_land_of_beli.php}} In her research for this book, Welch went undercover and used deceptive means, pretending to convert to Christianity to gain intimate access to parishioners at Jerry Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church. Harris discusses both of these events with humor, but I suspect his guard is up when it comes to outsiders. In addition, while the networking approach worked well for meeting interview participants, it wasn’t a guaranteed method. I had received a list of names and phone numbers of potential participants from one young woman I interviewed, and when I left a message at the first number, a young married woman called back to say she was sorry, but that her husband wasn’t comfortable with them participating in the research.

This fieldwork, which comprised events by most of the major players in the Christian courtship movement, as well as interviews with Christian singles and couples, gave me broad access to the wide spectrum of the courtship movement, as well as the depth of individual courtship stories. The combination of media analysis and ethnographic work revealed tensions between the rhetoric of the movement and the lived experience of its participants. Married couples reported that the courtship principle of guarding your heart from emotional intimacy before marriage was not possible, or even desirable. They said their emotional relationships moved quickly beyond the safe bounds of friendship into the heady territory of romantic feelings. This confession resonates with
a larger finding—while in theory courtship reflects a modern desire to eliminate risk from the experiences of romance, sex and marriage, participants say that when it comes to relationships, there are no guarantees.

My ethnographic work had another surprising finding, one that I hope guides the tone of this dissertation. I found that I had more in common with the courtship participants I met than I first expected I would. I was not aware of a phenomenon called courtship until beginning my graduate work, but I grew up attending conservative Christian churches, and I had even read Joshua Harris’s *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* as a teenager. At the time dating and romance were major preoccupations of mine and my friends, and I remember being dismissive of Harris’s suggestion that I just avoid these pleasurable endeavors altogether. With this background, I puzzled over my status in relation to the Christian courtship movement.

Was I an insider? Or did the intervening years, my distance from conservative Christianity, my commitments to feminism, and my position as a researcher make me outsider? It turns out this question mattered less than I feared it might. The real questions at the heart of this research are ones with which I strongly identify. How do people decide who to share their lives with? What does family look like? What markers measure success? What does romance mean? Does the reality of falling in love ever match the fantasy? Is there such a thing as happily ever after? These common questions served to remind me of the ways in which I was similar to the courtship participants who worked with me on this project.
Chapter One: The Movement

Although he needs no introduction in many Christian circles, Alex Harris is about to introduce his surprise guest speaker to the crowd of nearly six hundred teens and parents gathered for the Washington, D.C. stop of the Rebelution tour. The event, which Alex created with his twin brother, Brett, is a rally aimed at inspiring young Christians to rebel against what they perceive as American culture’s low expectations for teens. The brothers, who are students at nearby Patrick Henry College, the “Harvard for homeschoolers,” are not identical, but both are handsome with dark wavy hair and chiseled faces and their dark jeans and button down shirts are conservative but cool.  

The twins have spent the day alternately teaching, sharing personal stories and singing with the worship team, in the hopes of inspiring their audience to disprove the notion that teens are up to no good. Now, Alex hands the reigns of the conference over to featured speaker. “What Brett and I are doing,” he says, “in large part is standing on our big brother’s shoulders.”

Joshua Harris takes to the stage, large Bible in hand. The oldest Harris sibling, whom his brothers jokingly call the “shortest, baldest” of the six Harris brothers, now looks noticeably older than the fresh-faced young man who appeared on the back cover

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of his 1997 best seller, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Joshua, now a Senior Pastor at Covenant Life Church in nearby Gaithersburg, Maryland, opens his sermon with a joke about how his younger brothers might just become best-selling authors like him with their book *Do Hard Things*. Joshua’s message is less engaging than his brothers’ messages, more suited for the Sunday crowd at his megachurch than for this group of teenagers.

*I Kissed Dating Goodbye* made big waves with Joshua contemporaries when he wrote it in his early twenties, and it is still the biggest seller amongst the courtship crowd, but Joshua message has grown with him, and the fact that he doesn’t name the famous book in his biography on Covenant Life’s website suggests that he is trying to distance himself as the courtship guy. His most recent title, *Dug Down Deep: Unearthing What I Believe and Why it Matters*, examines questions of basic evangelical orthodoxy like redemption, sanctification and the Holy Spirit. After he closed the Rebelution event, Joshua stayed to sign copies of his *Dug Down Deep* for the crowd. Despite his choice to focus his words for the event on the message of *Dug Down Deep*, Joshua’s popular courtship books were also for sale, and many of the teens in the long line that wound past his book table in the lobby also clutched copies of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and its follow-up *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship*.

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Event goers could also purchase copies of the Alex and Brett’s book *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations* as well as a half dozen varieties of t-shirts emblazoned with the *Do Hard Things* slogan. This event displayed the success of the Harris’ family’s entrepreneurial spirit, a force that began with the siblings’ father, homeschool curriculum pioneer Gregg Harris. This chapter examines the role that this spirit, which is characteristic of homeschool families, contributed to the growth of the Christian courtship movement. It also traces the growth of the courtship movement through media like *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, its roots in Christian homeschooling and its theological ties to Christian Reconstruction theology. Finally, it considers courtship participants’ reluctance to over-identify with labels like ‘courtship’ and ‘Christian’ or with courtship “rules.” While this reluctance might signal casual or even “liberal” attitude about courtship, I argue that it actually reflects a stronger and more complex commitment to the principles of the Christian courtship movement.

**History**

David Crank’s family history is a perfect microcosm of the Christian courtship movement. In his self-published internet magazine, *Unless The Lord*, Crank describes how he and his wife began homeschooling their oldest child, Samuel, in 1982, then went on to homeschool all six of their children. Samuel, like his brothers, lived at home while attending college. He graduated in 1996, then courted and married a fellow homeschool graduate in 1999, and the couple had four children by the time David wrote his family’s biography in 2006. Samuel’s sister, Heidi grew up dreaming of one day becoming a

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missionary. In 1995, when she was 18, her parents and the parents of an unmarried, 24-year-old missionary began speculating that the two would make a good match. The couple courted and married in 1996. They had six children in their first ten years of marriage and live in Papua New Guinea, where they are missionaries.67

Like courtship itself, Crank’s family grew up alongside Christian homeschooling. He and his wife started homeschooling in the early 1980s just as that movement was gaining its stride. By the time their children reached dating age, David and his wife had heard about courtship, a new approach to romantic relationships, and Crank taught his children about this dating alternative from an early age. Both Samuel and Heidi courted and married as the courtship movement was gaining speed in the 1990s with the 1997 publication of Joshua Harris’ courtship confessional I Kissed Dating Goodbye, which is widely credited with putting Christian courtship on the map.

Harris’ book, which went on to sell nearly a million copies through Christian media leader Multnomah Publishers, is still the most popular book in the courtship movement. But it is not the only how-to book that emerged on the courtship scene in the mid-1990s. Books like Jeff Barth’s booklet Guidelines for Courtship & Preparation for Marriage (1995) and Doug Wilson’s book Her Hand in Marriage (1997) were self-published during this same time.68 Some speculate that Harris’ youth and good looks vaulted the book’s sales, especially among female readers. Harris’ name may have also carried weight with readers, especially those from Christian Homeschool families,

because his father, Gregg, was a pioneer of homeschool curriculum development in the early 1980s.

**Early Figures**

While *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* made courtship relevant to a broad Christian audience, David Crank writes that the movement can trace its roots back to the early 1970s and the teachings of Bill Gothard. Gothard, a former youth pastor, is known for the platform of his Institute for Basic Life Principles, which trains Christians on topics ranging from parenting to financial management. Gothard encourages Christians to practice courtship and homeschooling, to avoid debt and to eschew birth control in favor of trusting God for family planning. The Institute’s “character” training is influential in shaping Christian attitudes related to child raising, especially among homeschool families. 69 Thriftiness, self-control, faith and obedience are among Gothard’s list of “49 Character Qualities.” 70

According to Crank, Gothard laid the foundation of the movement with dating principles that were forerunners to the courtship movement. Among these principles was the recommendation that young men ask a girl’s father for permission to date and to marry her before discussing these steps with the young woman herself. 71 Crank writes that the first Christian teacher to label the new principles as “courtship” was Jonathan Lindvall, a California-based homeschool father who runs a ministry and family business,

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Bold Christian Living, which sells audio and video teaching on topics like “Youthful Romance,” “Godly Fatherhood” and “Financial Freedom.” By the early 1990s, others were teaching about courtship, especially within the homeschool community.

Homeschool mother Kathey Morrisey says she first began hearing about courtship in the mid 1990s at homeschool conferences. Morrisey runs Courtship Connection, the ministry through which she lectures and sells books and other media on topics like courtship, purity and “character.”72 Morrisey says Lindvall, Barth, S.M. Davis, and Jonathan “Little Bear” Wheeler were some of the first teachers to spread the courtship message. Davis, who is currently the pastor of Park Meadows Baptist Church in Illinois, has produced and sells a ten-part series of audio teachings on romantic relationships, including messages like “Commitment to Purity,” “Victory Over the Dating Spirit” and “God’s Plan for Finding a Mate.” Davis endorsed courtship early on in the movement, but has since embraced a more conservative concept called betrothal.73

Concerned that courtship relationships were beginning to mirror too closely traditional dating relationships, some Christian teachers have begun to advocate a betrothal model, which has an even stronger element of parental involvement, a stricter emphasis on marriage and no exit strategy. One homeschool mother I interviewed said she was familiar with betrothals in which a match was arranged, a girl consented, and the couple was immediately married. To prohibit breakups and premature emotional intimacy, the couple only got to know one another once they were legally married.

Courtship is distinct from betrothal, and most of the young singles, married couples and parents I met during my research would find the terms of betrothal too strict.

Another figure in the early courtship movement, Reb Bradley, father to six homeschool graduates and a former radio host, has been sharing his messages about family, parenting and courtship through seminars and books since the 1993 foundation of his Family Ministries. Richard “Little Bear” Wheeler, who earned his nickname as an adolescent in the Christian Boy Scout-like organization Royal Rangers, produced a series of audio teachings and a DVD, To Have and to Hold, with help from fellow homeschool leader and pastor Mark Holden. Wheeler is now a church pastor in Texas. He also founded Mantle Ministries, which has a publishing house and runs “living history” tours and adventure camps for families.74 Don Raunikar, a psychotherapist, speaker and author, wrote Choosing God’s Best: Wisdom for Lifelong Romance, which was published in 1998.75 Doug Wilson, who wrote the 1997 book Her Hand in Marriage: Biblical Courtship in the Modern World is pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. Wilson, who has also written books on marriage, masculinity, motherhood and parenting, also speaks on these topics at homeschool conferences.

The Homeschool Marketplace

As the courtship movement’s early history demonstrates, media like books, audio recordings, films and seminars have been integral to the courtship movement from its earliest days. This history also shows that the phenomenon of Christian courtship grew

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not through church congregations, but instead ideas about courtship circulated through convention workshops and networks of homeschool families. When I visited the Midwest Homeschool Convention in 2010, more than four hundred vendors filled the event center’s cavernous exhibit hall, and there were nearly two hundred workshops and panels scheduled for the three-day gathering. Scores of vendors sold homeschool curriculum and books for Christian living, including dozens of books about courtship, purity and abstinence. While some exhibitors sold products the designed themselves, others sold a mix of titles from on topics ranging from homeschool instruction to Christian masculinity. Exhibits are staffed by families well-versed in the rituals of the convention weekend. From setting up their portable bookshelves, to running credit card payments to reeling in overwhelmed convention visitors, exhibit vendors have honed their rhythm over years of convention-going.

Many of the exhibitors also speak at workshops during the convention. Kathey Morrisey of The Courtship Connection, who attended the 2010 event, moved between staffing her booth, filled with courtship materials, in the exhibit hall and giving presentations on topics like how to avoid teacher burnout, how to solve sibling squabbles and how to keep your children pure. Workshops and panels provide an opportunity for exhibitors to promote their ministry websites and to send shoppers down to their booths, while visiting a booth might inspire a homeschool parent to attend a convention seminar, where parents chat casually before and after each session starts. These same parents return home and share with other members of their homeschool co-op about an interesting workshop they attended or a good book they picked up at the conference. All
of this networking and commerce suggest that homeschool conventions are a lucrative marketplace for both goods and ideas.

This design makes it is easy to see how the idea of courtship spread quickly once it was introduced in the early 1990s. It is also easy to guess why so many homeschool leaders penned courtship books and recorded audio messages and films in the mid- to late-1990s. Because homeschool kids often have flexible schedules with lots of time for reading, and because their parents encourage curiosity and exploration, homeschool families are known for fostering voracious reading appetites amongst their larger-than-average size families. Conventions bring together these large families of readers with exhibitors hoping to sell their wares.

**Entrepreneurs**

Beyond a love for reading, homeschool families are also known for their entrepreneurial spirit. The Mally family from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, for example, together run a ministry called Tomorrow’s Forefathers, which they say is the “umbrella name” for conferences, curriculum and books the family produces, including the courtship book *Before You Meet Prince Charming* their oldest daughter, Sarah, wrote and *Making Brothers and Sisters Best Friends*, which all three Mally siblings wrote together. 76 The family travel to homeschool conventions, where they sell their books and other materials, and they also give presentations on topics like purity, sibling relationships and even “Credentials without College,” which advises homeschool teens to consider alternatives to the traditional four-year college experience. The family also runs a bookstore, Noah’s

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Archives, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The Mally siblings have designed each of the components that fall under the umbrella of the family ministry. The Botkin sisters, Anna Sofia and Elizabeth, who we will read more about in the next chapter, teach about femininity, purity and courtship, and they are authors of *So Much More* and the popular Visionary Daughters blog.\(^77\)

However, Joshua Harris and his two younger brothers are arguably the most famous enterprising siblings in Christian circles. The Harris brothers are the quintessential example of enterprising homeschool siblings. Gregg Harris, the homeschool curricula pioneer, is the patriarch of another successful entrepreneurial family, including Josh, who penned the courtship movement’s most famous book and Josh’s younger twin brothers, Alex and Brett. In 2005, the twins started a blog that turned into their Rebelution ministry and book whose title echoes the Rebelution’s rallying cry: *Do Hard Things*.\(^78\) The book, which resonates with the homeschool entrepreneurial spirit, urges teens to accomplish big things in their single years, from working on political campaigns to doing outreach in the global south or their own backyard.

**First Generation**

The thriving homeschool marketplace and the movement’s tendency to foster both initiative and creativity explain why so many parents and homeschool graduates have created family ministries and small businesses that produce or sell courtship books, films and other media. To answer the question of why the movement took off when it did, it is helpful to look at the growth Christian homeschooling in the United States. In his book


\(^{78}\) Alex and Brett Harris, *Do Hard Things*. 

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Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschool Movement,
sociologist Mitchell L. Stevens corrects the popular assumption that the movement is an exclusively Christian one. Stevens reports that the homeschool population encompasses a diversity of religions, including Mormons, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, pagans and atheists.⁷⁹

However, citing a 1995 survey of homeschool families by Maralee Mayberry and family, Stevens does find that a large majority of home educators identify as Protestant Christians. He also cites findings from the survey that reveal that more than eighty percent of participants believed that the Bible is the “inspired word of God and literally true,” that “eternal life is a gift of God, predicated on belief in Jesus Christ Further” and that “Satan is currently working the world.” ⁸⁰ Based on these findings, we can also determine that these Protestants are, more specifically, evangelical Christians.⁸¹

According to Stevens, many of the leaders of the homeschool movement became adults in the 1960 and 1970s and laid the foundations for home education in the early 1980s.⁸² In 1983, when Michael Farris founded what became the country’s most well-known advocacy organization for Christian homeschooling, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), he and his wife, Vicki, were already homeschooling their children, as was David Crank, who wrote later wrote about his children’s courtships in

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⁸⁰ Ibid, 12.
⁸¹ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3. Emerson and Smith define evangelicals as those who “hold that the final, ultimate authority is the Bible.”
⁸² Mitchell L. Stevens, Kingdom of Children, 6.
his *Unless the Lord* magazine.\(^{83}\) When Farris founded the HSLDA, law in his home state of Washington required that all children attend public or state-approved private schools. However, between 1985 and 1992, Stevens writes, twenty-five states passed laws exempting homeschool children from compulsory school attendance.\(^{84}\) He cites a U.S. Department of Education report which estimates that fifteen thousand children were homeschooled in the early 1970s, three hundred thousand in 1988 and as many as one million by the 1997-98 school year.\(^{85}\)

This evidence suggests that the homeschool movement experienced exponential growth in the 1980s. Students who were reaching school-age in the early to mid-1980s became teenagers in the 1990s, when the first books on Christian courtship were published. In this way, the courtship movement mirrors the growth of Christian homeschooling; as the first generation of Christian homeschoolers reached adolescence, their parents were a prime audience for the courtship message, an alternative to dating which is designed to keep kids from being exposed to sexual and romantic temptation before marriage. Some of the courtship families I met said that, because they homeschooled, they were already used to being subject to curiosity and disapproval from extended family members and from outsiders. So while courtship might seem strange and extreme to the uninitiated, these families were already used to being labeled as unusual.

**What’s in a Name**

The connection between the Christian courtship and homeschool movements seems clear to an outsider of both movements. The first generation of Christian

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\(^{83}\) Ibid, 3.  
\(^{84}\) Ibid, 14.  
\(^{85}\) Ibid, 10.
homeschool kids was coming of age in a subculture where learning and living takes place in the nuclear family home, and their parents were open to a new approach to romantic relationships—one that reinforced purity, abstinence, marriage and family. However, courtship authors do not claim a common heritage, and they do not see courtship as a movement, one that arose from a specific cultural and historical context. Instead, they view courtship as a return to the way romance used to work—before the development of the automobile in the 1920s created modern dating and the sexual revolution of the 1960s changed the terms of sexual engagement—or as God always intended it to be. And they tend to claim that their ideas about courtship and romance are inspired by God alone.

Authors follow the patterns common to the Christian testimony genre—they write about how they were living sinfully and about their moment of salvation or transformation through God’s grace. In her research on the Christian ex-gay movement, Tanya Erzen found that testimony played a critical role in transitional identities of ex-gay believers, marking the moment of the transformation of their religious identities with the hope that sexual transformation would follow. Testimony plays a similar role in the courtship movement. After a period of trying, and failing, to manage their romantic lives on their own, they relinquish control to God, who steers them in the direction of courtship. In I Kissed, for example, Harris writes that only when he was seventeen and fresh off a break up, did he ask himself, “Is this how it’s supposed to be?” After reading Elisabeth Elliot’s 1984 book Passion and Purity, which some credit as a precursor to the

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88 Joshua Harris, I Kissed Dating Goodbye, 17.
courtship publications of the ‘90s, and taking long walks and talking with his parents, his perspective changed. He decided that he wouldn’t date again until he was ready to marry; while he was single, he would kiss dating goodbye.89

This is how Harris frames his commitment in *I Kissed*— he writes that he is avoiding dating, or avoiding emotional and physical intimacy, until he is ready to pursue a relationship with the woman he intends to marry. He doesn’t actually use the word “courtship” until his follow up book, *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship*. Eric and Leslie Ludy, the husband and wife team who have written several books on romance, purity, masculinity and femininity, do not use the term ‘courtship’ either. But both *I Kissed* and the Ludy’s *When God Writes Your Love Story* echo courtship principles like purity, commitment and parental involvement. They are also the most popular books in the movement.90

It is possible that these titles owe their success to the fact that they avoid using the word ‘courtship.’ Many of the Christians I met who had practiced the movement’s principles were hesitant to classify their relationships as courtships. They related the term to a formula or a rigid set of rules and timelines, and feared that this formula didn’t address the diversity of personalities and circumstances that factor into the equation of a romantic relationship. They were more likely to identify with the Ludys’s language of surrendering the metaphorical pen (their personal agency) to God and letting Him craft a unique, romantic love story for them. Some avoided putting a label on the approach,
while others used terms like “dating with a purpose,” and many people said they had seen courtship that “looked more like dating” and dating relationships that “looked more like courtship.”

While Christian singles fear that ‘courtship’ suggests a process that is too strict and unyielding, parents have expressed concern that it is not distinct enough from dating. In his Guidelines for Courtship, homeschool father Jeff Barth addresses concerns about the courtship label. As early as 1995, when he published the booklet, some parents were concerned that courtships did not always end in marriage, and that these break-ups made the system too much like dating. They favored a stricter process like betrothal, one that provides no escape clause. However, Barth affirms his support of the original ‘courtship’ name, and makes the case for an argument that I heard frequently from many in the movement: there is an “element of risk” inherent to all important decisions and intimate relationships.91 Changing the name of the movement does not alter this reality.

Whether Christians embrace the word ‘courtship’ or think that the label connotes a process either too liberal or not strict enough, in practice, relationships played out in very similar ways. This reality, paired with an identifiable origin, discourse and leaders supports the notion that courtship ideas constitute a movement. All of the couples I met followed the primary courtship tenets of gaining a father’s consent, moving purposely toward marriage, saving the first kiss for the wedding day and attempting to guard the heart from emotional intimacy. And whether or not they followed strict timelines, which some courtship authors endorse, they mostly had short relationships and engagements, married young, and had children right away. The courtship practice that participants

91 Jeff Barth, Guidelines for Courtship, 2.
report the most variation on is the issue of chaperoning. While most couples, like David and Lindsay, spent very little time alone together during their courtship and engagement, some couples did go on dates without chaperones. The rare couples who did date without chaperones were the same ones who had had attended college away from home.

*Liberal & Conservative*

Popular authors like Joshua Harris and Eric and Leslie Ludy have a reputation for being on the “liberal” side of courtship. They talk more broadly about values and principles like guarding your heart from emotional intimacy and allowing God to “write your love story.” In contrast, authors like Anthony Padgett, whose *Journey to Agape* embraces the word ‘courtship’ and lays out definite steps and timelines for the courtship process, might be considered “conservative.” As these examples suggest, books tend to be seen as more conservative if they explicitly use the term ‘courtship’ and if they endorse rules and timelines for questions like how often a courting couple should see one another and how long their engagement should be.

‘Conservative’ authors and teachers launched the courtship movement, but it took flight with ‘liberal’ titles like *I Kissed, Boy Meets Girl* and *When God Writes Your Love Story*. These titles might owe their success to their young, attractive, relatable authors whose own love stories serve as inspiration models. The early books and audio teachings, in contrast, were all written by older, married homeschool fathers. The widespread success of the more recent titles might also be attributed to the authors’ wariness to identify strongly with denominational or other kinds of labels. This includes, in the case of

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the Ludys, the label of courtship itself. By avoiding rules and timelines for courtship as well as allegiance with any particular denomination, these titles appeal to a wide spectrum of evangelical Christians.

However, I find that despite their perception as liberal, these popular titles do an equally effective job as the more conservative titles of maintaining the norms of courtships. Consistent with Michel Foucault’s theories of power and regulation, ‘liberal’ courtship media are effective at facilitating the internalization of the rules of the courtship movement without the use of consistent external enforcement. In *Discipline & Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, Foucault theorizes that modern institutions like prisons are based on a model of power more effective and efficient than systems of the past. This system is based on a physical design (the Panopticon) that ensures prisoners remain “subjected to a field of visibility.”

In this design, which we can abstract form the physical spaces of institutions like prisons and schools and apply to more nebulous modern social institutions, it is always possible, but not certain, that a person is under surveillance, so she learns to correct her own behavior. He has become the “principle of his own subjection.”

Courtship norms function in a similar way, as one popular story from Joshua Harris’s *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* proves. In his chapter “A Cleansed Past: The Room,” Harris shares the vivid details of a dream he claims to have had. “In that place between wakefulness and dreams,” he writes, “I found myself in the room. There were no distinguishing features save for the one wall covered with small index-card files.” He

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94 Ibid, 203.
describes the files as a kind of library card catalog where each drawer is labeled with a category of his memory. The labels range from the happy “a file named ‘Friends’” to the shameful, “‘Lies I Have Told’” to those that we can imagine might contain damning evidence like “‘Books I Have Read’” and “‘Girls I Have Liked.’”

The dream culminates when he reaches “a file marked ‘Lustful Thoughts.’” “I felt a chill run through my body. I pulled the file out only an inch, not willing to test its size, and drew out a card. I shuddered at its detailed contents. I felt sick to think that such a moment had been recorded.” In his dream, Harris says he felt an animal rage and “in an insane frenzy” he tried to empty the file and burn the cards, but he could not dislodge them. Then Jesus appears in the dream, and knows to “intuitively go to the worst boxes.” After reading the cards, Jesus stands with Harris in the dream and weeps with him. Then, in a metaphor for Christ’s atonement for human sin, Jesus begins to take cards from the file and write his own name on them. Finally, he leads Harris from the room. But, Harris writes, “There was no lock on its door. There were still cards to be written.”

We can read this ending as both hopeful and cautionary. Readers take away the picture of the blank cards and the image of Jesus weeping for their sin. By internalizing messages, Christian singles learn to monitor their own behavior for fear of disappointing their savior. It is common for young Christians to say that a system like courtship will not work if parents try to force it on their children. It will only work if young women and men themselves aspire to courtship ideals, and messages like Harris’ ensure that they do just that. While some authors are hesitant to lay out detailed lists and timetables for

95 Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, 104.
96 Ibid, 105.
97 Ibid, 106.
courtships, they do evoke its ideals—physical and emotional purity, parental involvement, and a focus on marriage—and participants take up these guiding principles as their own standards. In this way, ‘liberal’ titles are even more effective than ‘conservative’ ones in enforcing courtship ideals.

Participants often say they dislike the term ‘courtship,’ because, to them, it connotes a strict formula. Beyond the theological commitments of many evangelicals which make them wary of orthodoxy, labels and rituals, it also seems more appealing and exciting to trust God to write you a romantic love story than it does to follow a formula. It is likely that the term ‘courtship’ also suffers because of its close association with homeschool culture and its roots in the teachings of Bill Gothard. Homeschool families do not have a reputation for being cool, and they know it. Their propensity for conservative dressing and for thrift have inspired self-deprecating jokes among homeschool insiders. One mother shared a long standing joke with me that illustrated homeschoolers’ sense of humor about their clothing choices. “How do you find your way to the homeschool convention?” she asked me. “Follow the woman in the denim jumper.” Homeschool students also poke fun at the fact that they are easily identified by their large family size and their enthusiasm for wholesome activities like baking their own bread.

The homeschool students I met were often articulate, enterprising and engaging. Many participated in local homeschool co-ops where they interacted regularly with other families. However, as Stevens discovered in his research on that movement, outsiders consistently assume that homeschool students miss out on critical socialization
opportunities, and that they are socially unskilled. Their willingness to embrace unusual practices makes homeschool families open to the practice of courtship. However, young Christian singles might grow wary of this stereotyping and bristle at the assumption that their choice to practice courtship signals that they are uncool or out of touch.

*Courtship and Reconstruction*

Those families who do support ‘courtship’ as a label also tend to embrace the values and ideals associated with Christian Reconstructionism, a theology with roots in Calvinism that advocates the transformation of American society into a Christian nation. Reconstructionists aim to make this change through individual families who conform to Christian values and to the social ideal of the autonomous, father-led nuclear family. While courtship participants may be wary of the connotation of ‘courtship,’ and make a distinction between liberal and conservative authors, I find that a more accurate distinction would be based on the degree to which a family identifies with these Reconstructionist ideals. This theology is woven through the Quiverfull movement, which encourages families to eschew birth control in favor of allowing God to control their family size, the Christian homeschool movement, and the Christian courtship movement. One of the early key courtship figures, Bill Gothard, his Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP), and his Advanced Training Institute (ATI) homeschool curriculum reflect many Reconstructionist ideals.

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Another institution, Vision Forum, publishes curriculum and other media for homeschool families, including books on purity, femininity and courtship. Media with Reconstructionist influences tend to be more comfortable with the courtship classification. They also tend to be more explicitly linked to the phenomenon of at-home daughterhood, which I will explore in chapter 2. Christian families who practice Reconstructionist values also tend to use buzz words like ‘character,’ to attempt to live completely free of debt, including home mortgages, and to follow especially modest standards for dress, the most identifiable of which is the teaching that girls and women should wear skirts or dresses rather than pants. Their adherence to these guidelines makes them more easily identifiable as Christians and homeschoolers. It also makes them more vulnerable to accusations that they are extreme or fundamentalist. I speculate that these perceptions account for some of the reluctance to identify with the word ‘courtship,’ despite the uniformity in the practice of courtship across the movement.

**Christ Followers**

For one of the married men I interviewed, his reluctance to classify his beliefs and practices went beyond labeling his relationship with his wife; rather than identify as a Christian, he said he and his wife were “followers of Christ.” The term ‘Christian,’ he thought, had become too “watered down.” This sentiment is common among conservative believers who fear that the label ‘Christian’ loses meaning when people claim the religious identity but don’t commit to pious behavior in the way they think the

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100 Ibid, 3.
Bible commands. Whatever they call themselves, the singles and young married couples I met fit the definition of evangelical Christianity as described sociologist Christian Smith—they believe that the “final, ultimate authority is the Bible.”

They also hold conservative beliefs about gender consistent with evangelical theology, often expressing support for the idea that men are to be the spiritual head and leader of the family and that women should serve as at-home wives and mothers and helpers to their husbands.

One couple, Kimberly and Anthony Padgett of Courtship in the Covenant ministries, were affiliated with churches and ministries that could be described as charismatic, placing central importance on the role of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts in Christian practice. However, most of the Christians I met were not. Almost everyone I interviewed was a homeschool graduate. They varied in their church affiliation from Baptist to Bible Church to non-denominational as well as in their adherence to Reconstructionist ideals and practices. What they had in common was their commitment to the principles of the Christian courtship movement and to evangelical values of Biblical authority and strict gender ideals. Though many resisted identification with labels, writing about a movement necessitates the use of names. Because these labels accurately reflect the theological and social commitments of the Christians I met, I use

the broad terms “conservative Christian” and “member” or “participant” in the courtship movement.

Courtship has its roots in the Christian homeschool movement, but it gained wider appeal with books like Joshua Harris’ *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Eric and Leslie Ludy’s *When God Writes your Love Story* and the Ludys’s companion books on Godly femininity and masculinity—Leslie’s *Authentic Beauty* book for girls and Eric’s *God’s Gift to Women: Discovering the Lost Greatness of Masculinity*. The success of these books accounts for the currency of courtship language beyond the homeschool world. Christian college students in my courses often share that they don’t want to “date for the sake of dating,” but instead date with the goal of marriage in mind. The phrase “guard your heart” is popular in amongst conservative Christians singles more broadly, not just among those homeschool graduates who grew up learning about courtship.

But while some of the key ideas—like emotional purity and dating with the purpose of marriage—have spread beyond the bounds of homeschool networks, courtship as a practice has not yet become commonplace there. Couples like Kimberly and Anthony Padgett, who run the small Courtship in the Covenant ministries out of their home, want to change that. The couple host weekend workshops to teach courtship principles to new audiences outside of the almost exclusively white homeschool networks. I attended two of their ministry seminars hosted by a rural youth group comprised of public school kids and a largely African American urban charismatic church. It was difficult to gauge the youth group’s enthusiasm for the courtship message.

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In a manner typical of middle-school students, they seemed more excited about the opportunities for free pizza and socialization than about teachings on purity and marriage. The urban church audience seemed receptive to the Padgetts’s message. However, when the couple opened the floor to questions, the attendees wondered about topics like divorce, re-marriage and blended families—topics that courtship media typically do not address.

**Conclusion**

These instances raise the question of whether courtship can thrive outside of Christian homeschool subcultures, where divorce is discouraged, the in-tact nuclear family is the primary social unit, young marriage and large families are common, and pursuit of a four-year degree is not the uncontested ideal. In these social circles, courtship media circulate freely and networking opportunities with potential, like-minded mates are abundant. If they hadn’t been members of the same homeschool co-op, would David and Lindsay, whose story we read in the introduction, ever have met? Would David’s parents have suggested Lindsay as a future wife, and would her parents have consented if he had come from an “outsider” family? Most importantly, if David hadn’t displayed the homeschool entrepreneurial spirit with his friends and produced a film in which he starred, would Lindsay ever have fallen for him?

Though it is never explicitly stated in courtship media as a key element, homeschool culture plays a key role in producing courtships. And though many in the movement are suspicious of labels, rules and regulations, homeschool networks have efficiently circulated courtship ideals and practices across time, space and denominational lines. In fact, participants’ reluctance to identify strongly with labels
obsures the effective, dynamic method through which Christians make the movement’s principles their own.
Chapter Two: Luminous Femininity

As convention-goers slowly file in to fill the neat rows of seats set up for Janis Garcia’s presentation titled “Training Our Daughters to Be Keepers at Home,” the presenter chats casually with audience members about her family. When she tells a young mother in the front row that she has twin 23-year-old daughters, the woman, whose own son and daughter are tucked closely against her on each side, expresses sympathy for Janis, whose children, she assumes, will soon be leaving home. But Janis’ daughters have no immediate plans to leave the nest and live independently of their parents. In fact, over the course of her presentation, Janis proudly shares with the audience that her daughters, who are homeschool graduates, have never worked outside of the home for pay, did not pursue education after high school, do not have bank accounts or driver’s licenses, and have no immediate plans to acquire them.

Rather than pursuing the milestones that others believe would prepare them for autonomous adulthood, the girls are purposely preparing for their future roles as wives and mothers. “You know what?” she asks during her presentation, “We don’t go anywhere apart from each other.” The Garcias, like many families who practice courtship, believe that God’s plan is for a daughter to remain under her father’s protection and authority until the day she marries, when this banner of authority will be passed to her husband. According to this design, if the girls pursue independence outside of the family, they would be rebelling against God’s plan.
Following Janis’ talk at the 2010 Christian Home Educators of Ohio convention, one homeschool parent asks about what would happen if the girls never married and something happened to Janis and her husband. Janis is confident that marriage and motherhood are in her daughters’ futures. “[W]e believe truly that he is preparing them for what he wants them to do”. In fact, talking about, imagining and preparing together for their future families and homes is a common thread running through the daily activities of the Garcia women. One daughter says that God has shown her that she will have three sons, while the other says she believes she will have one daughter. The girls have filled their attic at home with baby clothes for their anticipated children. They have also collected dishes, furniture, linens and other household items, acquired frugally through garage sales and auctions, to furnish their future homes. “So when it comes time they will have everything that they need,” Janis says.

She knows that her family’s choice to prepare their daughters solely for the role of helpmeets, or helpers to their future husbands, is not a universally popular one, even among Christian homeschool families. For this reason, she says the “Preparing Your Daughters” talk is her least favorite to present. That day, she says, she watched at least half of the audience trickle out of the conference room while she spoke. Her position on training daughters is amongst the most conservative in the courtship movement. But Janis is not alone in her convictions and several mothers with younger daughters stay after the presentation to get advice from Janis on her approach to raising her daughters.
If Janis Garcia advocates one end of the spectrum of girlhood represented in the courtship movement, Michelle represents the opposite. Following Janis’ presentation, I hurry across the convention center to meet Michelle in the event’s exhibit hall. After winding my way through the maze of homeschool curricula for sale, I find Michelle at her booth. Michelle, who I met months earlier at a separate convention, is known affectionately in her community as “the abstinence lady” because of her work teaching abstinence education in local schools. In addition to this outreach, which is coordinated through her position at a pro-life Pregnancy Care Center, Michelle has designed a purity curriculum for teen girls, which she sells online and at events like this one. Michelle, who is 31 and unmarried, has traveled alone to the convention, where she is also giving a presentation for parents about talking to their children about abstinence. The purity curriculum is part of a larger ministry which Michelle is building with the goal of helping teens maintain their purity and strengthen their relationships with God.

As convention goers pass by Michelle’s booth, some stopping to flip through the books she has neatly lined up in her display, we talk about Michelle’s background, her career and her thoughts about her future. Michelle has been working in ministry, including the pregnancy center, for the past twelve years. She lives by herself in a home she bought two years ago. She is currently in a courtship that has lasted for several months, and when I talk with her that afternoon, she is cautiously optimistic that Sean

\[105\] I use the terms “girl” and “girlhood” to mean an adolescent or young adult woman and young womanhood. This is consistent with girlhood studies literature, which uses the word ‘girl,’ a term that young feminists recuperated from its second wave connotation as an insulting or belittling version of ‘woman.’ See, for example, Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (New York, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 8.
will be the one for her. “Well, right now I’m in a relationship that’s looking pretty awesome,” she tells me with a big smile. The day after we talk, Michelle learns that Sean met with her father that weekend while she was away to ask for her hand in marriage. In our interview, Michelle shares that if she were to marry Sean, she would like to have four or five kids and be a stay-at-home mom, and while she is a graduate of public school, she would like to homeschool her own children someday. “I would love to be at home,” she says.

Michelle and Janis’ stories represent two diverse perspectives on girlhood I encountered in my research of the courtship movement. The girls I met experienced a range of independence within or outside of their parents’ homes, had reached different levels of education and had varied employment and ministries experiences. What they all had in common was the idea that dating and romance were a prelude to eventually becoming an at-home wife and mother, and a commitment to courtship as the path for meeting and marrying their future husbands.

This commitment reflects the primary function of courtship. It provides Christian young people with a set of guidelines for safely navigating romantic relationships that will ideally end in marriage. But a couple’s courtship, which for most lasts less than a year, is just one season in a lifelong commitment to purity and investment in marriage. The courtship movement not only steers young people through their engagement and marriage, but it also provides a roadmap for navigating their single years. Whether they stay at home under their father’s authority or go away to college, courtship media teach young women to build the skills that will serve them when they marry and to serve God and others through ministry.
In addition to advising girls on how to fill their single years, the movement also inspires a specific kind of femininity for girls to emulate. Girls in the courtship movement model themselves after what I call “luminous femininity,” a warm mix of nurturing and hospitality. This ideal of femininity is flexible enough to appeal to believers as diverse as Michelle and Janis Garcia, but it consistently expresses several key characteristics. The luminous girl both attracts attention and deflects it. She shines with radiant modesty and radiates warm nurturing while dressing modestly and pouring her energy and talents out in service to others through hospitality and mission work. She is industrious, productive and deeply desires to one day be married and have children, but she struggles to continuously relinquish her own desires in favor of following what she understands as God’s plan for her single years.

Reviving Femininity

This chapter explains how these characteristics of luminous femininity equip Christian girls to manage their single years and prepare them for courtship and marriage. It also examines the diverse ways that this model of girlhood is expressed by families in the courtship movement. On one end of the spectrum, some homeschool families like the Garcias believe that it is God’s design for the family for daughters to remain in their father’s home and under his authority until marriage. These families cultivate keepers of the home who prepare exclusively for their role as helpmeet to their future husbands. Girls from families like the Garcias are more likely to believe that modesty requires girls and women to wear skirts or dresses rather than pants.

On the other end are young women like Michelle, who grew up in a Christian home, attended public school and graduated from college before working full-time in
Christian ministry. Michelle, like other luminous girls, is committed to the standards of outward purity that the movement endorses, a wholesome look that I call “radiant modesty,” but for girls like Michelle, dressing modestly does not preclude wearing pants or shorts. While Michelle she has not begun to collect the baby clothes and other tangible objects that will mark her future as a wife and mother, Michelle, like the Garcia twins, nurtures a desire to be an at-home wife and homeschool mother. Despite the diversity of the young women in the movement, all the girls I met had this wish in common.

Girls in the courtship movement also strive to embody luminous femininity and radiant modesty, and they work to submit their love lives to God’s hand. While these commitments might seem to constitute a passive surrender to traditionally feminine ideals, I argue that girls in the courtship movement are actually actively negotiating to ensure their successful futures. Classic texts in studies of girlhood make the case for how cultural expectations about appropriate feminine behavior work to the detriment of contemporary girls. In Mystics, Mavericks and Merrymakers, her ethnography of girlhood in a Hasidic Jewish community, Stephanie Wellen Levine argues that texts like Mary Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia, Joan Jacobs Brumberg’s The Body Project, Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan’s Meeting at the Crossroads and Rachel Simmons Odd Girl Out reveal a “profound tension” between cultural expectations of femininity and what Pipher calls girls’ authentic voices.106

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Levine writes, “Pressure on many young women to shape themselves into the pretty, nice, amenable, friendly but not overly boisterous specimens our society adores can breed inner turmoil and obsession with physical appearance.”

Pipher’s Ophelia, Levine writes “shed the assertiveness, rambunctiousness, and playfulness that had carried them through childhood.” And in Odd Girl Out, Levine writes, “Rachel Simmons argues that our culture’s expectations that young women conform to the feminine ideal of ‘nice and kind’ can cause rage to fester beneath the surface.”

But, Levine points out, “Resistance to these expectations crops up everywhere,” including, she goes on to argue, amongst the community of Hasidic girls she studies. However, girls in the courtship movement attempt to find agency not in resisting these expectations, but in actively embodying them.

As Saba Mahmood found in her research of women’s role in Islamic revival in Egypt, resistance is not always a meaningful category for understanding women’s positions relative to agency and patriarchy. The women in her Politics of Piety, as well as the girls in the Christian courtship movement, negotiate in very different social worlds than the feminists who write about them, and find agency in their embrace of piety and modesty. Like the Christian wives of the women’s Aglow movement in Marie Griffith’s God’s Daughters, who found peace in their marriages by performing what they

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107 Levine, Mystics, Mavericks and Merrymakers, 10.
108 Ibid. 
109 Ibid, 11. 
110 Ibid, 11. 
understood as their God-ordained role in marriage, luminous girls engage in a bargain. They embrace traditionally feminine virtues like nurturing, hospitality, grace, kindness and deference with the understanding that these characteristics complement the leadership, protection, authority, strength and provision provided by the men in their lives, including brothers, fathers and, later, husbands. Josh Harris references this arrangement in his book *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship*. His chapter title asks, “If Boys Would Be Men, Would Girls Be Ladies?”

Luminous girls embody an active, albeit traditional, femininity and purity. Girls work at luminous femininity and radiant modesty, and they expect that this work will pay off when they one day meet and marry the man who will provide for and protect them. He will guarantee her financial future, provide emotional support and serve as her spiritual authority. Griffith found in her study of the *Aglow* movement that, while conservative discourses about submission and gender might be “politically immobilizing” from a feminist perspective, the women she met found personal healing and domestic harmony by embracing the doctrine of submission. In a similar way, the courtship movement, and its attendant discourses of luminous girlhood and radiant femininity, in some ways contributes the oppressive forces that operate in girls’ worlds, but it does offer girls a strategy for negotiating the gendered and sexed dynamics of contemporary adolescence.

Specifically, I argue that courtship offers girls strategies for managing some of the problems diagnosed in feminist studies of girlhood, including the hypersexualization of

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113 Ibid, 175 and 213.
contemporary girlhood. Drawing from Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*, I argue that luminous femininity provides an emotional investment strategy for girls in what Hochschild describes as the “cool” turn in the modern culture of emotion.¹¹⁴ The luminous girl could also be diagnosed as suffering from what modern advice authors identify as “the dreaded ‘Cinderella Complex.’”¹¹⁵ Drawing from Colette Dowling’s self-help book of the same name, Hochshild identifies the cool modern tendency to dismiss the need to be “‘safe, warm, taken care of.’” Finally, courtship addresses a situation that the movement diagnoses as “prolonged singleness.”¹¹⁶

American youth are taking longer than ever before to reach the traditional milestones that mark adulthood, including career stability, marriage and parenthood.¹¹⁷ While many girls I met deeply desired to be married young, the movement acknowledges that some, like Michelle, might spend a decade or more as single adults before they marry.

Courtship and luminous femininity provide a plausible, even attractive, alternative for those who don’t marry until late in their twenties or even thirties. Popular courtship author Leslie Ludy encourages young women to view this time as a season of “sacred singleness” when, unencumbered by the responsibilities of marriage and families, girls can be wholly dedicated to Christian ministry.¹¹⁸ But despite this optimistic framing of singlehood, girls struggle to fully embrace this time in their lives without giving in to the

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¹¹⁵ Ibid, 21.
temptation to dream about what seems to be the real prize of courtship – a fairytale romance with a flesh and blood Prince Charming and a happily ever after ending.

*Luminous Girlhood*

During the final session of Sarah Mally’s Strong in the Lord retreat, the chandeliers in the church sanctuary are dimmed as the opening notes of “This Little Light of Mine” fills the large room. As hundreds of girls and their parents watch in anticipation, the retreat leaders, all girls in their teens and twenties, stream in slowly, singing “I’m gonna let it shine,” the chorus to the familiar children’s gospel song. Marching in single file, each girl carries a candle with a bright yellow flame. They proceed to the stage, where they stand side by side, singing the final words of the song, then blow out the candles softly, leaving the room in prayerful silence for a few moments before beginning a new song and relighting their candles, one by one. This time the candlelight is joined by the neon shine from hundreds of glow sticks in the small hands of the retreat attendees. The event had begun the evening before when the girls, wearing their Sunday best dresses, had gathered with their leaders into small groups with names like the Candles, the Flashlights, the Fireworks, the Fireflies, the Sparklers and the Sunbeams.

As these light themes suggest, girls who attend purity conferences like Sarah’s are getting their first lessons in what I call luminous femininity. Books, blogs, and presentations about courtship and Christian girlhood paint a picture of a kind of femininity that seems to be glowing, emanating both light and warmth. The subtitle of Sarah Mally’s book for young women, *Before You Meet Prince Charming*, is *A Guide to Radiant Purity*. Instead of evoking a kind of prudish modesty, Sarah’s term radiant purity, and the term radiant modesty, which I use, describe a girl who shines brightly with
a light that is understood to be an outward reflection of her true inner beauty. In Sarah’s book, an allegorical fairy tale of purity and romance, the heroine of the story is compared to a sparkly “precious gem.” The princess, as described in the first chapter, seems to glow on the page. “Her blonde hair, highlighted by the sun, flowed behind her, and the crystals on her thin golden headband sparkled brightly.”

But in her kingdom, while the princess is admired for this physical beauty, Sarah writes that she is most noted for her inner qualities, her kindness and her gracious words, a theme that is common in teachings about Christian girlhood.

In Sarah’s story, she distinguished between the princess’ inner and outer beauty, but in courtship media, these traits are often connected. A girl’s bright character is visible on the outside, creating or enhancing her outer physical beauty. In some Christian circles, this ethereal combination of traits is said to be visible in a girl’s countenance. For example, in Sarah’s Bright Lights curriculum for girls, an important characteristic of embodying modesty is maintaining a “joyful countenance.” This phrasing is especially common amongst groups that are familiar with Bill Gothard’s extensive teachings about character, but the linking of femininity with selfless traits is common across the broad spectrum of the courtship movement. In Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship, his follow up to I Kissed Dating Goodbye, Joshua Harris writes, “As a single woman, you

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120 See, for example, Leslie Ludy, The Lost Art of True Beauty: The Set-Apart Girl’s Guide to Feminine Grace (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2010) and Sarah Mally, Before Your Meet Prince Charming, 16.
can express your femininity by practicing hospitality and by caring for and nurturing the people in your life.”121

Authentic Beauty

Leslie Ludy is alone on stage, confident and poised as she sits tall on a stool, her shoulder-length dark hair smoothed into place, her black slacks and colorful top well-fitted, but not too tight. All eyes in the cozy chapel are trained on her as she talks about Jesus, her heavenly prince and her husband, Eric, her earthly one. When I met Leslie at her Set-Apart Girl conference, she seemed to embody the ideals of luminous feminity, and she writes about these characteristics in her setapartgirl magazine. In “The Secrets of Social Grace,” Leslie says this kind of girlhood was once the social norm in a bygone era, though she doesn’t state specifically when. She writes, “Once upon a time, nearly every young woman was trained in the art of gracious living.” Leslie talks about reading “a very old book on young women’s etiquette” that left her wishing she could return to a more old-fashioned way of living.122 “It was all about how a young woman could let her light shine in this world – how she could use her feminine gifts to bless and serve those around her” (emphasis added). According to Leslie, the old-fashioned girl dressed and carried herself with dignity, spoke eloquently, excelled in hospitality, gift-giving and community service, sat up straight and listened intently, and smiled and said hello to strangers.123 Christian girls of today, she argues, should learn to follow suit.

Sisters Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin, who have produced a film, book and website dedicated to teaching about the proper role of single daughters, write about their

121 Joshua Harris, Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 2005) 119.
123 Ibid.
understanding of luminous femininity. In *So Much More: The Remarkable Influence of Visionary Daughters on the Kingdom of God*, the girls equate virtuous womanhood with humility, a quiet and gentle spirit and dependence. “Picture a girl,” they write, “who *radiates* dignity, regal serenity, respectfulness, grace, a gentle and quiet voice, poise, discretion, self-command, sincerity, peace, compassion, cheerfulness and humility” (emphasis added).\(^{124}\) The Botkin sisters also teach that outward characteristics of luminous femininity, like regal poise and a gentle voice, are a reflection of inner beauty. They draw from Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:18, which says, “A good tree does not produce bad fruit.” The sisters argue that “A rebellious, discontent spirit will be obvious in a girl’s countenance, carriage, and speech. A boisterous, tomboyish, masculine spirit will reveal itself in the same way.”\(^{125}\)

This warning about the risk of betraying a “masculine spirit” reveals what may seem like an obvious characteristic of luminous femininity – it strives to be traditionally feminine, even girlie. Anxiety about girls harboring a ‘masculine spirit’ resonates with broader conservative Christian fears about the changing nature of prescribed gender roles. In *Boy Meets Girl*, Joshua Harris calls his secular contemporaries the “generation of the ‘transgendered,’” in which men act like women and women act like men.”\(^{126}\) Like some of the more commercial aspects of contemporary American girl culture, luminous girlhood is associated with all things pink and princess related. Sarah’s heroine in *Before You Meet Prince Charming* is a beautiful princess, and the dedication to the book is to its readers,


\(^{125}\) Ibid.

the “true princesses of the heavenly King.” Princesses are also a favorite motif in Leslie’s teachings and writing about luminous femininity. Leslie, who has written several books about Christian femininity and courtship, writes about the days when, during her teen years, she began to feel guilty about dressing in a way that she called “seductive,” flirting with boys and wasting her time and emotional energy pursuing romance instead of God. She chose to fully embrace radiant modesty and luminous femininity and described receiving “princess lessons” from the King, who helped her develop the appropriate characteristics of femininity.127

In *The Lost Art of True Beauty: The Set-Apart Girl’s Guide to Feminine Grace* she writes about what she sees as the universal desire of girls to grow up to be princesses. “For some reason, the idea of becoming a princess seems to capture the intrinsic longing in every girl’s heart to be fully feminine—to *glow* with grace, radiance, and loveliness. It’s an innocent desire. In fact, I believe it’s a God-given desire” (emphasis added).128 Popular forms of feminism and academic theories about gender have, over the last thirty years, dismantled the notion that gender has an inherent or fixed essence, while studies in sociology, psychology and other fields have made visible the unseen paths by which girls seem to “naturally” gravitate to pink toys and princess play.129 However, luminous femininity operates on the assumption that a state of being fully feminine exists, that girls have an innate desire to reach this state, and that this desire aligns with God’s plan for womanhood.

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A Heaven-Sent Glow

In Set-Apart Femininity: God’s Sacred Intent for Every Young Woman, Leslie links the effervescent nature of luminous femininity with the presence of Jesus. “We were created to shine with heavenly beauty, to radiate with Christlike feminine loveliness, and to sparkle with the lily-white purity of our Prince” (emphasis added).¹³⁰ Bright lily-white charm is a reflection of authentic beauty within. And authentic beauty is only possible for a girl who has a personal relationship with Jesus. Leslie dismisses the pop psychology message of embracing inner beauty, which she says was common advice from teachers and youth pastors during her childhood. “Young women today are supposed to be the most liberated, independent, confident, and fulfilled of any in history,” she writes. “But we are a desperate, lonely, insecure, and hopeless lot.”¹³¹ Leslie says girls also suffer from the fruitless pursuit of “inner beauty.” Authentic beauty, she says, can only come from the radiance of Christ within. “We don’t understand that apart from Him, we have nothing, we are nothing, and we can accomplish nothing.”¹³²

“I never could find my own unique special beauty” she writes.¹³³ She even critiques Captivating, a popular contemporary book for Christian women, because it “convinces us that we can look inward and find worth, beauty, and value within ourselves. It keeps the focus on us; on our feelings, our attributes, and our beauty.”¹³⁴ Instead, she says a luminous girl is “consumed with the desire to have Christ flash off her

¹³¹ Ibid, 12.
¹³² Ibid, 43.
¹³³ Ibid, 44.
frame and face and letting Christ (not self) inhabit every part of her inner being.” She quotes John 3:30. “I must decrease, so that He might increase!”

As these examples suggest, luminous femininity reinforces the primary importance of salvation and of developing a personal relationship with Jesus. Like many contemporary American evangelicals, members of the courtship movement are wary of religious dogma and denominational differences eclipsing the central, vital importance of a relationship with Jesus in the practice of Christianity, and teachings about courtship are premised on the notion that participants must first be believers. Evangelical media and ministries often link the status of believers’ sexual health with the standing of their relationship with God. As I discuss in more depth in Chapter Three, courtship ministries often connect teachings about romance, gender and purity to a believer’s relationship with Jesus. “True purity,” Leslie writes, “comes only when we fall into the loving arms of our Prince, surrender ourselves fully to Him, and allow Him to tenderly shape us into His lily-white likeness.”

It may be a relationship with Jesus that inspires luminous femininity to shine through in the first place, but the promise of glowing beauty goes beyond the spiritual realm. Courtship operates on the principle that young men will initiate relationships, and girls are discouraged from attracting attention to themselves, but luminous femininity is understood to have the power to draw the moth to flame. In an article for setapartgirl

136 Leslie Ludy, Authentic Beauty, 55.
magazine, young men are asked to respond to the question, “What is something that you desire in your future wife?” One of the answers, which draws from one of Ludy’s own passages, references both a movie star and a famous Christian missionary. Reflecting the sometimes paradoxical demands of luminous femininity, he writes that he is looking for a wife who possesses, “…the elegance of Audrey Hepburn with the poured out life of Amy Carmichael.”  

Beyond attracting the attention of a worthy young man, luminous femininity is sometimes understood to play an integral role in creating heroic masculinity. One chapter of Leslie’s *Set-Apart Femininity* is called “Sacred Mystique: femininity that changes men into princes.” She writes nostalgically about “feminine dignity” and “womanly mystery” and gallant men who “counted it a privilege to tenderly win and woo their lady love’s heart.” It is feminine mystery that inspires gallant knights to heroic action.

In addition to serving as the light that sparks the interest of a suitor, luminous femininity can also aid the evangelical impulse to act as a witness for Christ and spread the good news. The Botkin sisters write, “[T]hough God looks primarily on the inside, people can only see the outside…Do we show people the magnitude of God’s grace by showing how our crude, unrefined behavior becomes gentle and quiet?” A gentle and quiet spirit and a posture that demonstrates attentiveness and carefully honed hospitality skills are the outward signs that the luminous girl has something attractive to offer to unbelievers. In a chapter called “Excelling at the Sacred Art of Hospitality,” Leslie warns

139 Ibid.
140 Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin, *So Much More*, 81.
against developing these skills for the purpose of simply socializing. Jesus’ version of hospitality, she writes, is “to search out those who are lonely, outcast, and poor, bring them into our homes, and treat them as royalty.”

These descriptions of luminous femininity paint a demanding picture of purity and piety, and I met several young women who seemed to embody this kind of light and warmth. This was especially true when it came to the quality of showing warm hospitality to strangers. Many of the young married couples I spoke with invited me to their homes for interviews, and several asked me to join them for a meal. When I met with Lauren, 22, and Micah, 23, the couple were weeks away from expected their first child. Lauren, who was heavily pregnant, had prepared dinner for the three of us in her small apartment kitchen on a hot summer day while Micah was at work. The meal was simple, but meticulously prepared, down to the organic, home-made salad dressing and catsup. Another couple had me over for lunch, which the wife, Katie, had prepared while caring for two busy, curious toddlers in a home they were sharing with family while their own house was under construction. Katie, 25, was extra busy that week when, in addition to caring for her children, she was volunteering as a leader at Sarah Mally’s Bright Lights retreats. These girls’ commitment to hospitality highlights the active, external focus of luminous femininity and demonstrates the degree to which they learn to serve others’ needs.

141 Leslie Ludy, *The Lost Art of True Beauty*, 120.
142 Sarah Mally’s ministry for girls is called Bright Lights. Her Bright Lights ministry hosts Strong in the Lord retreats for girls age 8-14 and Radiant Purity retreats for girls aged 1-22. This week, she hosted both events consecutively.
In addition to demonstrating warm hospitality, some of the girls I met carried themselves with the kind of elegance reminiscent of the young women in the old-fashioned etiquette book that Leslie cherishes. During planning time and in-between events at the Bright Lights retreats, many of the volunteers sought me out to introduce themselves, find out where I was from and learn about my work and family. Some of the girls had bright, cheery voices and spoke in a friendly, but formal manner that matched their graceful aesthetic – loosely curled, long hair swept neatly into place, ankle-length skirts and button-down tops with a ribbon tied pertly at the waist. No one, though, seemed to embody luminous femininity more clearly to me than Sarah Mally herself, and her younger sister, Grace. I had first met Sarah months earlier at a homeschool convention, where she and her family were presenting several workshops and running a booth in the exhibit hall filled with books and other materials. Demonstrating the hospitality characteristic of luminous femininity, after talking with the sisters one morning about courtship and purity, Grace offered to walk me through the busy exhibit hall to introduce me to families she knew who might be interested in my research about courtship. Sarah also agreed to let me attend her Strong in the Lord and Radiant Purity retreats hosted during the summer in her hometown of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She let me sit in on planning sessions, introduced me to the group alongside the new leaders for the event and invited me to share meals with the conference volunteers.

Despite their ten-year age difference, Sarah and Grace look alike, both slender with honey blonde hair and large blue eyes, and they favor a similar style of dress, the long skirts and tailored tops that were popular among their circle of friends in Iowa. Because of their experience performing skits and giving presentations at homeschool
conventions and Bright Lights events, Sarah and Grace are both confident public speakers, a skill which seems at odds with traditional notions of femininity. They are also skilled at interacting with people who attended their workshops and retreats, a task which often calls for quick thinking and diplomacy. On the last night of Radiant Purity, a young teen girl stood in line to meet Sarah, and when she got to the front she blurted out “You’re so skinny!” Given the nature of the retreat, Sarah’s goal was not to place emphasis on her physical appearance, and praising someone for being skinny is not always read as a compliment, but Sarah just smiled and said that she had a quick metabolism, then moved on to a new topic.

With their poise and artistic skills, the young women have a dignified, serene presence not unlike one of the Jane Austen heroines that authors like Leslie Ludy esteem. During the Bright Lights events, the sisters played an integral role in the worship team, with Sarah leading hymns on the piano and Grace playing harp. Occasionally, they both played their harps side-by-side, adopting the regal posture and elegant hand positions that the instrument requires. The sisters also closed one evening of the event with a presentation called a chalk talk. For forty-five minutes, with the lights of the sanctuary dimmed, Sarah slowly etched a brightly colored, intricate chalk drawing while she and other young women shared stories or “testimonies” about their relationship with God for the hundreds of girls in the audience. As Sarah sketched the picture and the young women took turns on the stage sharing their stories, Grace played angelic harp music in the background.

This description paints the picture of a girl straight from the pages of the Botkin sisters’ *So Much More*, one who radiates regal serenity, poise and discretion, hospitality,
grace and cheerfulness. But these stories do not represent the full picture of the girls I met, girls who were not always dignified and serene, but a great deal more complex than the ideal of luminous femininity would suggest. This was especially true the more I got to know some of the women and the longer I spent with them in casual, familiar settings. While Sarah always appeared self-commanding, graceful and perfectly poised when she was giving a presentation or hosting a retreat, I spotted her one afternoon behind the scenes in her office, talking intently on the phone, sitting on the front edge of her chair and leaning over her desk, her forehead resting in her hand, her foot tucked underneath her. Moments later, she sprang from the office, and I saw she had traded her tailored outfit for a flannel shirt and a long jean skirt. She fairly galloped through the ministry headquarters, hurriedly gathering the volunteers together for the next event. Descriptions of luminous femininity, with their Victorian air, give a stiff, two-dimensional impression of girlhood, leaving out any sense of embodiment or the kind of spontaneous physicality Sarah demonstrated in the office that afternoon.

Similarly, my host, Molly, 21, who is committed to the ideals of courtship and purity that the movement encourages, cannot readily be described as quiet or serene, although she does possess the kind of joyful countenance that courtship literature praises. Molly and I spent much of the week together, and our drives home after the conference were filled with the kind of silly laughter that accompanies a punchy state of exhaustion brought on by early mornings and long days. Michelle, the abstinence lady, has a habit of slipping into silly, exaggerated voices to emphasize a point when talking, and on the morning she learned that her father had given his blessing and a marriage proposal was imminent, she didn’t try to hide her excitement from the small crowd gathered for her
presentation. She was so distracted by her good news that she couldn’t keep the bright smile from her face and took a detour from her prepared notes to happily share with the audience that she was just one step away from a proposal. Once I began to know them more closely, the luminous girls I met were more multi-dimensional than first sedate appearances might suggest. Moments of slippage like these reinforce the notion that luminous femininity is not naturally occurring, but it’s something that girls work at.

Sometimes, though, luminous femininity can come across as stilted or as saccharine sweet as happens in the Botkins’ *Return of the Daughters* film. It features vignettes of five Christian families interspersed with transitional scenes featuring the sisters. The girls, shown only from the neck up, wear conservative, buttoned shirts and minimal, but flattering makeup. Their voices, controlled and deliberate, reflect the luminously feminine characteristics of self-command and regal serenity, but are missing any of its lighter notes, like joy or cheerfulness. Their eyes are focused and unblinking, giving them a vacant affect. It is possible that this stiff, almost robotic presence is the result of discomfort in front of the camera, but those who have had closer interactions with the sisters say the felt this same presence in person.

Barb, who attended Leslie’s Set-Apart Girl conference with her daughter, Tess, said that her husband and daughter had met the Botkin sisters at a Vision forum father-daughter retreat a couple of years earlier. Barb said that her husband found the Botkin sisters to be unapproachable. “He said, ‘They were like mannequins.’” Barb said that what she and her husband want for their daughter is for her to be able to go out into the world and share the gospel. “But how can she do that if she’s a mannequin? We want our daughter to be real, touchable,” she said. Barb’s critique illuminates the impossible
paradox of luminous femininity. With a focus on serving others, and its imagery of glowing and shining, luminous femininity demands that girls be demure, but not passive, graceful, but relatable, and it challenge believers to constant self-monitoring of their thoughts and behaviors.

“Are you willing to live out the sacred decorum of set-apart femininity even if others label you as extreme?” Leslie asks in one of her books.\(^{143}\) This challenge is followed by a personal story from Leslie, who shares that she and her husband used to enjoy date nights at the movie theater until they found that even if they picked what they thought would be a wholesome film, it was still impossible to avoid sexual or vulgar images and messages in the film’s previews. Leslie wondered how she would “survive without at least a couple hours every few nights each week to relax, unwind, and escape reality?” But then “the gentle voice of Christ’s Spirit reminded me, ‘A daughter of the King should never have the need to escape reality.’”\(^{144}\) Luminous femininity, it seems, is a full-time endeavor.

The way that courtship literature advises girls to work at luminous femininity is consistent with what sociologist Arie Russell Hocshchild calls the “cool” tone of modern advice books for women. One characteristic of “cool” advice books is that they suggest that if women want to be successful in gaining the love of a man, they should control their emotional needs rather than expressing them.\(^{145}\) She cites Marabel Morgan’s *The Total Woman*, an advice book representative of the cool modern era. *The Total Woman* advises women on how to cultivate stereotypically feminine characteristic to please their

\(^{143}\) Leslie Ludy, *Set-Apart Femininity*, 71.

\(^{144}\) Ibid, 73.

\(^{145}\) Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Commericalization of Intimate Life*, 16.
husbands. In one example, Morgan writes that she “looked foolish and felt even more so,” when she “‘waltzed to the door in a cloud of powder and perfume’ and put on ‘‘pink baby-doll pajamas’’ to greet her husband after work.147

While the luminous girl’s performance is much more chaste, she similarly learns to cultivate a “feminine” air and to anticipate others’ needs, much like the giggly, feminine woman greeting her husband at the door. The luminous girl is graceful, excels at hospitality and exudes a joyful countenance. Even the language of radiant femininity describes a kind of outward focus—it glows, radiates and shines. Luminous femininity is “poured out” in service to others. Courtship literature credits the presence of Jesus within for this outward shine, and it advocates that girls practice luminous femininity to please their heavenly prince.

But courtship authors also imply that this outward shine will one day attract a husband. In this way, girls practice a kind of emotional investment strategy. As part of a larger argument about what she calls the commercialization of intimate life, Hocshchild describes advice book authors as “emotional investment counselors” who advise women how and in whom to invest emotion.148 In many ways, courtship literature does exactly this. Luminous girls focus their emotional energy outward with hopes that their glowing grace and hospitality will one day attract a prince to care for their emotional and material needs.

Radiant Modesty

146 Marabel Morgan, The Total Woman (Pocket Books, 1975).
147 Ibid, 17.
148 Ibid, 14.
In an article titled “Dressing with Selfless Style,” Leslie describes how some of Christianity’s most famous women missionaries adorned themselves. “Rather than showcasing the status and sparkle of the world,” she writes, “these women desired to shine with the radiance of Christ” (emphasis added).\footnote{149} She encourages contemporary Christian girls to do the same. “A woman who exudes true feminine mystique is both modest and selfless. She doesn’t hide her femininity; she dresses to reflect the joy and radiance that fills her soul” (emphasis added).\footnote{150} In keeping with goals of luminous femininity, girls in the courtship movement strive to display a kind of modesty that deflects attention away from themselves and their bodies and toward their heavenly prince. “Her goal,” writes Leslie “is to point people’s eyes to Jesus and not to herself.”\footnote{151}

This aesthetic, which I call “radiant modesty,” is popular throughout the courtship movement. While specific hem lengths and hairstyles vary, radiant modesty always discourages girls from wearing clothes that are tight or show too much skin and encourages them to dress in a way that evokes traditional femininity. Across the movement, radiant modesty is reflected not only in what a girl wears, but also in how she behaves – flirting or otherwise purposely attracting the attention of a young man is verboten, and a girl has to be careful that her posture or physical position isn’t a temptation to young men. In addition to distracting from the glory of the inner light reflected in their countenance, dressing or acting immodestly has the potential to inspire lustful thoughts in young men or cause them to “stumble.” Guidelines for radiant modesty rest on the assumption that young men and women are inherently very different

\footnote{149} Leslie Ludy, “Part One: Dressing With Selfless Style,” setapartgirl magazine, January/February, 2011.  
\footnote{150} Ibid.  
\footnote{151} Ibid.
– while boys are more visually and sexually oriented, girls are understood to be more emotional and romantic.

Leslie’s rule of thumb summarizes the general sentiment behind commonly accepted guidelines for physical modesty for girls in the courtship movement. She writes in setapartgirl, “Any area of my body that can be associated with sensuality is not to be touched or seen by anyone other than my husband.” In general, luminous girls avoid necklines that are low enough to show cleavage, hemlines that are suggestively short and tight, or clingy clothing that reveals feminine curves. Depending on their size and build, these guidelines are more difficult for some girls to meet than others. Jennifer, a single college student, said, “I think the hardest part of being modest for me is I have large boobs.” A common complaint among Christian girls is that it is difficult to find fashionable, but modest, clothing. Because contemporary girls’ fashions are skewed toward more revealing styles, sometimes this clothing requires modification.

At the Radiant Purity event, a panel of retreat leaders, dressed in long khaki or denim skirts and layered tops, demonstrated for the sanctuary full of teen girls and their parents tips and tricks for dressing modestly. The girls on the panel showed how to modify store-bought clothing by adding fabric to a skirt to lengthen it and how to pin or sew the straps on a camisole or tank top to shorten them to raise the neckline of an undergarment. One girl held up a flower print one-piece bathing suit, a long pair of athletic shorts and a short-sleeve nylon top and explained how she layered these items for a modest swimwear outfit. The girls reminded the audience to examine each top and skirt under different lighting to be sure the fabric wasn’t too sheer and to check that her outfit

152 Leslie Ludy, “Reflecting His Beauty in Your Appearance, setapartgirl magazine, March/April, 2011.
was modest not only standing and sitting, but when bending over as well. When it came
to makeup, the suggestion was “less is more, make it look more natural” and jewelry
should not be “too flashy.” Big earrings or necklaces might distract from the face and
dark eye makeup could make a girl’s countenance look dark, instead of bright and
luminous. These examples illustrate that the shining, bright imagery associated with
radiant modesty belie an effort to distract attention away from girls’ bodies as objects of
lust. However, because radiant modesty places the burden of boys’ sexual appetites on
girls’ behavior, as Jennifer and others discovered, no amount of careful dressing can
ensure that a girl is free of sexual attention.

In addition, luminous femininity and radiant modesty sometimes take whiteness
and lightness to a literal level. I first began to notice this in my research when I attended
my first homeschool convention. I had made an effort to dress conservatively in a knee
length black dress, cardigan and boots, but after walking around for a few hours, I felt
like I stood out in my all-black outfit when most of the women around me dressed in
lighter, more typically feminine colors. But when the Bright Lights leader suggested that
dark, heavy eye makeup detracted from portraying feminine modesty, one mother feared
that this advice could be interpreted as a racialized message. At lunch that afternoon,
Sarah interrupted the kitchen full of leaders who were eating and talking to alert them to a
potential problem the comment had caused. An upset mother had approached Sarah and
said that she was concerned that the girls of color in the audience might have been
offended by the implication that dark eyes were bad or unfeminine. Sarah, who I
observed to be remarkably adept at graciously handling interactions with all kinds of
people, did not chastise the leaders, but instead reminded them to be especially sensitive in how they handle the topic of modesty.

To avoid making girls feel uncomfortable, she encouraged the leaders to focus on larger principles related to modesty and avoid giving a list of specific rules. But giving the girls a sense of what crosses the line into immodesty without talking about specific hem or sleeve lengths is tricky, much like the struggle to avoid legalism and labels that characterizes the courtship movement as a whole. Similarly, while Sarah addressed the mother’s complaint, and the leaders expressed concern about wanting to avoid offensive comments, a kind of femininity that centers around metaphors of whiteness and lightness runs the risk of unintentionally evoking racialized implications, especially with phrases that are burdened with such complicated connotations as “lily white.”

The courtship movement overlaps with the Christian homeschool world to a large extent. Surveys indicate that 95 percent of homeschool participants are white, which means that the courtship movement an almost exclusively white phenomenon.\textsuperscript{153} The most visible exceptions to this rule were kids I saw at homeschool conference and purity conventions who appeared to be the adopted children of white married couples. This was especially the case at Sarah’s Bright Lights retreat, where I learned from my hosts that many Christian families in the area had adopted internationally from Africa. It may have been the presence of some of these daughters that sparked the mother’s concern about the use of phrases such as “dark countenance.”

Guidelines for dressing modestly also come with a particular class perspective. The clothing styles and brands that are popular in courtship media reflect middle class tastes and budget and serve the needs of a middle class wardrobe. While Leslie admits to wearing “sweats or causal jeans and a tee shirt” when “cleaning out the basement or baking cookies with the kids,” she writes that “for the most part, I feel and act more dignified when I dress like a lady.”\textsuperscript{154} Wearing tailored jeans in a dark wash provides a “feminine upgrade” to a sloppy outfit. She also suggests that girls shop in young professional stores at the mall rather than in the less formal juniors’ departments. And while she says that she doesn’t wear high heels every day, her “Making it Practical” article is illustrated with photos of open-toed kitten heels, dress slacks, a scarf that looks to be made of cashmere and a string of pearls.

In another article for the magazine, luminous girl Jade suggests shopping at second hand stores or more moderately priced retailers like Target for a more affordable look. These tips could help a girl achieve the “modest feminine” look for less, but the aesthetic is still decidedly middle class. Jade writes, “They think I must shop at Ann Taylor or J.Crew and pay tons of money to find my clothes.”\textsuperscript{155} In addition to modesty and femininity, Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin list “excellence” as the third quality that reflects how a luminous girl should dress. Drawing from Proverbs 31:22, “She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.” They point out that “the Proverbs 31 woman was dressed in fine clothing, not in rags.”\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{155}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{156}Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin, \textit{So Much More}, 87.
These guidelines might create expectations that are unreasonable or unsuitable for some girls, but the most controversial aspect of modest dressing, at least according to the Botkin sisters, is the quality of “femininity,” and more specifically, whether or not girls should always wear skirts and dresses rather than pants or shorts. Referring to the creation story in Genesis, the sisters write, “In the beginning, God created them male and female, and He called the distinction between the two ‘good.’ God specifically forbids the blurring of this distinction.” They further support their stance with Deuteronomy 22:5, which says that a woman who dresses in men’s clothing is an “abomination.”

Dressing “femininely” is a consistent requirement across the courtship movement, but authors who write about courtship and modesty do not describe in great detail what qualifies as feminine. It is likely that those who participate in courtship, like evangelical Christians more broadly, consider masculinity and femininity to be the natural, inherent traits of men and women, respectively. The courtship movement doesn’t describe femininity, because it should be obvious to believers what is and isn’t feminine. The one area that isn’t obvious is the question of pants. The Botkin sisters consistently wear skirts or dresses, as did roughly half of the girls and women I interviewed, and for one couple, this question was a point of discussion during their courtship.

“He had said he thought it would be nice if his wife and daughters would wear skirts a lot,” Lauren explained. “I like wearing skirts, and I like dressing up, but I just wasn’t the typical ‘wear a skirt every day [kind of girl].’” I asked Lauren’s husband, Micah, if his preference had to do with the rules in his family growing up. “No, I just

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157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
think sometimes when I would come home from work and see my sisters in a skirt, oh, it looks nice, it just seems very like creating a home atmosphere,” he said. “Feminine,” Lauren added. Lauren, who said that each “gave a little” when it came to making decisions as a couple, continues to wear skirts sometimes, which Micah says he appreciates. At the homeschool conference and purity retreats I attended, I noticed a mix of women and girls in skirts and pants. Leslie wore both looks at the Set-Apart Girl conference, while the Bright Lights leaders all wore long skirts.

My host, Molly, and her family do not view wearing skirts and dresses to be a critical component of modesty, but Molly said she thought skirts were recommended for the retreat leaders. She couldn’t remember if this was a written rule or just what everyone seemed to do. Molly didn’t seem concerned about the requirement. She wore a skirt each day, and was more worried that her short, brightly dyed hair might stand out against the other leaders’ longer, naturally colored locks. The most contentious factor in the skirt question, then, isn’t so much that luminous girls argue with one another or with their husbands about pants, but that this decision seems to carry disproportionate symbolic weight about what kind of Christian a girl is. Girls who wear dresses and skirts exclusively are understood to be more conservative or strict not only in the way they dress, but also in their approach to popular media and their views on courtship. In a similar way that the image of the veiled Muslim woman has been eroticized and utilized by westerners to represent the oppression of women, the exclusive wearing of skirts and
dresses among conservative Christians fascinates outsiders and accurately or not, signals more than the wearer’s perspective on modesty.159

Preoccupation with skirts can be frustrating to the girls who wear them. This appeared to be the case in a 2011 episode of TLC’s 19 Kids and Counting, a reality show about the Duggars, a family who participates in the related Christian practices of courtship, homeschooling and Quiverfull. The family is one who interprets dressing femininely to mean that girls and women should not wear pants, and the girls’ wearing of skirts has been the subject of several episodes. In the 2011 episode, a dozen or so of the nineteen children were put to work painting and tiling a commercial rental property owned by their father, Jim Bob. A crew member from the show questioned one daughter about her ability to do this manual labor in a skirt. The girl, appearing exasperated, rolled her eyes at the question while Jim Bob answered, “These Duggar girls can do just about anything in a skirt.” Minutes later we see Jinger kneeling on the concrete floor, knee pads fastened over black leggings beneath her denim skirt, laying rows of tile.160

Girls who wear skirts become adept at doing all kinds of tasks while keeping the presentation of their radiant modesty intact, but for all luminous girls this maintenance requires constant self-monitoring. Beyond checking the sheerness of fabrics in different lights, girls learn to be aware of how their posture and physical presence can be tempting to boys, as well. Chelsea, who is 21 and single, said she was surprised to learn the full

range of looks and behaviors that Christian young men find tempting when she studied Alex and Brett Harris’ *Modesty Survey*.161

The Harris brothers, who run The Rebelution ministry, expanded a discussion about modesty, which started on the ministry’s website discussion forums, into a comprehensive, detailed survey measuring Christian young mans’ responses to what they consider immodest dress and behavior from girls. Chelsea said she’d looked through the survey and was surprised to find that young mans reported that seeing girls lying on the floor could be a stumbling block. “Every time I’m over at a friend’s house watching a movie, I think about that now,” she said. Chelsea says she hasn’t changed her behavior because of this finding, but she is conscious now of the temptation. “I feel like I’m confident where I’m at with things and my heart is not to make young mans stumble and so—I don’t know.”

More than ninety percent of the thousand-plus respondents to the *Modesty Survey* agreed with the statement, “A modestly dressed girl can still be a stumbling block because of her attitude and behavior.”162 One fifteen-year-old boy said, “Well, young men can see through any girl’s clothes if they trick themselves into it. If a girl…acts a certain way, (Posing, leaning, dancing, touching.) It can trigger thoughts either directly towards that girl, or it may just get you thinking in the wrong way” (sic).163 In addition to lying down, the way a girl walks, a girl bending over and exposing her lower back, a girl stretching, lifting a long skirt higher than the knee to step over something and seeing a

161 Alex Harris and Brett Harris. “Modesty Survey.” Therebelution.com (blog). http://www.therebelution.com/modestysurvey/promote
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
girl’s chest bounce when walking or running are all listed in the Posture/Movement section as potential stumbling blocks.\textsuperscript{164} Not only do these guidelines place responsibility on girls for controlling boys’ sexual appetites, but lists like these suggest that almost anything a girl wears or does could be grounds for causing a young man to stumble.

The all-girl environment of the Bright Lights retreats seemed to provide a reprieve from the kind of constant self-scrutiny that this long list of behaviors could inspire. One afternoon, I was with Molly and Kayla, a young teen girl who had been assigned as Molly’s helper, as they prepared their classroom for the first night of the retreat. As Kayla sat on the floor preparing materials for class she said how nice it was to be able to just plop on the floor without having to worry about creating a stumbling block for young men. During preparation time for the retreat, I would often hear the distinct \textit{swoosh} of long denim skirts as girls rushed down the church hallways to gather supplies or locate a co-leader, momentarily relieved from the worry of moving in a way that would cause a young man to stumble.

Beyond postures and movements, behavior like flirting and even certain attitudes, fall under the umbrella of immodesty. Leslie captures these behaviors in the term “seductive femininity.”\textsuperscript{165} Unlike luminous femininity, which is elegant and controlled, a woman with seductive femininity is physically aggressive, “on the prowl” and flirtatious. As is characteristic in \textit{setapart}girl articles, several young men weigh in on the topic at hand. Nathan, 24, says “[T]hings like teasing (with sexual innuendo), provocative looks, 

\textsuperscript{164}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{165} Leslie Ludy, “Seductive Femininity: using feminine power for good and not evil,” \textit{setapart}girl magazine.
suggestive conversations are not honoring and quite destructive.” The Botkin sisters also associate modesty with behavior. “It is possible for a girl to be dressed irreproachably but to be shamefully immodest in behavior—by flirting, being loud and boisterous, by attracting the wrong kind of attention to herself in the wrong way,” they write. “As Proverbs 11:22 tells us, ‘As a jewel of gold in a swine’s snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion.”167 Instead of a sparkly gem, seductive femininity is tarnished gold in a pig’s snout.

Whether it is reflected in the clothes she wears, her posture, position, or behavior, a luminous girl maintains modesty not only to direct attention to her authentic beauty and shining countenance but also to protect young men from the temptation of lust. In the courtship movement, there are several words to symbolize this act of inciting lust, and they tend to place the responsibility for the action in the hands of girls. In the Harris brothers’ modesty survey immodest looks and actions cause a young man to “stumble,” as if a girl pushes him until he falls from a pure height into the depths of lust.

Another common word is “defrauding.” Like “countenance,” defrauding is favored by those who are familiar with Bill Gothard’s character teaching. Sarah Mally uses this term, which she defines as “deceiving or taking advantage of someone.”168 Consistent with the courtship movement’s lifelong perspective on courtship and purity, which says that a girl always belongs to her future husband, Sarah also calls defrauding a theft. “If a girl kisses a boy to whom she is not married, she is taking what does not

166 Ibid.
167 Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin, So Much More, 84.
168 Sarah Mally, Before Your Meet Prince Charming, 187.
belong to her and giving away what is not hers to give,” she writes.\textsuperscript{169} At her Radiant Purity event, Sarah reminded the audience that men have difficulty controlling their eyes and that girls should “take seriously our responsibility to our brothers in Christ. We suffer together when someone else sins.”

Most often defrauding is used in the context of a girl robbing a young man of his purity by dressing or acting suggestively. But Sarah also provides an example of young man defrauding a girl. “Daniel thinks Christy is a really cute girl, so he talks with her every week at church. He winks at her, laughs at her, pats her on the back, flirts with her, and always goes out of his way to stand by her or give her attention. He’s not seriously interested in her,” she writes. “Christy, on the other hand is flattered by his attention and is falling more in love with him each time they talk. She thinks about him all week long and is just waiting for the day he will ask her out and express his love.”\textsuperscript{170} The same acts that might cause a young man to stumble into lust—a pat on the back and flirting—have a very different effect on Christy. She falls in love and spends all week thinking about Daniel, indulging in a kind of emotional impurity.

This story reflects a belief that forms the foundation of radiant modesty and is reflected throughout the courtship movement. Young men are visual and sexual creatures, while girls are more emotional. “Ladies,” writes Joshua Harris in \textit{Boy Meets Girl}, “you’ll never know just how differently we’re wired until you get married.”\textsuperscript{171} It also reveals a pattern that runs throughout Christian teachings about purity, romance and courtship. Girls learn to monitor their bodies and police their dress and behavior to avoid stirring up

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{171} Joshua Harris, \textit{Boy Meets Girl}, 120.
lust in young men, but the literature fails to acknowledge that girls might have physical sexual desires of their own. In fact, it rarely acknowledges the existence of girls’ bodies at all, except in their relation to boys and men, and the bright, light, glowing imagery of radiant modesty suggests that it is meant to be a performance that obscures girls’ bodies and focuses attention, instead on their faces or their ‘joyful countenances.’

The failure of courtship authors to acknowledge girls’ sexual agency or desire is not unique to the courtship movement. In her Risky Lessons: Sex Education and Social Inequality, sociologist Jessica Fields finds that sex education curriculum in middle schools fails to teach about sexual desire and pleasure, especially for girls. Fields and other researchers who study sex education also find that discussion of bodies and divorced from discussions of sexual activity, while feminist studies of girlhood sexuality find that public knowledge of girls’ sexual activities and sexual desire fosters shame in girls. The result of these forces, Fields argues, is that youth, especially girls, lack a sense of sexual agency and subjectivity that would enable them to competently make decisions about their own bodies and sexual activity.

While girls’ bodies are missing from sex education curriculum and from courtship discourse, in other ways, their sexualized bodies are hypervisible. In The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women, author Jessica Valenti argues that “the sexualization of girls has hit a crisis point.” She cites the

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173 Ibid, 111.
174 Ibid, 114.
175 Jessica Valenti, The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women (Berkeley, California: Seal Press, 2009), 63.
popularity of sexy looking dolls marketing for young girls and the prevalence of provocative Halloween costumes like “‘sexy ghost’” or “‘Playboy witch’” as evidence of this trend, which author Gigi Durham calls the “Lolita effect.” Valenti also argues that America media, sex education curricula and abstinence campaigns reflect a growing obsession with girls’ virginity. By focusing on the virginity of young women and girls, she argues, sexual abstinence campaigns are actually objectifying women and reducing them to their sexuality.

Combined, these forces suggest that the ideal girl is one who is sexually desirable, but not sexually desiring. By endorsing modest dress and behavior, radiant modesty attempts to address the “Lolita effect” and the sexual objectification of girls by boys and men. By embracing the traditionally feminine virtue of modesty, girls hope to be free from objectification, the male gaze or even sexual violence. However, radiant modesty contributes to cultural dynamics that place a responsibility for a girl’s sexual safety in her own hands. It also teaches girls to constantly monitor their own bodies to avoid attracting the male gaze, and it fails to acknowledge girls’ bodies and girls’ desires. So, while it seems to address some feminist concerns, courtship only intensifies some of the problematic dynamics diagnosed in girls studies literature, including the fetishizing of young women’s purity and the denial of women as sexual subjects with agency.

Proverbs 31 Women

The most famous woman in the courtship movement is a mythical one. The Proverbs 31 Woman, who has no name except for the biblical chapter in which she


177 Ibid
appears, is the ultimate role model for girls in the movement. She embodies luminous femininity, radiant modesty and productivity, a characteristic that is highly valued for and by Christian youth. Proverbs 31 describes in detail this theoretical woman who displays all the characteristics of a “wife of noble character.” The ultimate goal of courtship is marriage, and the Proverbs 31 Woman provides an example for girls to aspire to not only once they are married, but also during their single years as they prepare to one day become wives and mothers. She excels at homemaking and childrearing, and the Proverbs woman also demonstrates hospitality, gracious speech and other qualities characteristic of luminous femininity.

A girl can use her single years to develop and hone these characteristics, and she can use them to serve God and her future husband. Courtship authors interpret verse twelve of this chapter, “She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life,” to mean that a woman should keep her husband’s best interest at heart, even before she meets him. Luminous girls also take a cue from the Proverbs woman’s industry and productivity. For some girls, like Janis Garcia’s daughters, this means serving the needs of her family and her father as an at-home daughter. For others, like Michelle, a girl’s single years, when she is not burdened with the responsibilities of being a wife and mother, are ideal for devoting to Christian ministry. In this way, luminous femininity, in the form of the Proverbs woman, provides a role model for marriage as well as a strategy for managing singlehood.

The Proverbs woman is “clothed with strength and dignity” as well as the “fine linen and purple” (Prov. 31:25, Prov. 31:22) that the Botkin sisters view as a mark of luminous femininity.

178 Prov. 31:10, NIV.
excellence and radiant modesty. Her luminous femininity shines in her voice and her hospitality. “She speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction is on her tongue” (Prov. 31:26). And “She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy” (Prov. 31:20). But the Proverbs woman is most obviously a model of industry and productivity. “She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night,” and “She sets about her work vigorously” (Prov. 31:17-18). She trades, plants a vineyard and makes and sells garments. Far from idly waiting for their prince to come, being productive is an important virtue for girls in the courtship movement. “[W]hat do we see her doing from the darkness of the early morning through the night?” the Botkin sisters ask. “Laboring. Producing. Earning. Increasing.” In an article from their website, VisionaryDaughters.com, the sisters use the example of the Proverbs woman to argue that “industry is a fundamental feminine virtue.”  

Just as the mythical wife was able to labor, produce and earn from home while still serving the needs of her husband and children, the sisters argue that a girl need not leave her father’s home to be industrious. Like the Garcias, the Botkin family believes that daughters should remain living at home under the authority and protection of their fathers until they marry. 

*At-Home Daughters*

In *So Much More* and in their film, *Return of the Daughters*, Anna Sofia and Elizabeth describe the framework of this lifestyle, which some have called the phenomenon of the “stay-at-home daughters.” These daughters remain living in the

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family home, serving the needs of their family until they marry. Their work can range from cooking and caring for younger siblings, as is the case in Duggar family, to helping fathers with their professional and ministry responsibilities. This arrangement seems to work best for families in which fathers own their own businesses or ministries, as is the case with the Valenti family in Return of the Daughters. Katie Valenti helps her father with accounting, design and others tasks related to his home design company.

In the same film, Jasmine Baucham, daughter of well-known pastor and author Voddie Baucham, helps her father with his ministry by researching topics of interest for him. Voddie, who holds a doctorate in ministry, argues that in this way Jasmine, who did not attend college, is receiving the equivalent of a higher education. The Botkins are sensitive to the critique that stay-at-home daughterhood may not work for families in which the father is not a minister or business owner. Without the need for bookkeeping or research, one mother who had seen the film found it difficult to imagine what a daughter’s tasks would be. “I don’t understand what his needs are,” she told me. Beyond helping their fathers or caring for siblings, the Botkins also suggest that girls, like the Proverbs woman who made and sold garments, might develop their own cottage industry. Their own friends, they write, have made money from ventures ranging from catering and dressmaking to website design and freelance journalism.\(^{181}\)

The sisters do not say whether girls are allowed to keep their own earnings, but the chapter “Daughters and a father’s roof,” implies that a girl’s income would go to the family coffers. “[A] girl should be worth her keep, one way or another,” they write.\(^ {182}\)

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\(^{181}\) Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin, So Much More, 188.
\(^{182}\) Ibid, 182.
She could also earn her keep by helping the family to save money by providing childcare or shopping frugally, for example. In addition to working for their own families, many of the girls I met spent time volunteering. This was true of luminous girls whether or not they were at-home daughters. All of the Bright Lights leaders were volunteers, and many had travelled from out of town for the week. Heather, 28 and married, said that when she was younger and single she had organized a group of girls to serve as mother’s helpers who would clean and cook for women who were busy with small children at home.

**Submission and Authority**

Beyond productivity, another characteristic that was common among luminous girls I met was their respect for their father’s authority. Fathers of at-home daughters might play a more clearly defined role in their daughter’s life, especially if the two work intimately together in ministry or business, but girls across the spectrum tended to support the evangelical theology of male headship and female submission in marriage. In the courtship movement, the father-daughter relationship echoes this design. “I… look at my dad as my protector and my provider,” Chelsea says, “and…my husband will be the same thing.” Chelsea says that when she imagines her future husband, “I look at him as he will be…sort of a replacement of my father and right now I’m under the authority of my dad. And when I get married I’ll be under the authority of my husband.” Specifically, Chelsea says her dad serves as an advisor but does not make decisions for her. “[T]he way our relationship works is that he will give me suggestions and wisdom and just advice on things, and he still allows me to make the decision.”

Mary, 18 and single, says her father has a similar, but slightly more involved, role. “Mine is very protective and I’m glad of that. He also makes important decision and
helps me make decisions and gives wise council.” She also imagines that her future husband will one day fill this role. “I think that when the father gives a daughter away to her husband, that the husband takes place of the father in those areas.” Mary, like many luminous girls, sees the father-daughter relationship as a training ground for submission in marriage. “I think that the woman really needs to learn how to submit,” she said.

Key research on gender and evangelicalism, like John Bartkowski’s *Remaking the Godly Marriage*, Marie Griffith’s *God’s Daughters*, Brenda Brasher’s *Godly Women* and Sally K. Gallagher’s *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, have examined the way that ideas about submission and authority function in marriage, but courtship discourse suggests that the ideals of evangelical womanhood are actually established well before marriage when girls practice the patriarch authority relationship with their fathers. However, Chelsea says that she has not experienced submission to her father as oppressive. “I’ve had a great relationship with my dad and I’ve never once looked at it as I’m just a doormat and get walked all over.” Her experience seems consistent with the results of this research about submission in evangelical marriage, which find that while conservative Christians hold tightly to the rhetoric of submission and male headship, in practice, married couples often have more egalitarian relationships than rhetoric suggests. For example, when I asked Molly’s mother whether she thought her husband’s authority would extend over her daughter even if Molly moved out of the

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184 Ibid
family home, she said she hoped her daughter would always seek her parents’ advice about decisions, but she couldn’t think of any specific ways in which she or her husband would make rules regarding her daughter’s life at that point.

However, as we will see in Chapter Three, both Chelsea and Molly share stories of having relationships with young men that pushed the boundaries of friendship, and in both cases, their fathers disapproved. Chelsea’s father even issued an ultimatum: if she didn’t break things off with the young man in question, she would have to move out. Examples like these were rare in my research, but it is likely that girls often presented to me a somewhat idealized version of themselves, and their relationships. Beyond the understandable reluctance for interview participants to reveal negative things about themselves, the Christians I met were excited about the idea of courtship, and very committed to the movement’s ideals. For this reason, they may have been especially reluctant to give themselves in a bad or rebellious light or point out flaws in the courtship system. In addition, in families that value patriarchal authority, girls may not feel safe expressing outwardly any rebellious notions they entertain privately.

Mission-Minded Girls

Molly, who is 21, lives at home but does fit the label of an at-home daughter. This is true of several of the girls I met, and is characteristic of a broader social trend. Due to changes in the economy and job market that make financial independence more difficult, young adults, whether from Christian families or not, are living longer in their parents’ home in large numbers. What distinguishes an at-home daughter from her luminous

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girl peers, then, is the degree of independence she experiences in relation to her home and nuclear family. While Janis’ daughters, who lacked drivers’ licenses, could not travel anywhere on their own, Molly had her own car and drove independently to work and to school, a small liberal arts college where she was pursuing an elementary education degree.

As her interview introduction suggests, Molly’s interests are wide and varied. “I am a student and a photographer and a janitor, sort of.” In addition to attending school full-time, Molly owns a small photography business, specializing in wedding photography. To help cover tuition and other bills, she also works with her best friend, Chelsea, cleaning commercial buildings in the evenings. The week I spent with them, the girls sometimes rushed from volunteering at the retreat all day to their after-hours cleaning jobs. Chelsea and Molly had also traveled overseas for a mission trip to Mozambique the previous summer. Molly’s father had joined her for the first part of the trip, but left once he felt she was safe there. Molly hopes her teaching degree will be the ticket she needs to gain access to the country again as a missionary, and Chelsea dreams of continuing missions work in Africa, even after she is married someday. “After going there last summer, I would love to go back there. I feel like I left a piece of my heart back there,” she said.

If the Botkin sisters and the Garcia family represent one kind of luminous femininity, girls like Molly, Chelsea and Michelle represent a much different kind. I call these girls “mission minded” because of their desire to dedicate their single years to serving God on the mission field. Like Michelle, who owns her own home, and Molly,
who was the only Bright Lights leader to pursue a four-year college degree, mission-minded girls tend to exercise a good deal of independence outside of their father’s home and nuclear family. But, like at-home daughters, they value the Proverbs woman’s industry and productivity. Chelsea, who like Molly is a homeschool graduate, had just finished an associate’s degree in liberal arts, but decided not to pursue higher education any further. Instead, in addition to one day returning to the mission field, she was focused on developing her music career. A singer and guitar player, Chelsea had recorded an album of Christian music and often performed locally. Michelle, in addition to working full-time at the pregnancy care center, had developed her own line of curriculum for Christian teens and also hosted purity retreats for girls.

Mission-minded girls view their single years as a season for serving God and others before they take on the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood. Leslie calls this season “sacred singleness” and has written a book with the same title. Leslie does not take a stance against girls pursuing secular jobs or careers, in fact, she doesn’t address this question at all. Instead, her books, articles and lectures repeatedly valorize famous women missionaries like Amy Carmichael and Gladys Aylward, whose work with orphans in China was made famous in the 1958 movie *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* starring Ingrid Bergman. Leslie draws from the exciting tales of women in distant locales like these to inspire contemporary single girls, a group that she says is underserved by contemporary Christian church culture, where single women are problems to be solved.186

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186 Leslie Ludy, *Sacred Singleness*, 58.
Like Molly and Chelsea, many of the luminous girls I met had done at least one international missions trip, which they remembered in a romantic light, like Chelsea saying she had left her heart in Africa. They hoped to one day return to the mission field, most often with dreams of working with children in orphanages or schools. While most luminous girls desired to one day be married with children of their own, international mission work serves as an exciting, even romantic, calling in the meantime. But the noble dream of serving others in far-away lands comes at a steep price, as Christian missionaries are often responsible for raising funds for their own journeys, which puts a life on the foreign mission field out of reach for many. Mission-minded girls can also choose the more accessible route of local mission to work, serving the needs of the poor and children in their own cities.

**Sacred Singleness**

Katie, who I met at Leslie’s Set-Apart Girl retreat, said that in addition to going to college in her home city, she also spent a lot of time volunteering at the “inner-city” church where her father is pastor. Her ultimate dream, though, is to one day open an orphanage abroad. Katie’s dream fits the mold of the mission-minded girls that Leslie writes about. In addition to famous missionaries, Leslie’s book *Sacred Singleness* features profiles of contemporary modern mission-minded girls or, as she calls them, “sisters of the common life,” who work abroad in Haiti, Jamaica and China or domestically in the inner-city. Beyond reaching the lost and orphaned, mission-minded girls work for Christian non-profit organizations like Michelle’s pregnancy care center.

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\(^{187}\) Ibid, 127-146.
Grace Mally, Sarah’s younger sister, frequently volunteers at the Christian Creation Museum in Kentucky and for her sister’s Bright Light events. Whatever form it takes, engaging in mission work reflects the Proverbs woman’s productivity and her willingness to serve the needs of others, which is a message to girls across the courtship movement. In Leslie word’s, this kind of work constitutes a “poured-out” life. Despite their ambition and industry, for mission-minded girls, as well as for at-home daughters, career achievement and financial independence are not priorities. Some authors, like Sarah Mally and the Botkin sisters, believe that it is wrong for girls to pursue careers outside of the home, and that this desire is served at the expense of serving a woman’s husband and children. Instead, the Botkin sisters say girls should follow the Proverbs woman’s lead of cultivating cottage industries that can be done from home. Sarah encourages girls to be mission-minded, a sentiment that is reflected in her chapter titled “Have a life purpose bigger than marriage.”

Sarah’s reminder reflects an uncomfortable reality of luminous girlhood. At-home daughters may find fulfillment in helping their fathers with business or ministry tasks, and the allure of an exciting foreign adventure inspires mission-minded girls, but ultimately, girls in the courtship movement deeply desire to be married. In the manner of the Proverbs 31 woman, some girls imagined they would continue part-time work from home after they married, but all of the single girls I interviewed aspired to one day be at-home wives and mothers. Mary, explaining her choice not to go to college, says, “I’ve chosen my career, and my career is to be a godly wife and mother, and I don’t see how

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college is going to help me with that.” But Mary, in addition to teaching piano lessons, working at her local library and volunteering for Bright Lights events, is preparing for her future. “I am getting a lot of teaching and a lot of learning, and my classroom is my home, and my teacher is my mom,” she says. “We’re going to start having [it] where I plan more meals and figure out, you know, checkbook stuff and accounts, like bank accounts.” While Sarah encourages girls to have a purpose beyond being a wife, she also assures them that participating in ministry will help prepare them for marriage.189

This is clearly the case for girls who work with children, as many desire to do. But those who write about courtship and femininity assure girls that and skills they learn in ministry, helping their father with his business, or working on their own entrepreneurial endeavors from home, will be transferrable to their future families. Because mothers who practice courtship almost always end up homeschooling their children, it is also possible that their skills could be applied one day in the home classroom. By preparing now for the life of the Proverbs woman, who provides food for her family and “watches over the affairs of her household,” a luminous girl is fulfilling the mandate to bring her husband good all the days of her life (emphasis added). (Prov. 31:15 and Prov. 31:27). By practicing submission in her relationship with her father, following his advice, and even helping him with business, she is preparing to submit to her future husband and to meet his needs. The reward for her investment, she hopes, will be like that of her mythical role model. “Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.” (Prov. 31:28).

189 Sarah Mally, Before Your Meet Prince Charming, 160.
Luminous girlhood provides a plan for a girl’s single years, when she can be productive and industrious whether at home or on the mission field, at the same time that she prepares for marriage and motherhood. Busy, productive at-home daughters and mission-minded girls are supposed to be content with, and even relish, this period of singleness. But it is impossible to talk about singlehood without invoking the specter of marriage, and amongst evangelical Christians, where the nuclear family is the most important social unit, many luminous girls yearn for the day they will get married and have a family of their own. Sarah Mally cautions girls against indulging in self-pity and becoming impatient while they wait for their prince to come. Sarah, who is 32 and unmarried, even addresses the possibility that he may never come. “What about those who never marry? This is a horrible thought for many young ladies. Yet if we have the right perspective, there is no need to fear a life of singleness,” she writes. “Rather, we can be excited to know that if it is God’s plan for us to be single, He is calling us to some special ministry for the Lord.”

In *Sacred Singleness*, Leslie warns girls about the danger of making their marriage dreams an idol that stand in the way of fulfilling God’s plan for them. One girl who attended the Set-Apart Girl retreat admitted that of all of Leslie’s books about femininity this one was the hardest for her to read, because of her reluctance to accept the message. The Botkin sisters, however, are hesitant to encourage girls to consider the possibility of singleness, which they say “is a calling God bestows only on a very few

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190 Sarah Mally, *Before Your Meet Prince Charming*, 152.
people.”

Still, they discourage girls from fantasizing about their future weddings or husbands.

But constantly focusing on their role as helpers, honing their homemaking skills, cultivating a bright, shining countenance and fashioning their bodies for modesty can only serve to constantly remind girls of their single status. I could see this struggle playing out in Mary as we talked one afternoon about courtship and marriage. “[I]f I never get married, which I very much want to get married, I will be fine with just having the Lord,” she said, but she also admits, “I’d be fine with getting married next year. I always have this idea that if I’m thinking about marriage a lot, it’s probably not going to happen right then, but like if I get my mind focused on the Lord, it’s going to happen.” Mary is struggling to reconcile her desire to be married with the rhetoric of courtship, which suggests that she should be content with her relationship with God and make the most of her single years. Her internal conflict demonstrates that courtship and luminous femininity provide girls with strategies for coping with the difficult reality of being single in a family-oriented subculture. However, luminous femininity cannot change the courtship marriage market, which has more single women than men, and it does not empower girls to take action to make marriage happen on their own terms.

All the Single Ladies

Some advocates of luminous girlhood do see the possibility of prolonged singlehood as a crisis brought on by feminism. In the introduction to their film Return of the Daughters, the Botkin sisters argue, “Girls are confused about where they fit into the

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191 Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin, So Much More, 218.
192 Ibid., 217.
world, even into their own families. They’re confused about what it means to be a woman. Perhaps most of all they’re confused about how to deal with a new byproduct of feminism – prolonged singleness.”

Feminist advances have made it easier for women to live independently, and changes in cultural attitudes about premarital sex and cohabitation may be the cause of increasing marriage ages. But changes in the economy are also responsible for the phenomenon of prolonged adolescence that is characteristic of contemporary American youth. Since it takes longer for young people to establish their careers and attain financial security, traditional markers like marriage, parenthood and home ownership seem less urgent. Whatever the cause of extended adolescence, the courtship movement is uncomfortable with its existence, and it attempts to addresses the question of prolonged singleness with the options of at-home daughters and mission-minded girls.

In contrast, girls outside of the movement might be expected to delay marriage and motherhood and to strive to emulate the elusive ideal of the successful, glamorous career woman. Feminist scholars of girlhood like Anita Harris argue that for many girls, “the signs of their success are glamorous careers and luxurious consumer lifestyles, financial independence, and high standards of physical beauty and grooming.” With the Proverbs 31 woman as a model, luminous femininity values girls for their frugality, resourcefulness, hospitality and productivity. But for the girls that Harris calls “can-do” or “future girls,” expectations about career success are intertwined with consumerism.

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193 *Return of the Daughters.*
194 Robin Marantz Henig, “What Is It About 20-Somethings?”
Harris writes, “While media and advertising have always focused on feminine success in relation to body and appearance, what is new is that this is now connected to success at work.” As a final sign of success, future girls are also expected to delay motherhood until they are firmly established in their careers. Harris writes, “Motherhood has been repackaged as a profitable and attractive choice for the career woman in her mid-thirties.”

Similarly, in her analysis of the cool tone of modern advice books Hochschild argues that modern women have been forced to “assimilate to the male rules of love.” They advise women to subordinate the importance of love, delay falling in love until after consolidating a career, and separate love from sex. Love should play a less central role in the lives of women and should occur later in life than before. Previously men had been advised to wait for marriage until they were “occupationally prepared.” But, “Now this delay in the timing of love, and the emotion management needed to delay, are recommended to women as well. Wait, advice books for women now caution, until your late twenties or thirties, when you are trained in a career, until you are ready to fall in love.” Whether girls attempt to embrace a season of sacred singleness or they assimilate to male rules and delay love, both luminous girls and future girls are invited to manage their own emotional need for love.

**Conclusion**

As this chapter demonstrates, luminous girlhood offer girls a strategy for navigating some of the problematic gendered and sexed dynamics of contemporary

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196 Ibid, 19.
girlhood, including the hypersexualization of girls’ bodies, the expectation that girls assimilate to male rules of love, and the phenomenon of prolonged singlehood. However, luminous girlhood comes with anxieties of its own, and, like the psychologized discourses of self-esteem and voice, it does little to address culturally oppressive forces. A luminous girl’s radiant modesty is supposed to draw attention to her beautiful countenance and serve as a safeguard to prevent her from being sexually objectified, but courtship only intensifies some of the problematic dynamics diagnosed in girls studies literature, including the fetishizing of young women’s purity and the denial of women as sexual subjects with agency.

For girls in the courtship movement, dreams of a romantic love story are contingent on the successful performance luminous femininity, radiant modesty and mission-mindedness. Luminous girls are expected to follow the cool modern rules of love, in which they are invited to manage their own emotional needs more and avoid the Cinderella complex desire to be loved and cared for. The luminous girl struggles, as Lindsay shared in the introduction, “kill her dreams” of romance and marriage until she has met the man God wants her to marry. In the meantime, she should maximize her potential by serving others. Despite the strategies that the courtship movement offers for managing singlehood, girls deeply desire to be married, a choice over which they have little control in the male-led world of Christian courtship. A luminous girl shines with the kind of warmth and beauty that might someday attract a prince, but she also faces the uncomfortable reality of being single in a world built around marriage and of preparing for be a wife without a prospective husband in sight.
Chapter Three: “Guard Your Heart”

Anthony Padgett still tears up when he tells the story of his first marriage ending. Anthony, a self-proclaimed family guy, says he always desired to have a wife and children, but he found himself alone at the age of 35. He was divorced, a decision that he says was solely his ex-wife’s. To give the couple’s children the opportunity of living in a stable home with two parents, they kids were living full time with his ex-wife and her new husband. When he shares his testimony during events for Courtship in the Covenant Ministries, Anthony describes two of the lowest moments following his divorce. During the first, he was driving and was crying so hard that he couldn’t see the road in front of him. At another point, he fell to his knees on the floor of his home, weeping, but it was at this moment that he felt God speak to him, saying, “I know your pain. I’m with you in your pain.” Eventually, Anthony entered a courtship and remarried. He and his current wife, Kimberly, have three children. In addition to running the ministry together, he works a full-time job, and she is an at-home wife and homeschool mother.

Though her marriage to Anthony is her first, Kimberly’s testimony is also painted with regret. Shortly before meeting Anthony, Kimberly had ended a three-year relationship that she realized was going nowhere. From the outside, things looked promising – he was a Christian, and he had offered enough assurances about their future together that she had already purchased a wedding dress. But the ring never came. Heartbroken and unsure what to do, she felt God spoke to her saying, “If you let go of
your Ishmael, I will give you your Isaac.” This prophecy references the biblical tale of Abraham who, instead of waiting for God to fulfill his promise of making him the father of many with his first wife, Sarah, took matters into his own hands to produce an heir with his second wife, Hagar. The message to Kimberly, delivered through this prophecy, was that she, like Abraham, was to step aside and let God be in charge of her life.

Still, Kimberly says that ending the relationship and severing the emotional bonds she had formed with her boyfriend felt like a “mini divorce in my heart.” It is this pain, like the sorrow that brought Anthony to his knees following his divorce, that the Padgetts want to help others avoid. This mission is the inspiration behind their ministry, and like many in the movement, the Padgetts believe that choosing courtship will help single Christians avoid the emotional pitfalls of dating and lay the foundation for a happy, lasting marriage. During one of their weekend Radical Royal Romance workshops, the Padgetts ask the question, “What is God’s will for your love life?” The answer, they say is, “You never have a broken heart, you never break the heart of another and that you properly court and marry your first love.”

When I met Kimberly in her home, weeks earlier, she had described what she understood to be God’s plan for marital love. She described how the kind of romantic love that often accompanies dating and marriage has peaks and valleys, and as she spoke she demonstrated this roller coaster track of emotion with her hands. Courtship, she said, is centered on a selfless kind of loved based on a believer’s relationship with God. This kind of love, she said, begins at marriage and always grows steadily, a path she mirrored with her hand tracing an imaginary upward line with her hands. In this way, as the title of
Anthony Padgett’s book *Journey to Agape* suggests, courtship advocates a kind of selfless, or *agape* love, beyond the romantic or *eros* love that characterizes infatuations.

This is the promise of the courtship movement. By following the principles and guidelines of courtship, Christian singles will minimize or eliminate the risk that is otherwise inherent in romantic relationships, and it promises to maximize the experience of love in a marriage relationship. This sentiment is best captured in the ubiquitous phrase “guard your heart,” which Joshua Harris adapted from Proverbs 4:23 and popularized in his bestseller *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. In order to shield the heart from injury and impurity, Christians should treat peers as platonic brothers and sisters in Christ, avoid romantic relationships until they are ready for marriage and practice purposeful courtships with the end goal of marriage. Spiritual, emotional and physical intimacy should be reserved for engagement and marriage, and many couples choose to “save the first kiss” for the wedding day.

**Defining Romance**

In his *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship*, Harris writes that the “essence of pure romance is pursuit—a man showing through his words and appropriate actions his care, affection and sincere love for a woman and the women responding in kind.” Many of the courtship stories I heard reflected this understanding of romance as a performance initiated by men. Like David and Lindsay’s engagement story in the dissertation’s introduction, which enabled her to live out her fantasy of a tandem bicycle ride through the park, courtships often feature moments highly choreographed by young

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men to demonstrate affection for their future wives. While Harris says romantic expression is a critical element in the later stages of the courtship process, he cautions that romantic gestures and words should not outpace a man’s commitment to the relationship—in other words, he should be careful not to lead a girl on.\textsuperscript{201}

Like Harris, many courtship advocates say that romantic zeal is best saved for the later stages of a relationship, just preceding or beginning with the engagement, when it is clear that both parties are ready to accept the lifetime commitment of marriage. The same goes for emotional intimacy, which courtship authors describe as the sharing of deeply personal thoughts, hopes and dreams with another person. Courtship media reflect larger cultural assumptions about the nature of men and women—young women are understood to be more emotionally oriented and young men, more physical. In fact, as we explored in Chapter Two, courtship media reflect the movement’s overall denial of girls’ embodiment and sexual desires.

For this reason, courtship teachings suggest that young women struggle more with the temptation to lose themselves in romantic fantasy, while young men struggle to combat lust and maintain their physical purity. However, the initiation of romance is understood to be the young man’s purview, so it is up to him to avoid leading a girl on with romantic gestures. However, courtship authors suggest that even without attention from a young man, girls might still struggle with the temptation to engage in premature emotional intimacy or to indulge in intimate romantic fantasies about her future with a young man, so she must work to keep these desires in check.

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid, 90
Though Harris describes romance in terms of the performative, emphasizing romantic gestures, courtship discourse also suggests that the expression of romance goes hand in hand with emotionally intimate acts like sharing private thoughts and imagining a future together. The way the courtship movement understands the interconnectedness of emotional intimacy and romance is similar to the way students described these terms in Donna Freitas’ *Sex & the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America’s College Campuses*. Freitas emphasizes students’ tendency to hold sex apart from romance and to define romance in terms of communication. “Students are looking for communication. Talking without sex. Without even so much as a kiss, Romance, to them, is chaste.”

Freitas asked students to describe “the most romantic night of your life so far,” and reports that their stories rarely “moved beyond just talking.” But while students rarely shared accounts of physical, sexual intimacy, they did describe romantic gestures similar to those popular in the courtship movement. Their stories recounted beach picnics at sunset, nights spent watching the stars, and even a boy throwing a stone at a girl’s window late one night to wake her up and talk late into the night. These romantic nights are reminiscent of the walks through the park and starlit proposals that I often heard from young married couples who had courted. So while Freitas equates romance with talking, it seems that for many young adults—both in the courtship movement and beyond—romance is a combination of both intimate communication and sentimental performance.

**Abstinence and Hookups**

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203 Ibid.
Freitas also finds that, consistent with the separation of sex from romance, young adults practice “hookups” more often than dating. Hookups are brief physical encounters ranging from kissing to intercourse that are divorced from the context of a committed relationship. Sometimes hookups are viewed as a trial for a more committed arrangement, and sometimes hookups become steady and can even lead to relationships, but steady hookups do not begin with traditional dating, where one person ask the other out. And in either case, young men tend to view hooking up more casually than girls. Freitas reports, “If any coffees, dinners, or ‘just talking’ romantic encounters occurred with these students, these experiences typically happened after multiple hookups and the decision to become a couple. Dates just aren’t a common way into a relationship. Students don’t see many avenues into committed romantic relationships aside from hooking up.”

Physical, sexual purity among adolescents has long been a concern of parents and other adults in the United States, but the courtship movement’s emphasis on emotional purity is consistent with new trends in the American sex education classroom. Like courtship media, abstinence education teaches that sex outside of marriage can damage the integrity of all aspects of a person’s sexual life. For example, the federal parameters for receiving funding to teach abstinence education in schools stipulate that educators teach that “sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful

\[\text{Ibid, 138.}\]
\[\text{Ibid, 127.}\]
\[\text{Ibid, 139.}\]
psychological and physical effects” and that abstaining from sex has clear “social, psychological and health gains.”

Similarly, in *Making Chastity Sexy*, Christine J. Gardner found that a “key argument in the evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns is that delaying sexual gratification today means a greater prize of true love and romance tomorrow.” And failing to remain sexually pure will have negative effects on the emotional health of a marriage. Gardner describes how the sexual abstinence program Silver Ring Thing stages a skit to demonstrate this point. In it, a young man, who’s heart is represented outwardly by plywood model, is burned up and sawed apart each time he “goes too far” with a girl he’s dating (49). While this skit is supposed to demonstrate how the young man created emotional baggage that he later carried into and added to his marriage, the effect on his heart is that is decimated into smaller pieces. This example demonstrates the paradoxical nature of the abstinence message. Whether religiously-based or taught in public school classrooms, abstinence teachings often feature lessons that demonstrate the finite nature of human emotions and sexuality. People lose pieces of their heart—they run out of love—that they can never get back. At the same time, their sexual encounters outside of marriage attach to them like unwanted baggage and carry forward, like a bad credit rating, into their future marriage.

In contrast to the “giving it all away” demonstration, a related version of this lesson demonstrates how easy it is for people to take the past with them into future

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relationships. Like Anthony Padgett’s warning about unhealed emotional wounds springing up in new relationships, the abstinence classroom teaches that past sexual intimacy can pollute a future marriage. Countless versions of this lesson have been documented in studies of abstinence education, but the most infamous, is the lollipop analogy. In this example, a fresh lollipop represents a young woman or man’s virgin state, and as the candy is passed around, each student gets a taste until the lollipop becomes completely undesirable. This lesson suggests to students that intimacies they share while single will stick with them and follow them into future marriages.

In a particularly graphic example, Leslie Ludy invites readers to imagine their hypothetical wedding night scenario, if they give their hearts and bodies to men other than her husband’s: “[N]o sooner do your feet touch the floor than you begin to sense that something is wrong. Your husband notices it, too. His face is bewildered as he looks slowly around the room. An intense, nauseating odor begins to surround you…there is trash everywhere! Piles and piles of garbage bags overflowing with slimy refuse lay scattered haphazardly thought the room. Flies buzz around heaps of gooey used pop cans and sticky banana peels….A group of your past boyfriends are casually leaning against the wall.”209 While Padgett’s teachings tend to emphasize that patterns of relationship discord can carry over from one relationship to the next, Ludy’s example suggests that a specter of former loves themselves actually carry over.

Courtship discourse takes these teachings a step further, arguing that unchecked romantic feelings and fantasy can be as damaging as pre-marital sexual intimacy. Like

Silver Ring Thing’s plywood heart example, I witnessed a similar version of this skit at a homeschool conference workshop aimed at equipping parents to talk to their children about purity. In this demonstration, homeschool mom Kathy Morrisey performed a skit with the help of her young son. Kathy was armed with a cut-out paper heart, and her son played the part of several young suitors. As each one wooed Kathy, he ripped a piece of her paper heart away until there was nothing left when her future husband came along to court her.

Whether it is ties that bind or a heart that is carelessly given away, guarding your heart from premature emotional intimacy is the way to be sure that a marriage isn’t polluted with too much of the past or contain too little fuel for future happiness. In this way, romance becomes a powerful, even dangerous, force to be reckoned with. Freitas’ finding that hookups are easier to come by than romance, combined with the abstinence movement’s understanding of sexuality as multidimensional, comprising the physical and emotional self, and courtship’s warnings about the danger of premature emotional intimacy suggests that romance, not sex, might be the most valuable resource on the relationship market.

*An Economy of Romance*

If romance, not sex, is the real prize worth waiting for, it would seem that courtship participants, who eschew romance before engagement, might experience an overall shortage. However, what they may lose in quantity when they choose to share romantic intimacy with just one person, courtship promises to make up in quality. The carefully orchestrated romantic gestures common to courtship stories gives Christian singles, especially girls, an incentive to bank their fantasies and invest them in a young
man who will take care to produce a romantic courtship. This trade-off is calculation that fuels what can be understood as the economy of romance in the courtship movement.

Courtship promises to minimize the risk of romantic relationships and reward believers who invest by providing happy, fulfilling marriages. Saving intimacy for marriage assures that a couple will not “run-out” of love and happiness. It also promises to ensure believers that they never experience heartbreak. By eschewing romantic attachments and attempting to avoid dreaming of a future with someone, ideally courtship participants will never know the pain of having these dreams dashed. Finally, believers hope to court and marry their first love and to maximize the romantic potential of each step in this relationship.

However, despite these careful calculations, believers say that there are no guarantees when it comes to matters of the heart. Those who practice courtship find that relationships don’t always work out, and hearts sometimes get broken. Believers say that it is impossible to completely control their emotions, especially once a courtship has begun. Despite the assumption that girls are more emotional and more prone to losing themselves in romantic fantasy about the future, this is true for both young women. When it comes to physical purity, even the excitement of holding hands for the first time can be distracting and overwhelming. While courtship guidelines seem tidy on paper, believers also find that risk is an inevitable, even necessary component of romantic relationships. They say it is impossible to really get to know someone without emotionally investing in a relationship, which makes them vulnerable to pain.

*Dating as Divorce Prep*
Joshua Harris’ chapter *Guard Your Heart* comprises just fourteen pages in his classic courtship how-to book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. But this small phrase has struck a chord with the book’s readers. Nearly everyone I talked to about courtship during my research had read Harris’ book, and the words “guard your heart” were often slipped into teachings and conversations without further elaboration, as if the phrase was self-explanatory. Among courtship audiences, it most likely is. The spirit behind “guard your heart” represents the crux of the movement – in exchange for avoiding intimacy outside of the context of engagement and marriage, courtship promises to protect believers from the pain and heartache associated with romantic break-ups.

For those familiar with courtship, the phrase is common enough to perhaps be obscured from its scriptural roots, but Harris takes the phrase from Proverbs 4:23, “Above all else, guard your heart.” In his chapter by the same name, Harris warns that the danger we are guarding against is actually the heart’s own sinful nature. Without vigilant monitoring, the heart can fall prey to “pollutants” like infatuation, lust and even self-pity. Most courtship authors agree that crushes are natural and acceptable, as long as they are not indulged. In keeping with recent trends in evangelical writings about sexuality, courtship literature does not dismiss sexual feelings as bad or dirty, but instead assures readers that they are a beautiful gift from God to be enjoyed exclusively within the context of marriage. Romantic and sexual feelings are not always dangerous, but expressing them safely is a matter of careful timing.

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210 Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, 141.
211 Ibid, 143.
Courtship media describe intimacy as having emotional, physical and sometimes spiritual components. Engaging in any kind of romantic closeness at the wrong time or with the wrong person will create effects that carry over into a believer’s future marriage. These effects can be permanent bonds or ties that tug at the fabric of a marriage or bad habits that carry over from one relationship to the next. As the title suggests, Anthony Padgett’s book warns of the dangers of practicing romantic relationships outside of the courtship pattern. While sexual abstinence education tends to focus on both the physical (unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections) and emotional consequences of sex outside of marriage, as is common in courtship media, Padgett’s message focuses primarily on the emotional consequences of premature intimacy. The book called Journey to Agape: Escaping the Cultural Inferno of Romantic Disaster Through True Courtship explains the devastating effect of broken relationships on a believer’s marriage.\textsuperscript{213} Unhealed emotional wounds from dating relationships can be triggered in a future marriage.

This, he writes, leads to a “greatly reduced capacity for intimacy and bonding” and a “limited ability to trust [a] partner’s love.”\textsuperscript{214} In addition to reducing the capacity for emotional fulfillment in marriage, courtship authors warn that dating relationships can also train people to cut and run when the going gets tough or to say goodbye when the initial spark fades. Harris says that if believers indulge their infatuations, they will find

\textsuperscript{213} The inclusion of the word ‘agape’ in Padgett’s title rather than ‘eros’ or romantic love reinforces the notion that marital love should be selfless. For example, his wife, Kimberly received the message from God that she was ready to be married not when she wanted to be married but when she felt God had taken her as far as he could in her spiritual journey as a single person.

\textsuperscript{214} Anthony Padgett, Journey To Agape: Escaping the Cultural Inferno of Romantic Disaster Through True Courtship, A Handbook for Christian Courtship and Beyond (Pataskala, Ohio: From the Ashes Publishing, 2003), 27.
themselves locked in a “pattern of infatuation.” When we’re infatuated with someone, he says, we build up a fantastic illusion around that person, but when we discover our crush’s disappointing, imperfect self, “our dreams fade and we move on to a new crush.” For this reason, it is common in the courtship movement to hear a version of the refrain, “courtship is preparation for marriage, while dating is preparation for divorce.”

**Emotional Baggage**

As Harris’ example suggests, courtship teachings warn that bonds and bad patterns can form even from an unrequited crush. In the absence of an actual relationship, courtship teaches that believers can damage their future marriages by feeding into their infatuations and romantic fantasies. Lindsay, who is 24 and who courted and married her first love, says she still had to deal with the effects of previous crushes when she married her husband, David. “I guess I was a little surprised that—I didn’t think that we would carry any baggage into our marriage and relatively speaking, it’s light, but you still have to work through things—like previous crushes or just different things.” Lindsay said she had gone through a period when she was single when she felt insecure because she didn’t have a boyfriend. “It makes you feel special when someone actually likes you,” she said. “I guess I went through that for a little while—like why have no guys come up and asked me for my phone number? That type of thing, like am I attractive—what’s my problem?”

Despite the courtship teaching that girls avoid all behavior that might inspire lust in a

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216 Ibid.
young man, Lindsay’s doubt demonstrates that girls are not free from the desire to be acknowledged as attractive.

From Harris’ perspective, her doubt could be understood as an expression of self-pity, one of the “pollutants” that can cloud the unguarded heart. Courtship authors argue that self-pity and doubt can fuel crushes, like the ones that Lindsay says packed the emotional baggage she brought into marriage. Like many courtship authors, Sarah Mally assures readers that crushes are natural and nothing to be embarrassed about. “The problem isn’t so much having a crush,” she writes, “but how we respond to it.”217 To prevent taking a crush to the next level, which in the world of courtship might mean imagining a future with a young man, Sarah suggests that girls who find themselves attracted to a young man avoid telling him about her feelings or talking about him with her friends. She should try not to do anything that will intentionally stir up thoughts about him, like pinning up pictures of him on her bedroom wall. She also suggests that girls try not to “dwell on thoughts of him or let yourself get carried away with dreamy imaginations.”218 Finally, girls should consider telling their parents about their feelings, which she says might “lighten the intensity” of the crush. Parents can also help by praying for and advising girls about crushes.219

Another common strategy for guarding your own heart and protecting others’ is to treat opposite-sex peers as someone else’s future husband or wife. Harris encourages singles to keep this scenario in mind when they interact with their Christian brothers and

218 Ibid, 91.
219 Ibid, 92.
sisters. “Gentlemen, are you the kind of friend to the girls in your life that you will one day hear from their husbands, ‘Thank you for being a brother to my wife?’” he asks. “Ladies, do you relate to your guy friends in a way that would make their future wives want to seek you out and thank you for being a sister to their husbands?” For luminous girls, this means dressing and acting modestly to avoiding stirring up lust in a young man’s heart.

For young men, this usually means trying to avoid leading a girl on emotionally. They should be especially careful to act consistently in their friendships with Christian sisters, Harris says. “Don’t show kindness only to those people you have a romantic interest in….This isn’t flirting for the purpose of stirring romantic interest in someone; it’s showing Christlike brotherly love.” In addition to sharing the same level of affection and attention with all friends and avoiding flirting, Harris offers a litmus test for deciding whether young men are crossing the “elusive line between friendship and ‘more than friendship.’” The difference is that going beyond friendship means there is a level of intimacy in the relationship. This happens, he says, when the relationship is focused solely on the two people in it, rather than on some other common interest. “It can be an athletic pursuit, a hobby, faith, or music, but it’s something outside of them.”

Girls can also employ their own strategies to keep their hearts from running away from them in their friendships with young men. Sarah Mally suggests that girls avoid spending time alone with a young man or singling him out for attention by writing letters

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221 Ibid, 130.
222 Ibid, 132.
223 Ibid.
or e-mails. While Harris seems more comfortable with cross-gender friendships that share brotherly affections, Sarah suggests that girls keep their relationships with young men at a casual, acquaintance level and focus instead on developing strong relationships with siblings and other young women. “[B]e careful not to share personal or intimate things with your guy friends,” she warns.\(^\text{224}\) She also reminds girls that “emotional intimacy belongs to your spouse” and that “it is easy to give a piece of your heart to a young man without dating him at all.”\(^\text{225}\)

In *Set-Apart Femininity*, Leslie Ludy also gives guidelines for avoiding intimacy with young men. Leslie uses the term “sacred things” to mean behaviors and thoughts that are best kept within the intimate relationship of marriage. She compares sacred things with the architecture of the Hebrew temple in the Old Testament. The innermost area of the temple, the Holy of Holies, is equal to the intimacy of sexual expression and “the deepest, most personal dimensions of the heart and mind.”\(^\text{226}\) Only God and a girl’s husband should gain entrance to the Holy of Holies. The next level out, the Holy Place, contains the “domain of the human life [that] must not be shared with the public.” Family and intimate friends can enter this space which includes deeply personal expression of fears, dreams and desires as well as personal, nonsexual touch. Only when a relationship with a young man is clearly headed toward marriage is he allowed in the Holy Place.\(^\text{227}\)

\(^{224}\) Sarah Mally, *Before You Meet Prince Charming*, 50.
\(^{225}\) Ibid.
\(^{227}\) Though this analogy reads as a sexual euphemism, it is not clear that Ludy intends it to be suggestive of a sexual relationship. In a similar way Ludy uses the phrase “feminine mystique” in her book *Authentic Beauty: The Shaping of a Set-Apart Young Woman* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 2003), 71, without seeming to be aware of the critical second-wave feminist roots of the phrase.
Otherwise, Leslie says, girls can give away “affection, attention, and emotion” meant only for a girl’s husband. Friendly touch, words of encouragement and friendships can be entertained in the “outer court.”

In writing about intimacy and friendship, both Leslie and Sarah use the language of “giving away” a part of one’s heart. Like “guard your heart,” phrases that suggest it is possible to give away pieces of affection, emotion and intimacy are common across all parts of the courtship spectrum. This language suggests that people have a finite amount of physical or emotional affection and feelings, and that if they give it away too soon, there will be none left for a believer’s future husband or wife. This message resonates with practices in contemporary abstinence-only sex education like the many permutations of the “giving your heart away” skit earlier in this chapter.

**Heavenly King, Earthly Prince**

For girls, romance can be safely expressed in a relationship with Jesus without fear of giving away pieces of their heart to someone else’s future husband. Courtship media encourage all singles to focus first on their relationship with Jesus, but for luminous girls, this relationship is often described as a romantic one. According to courtship authors, who imagine Christ with attractive physical features and personality characteristics, Jesus is the ideal first lover, gentle and even handsome. In *Authentic Beauty*, Leslie Ludy recalls when she realized she could be God’s “spotless bride for all

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228 Leslie Ludy, *Set-Apart Femininity*, 112.
229 Ibid, 113.
of eternity.” God, she assures readers, “is the most amazing hero, the perfect gentleman, the most powerful of all kings, and the most tender of all lovers.”

Ludy also includes an extended allegory in which she describes Jesus as her first true love. She describes his “piercing gaze,” his “tender, intimate smile” and says that he “deeply desired” her. “He was infinitely patient, tender, and sensitive…the kind of prince I had dreamed of for as long as I could remember.” Ludy advises women to replace their romantic desires with desire for Christ. Though evangelical Christians often characterize a believer’s relationship with Jesus as a passionate one, physical descriptions of Jesus as a lover are unique to courtship literature, and to books aimed at girls in particular. Young men in the courtship movement do not appear to have the same opportunity of an outlet for romantic feelings.

Though some girls do talk about Christ in passionate terms, this sacred relationship does not fully contain their need for romantic expression. In fact, while courtship is designed to keep sexual and romantic feelings under wrap until engagement, I argue that it can actually serve to intensify fantasies about marriage, especially for girls. For at-home daughters, especially, who are preparing full-time to serve the needs of their future husbands and children, marriage can seem like the starting point for their adult lives. Though courtship discourages girls from fantasizing about a future with a specific young man, girls do seem to have specific ideas about the man they will one day marry—their “future husband” as the movement’s rhetoric says.

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231 Ibid, 34.
Many girls, and some young men, create lists detailing the characteristics they want their future spouse to possess. This way, when a young man is considering initiating a courtship, he can compare his list against the girl’s actual qualities, and a girl can do the same. If the potential suitor does not match up, a girl can decide to wait until someone comes along who better meets her criteria. This system is supposed to be further insurance against a couple falling for each other if they are not a good match. In this way, a believer’s “future husband” or “future wife” can become the subject of romantic fantasy. For example, in the place where other young adults might have a poster of their favorite actor, popstar or teen idol, one young woman I met had a list of character traits she hoped to one day find in her future husband. Many girls were hesitant to put physical traits on their list, but often said they were looking for someone who was committed to his relationship with Christ. Several also said they wanted a husband who had a “gentle spirit.”

*Fantasies and “Pseudo-Dating”*

The courtship movement provides clear guidelines for keeping relationships and fantasies in check, but in practice, emotions prove difficult to wrangle and to keep inside the safe boundaries of friendship. Luminous girls seem to be aware of how difficult it can be to keep romantic feelings from creeping into relationships with their Christian brothers. Paige, a slender girl with porcelain skin, wide hazel eyes, and a mastery of dressing both stylishly and modestly, was very aware of this potential danger. I met Paige at Leslie Ludy’s Set-Apart Girl retreat. She was in her early twenties and single. It was early January, and Paige was scheduled to return to Colorado in a few weeks because, in addition to attending the Set-Apart weekend, she had enrolled in the spring semester at
Ellerslie, Eric and Ludy’s missionary training school. First, Paige was returning to her hometown, and as she rode with the other girls on a small chartered bus back to the airport, she worried out loud about the possibility of a romantic crush interfering with her dedication to the program.

Both the school and the Set-Apart events are housed at the same small campus in Windsor, and Ellerslie students who had remained there between semesters were recruited to help with the Set-Apart event. Several of the students were single young men. They all attended the final session of the retreat on Saturday night when Eric ended the evening with songs and an open altar call, inviting the audience to come to the front or move to the back and use the sanctuary space to worship in any way they felt. The Ellerslie guys fell to their knees and raised their arms, looking heavenward in adoration of Jesus. On the shuttle ride back to the airport the following morning, Paige and the other girls began talking about these young men. In courtship, the concern that there won’t be enough committed young men to go around is a common, if sometimes unacknowledged fear. The Ellerslie guys seemed to represent hopeful possibilities for the future – living proof that heroic princes actually exist. This was good news for some, but Paige was concerned that their presence might derail her from her reason for being at Ellerslie in the first place, to draw closer to God and receive a vision for His purpose for her single years. “I’m worried that I’ll be distracted,” she told the other girls, who empathized with her concern.

Paige was concerned that the presence of desirable young men would serve as a temptation, luring her into romantic fantasies. Sometimes, though, romantic feelings go beyond the realm of fantasy and push friendships towards the dangerous territory of an
intimate relationship. Because of the intense feelings involved in these relationships, they can easily slip into a dating or boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, but one that lacks the commitment and shared goal of future marriage inherent in a courtship. Best friends Molly and Chelsea say they have both been a part of emotionally-driven, undefined relationships, and that these experiences have strengthened their resolve to pursue only a committed courtship in the future.

Chelsea calls these experiences “pseudo-dating relationships.” “There’s the guy,” she says, “that I didn’t officially date him, but we just didn’t give it a title basically, but we both liked each other.” The relationship started when Chelsea, now 21, was 18. “And it’s funny,” Chelsea said, “because at that point I had already kind of said, yeah, I don’t want to do the traditional dating, I want to do courtship. I want my parents to be involved. But I got a little distracted….That was the first guy that really expressed interest in me and I was just so flattered with it.” In addition to not clearly defining the goal of the relationship, Chelsea says she eventually came to doubt that the guy’s commitment a Christian lifestyle was not as strong as he had let on.

“[T]he guy had me fooled into thinking that he was really a lot different than he was….He wasn’t the little church boy that I thought he was.” In addition to her own doubts, Chelsea’s friends and family didn’t approve of him, but despite all of these signs, Chelsea said she tried to convince herself that the relationship was good for her. Though the two had not spent time alone together or gone on dates, her parents were concerned enough that eventually, she says, they told her, “I either had to move out or continue my relationship with him.” Chelsea associates the failure of the relationship and the trouble it caused with the fact that it was more “pseudo-dating” than courtship and that she had let
her feelings lead the way. “[I] don’t actually consider it that I dated him, but it was close enough emotionally that I feel like I did. And so I realized the importance of just being emotionally—guarding your heart in that area” [emphasis added].

Molly said she has had two similar experiences, where friendships with young men entered a gray area and ended badly. She, too, associates these failed relationships with getting too close emotionally without the safety net of a commitment that courtship provides. In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Harris uses a familiar courtship word to describe this kind of emotional investment. “Intimacy without commitment is defrauding,” he writes. Molly found herself in one of these problematic relationships when a friend of her brother’s expressed interest in her. Molly, who was committed to courtship, told the young man she didn’t date, but that she would be willing to get to know him as friends. Besides, she said, “I didn’t know if I even liked him that well.”

Because of his friendship with her brother, he was over at their house a lot. “So things went on,” she says “and then the lines got blurry. Nothing went on that was inappropriate. But it was at the point where we either had to call it dating or not dating.” When he started buying her gifts, including an expensive outfit and a camera, she said she realized she had to stop the momentum of the relationship. “[A]t that point, I was like, man there’s gonna be strings attached to this. And there kind of were. So I had to make a decision. So then, I told him, I was like, I told you I wasn’t going to date you and I don’t feel like I’m ever going to date you. So we need to like kind of have a little bit more boundaries so that we have a little more freedom.” While it seems paradoxical that setting boundaries actually creates freedom, in this case defining the relationship as a

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friendship only might have freed Molly from being further drawn into an intimate relationship that she seemed to not be very desirous of in the first place. Besides Molly’s lack of romantic interest in him, it is likely that this young man would not have made a strong candidate for courtship because he does not appear to have been well-versed in courtship practices like approaching Molly’s father for permission to pursue a relationship with him.

In another situation, Molly says, she began Facebook messaging with a friend of a friend. “[A]nd then that turned into like five messages a day. And then it turned into like every day we were like sitting on the computer talking to each other, which in itself I didn’t think was that big of a deal, but connections were started and then it was like, oh, let’s call each other.” Eventually, Molly ended up meeting the guy face-to-face when she visited his city for a separate reason. After meeting, she knew she really liked him and they continued emailing and talking on the phone. Molly said all of this happened while she was still shy of a commitment she had made not to be involved in a romantic relationship until she was 21. Though there is no agreed upon age at which a girl should begin a courtship, I heard of several instances of girls making a pledge to God to wait until a certain age to begin courting, with the intention that they will devote their intermittent single years fully to service, such as mission trips or other ministry work. However, some girls and parents did express concern about girls they knew who were marrying very young, so it is likely that such pledges could also be a strategy for avoiding early marriage.

“So in my mind, I was like, I could push the lines as close as I wanted to and then kind of go with it.” In the meantime, her parents learned that the young man had a bad
reputation with people in their hometown. Like Chelsea’s parents, they asked her to stop talking with him. “And I did for two weeks,” Molly says. “Then I started talking to him again behind their back and I wasn’t even the same person. I had attitude problems, too, because I knew I wasn’t supposed to be.” Eventually, she ended the relationship. “I was like I can’t because I’m too emotionally bound to you right now.”

Both Molly’s and Chelsea’s stories closely follow the narrative of cautionary tales from courtship books that warn readers about the dangers of uncommitted, but emotionally intimate relationships. In “The Seven Habits of Highly Defective Dating,” a chapter in I Kissed Dating Goodbye, Joshua Harris argues that “dating can create an artificial environment for evaluating another person’s character.” This was the case in both girls’ stories. According to Chelsea, her suitor misled her about his commitment to his faith. In Molly’s story, she said that with the first young man, “I had seen red flags and just ignored them….But he was like super controlling and then sneaky.” The second, she said, had a reputation for being lazy, and a cloud of other unconfirmed character accusations hung over him.

In each story, an emotionally charged, pseudo-dating relationship had impaired a girl’s ability to make sound judgments about the young man’s character. Each guy, in turn, was described as deceptive or even controlling. The relationships were never committed to the end goal of marriage. Both girls talked about failing to guard their heart and about forming emotional ties. Both said their parents disapproved of the guys, and the girls’ unwillingness to break things off strained their relationships with their families. All of these elements are common tropes in courtship literature, a genre which often uses

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233 Joshua Harris, I Kissed Dating Goodbye, 45.
real or hypothetical stories of relationships to illustrate guidelines and principles. In *Journey to Agape*, for example, Anthony Padgett has a chapter called “Christian Romantic Disasters” which includes cautionary case studies about figures like The Long Term Daters and The “I Just Can’t Commit Man.”²³⁴ Because they fail to follow courtship principles, each story ends in disaster for the couple.

The way Chelsea’s and Molly’s stories resonate with courtship media narratives suggests that those who read courtship books learn to frame their real-life experiences in the terms of these familiar tropes. When relationships fail, believers look to courtship principles to explain what went wrong. They emphasize the impact of premature emotional ties or the failure to define the relationship’s end goal as marriage. If parents disapproved of the partnership, this might impact how a girl remembers the guy, who is framed as deceitful or manipulative. For Chelsea and Molly, these pseudo-dating experiences reinforced the girls’ commitment to pursuing courtship, and in the movement more broadly, stories like theirs are used as evidence for choosing courtship over dating.

*When Feelings Fail*

In the courtship movement, not only is it important to keep your fantasy life in check and to keep romantic feelings from creeping into friendships, but managing emotions during the early stages of a courtship is also considered to be critically important to a relationship’s success. Ideally, a couple will start off as friends, and even once a courtship has begun, they will try to keep the relationship at the friendship level for a time so that they can get to know one another without the overwhelming distraction of romantic feelings. Chelsea says that one of the problems with her pseudo-dating.

²³⁴ Anthony Padgett, *Journey to Agape*, 47.
relationship is that she led with her heart instead of her head. “I guess it really comes down to what is the driving force of your relationship,” she says. “It’s not necessarily that emotions are a bad thing. It’s okay to get the warm fuzzy feeling. It’s not like that’s bad, or to be emotionally attracted to somebody, but I think it’s all a matter of what’s driving this….But my relationship with him, it’s clear that it was just emotions driving it.” The relationship, she says, “was purely emotional and just a feel good thing for me, and really that’s just selfish.”

Not only did leading with feelings set the relationship off on the wrong foot, but Chelsea also said that, because she wasn’t sharing her feelings in the context of a secure relationship, her feelings changed in response to the whim of the young man she was seeing, and her mood changes began to affect other parts of her life. “I would be horribly depressed and down in the dumps because I hadn’t heard from him…And then he’d call me and I’d be just as happy as could be,” she said. “So I think the moment that you start—I don’t know, freaking out when he doesn’t call, and it’s controlling other aspects of your life as far as emotions go…I think that’s when it’s crossed the line.”

Chelsea and other girls I talked to echoed the courtship teaching that girls are more susceptible to emotional impurity and giving their hearts away than are young men. “I know as girls it’s easy to just get emotional about things and let that be the driving factor the whole way through….it’s the girl that can kind of lead it off that emotional cliff,” Chelsea said. When I talked with Mary, an eighteen-year-old, self-described at-home daughter, about courtship and marriage, she seemed very conscious of the fact that she is an emotional person, and she speculated that this characteristic might be difficult to control in the context of a courtship. When I asked her about what role she imagined her
parents would have in her courtship one day, Mary said she thought they would play a “big role” because, “I’m rather an emotional person, and I think that it’d be really hard for me not to get overly attached to someone before I knew that that person is who the Lord will want me to marry.”

Mary said she would rely on her parents to “keep her accountable” and to help the couple get to know one another on a spiritual level, first. “It’s not just physical purity,” she said. “It’s also emotional purity, your heart purity. That if you give a piece of your heart to someone, it’s not all there for your future husband. Even in a courtship situation which is so guarded, it’d be very easy to do that.” While some of the girls I met, like Chelsea and Molly, expressed regret about investing their emotional energy prematurely in young men who would not become their husband, Mary shared no such stories. Instead, her wariness about emotional purity seemed to be based on the discourse of the courtship movement which she had adopted as her own.

Mary also said she wanted her parents to hold her accountable for the emotional investment she made in her future courtship, because if things didn’t work out with the young man, she would have fewer regrets. This sentiment is common in courtship literature—beyond ensuring that a relationships starts out on a firm foundation, another reason for controlling romantic emotions is that this strategy is supposed to keep the couple from becoming too emotionally invested before an engagement is imminent. This way, if the courtship were to end before marriage, the idea is that the potential heartache would be minimal. “I think I would be very grateful that my parents and my whole family would be in that scene a lot, because like I said, I’m a very emotional person, and I’d want to make sure I stayed completely pure if this wasn’t the man that God had for me,”
Mary said. “I wouldn’t want to end this relationship with any regrets or ties to that person.”

Mary’s concern represents an unpleasant truth that lies under the surface in the courtship movement. The careful, cautious design of the courtship model is supposed to ensure a good match and a safe transition from chaste, platonic friendship to romantic engagement and a lifelong marriage. But some courtship media also acknowledge the possibility that a relationship will not work out, and most of the believers I met shared stories – their own or someone else’s – that confirmed that sometimes courtships do not end happily ever after. Some courtship teachings are careful to point out that a relationship that does not end in marriage is not a failure, so long as the couple carefully guarded their physical and emotional purity.

However, young believers say that, in reality, when a courtship breaks up it can be equally as painful as the end of a dating relationship. David and Lindsay are a young and newly married couple who describe their courtship as “textbook,” but they know that not every story reads as neatly as theirs. “[I]n a courtship,” David says, “you know up front that the idea is thinking about marriage, so feelings are always a lot stronger in that case. So to be honest, courtship is messy, especially if it doesn’t work out. So we were really blessed that this was our first courtship, and it was perfect.”

Despite the fact that their own courtship went smoothly, and the two have few regrets about their relationship before marriage, Lindsay also recognizes that relationships are rarely as tidy as the courtship model suggests. She contrasts real-life courtship stories with the ones she read about in Stephen Castleberry’s courtship series, a set of books chronicling the relationships of the fiction McLean family. Lindsey said she
has read several of these titles, and she enjoyed the stories, but doesn’t find them realistic. “So it was pretty much pie-in-the-sky books,” she says. “Like everything works out great, and in both books they have relationships that don’t work out for people, but it’s like no big deal, whatever, you know. For them, courtship was such a sterile process, whereas in real life we learned very quickly through friends and people that it didn’t work out, that courtship’s really messy, especially when it doesn’t work out.”

David and Lindsay sympathize with friends who have travelled a rocky road to the altar, but they feel blessed to have courted and married their first loves, as Anthony Padgett of Courtship in the Covenant Ministries recommends. Luke, on the other hand, who is now twenty-eight and happily married, knows first-hand what it feels like when a courtship doesn’t work out. When I meet Luke, 28, and his wife, Emily, 19, they have been married for just over a year and are the parents to a newborn baby. I talk with Luke and Emily about their courtship during a break at a homeschool conference, while Emily nurses their weeks-old baby. The baby occasionally stretches a slender bare leg out from under the nursing cover that Emily wears as she feeds her while we talk in the hallway of a crowded homeschool conference. When a woman that the couple knows passes by and interrupts us to congratulate them on the baby, Luke beams with pride, and when he talks about the details of their engagement, he smiles shyly. Luke seems content with his young family and with how his relationship with Emily unfolded, but the couple’s engagement was not the result of Luke’s first attempt at courtship.

His first courtship, which ended badly, left him hurt and, he says, “gun shy.” Luke says that when he was in his mid-twenties, “I formulated my formula for how I selected [a girl], and then in 2006 I walked it out in a relationship, and then I got hurt pretty
badly.” The girl he was interested in at first agreed to the courtship, but eventually changed her mind about marrying him. “And so I got my emotions involved, and then she had decided that she didn’t like me enough to marry me.” Emily is familiar with Luke’s previous courtship and the pain it caused him. Now, the couple say, their message to others is, “It’s not about formulas. It’s about relationships.”

For this reason, they don’t use the word courtship to describe their own relationship, because, like many in the movement, they think the word carries the connotations of a rigid, legalistic formula. “I went through courtship and it didn’t work and I got hurt really badly, so after that, it was kind of like formulas don’t work. It’s about what God’s doing.” Following the rules prescribed rules of courtship did not prevent Luke from getting his heart broken, but when the time was right with Emily, he felt like God orchestrated their engagement and marriage. Luke says his mistake the first time around was taking the lead—deciding he was ready to marry and taking steps to make that happen—instead of following God’s leading. Still, while Luke and Emily don’t call their relationship a courtship, they followed many of the movement’s guidelines, including making their parents an integral part of their relationship, committing to the goal of marriage and saving their first kiss for the wedding day.

*A Balancing Act*

Despite the fact that Luke had been badly hurt by becoming emotionally involved in his first courtship, when he began his relationship with Emily, the couple found that it was impossible to keep romantic feelings out of their relationship. “My emotions were fully involved in a week or two,” Emily said. “Whether we called it courtship or called it dating, there was risk involved in the relationship.” From Emily’s perspective, emotional
risk is an inherent part of relationships. “There’s even a risk involved in friendship,” she says. “The other person… walking out on you after you thought you had a great relationship or whatever, and that goes deeper in a guy-girl relationship, so I’m sure if one of us wasn’t thinking on the marriage lines, there would have been emotions and pain.” Courtship media maintain that it is possible to keep a relationship at a friendship level, avoid intimacy and treat the other person as another’s future spouse until engagement. But in practice, believers don’t find this kind of detachment to be possible.

Michelle, 31 and single, talked to me about courtship on what turned out to be the eve of her engagement, but even before she had a ring on her finger, Michelle said her heart was already invested in the relationship. “It’s really easy to start feeling romantic towards someone without you even—even if you make a decision….I’m not going to give my heart to you. The longer you hang out with somebody the harder it is to keep that in check.” Without an engagement commitment, however, Michelle said she prayed daily that God would help her to manage her feelings. She said she prays, “Lord, let me feel what I’m supposed to feel….help me be guarded.” In addition to daily prayer, Michelle says that spending time reading scripture, and even fasting, can be important strategies for keeping her priorities straight during the heady period of courtship. She says she tells herself, “Okay, now you do not miss out on your prayer time, especially not now, because you’ve got to have strength all of the time….Because you love this person and you care about him and you don’t want your thoughts to go crazy on you.”

Like others, Michelle seemed to be searching for the right balance between risk and intimacy. Chelsea, who is single, says she has already talked with friends about how they imagine they will manage this balance in their courtships. “There is a point when, to
really get to know somebody, you have to make yourself vulnerable, if you really want to connect with that person,” she says. “You hear it all the time—guard your heart, guard your heart. But at the same time, there comes a point where you have to let down your guard to really know how the other is.” This is especially the case for courting couples, who front-load the early part of a relationship with conversations about finances, parenthood and ministry and career plans.

Michelle says, “We have talked about marriage and things like that—how many children you want, all that kind of stuff,” she said. “Somehow I feel like that’s planning things too much, but I’m like why not be as prepared as you possibly can? Plan to have conversations about things that are important to you.” Having these discussions, though, increases the intimacy and risk in the relationship. “So, having your hands and your heart open…I think you have to risk a little by caring and the more you know somebody and you’re asking questions like this, they’re going to start feeling like wow, I feel romantic towards you….I don’t know that I know the answer to that as far as how much am I supposed to feel for you?” She said she did know that despite her efforts to balance guardedness and openness, if the relationship were to end now, she would be hurt. “Even still at this point, I mean I care about this person, but I still pray like Lord, in the end, [if] you decide to close the door….I will be broken hearted.”

**Guy Watching Girl Watchers**

Despite recognizing the difficulty of striking a safe balance between vulnerability and intimacy, Chelsea and Michelle both seemed to be conscious of the need to keep a close watch on their romantic feelings during courtship. Consistent with teachings about friendships and fantasy, the movement maintains that managing feelings in a courtship
relationship is especially difficult for girls. Courtship teachings suggest that for girls, romantic fantasy would not be sexual in nature, but that it would involve wishing for the kind of elaborate expressions of romance that mark many courtship relationships, as well as imagining a future together with a young man. Chelsea says that letting things go too far emotionally can be detrimental to both the girl and the guy, but, she says, “I think a lot of times it’s the girl that can kind of lead it off that emotional cliff.” Michelle questions, but ultimately accepts a truth about purity that is widely accepted amongst evangelical Christians. “I don’t know, maybe this is a stereotype,” she says, but “[guys] probably struggle more with their [sexual] thoughts and actions more than we do, because they’re very visual. Girls are very relational and emotional.”

Young men also seem to accept that girls are more susceptible to giving away their hearts than are girls, and they take seriously the charge of protecting girls’ feelings. Micah, who was newly married, talked about how he handled this responsibility during his courtship with Lauren. Until he had asked her father for permission to approach Lauren about a courtship, Micah said he tried to avoid showing Lauren that he was interested in her. “I’ve been warned so many times about how girls can be emotionally led on by guys who are just extra friendly, so I never wanted to take advantage of that,” he said. Micah’s strategy was similar to the advice Joshua Harris gives about walking the line between friendship and intimacy. “I would intentionally be in the same area as her,” Micah said, “but not showing her any specific attention, so I could get to know her, be around her when we were at activities and stuff like that, but not be showing her I was interested, per se, because I wanted to protect her heart.”
Making an effort to protect a girl’s feelings can be a romantic gesture, especially when the contemporary climate for young men pressures them to be “players” and teaches that becoming a “real man,” involves sexually objectifying girls.\textsuperscript{235} But in the courtship movement this kind of protection can border on controlling. Micah and Lauren talk about a disagreement they had during their courtship when Lauren, who describes herself as social and outgoing, had lots of male friends and Micah said he became jealous of the time and attention she shared with them. He framed his jealousy in terms of feeling the need to protect her from men whose intentions may not be honorable. “I tend to be very protective, even my sisters, even female friends that I have,” Micah said. “I picked up on this one line that I heard at a conference. This guy said, ‘Young men, you need to be guy-watching girl watchers,’ which is just protect girls around you, just protect their hearts, protect their innocence and integrity, because there are just sharks out there. So with that, I just sort of picked up on that, and I thought I should be very jealous of attention she got from guys.”

Specifically, Micah said he had difficulty with email and phone conversations and online chatting that Lauren shared with her male friends. In order to resolve this conflict, Lauren and Micah sought advice from their parents. Micah learned to respect what he called Lauren’s “vivacious” personality, and Lauren was able to see why Micah was concerned about friendships she had with other young men. Together, they came to a decision that “e-mail and phone conversations were too one-on-one for her and another

guy, but other than that, just kind of gave her the liberty to be friendly.” Micah said he also appreciated if Lauren told him about all conversations she had with other young men.

As this story suggests, the need to protect a girl’s heart is based not only on the assumption that she is more susceptible to emotional pain but also the understanding that most young men, even Christian ones, are predatory. Micah even calls them sharks. This assumption is consistent with courtship teachings about masculinity and with Molly and Chelsea’s pseudo-dating experiences with men who dishonest or even controlling. As with the girls’ stories, Micah’s critique of the aggressive, predatory tendencies of men suggests both positive and problematic potentials of courtship. Micah’s diagnosis of men as sharks resonates with sociological, cultural studies and other research about contemporary guy culture.

In her book *Sex and the Soul*, which studies attitudes and experiences related to sexuality among college students, Donna Freitas found that college men do experience pressure “be a player.” The men she interviewed said they felt that in order to fit in, they were expected to hook-up with random girls instead of pursuing monogamous romantic relationships. And in her study of masculinity in high school, C.J. Pascoe found that a key practice of masculine behavior for adolescents is the phenomenon of “getting girls,” which involves sexually objectifying girls, leering at them and coercing them into sexual activity.

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237 C.J. Pascoe, *Dude You’re a Fag*, 92-94
Courtship’s emphasis on physical purity and its regard for girls’ feelings seem like a welcome antidote to this kind of predatory masculinity. However, being a “guy-watching girl watcher” points to a power imbalance that exists between young women and men in the courtship movement. Courtship media do teach girls to monitor their feelings, but not to express them or to assert themselves. In addition, by reasserting the difference between young men’s physical, visual selves and women’s relational, emotional ones, courtship media seem to deny the possibility that men, too, are susceptible to emotional pain. For Luke, who followed the formula of courtship and still had his heart broken by a girl who changed her mind, this assumption was painfully untrue.

**Special Firsts**

At 31, Michelle, the abstinence lady, had waited a long time for her prince charming. For a dozen years she taught junior high kids about the benefits of abstinence. She shared with them the story of a young couple who waited for marriage and who became engaged during a romantic fairy-tale carriage ride. And she committed to holding herself to the same standard she taught her students. At last she met the guy. He treated her with respect, brought her flowers for no particular reason, and drove forty minutes to her house each weekend during the summer to mow her lawn. Early on Sunday mornings, he had a standing coffee date with an elderly widow he had met at the pharmacy. He was great with kids and close with his nieces and nephews. He had never heard of courtship when he met Michelle, but at Michelle’s request, he carefully reviewed the giant binder of courtship materials she had prepared for him, learned the principles and followed them.
He was everything Michelle could have hoped for. But even after she met him, Michelle remained committed to guarding her heart – optimistically planning for the future while trying to keep her feet on the ground and her mind in the word of God. Still, she said, there was no way around the fact that she would be broken-hearted if this amazing man ended up not being the one for her. As it turns out, Michelle didn’t need to worry. On an early summer evening, he proposed to her during a carriage ride through the streets of downtown Cincinnati, their hometown. Her own fairy-tale engagement ended up being just like the one she had taught her students for so many years. “That’s really what I always wanted,” she says. “God totally orchestrated that.” While Michelle didn’t mention having shared her fantasy with Sean for him to later implement, this did sometimes happen with courtship couples I met. For example, Holly, one of the few married women I met who had graduated college, shared how her fiancé proposed at Christmastime their junior year because, “He knew I always wanted to get proposed to in front of a Christmas tree.” And this wasn’t just any tree. Because they were attending school near Washington, D.C., her fiancé took her up the steps of the Capitol to the Hill tree and proposed there.

For Michelle, the romantic fantasies didn’t end with her engagement. The last time we spoke, Michelle was deep in the throes of wedding planning, pulling together an autumn wedding for 160 people in under four months. “I always wanted to get married in the fall,” she said. Faced with this option or waiting another year, Michelle sped up the planning. Six weeks before the wedding, Michelle had most of the details worked out. She planned to combine her autumn color scheme with a princess theme. The wedding would take place in an old barn on her brother’s property and would feature pumpkins for
decorations. Tiny glass slippers would hold the place cards, which were printed not only with guests’ names, but with Jeremiah 29:11. “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plan is to give you hope and a future.’” She and her fiancé planned to be married standing on a landscaping stone engraved with another scripture, which they would later place in the yard of their home. On the stone, they would share their first kiss. Then the couple would leave the ceremony before returning for the reception, by carriage.

They sound like something out of a fairy tale or a Hollywood movie, but the romantic details that marked Michelle’s engagement and wedding are typical of the courtship stories I heard. What courtship demands of participants in patience and restraint, it can make up for in relationships filled with romance, fairytale engagements and picture-perfect weddings. Ideally, participants limit their romantic relationships to the person they marry, but they invest heavily in this relationship. In *Before You Meet Prince Charming*, Sarah Mally encourages girls to think about this investment not as a sacrifice, but as an opportunity. “The question is not ‘how little’ can I save for my future husband and still be pure,” she writes. “The question is how *much* can I save for him, how many little special and meaningful ‘firsts’ will I have to share with him?” She provides a list of special firsts for girls to consider, including first expression of interest, first gift, first romantic look, first dinner date, first “I love you,” first piece of heart given and, finally, first kiss.  

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238 Jer. 29:11, NIV.
This strategy to managing intimacy is consistent with abstinence education principles that teach that sexuality is multidimensional, comprising the physical and emotional self, and that both sexuality and emotional intimacy are finite. As in the paper heart example at the beginning of this chapter, if a girl tears off a piece of herself for each young man she meets, she will have nothing left to give her husband, paradoxically, intimacy that is shared with someone other than a future spouse doesn’t disappear but instead threatens to carry over into a future marriage. Sarah asks, “How would you like it if some other girl had dozens of long, deep, intimate conversations with your husband and knew practically everything there was to know about him?”

It is as if these dozens of girls are themselves present in the relationship. Saving special firsts and intimacy for courtship and marriage ensures that the relationship has plenty of romance and very little regret.

To ensure that they got this formula correct, many of the couples I met had rules about when they would share these special firsts, including their first “I love you” and their first kiss. Despite the fact they often found it difficult to contain their romantic feelings once a courtship had begun, many couples made a point of waiting to say “I love you” until they were engaged. This was the case for Lauren and Micah, who became engaged just four months after their courtship began.

Micah describes the carefully planned engagement that preceded the couple’s first declaration of love. “I wanted to propose to her with snowfall,” Micah said, “since it was going to be wintertime, and it was just this wonderfully falling snow. We had just been to a wedding, so I was inspired.” The couple left the wedding they were attending and

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Micah asked Lauren if he could take her to show her something special. She agreed, and he drove her to a nearby reservoir. “There’s a little bit of a dock there, just next to a little body of water, and so we stood up against this little post…with the snow falling in her hair.” Micah said he made a joke about whether she was prepared to take on a strange new name that people find difficult to pronounce. “She didn’t get it,” Micah said. “So I said, ‘Well, I guess there’s only one thing left for me to do.’ So I pulled the ring out of my pocket, got down on one knee, and proposed to her in the snowfall.” And Lauren said yes.

Once they were engaged, the couple said they felt comfortable beginning to ask each deeper, more intimate questions than they had during their courtship. And, Micah said, “It was the first time we told each other ‘I love you.’ On that night was the first time.” Lauren said she felt safe, now that they were engaged, to make this confession. “To know, like, that we were attached….I felt like now I really know I’m going to marry this guy. I can tell this guy I love him, and that means a lot.” Lauren reflects on the importance of waiting to share her first “I love you.” She says, “I hear teenagers and dating couples all the time just say, I love you. “And you know, it doesn’t mean anything when they just kind of throw it [out there]. What does it really mean when they say it to the next person and the next person? I want it to mean something when I say it.”

**Save the First Kiss**

Though Lauren and Micah waited until the relative safety of engagement to share their first “I love you,” they say there was another first that happened sooner than they had planned for it to. Like most courtship couples, Lauren and Micah had originally planned to “save their first kiss” for their wedding day, but they didn’t make it that far.
There is no discernable scriptural reason for the decision to save the first kiss, but like “guard your heart,” the phrase seems to be most often attributed to Harris’ *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Anthony Padgett of Courtship in the Covenant teaches that it should happen this way since it is at the altar during the wedding ceremony that the minister declares, “*Now you may kiss the bride*” [emphasis added]. Saving the first kiss is also an important part of the model courtship narratives detailed for readers by Harris and by Eric and Leslie Ludy, unarguably the most popular figures in the courtship movement. Both Harris and his wife and Eric and Leslie shared their first kiss on the wedding day.

Because this ritual is so familiar to readers of courtship literature, saving the first kiss also seems to add to the excitement and romance of the wedding day.

Interestingly, for both the Harrises and the Ludys, while their first kiss as a couple was on their wedding day, both Joshua Harris and Leslie Ludy admit to having “gone too far” physically in dating relationships with others before God revealed to them a better plan—courtship—and with that plan, the vow that their next kiss would be on their wedding day. This pattern was also true for some of the believers that I met. Michelle, who had had unsuccessful dating relationships before courting her fiancé, had made and kept a vow that the next kiss she shared with a man would be on her wedding day.

The ability to renew a commitment to purity or to make a new vow after having gone too far physically is consistent with both religious and secular abstinence education teachings. In abstinence-only sex education, Christian purity campaigns and the courtship movement, concepts like “secondary virginity” allow all singles, in spite of their past, to participate in sexual abstinence and courtship. Being given a second chance to save the first kiss is also becomes an important part of a believer’s testimony. Testimonies are
stories that evangelical Christians tell about ways that God has worked in their lives. More specifically, a testimony is often the story of a Christian’s transition from unbeliever to “saved” or “born again.” The most prominent figures in the courtship movement have capitalized on the authenticity and compelling content of their testimonies to form the foundation of their ministries. Because they “went too far” or flirted with the world’s version of dating before embracing courtship, their testimonies have a kind of credibility or authenticity.  

Micah and Lauren, however, do not have particularly troubling backgrounds or gritty testimonies. Both come from large, Christian, homeschool families. Neither experimented with dating, but instead courted and married their first love. But despite their commitment to courtship and purity, they say they didn’t make it to the altar before sharing their first kiss. They have mixed feelings about this turn of events. “I can’t say that I regret not saving it,” Lauren said, “but at the same time, I do, just because that’s special, and it means something. It means you waited.” Lauren’s regret appears to stem from the fact that, being unplanned and private, the first kiss lost its symbolic value of serving as a witness to others.

Lauren and Micah also seem to place responsibility for the kiss on the lack of chaperoning they experienced during their courtship. Lauren was away at college during the first few months of their relationship, so Micah would often visit her at school. They did a lot of group activities together, but their arrangement also afforded them more

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privacy than a courtship couple living at home closely supervised by parents. “Because we were alone, we were more physically comfortable with each other,” Micah said. “So we married virgins, but just too physically comfortable.” As it turns out, though, the couple discovered that they were not alone. Micah said, “We had said we were going to [save our first kiss], and then we admitted that we hadn’t, and her brother was like, ‘Ah, that’s all right, we didn’t either.’”

Though they seem to have made peace with the way things played out in their relationship, Lauren did say that, if they had it to do over, “We would probably want more chaperoning….We want to do it differently for our children.” Even David and Lindsay, who say they had the “textbook” courtship and saved their first kiss for the wedding day, say that they would supervise their own children’s courtship more closely than their parents did. They talk about how, in the absence of other kinds of physical intimacy, even holding hands was an emotionally charged, even overwhelming, event.

“It was very romantic holding hands,” Lindsay said. David added, “For us, it was a big deal….We could sometimes just spend a half hour—I could just sit there petting Lindsay’s palm, you know, because that was special for us.” Lindsay and David seem to have relished this time and look back on this period in their relationship fondly. At the same time, they seem almost wary about the power that those first displays of physical intimacy had on them, which is why they say would be careful about supervising their own children someday. “I can almost be a little bit embarrassed looking back, too…because we were so mushy.”

Lindsay said her parents did step in and remind the couple to keep focusing on developing other aspects of the relationship, not just the physical. They didn’t seem
worried that the couple would go “too far,” but that they might neglect communicating about important things in the face of the intoxicating power of physical intimacy.

“Lindsay’s parents encouraged us that we needed to keep communicating and talking because we could—” Lindsay finishes David’s sentence, “Just sit on the couch and hold hands.” David adds, “The romantic specialness is important. But I guess I also feel it’s important to encourage a couple to keep developing as friends, because I really do feel strongly that that’s what’s going to make a marriage last is being best friends for life.”

Laying a strong foundation of friendship and communication is an important reason to manage physical intimacy in courtship, but this strategy also promises to intensify the pleasure of romantic closeness when it does happen. “Why would we wait?” David asks. “I guess some of the reason to wait would just be to save some of the specialness of it.”

Like Sarah Mally’s “special firsts” list, Lindsay and David’s approach to intimacy aimed to maximize the romantic potential of each step in their relationship, from hand holding to engagement to the first kiss at the altar. The couple also hoped to minimize the risk of a bad emotional investment by setting clear boundaries for their relationship up front. They agreed that unless something unexpected happened in the courtship, it would likely end in marriage. In retrospect, they seem to have been startled by the power of their first physical contact, but from their perspective they successfully balanced the complicated equation of courtship. They invested enough intimacy at the right time to secure a solid relationship for the future, and they carefully managed their physical and emotional reserves to maximize the pleasurable potential of their romance. Lindsay and David even hope that their relationship can serve as a model for single young Christians in their community to emulate.
Conclusion

From hours spent holding hands to engagements in the snowfall and weddings capped with carriage rides, courtships like Lindsay and David’s, Lauren’s and Micah’s and Michelle and Sean’s are thoughtfully planned and carefully orchestrated, often culminating in picture perfect engagements and weddings. But they also contain some degree of risk as well as the elements of frustration, clumsiness and imperfection inherent in human relationships. In reality, those who practice courtship say it is impossible to keep their romantic feelings completely in check. Some couples fail to make it to the altar with virgin lips. Others are overwhelmed by the power of physical intimacy, even holding hands. And when I spoke with Michelle about her quickly-approaching autumn wedding, her anticipation about the day was a mix of excitement and anxiety. “I’m not gonna lie,” she said. “There have been moments where I’ve been stressed to the max. I try to enjoy every second, because we’ve waited a long time.” But the inevitable stress of planning an event for 160 people in six weeks was getting to her.

Ultimately, these relationships are not as smooth and seamless as courtship media promise. Feelings do not always follow the rules, and fairytale weddings demand detailed logistics. But in many cases, courtships do lead to marriage and help believers avoid major emotional pitfalls. And for the couples I met, while a few may have stolen a kiss before the wedding, they otherwise made it to the altar with their purity intact. For those who are willing to sacrifice and commit, courtship seems to be largely successful at steering Christian youth to marriage and ensuring that they remain pure along the way. It also offers something that some argue is hard to come by in contemporary American youth culture—good old-fashioned romance.
For those who sacrifice physical intimacy and manage romantic feelings, courtship offers fairy tale happy endings and beautiful marriages. This path can be a promising one for young believers raised in the hook-up era that divorces sex from romance or eschews it altogether. Courtship manages to bring together physical intimacy and romance in unexpected ways. It frees young men from the pressure to be players and promises girls that their feelings will be taken seriously and their hearts will be guarded. Courtship is also appealing because it pledges to help believers lay the foundation for a solid, lasting marriage and help them avoid the pain of broken relationships and divorce. It also provides a practical plan for Christian youth who, in an era where abstinence-only sex education dominates, are well-versed in the message that true love waits, but can’t seem to reconcile the practice of sexual restraint with the contemporary hookup culture. Finally, it is appealing to Christians because it reinforces the institution of marriage, which provides the only context in which sex and intimacy can be safely practiced.

However, despite these promises, feelings prove impossible to control completely. Participants say that romantic feelings develop quickly in courtship relationships, increasing the risk that someone may get hurt. But they also say that this risk is necessary—that in order to really know someone is to be vulnerable. The real goal, they say, is not to completely cut off emotions, but try to keep them secondary to the primary focus of the relationship—getting to know someone well enough to decide if they are marriage material. Physical intimacy also proves to be an unexpectedly powerful force, threatening to take over all aspects of the relationship. Though courtship participants tend to make it to their wedding day with their virginity intact, some fail to save their first kiss for the wedding day.
Finally, despite closely following the courtship formula, sometimes hearts do get broken. Relationships don’t always end in marriage, and when they fail the stakes can be even higher than in a traditional dating relationship. When Kimberly and Anthony Padgett share their story with young audiences, they hope to spare them the heartache they experienced from divorce and dead-end dating relationships. For some, courtship is the fix. But it is not fool proof. One mother, who was exploring courtship as a possibility for her two teenage children, said that in her community, she had seen courtships fail and Christian marriages end suddenly in divorce. She wasn’t sure there was a path that could deliver on the promise of romance without risk. “People are looking for guarantees,” she said. “But there are no guarantees.”
Chapter Four: First Comes Marriage

As a senior at one of the country’s most prestigious Christian colleges, Holly had more on her mind than exams, coursework and internships. Unlike most of her peers, the recently married college student was concerned that she would become pregnant before she was able to graduate. After a two-year courtship and a six-month engagement, Holly and her husband, Michael, married at the end of her junior year. Michael began law school as Holly was entering her senior year, and though they were both still students, the couple had agreed not to use birth control and remain open to the possibility of a pregnancy. The decision was not an easy one for Holly. In fact, she says it was probably the biggest disagreement they had in the months leading up to their marriage. “I wanted to use birth control, and he did not,” Holly says.

There is a diversity of opinions among conservative American Christians about whether and which kinds of birth control are acceptable for married couples to use, and Michael’s conviction was among the most conservative. “It was against his conscience to use it,” Holly said. So, “We came toward each other’s ground on this one.” Holly views their decision as a compromise, although she was the one to give up ground on the matter. “He couldn’t at that time bend on it, but I could.” After much prayer, she says, “We resolved by saying ‘ok, I think I’m ok with this.’ So we didn’t use it. I needed to be ok with the fact that I would end up at home being a mom right away.” But, she laughs as she says, “I really wanted to graduate without having a baby.”
As it turned out, the couple was married for almost four years before their son was born, and Holly said she was grateful for the time she and her husband had together before starting a family. They travelled a lot, and Holly, a drama major in college, had the opportunity to act in local theater productions. She also established several part-time jobs she could do from home, including drawing portraits, teaching online writing courses and tutoring in drama, music and art. Now that her son is eight months old, Holly still draws portraits and teaches online courses, but she considers herself “basically a stay-at-home-mom.” Though she has worked from home for years, Holly does not describe the work she does as a career. She contrasts herself with her husband who, she says, always wanted to be a lawyer and had a specific career plan mapped out. Holly, in comparison, says she just had “things she was interested in.” She says this difference factored into her decision to compromise with Michael on the issue of birth control. If she had become pregnant before graduating from college and was unable to finish, she wouldn’t be sacrificing career dreams in order care for a baby.

Now that the couple does have a child, Holly’s work-from-home arrangement allows her to embody the Proverbs 31 Woman ideal – caring for her family while being industrious at home. Holly and Michael’s relationship also reflects themes common to courtship marriages. The couple married young and, despite the four-year wait, became parents relatively young. Holly identifies primarily as a stay-at-home-mom. Because they entered their courtship with the possibility of marriage in mind, the couple started their relationship with serious talk about issues like birth control and career goals. As is the case in most courtships, the couple’s parents were heavily involved in decisions about their relationship.
Holly’s parents played a critical role in shaping the couple’s courtship, weighing in on questions like whether the couple should be alone together or supervised on dates. Holly was comfortable going on dates without a chaperone, but her parents were not. However, she didn’t want to go against their wishes, so she lobbied her parents to change their mind. Eventually, they agreed to Holly and Michael’s wish to go out together alone but, “It took a lot of convincing, a lot of phone calls.” Holly said she had friends who weren’t so fortunate. Her best friend’s parents wanted their daughter to save her first kiss for the wedding day, and while her friend didn’t agree, she respected her parents’ wishes.

“She didn’t want to fight that battle and knew they would lose,” Holly said, “but she wasn’t comfortable doing it underhandedly.” She knows other couples who were unable or unwilling to reach an understanding with their parents on issues like kissing and chaperones. “In the sadder cases, the couples got married and their parents didn’t go to the wedding,” Holly said. While Holly knew of several instances, among her friends from college, where such disagreements threatened or ruined relationships with parents, most of the couples she met reported having few disagreements with their parents.

A Marriage Market

This chapter examines the role of the nuclear family and heterosexual marriage in the courtship movement. It explores the relationships between courting couples and their siblings and parents, especially fathers, who have an authoritative role in the courtship process. Courtship media encourage children and teens to treat their sibling relationships as practice for their future marriages. Courtship norms dictate that young men should initiate courtship through a girl’s father, and fathers often give guidance on issues like chaperoning and physical intimacy. Advocates emphasize that, unlike traditional dating
relationships, courtships often take place largely in the context of the home, where the couple spends lots of time with one another’s families. Unlike sexual abstinence campaigns, courtship also provides support for young marriage, and in the meantime it gives Christian singles a purpose that is missing from other teachings about sexual abstinence. Adolescents and young adults are encouraged to make their familial relationships their primary connections, and to familiarize friendships in order to stamp out the potential for romantic sparks to ignite.

Girls, especially, are supposed to practice the relationship, homemaking and childrearing skills necessary to care for their own families one day. Marxist feminist critiques call this kind of work reproductive labor—the work necessary to reproduce the next generation. However courtship literature teaches that doing housework and childcare is a natural extension of Godly gender roles for young women. It also teaches that by reclaiming proper gender roles, Christian families can create a sense of warmth and harmony in their homes. But this ideal masks the time consuming and tedious tasks of reproductive labor that go into creating the outward production of a peaceful home.

Both young women and men in the courtship movement ideally move directly from their parents’ home to the home they create with their husband or wife, but this pattern is especially visible with girls, who theology dictates transfer from the authority and protection of their fathers to that of their husbands.

This system—prioritizing family relationships, familiarizing potentially romantic relationships, practicing for future families, surveilling the courtship process in the

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context of the family home and moving directly from one nuclear family structure to the
next—is supposed to recuperate what courtship proponents understand as God’s plan for
romance and family. Kathryn Joyce argues that the Quiverfull movement advocates “a
return to the traditional, patriarchal family as the basic economic unit of society.”
This chapter suggest that the patriarchal nuclear family is also the basic social unit of
conservative Christianity, and that courtship plays a key role in reproducing this family
structure.

The courtship marriage market results in instances of young marriage and
parenthood and large families. In order to maximize the potential of a successful
relationship ending in marriage, courting couples often discuss early in their relationship
issues like birth control, ideal family size and perspectives on childrearing. Sometimes, as
was the case with Holly and Michael, disagreements arise about questions like family
planning. While courtship participants often view this period as a time for assessing
compatibility, instances like these suggest that courtship discourse functions more to
reinforce the social norms of the courtship movement, including the primacy of the
nuclear family and heterosexual marriage and the practice of conservative gender roles.
As a result, all of the young women I met desired to one day be to primarily stay-at-
home-mothers. Many of the couples came from large families and hoped to have large
families themselves.

But while courtship is designed to create a seamless reproduction of the nuclear
family, it also creates moments of discord and pain. Some young women have trouble

\[243\] Kathryn Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon
Press, 2009), 171.
with the abrupt transition from their father’s home to their husband’s, and sometimes
their siblings feel abandoned. In addition, while courtship literature does not address the
issue of family finances in any detail, questions about a young man’s financial status tend
to be at the forefront of parents’ concerns when it comes to consenting to a daughter’s
marriage. The transfer of young women from their fathers’ home to their husbands, as
well as the concern over the financial health of a girl’s suitor highlight the ways in which
the courtship system operates on what Gayle Rubin identifies as a traffic in women.
Consistent with her argument in “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political
Economy’ of Sex,” daughters in the courtship movement serve as “precious gifts” in a
kinship system based on the exchange of women between men.244

This chapter also considers courtship in light of contemporary political debates
about marriage. Kathryn Joyce suggests that Quiverfull is “significant for representing an
ideal family structure that many conservatives reference as a counterexample when they
condemn modern society.”245 As advocates have begun to win legal rights for gay
marriage across the country, conservative Christians are responding to what they see as
an attack on the sanctity of heterosexual marriage. Christian trends like Quiverfull,
courtship and covenant marriage, which shore up the idea of the patriarchal family, are
reactions to this perceived threat. Covenant marriages, which are available in several
states and make divorce more difficult for those who choose them, and the courtship
movement, which echoes the message of marriage as a covenant, are examples of
institutions that seek to create lasting heterosexual marriages.

245 Kathryn Joyce, Quiverfull, 171.
Closing the Gap

Not only are marriage and family integral to the courtship process, but because the practice of courtship is so intimately tied to the ideas of heterosexual marriage and nuclear family, it encourages young marriage in a way that Christian abstinence campaigns do not. In a courtship-themed episode of 17 Kids and Counting, Josh Duggar drops in unexpectedly during Anna Keller’s 20th birthday celebration dinner with her family at a local restaurant. Dressed in his Sunday best and armed with a bouquet of bright balloons and an engagement ring, Joshua drops to one knee and proposes marriage. Anna excitedly says “yes,” and the two embrace in a chaste side-hug.246 We learn later Anna had made a commitment to God that she would not begin a romantic relationship until she was 20. Josh, who had his sights set on Anna since meeting her at a homeschool conference, learned about this commitment when he approached her father for permission to pursue her. He honored Anna’s commitment, but wasted no time by proposing on the very day she became eligible.

As Josh and Anna’s story illustrates, courtship solves a problem that Christian abstinence campaigns fail to acknowledge. As Christine J. Gardner argues in her book Making Chastity Sexy, there is a growing gap between the ages at which teens are sexually mature and the ages of average first marriage. With boys achieving sexual maturity at fourteen and girls before thirteen and the average age of first marriage at twenty-six for men and twenty-four for women, teens who make abstinence pledges are

supposed to maintain sexual purity for more than a decade. Mark Regnerus, author of *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*, who makes the case that it is unreasonable for teens to manage sexual desire for this long. Regnerus argues that if religious organizations are going to continue to fight for abstinence before marriage, they must come up with ways to support younger marriage.

Theoretically, courtship does just this. The Christian homeschool and Quiverfull cultures, which overlap the courtship movement, does not encourage teens to attend four-year colleges or universities, and at-home daughters avoid education and employment pursuits that take them outside the family home. Instead, young men and young women who do work outside the home are encouraged to acquire a useful skill or trade. If they do attend college, they are advised to make short work of the process, using advanced placement testing and other methods to quickly acquire as many credits as possible. With education or vocation in hand, ideally young adults are equipped to be financially independent and marry early.

Beyond paving the way for early marriage, the courtship movement reinforces the desirability of marriage by making it the only place in which a couple can express not only sexuality intimacy, but romance and emotional intimacy as well. While Christian abstinence campaigns like True Love Waits or the Silver Ring Thing encourage teens to save sex for marriage, they don’t rule out the possibility of dating the way courtship media do. Courtship media teach young men that they should only pursue a relationship

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249 Kathryn Joyce, *Quiverfull*, 4.
when they are in the “season of marriage” and ready to provide financially for a family and when they have met the woman they believe God wants them to marry. Once spiritual witnesses, like parents or pastors, have affirmed God’s calling, the young man should act quickly to avoid leading the girl on.

Most courtship authors teach that, ideally, the couple will be married within the year, before sexual or romantic temptation becomes too strong. These guidelines provide a clear philosophy and framework for avoiding long, drawn out dating relationships in favor quick engagements and early marriage. These expectations run counter to current studies that find the age of first marriage among Americans continuing to rise and contemporary young Americans are beginning to view marriage as the final marker of adulthood. Rather than viewing marriage as the first marker of adulthood, they celebrate marriage, he says, after they have arrived as adults with career success and home ownership already secured.

In practice, courtship might be slightly more successful at enabling young marriage for women than for men. The average age of marriage among the young women I met was twenty, but for young men it was twenty-six, the same as the current national average. These averages are based on small slices of the courtship movement, and they are higher amongst the network of courtship couples in one state, where the average was twenty-seven, than in another, where the average age was twenty-four. However, it is likely that these averages are seen elsewhere in the movement, since it is young men who are charged with ensuring a couple’s financial security. These findings suggest that while

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courtship provides a conceptual framework for marrying young it doesn’t always provide the kinds of concrete support system for early marriage that Regnerus imagines in *Forbidden Fruit*.

In addition to addressing the extended purity problem, the courtship movement also provides comfort for and purpose for Christian singles. In *Making Chastity Sexy*, Gardner argues that all the talk about marriage in Christian abstinence campaigns has created a stigma against singlehood, especially for young women in their late twenties. As I argued in Chapter Two, the courtship movement addresses this stigma by encouraging unmarried Christians to make the most of their single years, engaging in mission work and practicing for marriage and parenthood. At the same time, conservative Christians are responding with alarm to the trend of emerging adulthood and calling on young adults, especially men, to grow up faster. By eliminating dating and instead encouraging young marriage, the courtship movement answers this call.

*Brothers and Sisters*

It’s standing room only for the Mally siblings’ presentation of Making Brothers and Sisters Best Friends at a regional homeschool conference. The crowd that has gathered to hear Sarah, Stephen and Grace present the workshop, based on their book of the same name, is full of children and parents and is spilling out the door of the conference center room into the hallway, where several strollers are parked. The Mally’s sibling program, along with Sarah’s Bright Lights groups, are two branches of the family’s Tomorrow’s Forefathers ministry. In a series of animated skits, the Mallys share stories from their own childhoods that teach the Best Friends message—relationship

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training begins at home with brothers and sisters. The Mallys teach that humility solves
conflicts and that brothers and sisters can learn from each other’s different characteristics
and temperaments. Sarah says she learned to be a servant by tending to her younger
sister’s needs and the family, who work full-time in ministry, often talk about how they
value each other for their different gifts and personalities. Stephen is a skilled
photographer and also manages the ministry’s audio visual needs, while Grace, the
sensitive sibling, excels at evangelism. Each sibling’s skill is useful for the family
ministry, and learning to manage their personality differences is supposed to build
character. These relationships are also supposed to prepare young Christians for courtship
and lasting marriage, where disagreements and frustrations are inevitable.

Beyond the Mally family ministry, the message that sibling relationships are
important is consistent across the courtship movement. By learning to share with siblings
and tolerate their irritating habits, Christian kids are supposed to learn relationship skills
that will be helpful when they have their own families someday. In Eric and Leslie
Ludy’s courtship tutorial, When God Writes Your Love Story, Eric uses sports analogies
to explain the importance of family relationships in preparing a young Christian for
marriage and children. In the same way that professional football teams spend the
preseason perfecting skills, scrimmaging and studying the playbook, he writes, “We all
have our premarrige season in which we need to hone our family skills, study the
relationship’s playbook, and to learn how to be like Christ to the ‘them’ [family] in our
life.”253 Eric writes that the “them,” (parents and siblings) have the ability to wound and

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253 Eric and Leslie Ludy, When God Writes Your Love Story: The Ultimate Approach to Guy/Girl
Realtionships (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 1999), 180.
annoy us in ways that no one else can and are, therefore, an especially rigorous training ground for marriage.

In addition to serving as a training camp for the difficulties of marriage, by caring for younger siblings, teens practice for parenting their future children. In his chapter on “Making the Most of Your Singleness,” Joshua Harris writes, “While being a parent is in a totally different league from being a brother, I can ‘practice’ parenthood now by investing time in my siblings’ lives.” Harris, who has five younger siblings, says he’s changed dirty diapers and washed, fed and clothed his younger siblings. By providing care for his siblings, Harris said he experienced a taste of the joy and the responsibility that come with parenthood. Consistent with the movement’s view of intimacy and romance, Harris also frames this sibling care in economic terms—not only was he “making the most” of his single years by learning parenting skills, but he was also “investing” in the lives of his brothers and sisters.

The Duggar family, of 19 Kids and Counting fame, take sibling care to the next level with their buddy system, and in doing so the Duggar daughters perform a great deal of the unpaid reproductive labor necessary to keep the large family running smoothly. Each of the family’s older children is paired with a younger brother or sister. The older sibling is responsible for helping the younger with tasks like getting dressed each morning and keeping the younger brother or sister safe when the family goes out. While both the older brothers and sisters each have a buddy, it appears that the older sisters take on additional childcare and homemaking tasks. On the family’s reality TV program,

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mother Michelle Duggar repeatedly talks about how grateful she is that God blessed her family with four daughters in a row, now in their late teens and early twenties, to help care for the string of boys that followed. And while Harris spent time informally “investing” in his brothers’ and sisters’ lives, he says he is inspired by a young woman who took turned sibling care into an apprenticeship. Jeanne, who has no younger siblings of her own, volunteers once a week as a mother’s helper for a family with seven children. 255

These examples demonstrate that the joys and burdens of caring for younger siblings tend fall more heavily on girls. This was certainly the case for Faith who, at age 23, had five brothers aged 19 and younger. Faith’s mother, Kathy, says her daughter was almost like a “second mother” to her brothers. Before courting and marrying her husband, Kathy says that Faith was for her brothers a “best friend, confidante, everything.”

Mothering her brothers fostered a strong bond between Faith and her siblings, but their intense connection proved to be a problem when Faith got married. Faith, who lived at home until she married, began courting Brandon in January. After a few months of exchanging letters and four in-person meetings, the couple were engaged and married by July of that same year.

Faith moved two states away to live with Brandon in his home town, and her brothers, Kathy said, were “traumatized.” They were used to living at home with her and, within six months she had courted and married Brandon and moved six hours away. “They were too young to understand,” she said. “They thought it was too fast.” Faith’s brothers were upset that their sister had been “jerked away” from them, Kathy

said. In response, her brothers have said that they would never choose courtship themselves. They say they would never want to take a girl away from her family the way Faith had been taken from them. Kathy says she doesn’t fault courtship for this trauma in her family. The sudden move was also traumatizing in some ways for Faith, who had lived her whole life in a small, mostly white rural Midwestern town. When she married Brandon, she moved to the outskirts of a much larger city into a racially diverse neighborhood, and her mother says at first Faith was afraid to go outside her own home during the long hours she was alone at home while Brandon worked.

Kathy says that no matter how she met her husband, Faith would one day have moved away from the family home. While Kathy does not blame the courtship process, the system could have exacerbated the distress her brothers felt with Faith leaving. Courtships tend to be quick affairs. Most couples marry within a year and sometimes sooner, as was the case with Faith and Brandon. The speed of their relationship left little time for Faith’s brothers to accept the idea that their sister was moving out or for them to get to know Brandon, especially because they had a long-distance relationship. Courtship families also tend to foster at-home daughters, so Faith’s connections with her brothers were stronger than they might have been if she had lived on her own, and their relationships changed quickly when she married and moved out.

The movement also uses the example of sibling relationships as a model for how single Christians should relate to one another—not as potential romantic partners, but as brothers and sisters in Christ. Courtship mother Kathy says she used this model when she was advising her single daughter about how to conduct her relationships with young men.

“Before [her husband] came along, it was you treat guys like brothers, and you don’t
have a big deep relationship with a member of the opposite gender.” This advice mirrors
the movement’s ‘guard your heart’ mantra as well as the frequent instruction to view
other singles as someone else’s future spouse.

In a kind of reversal of what psychoanalytic theory calls the incest taboo, which
places kin relationships outside of the range of sexual desirability and trains sexual
desires outward, courtship authors suggest that Christian singles treat friends like siblings
and avoid intimacy with them, but these same authors say that young Christians can and
should practice intimacy with their siblings.256 Harris writes, “God has given us families
so that we can learn the art of sharing life.”257 In order to learn to be a godly husband who
nurtures, loves, respects and protects his wife, Harris writes, he can practicing by
understanding and honoring his sister and mother. The potential for sibling intimacy to
evoke an incestuous tone is apparently not lost on single Christians. In an episode of 17
Kids and Counting oldest brother Joshua goes on a dinner and movie date with his new
fiancé. The couple’s chaperones are Joshua’s brother and sister, and he describes their
outing as a “double date.” Then, recognizing the awkwardness of his phrase, Joshua
laughs and jokes, “Well, this is Arkansas, after all.”258

Courtship media do not provide specific examples of what understanding and
honoring look like, but my observations suggest that siblings from close-knit homeschool
families often spend more time in one another’s company than other school-age kids
might, which provides more opportunities for playing, hanging out and talking. Before

256 For feminist analysis of the incest taboo, see Gayle Rubin, “The Taffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political
Economy’ of Sex,” 173.
257 Joshua Harris, I Kissed Dating Goodbye, 158.
her courtship, Faith said she was a “best friend” and “confidante” to her four younger brothers. While courtship literature seems to suggest lofty goals like “protecting” or “serving,” siblings seemed to engage in the same playful, but mundane activities they might share with friends. When I stayed briefly with a homeschool family during my research, I joined the oldest brother and sister and their friends when they went out for snocones on a hot summer evening and the younger sisters as they played on the backyard trampoline and sorted through their older sister’s bag full nail polish and lip glosses.

While intimate relationships between siblings are encouraged, courtship media consistently advise singles against developing intimate relationships with members of the other sex. For Harris, friendship crosses the line into intimacy when the pair are focused on each other and not some outside element, like serving others or discussing their relationship with Christ. Leslie Ludy and Sarah Mally take a stricter stance, advising that even spiritual intimacy should be off limits to other gender friends. In either case, intimacy that is verboten for figurative siblings in Christ is encouraged between actual brothers and sisters, where there is no risk of igniting romantic sparks. This example illustrates the movement’s attempt to reinforce close, intimate relationships in the family and to discourage romantic connections that won’t lead to marriage and the reproduction of the nuclear family structure or, as participants often call it, “dating for the sake of dating.”

Disagreement among courtship authors about whether spiritual intimacy is safe between other gender friends or whether Christian singles should even have such

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259 Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, 132, 158.
friendships suggests that figurative siblings in Christ represent murky water for those attempting to navigate courtship waters. In addition, courtship represents a transitional stage for young Christians—as courtships progress, intimate relationships that were forbidden before become acceptable. Faith’s mother, for example told her daughter to treat single men as brothers in Christ, but once she entered a courtship, her mother advised her to “go ahead and let your heart go.” Like the question of when to let down the guard around your heart, there is no guaranteed safe way to determine when a brother of Christ becomes worthy of deep intimacy. Finally, Faith’s story demonstrates that despite its goal of ridding relationships of emotional pain, courtship sometimes puts strains on familial relationships. Even the supposed safe haven of family relationships can sometimes be a source of pain and loss.

In my Father’s House

Although at two-and-a-half years, their engagement was longer than most, Emily and Luke’s courtship had a whirlwind start. Luke had been devastated when his first courtship ended in rejection, and he wanted to be sure that he and Emily were on the same path headed toward marriage, so when asked Emily’s father for permission to court her, he made it clear from the start that he intended to marry her. With Emily’s and her father’s consent, the courtship began in May. Their friendship quickly deepened, and by August the couple was engaged. Though Emily’s parents had initially been supportive of the developing friendship between Emily, 16, and Luke, 25, when the couple got engaged her parents put the brakes on the fast-moving courtship.

“After we got engaged, reality hit hard for my parents and they had a harder time with it,” Emily said. An impending marriage meant that Emily would soon leave the
family home, although the couple had committed to wait until Emily was 18 to marry. Emily said her parents needed time to learn how to let go. “There were time constraints on the relationship and stress for me to feel like it wasn’t always desired that Luke be over, and then there was a period where we could only see each other x amount of days a week.” Eventually, she said, “My parents came to totally accept things and grow into the whole idea of getting married, and things got a lot more flexible then. I think mostly just—I think my dad didn’t realize how hard it would be, and I didn’t realize how hard it would be for him because he’s not an emotional person. It was just adjusting to all that. Everybody loved Luke and everything. It was just the adjustment, letting go.” Emily’s use of the phrase “letting go” reinforces the status of girls in the courtship movement as gifts given from a father to a future son-in-law.

Though, in theory, the courtship process is designed to move quickly, in reality, its swiftness is sometimes shocking for families. Like Faith’s fast, intense courtship, which traumatized her younger brothers, Emily’s engagement seems to have stunned her parents, even though they had consented to the relationship knowing that the couple was headed toward marriage. And, while courtship encourages young marriage, Emily’s age and the large age gap between her and Luke likely played into her parents’ concerns. Another young courtship wife, Libby, says that when she and her fiancé excitedly announced their engagement to her family, her younger sisters burst into tears and ran upstairs to hide. Several girls also reported that one of the most difficult parts of their early married life was that they very much missed their mothers, whom they were used to seeing and talking to every day. The intimacy of familial relationships in conservative
homeschool families who practice courtship is also likely to add to the separation anxiety families feel when a daughter or son “leaves and cleaves.”

**Bright Lights Burning Out**

Courtship and homeschool discourse is saturated with imagery of the warm, tightly-night nuclear family, where children are nurtured at home by their mothers and families enjoy lovingly prepared homemade meals. However, this imagery masks the unpaid labor that women and girls do in an effort to embody the ideals of the conservative Christian nuclear family. In the Botkin sisters *Return of the Daughters* film, husband and father Jay Valenti shares how his family returned what he considers a biblical family order, in which his daughters work and live at home until marriage, and the family spends more time together and less time pursuing individual endeavors or consuming media. “People feel the difference when they walk into our home,” he says. “The tv is no longer blaring. We have music going or our daughters are singing, or you can just smell pasta and Italian gravy going.” One visitor, he said, remarked, “I’ve never been in a more peaceful, serene home in my life.” As Valenti describes this idyllic scene, we watch a slow-motion series of images—a hand with a gold wedding band turns the pages of a Bible, visitors gather around a festively decorated dining table, the Valenti sisters embrace and laugh together in the family’s well-appointed kitchen, and the girls prepare and serve a homemade meal.260

The courtship families I met and the homes I visited were warm and welcoming, but none matched the perfect picture of the Valenti family’s unity and hospitality, and

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none of the families I met appeared to be as wealthy as the Valenti family. The scenes from the *Return of the Daughters* are overlaid with orchestral music and narration, muting the actual sounds of the family gatherings and enhancing the glossy glow of the Valenti home. In contrast, I shared meals during the *Bright Lights* conference in a church kitchen that was noisy with friendly conversations and in a school gym where volunteers’ siblings and children ran and played noisily. The homes of the young married couples I visited were mostly small and carefully, but sparsely decorated.

In reality, the families I met do not match the impossibly sentimental ideal of harmonious warmth that the courtship and homeschool movements valorize. The panel titles I read in the program for one homeschool convention suggest that it is not uncommon for women in homeschool families to feel overwhelmed by their dual roles of caretaker and educator. Some sections for moms included: “What does a relaxed day look like? Finally Answered!” “When you feel like quitting,” “Homeschool leader: are you burnt out?” and “If I’m diapering the watermelon, where’d I leave the baby?”

However, many courtship couples do talk fondly about their parents, siblings and family homes. Even in Emily and Luke’s courtship, when there was a time that Emily wasn’t sure if Luke was welcome in her home, she says he eventually became “one of the family.” For another couple, Tom and Katie, their courtship blossomed out of friendship Tom first had with Katie’s family. Tom, 28, whose family lived out of town, attended the same church as Katie, 21, her parents and her siblings and also worked at the same company as her father. Katie’s parents invited Tom over for lunch after church one afternoon. Katie says that Tom clicked with her family right away. “He ended up staying all afternoon just telling different stories and kind of just fit right in with the family,” she

**One of the Family**

At first Tom, who is more than seven years older than Katie, had no romantic interest in her. Then, one year at Christmas, Tom planned to go a concert with a group of friends and ended up with an extra ticket. He invited Katie, who joined him for the concert and for tea afterward at a local Chinese restaurant where Tom knew the owners. The two talked about Katie’s family and her job as snow fell softly outside the restaurant, and by the time Katie’s father came to pick her up, she had made an impression on Tom. Two weeks later, Tom approached Katie’s dad for permission to court her, and their relationship began. The start of Katie and Tom’s courtship was ideal in many ways, because the pair already knew one another, and Tom was close with Katie’s family.

Courtship proponents often contrast this method against traditional dating, and they argue that one of the benefits of courtship is that, ideally, it takes place within the context of the family home. This arrangement is supposed to have several benefits.

First, it allows potential spouses to learn about one another in a “real life” context. Courtship authors frequently argue that dating gives a false impression of a person’s character, because they are putting “their best face forward.” If, instead of going out alone to a fancy dinner, a courting couple spends time together at a girl’s family game night, the girl will be forced to be her “real” self. If she were being uncharacteristically polite and reserved, for example, her siblings would likely call her out on it. These settings are also considered to be more representative of real life, because among
courtship and homeschool families, real life means nuclear family life. Some authors call courting in the family setting “natural” in contrast with dating—unsupervised and in public spaces—as “unnatural.”

Getting to know one another in a family setting also provides for built in chaperoning, which most agree is necessary in one form or another. During Faith’s courtship, for example, her mother said the couple would sit in a swing and talk for hours in the small orchard at the back of the family home. Here they enjoyed some privacy, but were also in plain view. In addition to these stated benefits, courting in the family context also serves to reinforce the normalcy and naturalness of the heterosexual, married nuclear family. The courting couple is learning about one another and also learning how to reproduce the family setting on their own one day. By the time Tom and Katie started their courtship, Katie says, “I was already pretty impressed with his character. He was really patient with my younger brothers and really helpful….I thought, wow, he would make a really good dad someday.”

The Girl Market

Fathers are important figures in the courtship process. Not only do young women evaluate their suitors for their parenting potential, but courtship authors all agree that the correct way to initiate a courtship is for a young man to ask a girl’s father for permission to court her. This process is consistent with the belief that girls should pass from the protection and authority of their father to that of their husband. Many authors also argue that this design helps protect daughters from being in the awkward position of having to reject someone. While this is not a stated benefit of the courtship model, placing the father in a gatekeeper role also creates a buffer between girls and potentially dangerous or
ill-intentioned suitors. In the *19 Kids and Counting* episode about son Josh’s courtship, father Jim Bob proudly shares that many men have written to him in hopes of pursuing courtships with his older daughters. “Yeah,” his daughter says, “And they were all weirdos.”

The idea that God created men to be the “pursuers” in romantic relationships is common in evangelical self-help literature, including courtship media, and reinforces the notion of courtship as a marriage market in which girls operate as gifts exchanged between men. Many of the girls I met said they find leadership an attractive quality in men, and that they would want their future husbands to be initiate their romantic relationship. However, as Josh’s sister’s assessment reveals, this design reinforces a problematic dynamic. It frames men as active agents and girls and women as passive objects of men’s romantic and sexual intentions or, in her words, it invites pursuit by weirdos. This design also places men in the position of power in the courtship market, and their power is intensified by the fact that there seem to be more young women than men in the market to begin with. Girls can, and do, refuse potential suitors, but they cannot initiate relationships.

Sarah Mally, who is in her early 30s and unmarried, says she has turned down some offers that came her way through her father. When I asked her why, she would only say that she didn’t believe they were God’s best for her, and she remains confident that if it is God’s plan for her to be married, he will bring the right man into her life at the right time. While Sarah and her family have full-time ministry obligations, and apparently sufficient income, from her *Bright Lights* work and the family’s other endeavors, other

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girls may not have the luxury of dismissing potential marriage prospects, especially when they have no means to support themselves financially. As my conversations with courting couples and parents revealed, a potential suitor’s financial status is of primary concern to parents.

A Father’s Blessing

Sometimes, gaining a reluctant father’s blessing for a courtship confirms that a couple is on the right track. Kimberly Padgett, who runs Courtship in the Covenant ministries with her husband, Anthony, says that she didn’t think her father would consent to her courting a man who had been divorced. When he did, the couple saw his approval as confirmation that their relationship was part of God’s plan for their lives. In his book Journey to Agape, Anthony writes that this kind of confirmation is a critical courtship principle. To discern God’s will about a potential courtship, he advises couples to read scripture, listen for God to speak to them and receive confirmation about the relationship from “spiritual authorities” in their lives, like parents and pastors. If all of these “witnesses” line up, then they can move forward with the confidence that they are on the right track.

Heather, a mother of three boys, doesn’t at first glance look like a courtship bride. She has bleach blonde hair, and wears higher heels and shorter hemlines than most of the young wives I met. She’s serious about her relationship with Jesus, but doesn’t share the pleasant, sweet affect of many of her peers. She also confesses to having been kicked out a Christian youth camp as a teen for undisclosed reasons and to having a difficult

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relationship with her father. But when, at 19, Heather began spending time with Brad, who is five years her senior, and he said he wanted to get to take their friendship to the next level, she insisted that he first get her father’s permission. Heather says, “I knew if it was gonna work out, the best way to where I felt like I had my parents’ blessing—I knew it would be hard with both, but I was like, well, I’m just gonna have him go to my dad, even thought it might not…work out. So he went to my dad, and it’s a miracle that I said that.”

It was a miracle she chose to follow courtship principles, because Heather was doubtful that her father would consent. Her father, who had been divorced, had advised Heather that she shouldn’t marry, but be content to serve the Lord as a single person. Heather also thought he would have doubts about Brad, specifically, because of their theological differences. Brad practices a more Charismatic brand of Christianity than her father. Charismatic Christians tend to embrace physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit, like faith healing, speaking in tongues and raising his hands during worship services. Heather’s fears were founded, as it turns out. Her father initially said no. But Brad initiated a series of meetings with her father, so that they could get to know one another, and after a month, he consented. Faith sees her father’s relenting as a sign that they were meant to be together. “I felt like it was a miracle if my dad even liked the guy that I liked.”

Even when young men are on better terms with a girl’s father, the initial approach is often fraught with nerves. Tom, who had been friends with and worked with Katie’s father for years, said he was still nervous to ask him for his blessing. “I was such good friends with [her] family and had been for a long time, I was kind of scared that if
something didn’t work out that it would be awkward forever after. Also it’s just kind of nerve-wracking to talk to a girl’s dad about [courtship].”

On the other end of the spectrum Eric Ludy, whose courtship with wife Leslie is detailed in the couple’s book *When Dreams Come True* writes in his characteristically self-deprecating manner about talking to Leslie’s dad. He asked her father to lunch one Sunday afternoon to talk with him, because he was concerned that his friendship with Leslie was growing too intimate. Eric writes that he had to refuse the waitress’ offer of coffee, “Adrenaline was pumping through my wiry body already—the last thing I needed was another stimulant.”263 Rather than chastise Eric, Leslie’s dad instead preemptively assured Eric that he had permission to take the relationship to the next level. Courtship media consistently advise that a young man should first approach a girl’s father, and that this design will eliminate hurt feelings and complications. However, these examples, like many lived experiences of courtship, suggest that relationships are always fraught with uncertainty.

*Covenants*

In his courtship how-to book, *Journey to Agape*, Anthony Padgett identifies what he believes is wrong with modern marriage. “Whether marriages are Christian based or not, the main ingredient most are missing today is the presences of a covenant.”264 More serious than a pledge, Padgett explains that covenants are permanent and binding. They are publicly declared. And they are sealed in blood. The covenant between God and

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Abraham that declared Abraham the father of many was sealed with the innocent blood of animals. Jesus made the promise of salvation available by bleeding and dying on the cross. The marriage covenant is no exception. “By the design of God,” he writes. “On the wedding night during the act of marriage, the woman’s hymen is penetrated for the first time, and blood is shed. This is the blood of the marriage covenant that is shed so that the two may become one. Pause here and meditate for a moment on the importance of virginity. Without it, there is no blood shed to seal the marriage covenant.”

Padgett sees the breaking and bleeding of a woman’s hymen as the natural consequence of first intercourse. This graphic symbol is both disturbing and puzzling in light of the nurturing concern Anthony demonstrates for his own daughter, both in his book and in person. He dedicates his book to his daughter saying, “May you never know a broken heart.” Anthony and his wife, Kimberly, bring their children along to their courtship seminars, where Anthony’s interactions with children seem loving and gentle. Anthony may not have intended his symbol of the blood covenant in the marriage bed to depict or condone violence, but this symbol of purity can prove dangerous for girls and women. Beyond the fact that this supposed marker of virginity is commonly known to be unreliable, the broken hymen as physical proof of lost virginity places the burden of purity solely on girls and women and theoretically opens women’s bodies to violent scrutiny and monitoring, and this symbol once again reinforces the notion of women as gifts.

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265 Ibid, 82.
266 Ibid, 83.
Anthony’s description of the blood seal is the most graphic depiction of covenant that I encountered in my research. However, it is common in the courtship movement to emphasize that marriage vows are not just a promise, but a lasting covenant. The specific use of the word covenant is also popular in the overlapping phenomena of Christian reconstruction theology, homeschool and Quiverfull, and the idea of marriage as a permanent covenant is increasingly popular in the politics of the Religious Right, which has fought to make covenant marriages legal in several states. Covenant marriages, which have heightened requirements for entering and exiting a marriage, were made available in Louisiana, Arizona and Arkansas. An engaged couple who choose a covenant marriage or a married couple who chose to “upgrade” their contract to a covenant agree to extra premarital counseling and to a legally binding agreement that states that they can only be divorced after a lengthy separation or as a result of infidelity, abuse, a felony conviction or abandonment.267

Studies of covenant marriages find that covenant married couples hope to express to one another and to others their commitment to marriage.268 Feminist critiques of covenant marriage criticize the institution as a “potential backlash against the trend toward gay or same-sex marriages.”269 Not only does the covenant marriage vow promise to reduce the risk inherent in marriage, but it also makes a public, political statement about a couple’s dedication to the institution of heterosexual, monogamous marriage. In addition to their commitment to one another, covenant-married couples also report that God is at the center of their relationship. In her article on covenant marriage, Rochelle

268 Ibid, 231.
269 Ibid, 232.
Cades argues that the wedding vows in a covenant marriage unite the spouses as a couple and as a couple united to God.\textsuperscript{270}

Cade likens this union to the three-way chord metaphor found in Ecclesiastes 4:12 which represents the interconnection of religion and the institution of marriage.\textsuperscript{271} Couples emphasize the way God is intertwined in their individual marriages, and on a larger scale the covenant movement attempts to place God at the center of the institution of marriage. In this way, covenant marriage can be seen as an effort to cast American marriage as a Christian institution. The courtship process, which is designed to end in a lasting union, is consistent with both the political and religious goals of covenant marriage. It places God at the center of relationships, rejects the impermanent natures of traditional dating relationships and ensures strong matches by encouraging couples to prioritize discussion of important topics like family planning and finance.

One couple I met embraced the three-way cord metaphor in a literal way and incorporated it into their wedding ceremony. Jason, 31, was sitting next to his heavily pregnant wife, Libby, 21, on the sofa in their bright living room decorated with homemade quilts and blankets. When we began talking about their wedding ceremony, he interrupted us to search out a memento from the couple’s bedroom. He returned with a wrought iron heart from which hung a braid of satiny purple, gray and white ribbons. Libby explained. “Instead of doing a unity candle, we decided – Jason had seen it at a wedding and thought it was really neat, a neat picture. We decided to braid three strands

\textsuperscript{270} Ibid, 231-2.
or cords together to symbolize God, and then each of us, and so that was part of our ceremony.”

The ritual went smoothly during the rehearsal, but in the heightened atmosphere of the actually ceremony, Libby said “We could not braid to save our life.” Jason continues, “So we’re up there laughing. The other people didn’t realize because we had a whole song to do it. We were laughing because, like, I would go and then she would undo it, or she would do it and I would undo it.” Libby adds, “It’s one of those things where it’s like, we can’t just stop and have one person do it, because the symbolism is we’re doing this together.” Luckily, Jason says, “Other people really didn’t pick up on it.”

**Prescreening and Prototypes**

While Jason and Libby laugh about their ritual mishap, they are serious about ensuring that the threads of their marriage don’t come unraveled as easily. Unlike in traditional dating, where people are likely to put their best foot forward or change to try and please their partner, the movement’s authors say that courtship’s marriage focus encourages lasting unions. At the start of a courtship, many couples to get right down to the business of determining whether they are a good match. Sometimes, this process begins with a girl’s father, who attempts to determine if his daughter’s potential suitor is a good fit. While he might ask questions about a young man’s personality, his interests, or his denominational affiliation, most often courtship couples and parents told me that fathers were concerned with whether a young man could care for his daughter financially. This concern is especially important in the courtship movement, where girls are discouraged from pursuing careers and financial independence.
At the start of her daughter Faith’s courtship, Kathy said she and her husband “prescreened the guy.” Faith’s father had a list of qualifications that her future husband had to meet – he had to be completely debt free, be prepared to buy a house, have funds set aside in case of an emergency, and he had to have a life insurance policy “in case anything were to happen on the honeymoon, so she would be taken care of.” Libby also talked about her father’s involvement as a kind of screening process. “I thought it would kind of weed out some of the not-so-great guys, if they wouldn’t have the guts to talk to my dad,” she said. “It kind of took some pressure off me, because I think my dad was able to ask questions….that would have been awkward for me to ask, but he was able to find out where Jason was financially, and what his career goals were…. So it was kind of nice, because they’re not questions you would necessarily ask right in the beginning of a relationship.”

Once a young man has passed the first stage of the screening process, the couple can begin to explore for themselves whether they are a good match. Couples often report that it becomes difficult to guard their hearts during this exploration process. They struggle to keep their feelings in check when talking through questions like how many children they each hope to have. Libby said they had to purposely set boundaries during the initial stages of their courtship. “I think limiting time together was something that was probably the most beneficial,” Libby said. “Because I wasn’t so emotionally attached that we couldn’t talk through issues, like you know, what were problems in your parents’ marriage, or what are things in your family that are not so good, or what are your character weaknesses.”
David said he had a list of qualities that he had crafted before he was even interested in courting. The list detailed what he was looking for in a wife, and as his courtship with Lindsay progressed, his parents encouraged him to keep returning to the list to confirm that she was the one for him. He said he was looking for someone who was athletic. “Because I thought it would be fun to stay fit together,” he said. He also was looking for “somebody that liked talking.” After spending hours with the couple in their living room, listening to them talk animatedly about courtship, family, gender and theology, it seemed that David had found his match in Lindsay. “Basically David fit my ideal husband prototype,” Lindsay said.

Eyes Wide Open

Many couples I met said that hashing out big issues during courtship and engagement prevented them from having major disagreements once they got married, but that doesn’t mean that this process is always pleasant or that it always goes smoothly. “We don’t argue [anymore],” says Holly. But, she admits, “We fought a lot when we were going out. We just got it all out at once. Money, kids, family, birth control or no birth control, jobs, careers, everything pretty much.” David and Lindsay said that once they were engaged they worked out a budget based solely on his salary, because Lindsay would not be returning to her job as a math teacher. “I think it’s a really important thing,” Lindsay says, because the couple realized that even with careful planning, they wouldn’t be able to afford everything they wanted, like nice vacations and dance lessons. “It was kind of a little discouraging I think, at first, but it kind of made you go into marriage with your eyes open.”
Lindsay’s eye-opening moment reveals a level of reality that is not often captured in courtship rhetoric. Courtship books are heavy with romantic details and fairy tale imagery. Sarah Mally represents the courtship process through the storybook fable of a princess, who fails to find love only when she makes bad choices. Eric and Leslie Ludy liken the courtship process to God writing a unique love story for his children, and Eric’s proposal to Leslie featured candlelight, roses and a serenade. Famous courtship stories emphasize the way things “just worked out,” like when Eric, who didn’t have the money for an engagement ring, received an anonymous gift of an envelope filled with cash to pay for the ring. Joshua Harris’ *Boy Meets Girl* contains a small paragraph about questions like “religious beliefs and practice, children, church involvement, and money,” but courtship advice mostly emphasizes making good choices, having strong character and trusting that God will work out the details.  

In practice financial issues are important to courting couples and to their parents, especially parents of daughters. But a lot of the work of establishing financial compatibility is accomplished through socialization before a couple even begins courting. Most of the couples I met came from very conservative Christian homeschool families who had many children and placed a lot of value in debt-free living. In these cases, young people are likely to have similar views about big issues like religion, family size, childrearing and finances. Sometimes, though, this process leads to compromise and accommodation, as it did with Holly, who initially wanted to use birth control in the

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hopes that she would be able to finish college before becoming a mother, but accommodated Michael, who said this was an issue he just couldn’t compromise on.

In cases like these, courtship can be a site of normalization, where social or political values about birth control, family size, finances and gender roles are molded to meet the conservative norms of courtship culture. Consistent with the expectations of a Proverbs 31 woman, David said that having a “hospitable” wife was high on list of desired qualities in a spouse, but it turned out that he and Lindsay had different expectations when it came to hospitality. David says Lindsay “works really hard” at hospitality, but “because of [her] personality, she likes to have everything really, really nice when people come over….She’s awesome at being willing to have people when I want to do that. But then she gets stressed out because of all the work, so I usually don’t have as many people over.” While David frames this issue as a personality difference that he has conceded to, Lindsay, who is an at-home mom to their nine-month-old son and pregnant with their second baby, sees their disagreement as a division of labor question. “Well,” she says, “I feel like if we want to have more people over then we have to dedicate more evenings to do the cleaning.”

Beyond compatibility on questions related to day-to-day family life, some Christian singles say it is important to marry someone who supports or complements their vision for mission work. David and Lindsay said they felt like their calling was simply to have a strong marriage and raise Christian children. However, many of the single young women I met, including best friends Chelsea and Molly, hoped to marry someone who would be willing to serve doing international missions work, whether on a short-term or more permanent basis.
Kimberly Padgett says that shortly before she met Anthony, who became her partner in ministry when they created Courtship in the Covenant, she felt like God was telling her that he had brought her as far he could in her faith journey as a single person and that her next step for spiritual growth would come in the context of marriage. In marriage she would find not only a new ministry, but someone to complement her spiritual gifts and a relationship in which to hone important character traits like patience, joy and faithfulness. In David’s words, “I think marriage is a good chance to realize how selfish you are. Sometimes, when you’re single you don’t realize it as much, because you can just meet your own needs. But when you get married you realize how focused you are on meeting your needs and that you have to try and meet the other person’s needs, too.”

Whether through compromise, accommodation, socialization or normalization, the aim of the courtship process is for couples to harmonize their ideas and values about important issues before they say “I do” and before they are swept away on the tides of romantic emotion that might accompany a traditional dating relationship. Ideally, if a couple works on the big issues during their courtship, they won’t return to haunt their marriage. Like covenant marriage laws, courtship is designed to tightly seal the binding covenant of marriage, ensuring its longevity from the outset. Courtship and covenant marriage make political, but palatable, statements about a couple’s support of enduring, heterosexual marriage.

My Body is a Temple

Consistent with courtship’s connection to Christian Reconstructionist theology and Quiverfull ideals, participants also tend to be in a hurry to achieve another important
marker of adulthood—having a baby. Nearly all of the married couples I met were expecting their first child within a year of their wedding date. Many even became pregnant within a few months of getting married and had their first child before their first wedding anniversary. This was the case with David and Lindsay, who were married in December and discovered they were pregnant in January. The couple, who are expecting their second child shortly after their son’s first birthday, said that getting pregnant so quickly was one of the biggest challenges of their marriage so far.

“It was one of those things that ideally we were like, well it would be totally fine with us if we weren’t expecting for like a year,” Lindsay said. “Then we would have some time to grow as a couple and stuff.” But she and David, like many courtship couples, believe that using birth control to prevent pregnancy runs contrary to God’s will for their life. Instead, they follow the principles of the Quiverfull movement, which rests on the scripture from Psalms, “As arrows are in the hand of a might man; so are children of the youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.” Writing about the Quiverfull movement tend to emphasize the part of this scripture that extols the value of having many arrows, but the verse resonates with courtship because it specifically talks about the “children of the youth.” Those who follow Quiverfull theology often say that “God opens and closes the womb,”—that he is the one who decides how many children they will have. In many cases, this philosophy leads to many children born close together, like David and Lindsay’s growing family.

As David explains, while wrangling the squirming nine-month-old baby on his lap, “Everybody’s got different opinions on that, but our opinion is that children are awesome.” But he admits, “Having Lindsay get pregnant right away was a challenge.”
Still, Lindsay says, “We’re not going to prevent having children. But then it was like, okay, so now I’m expecting. It’s one of those interesting things, too, because shortly after having him, in April I found out that I was expecting again. Like, wow, if I would have known two years from when I started the courtship that I was going to be pregnant with my second child, I think I might have been a little worried.” David agrees. “Pretty freaked out,” he adds.

The possibility of having kids young, early in marriage and close together could be a reason that some girls make a commitment to avoid marriage until they are twenty or older. A girl might make such a pledge in order to maximize the potential of her single season, pursing several years of mission-minded service. But a commitment could also be a tactic for delaying marriage and motherhood, which often happen early for courtship girls like Lindsay and Anna Duggar, who married Josh after a short courtship and had two children with Josh. While all of the girls I met desired to one day be at-home wives and mothers, and some of them were ready to marry young, other young women and parents I met were wary about girls marrying too young, marrying men who were much older, or both. Among the couples I interviewed, there were several cases of young women who married men seven to ten years their senior. And like Lindsay, some girls expressed a desire to enjoy marriage for a time and get to know their husband before adding children to the equation.

Libby was twenty when she married thirty-year-old Jason. She did not have a commitment to wait for marriage, but did want to wait to become a mother. Libby said she was not opposed to using birth control, and the couple purposely waited about a year before becoming pregnant. Libby and Jason’s decision illustrates the variety of
perspectives on family planning that exist within the courtship movement. Courtship couples often come from large families and desire to have large families themselves, but belief in Quiverfull principles is not universal. Libby, who did become pregnant after her first year of marriage and was weeks away from the birth of her baby when we met, based her perspective of family planning on a verse from 1 Corinthians. She recited the verses, which read, “[Y]our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit…therefore honor God with your body,” and said she didn’t think that having baby after baby was consistent with honoring her body as a temple.

Several of the girls I met expressed complicated feelings about birth control and family planning. They were distrustful of hormonal birth control methods like the pill, but also wary about the possibility of not having any control of when and how often they were pregnant. Twenty-year-old Molly, who is single, said, “I don’t think [the pill] is the greatest probably for your body. But at the same time, I don’t want to be constantly pregnant.” Molly pointed out that the Bible doesn’t specifically say that birth control is wrong and that sometimes “enough is enough”—a woman’s body sometimes can’t handle repeated pregnancies. Finally, she described a modified take on the “open womb” Quiverfull theology. She said might use birth control like the pill, but she knows the pill is not foolproof, and that if God wanted her to become pregnant, she would.

Jennifer, who was also twenty and single, said, “I don’t believe in birth control, but not for the reasons that most people do. I just don’t see the necessity of putting chemicals in my body that shouldn’t be there.” Molly and Jennifer’s suspicion of hormonal birth control methods is consistent with some of the values popular amongst homeschool and courtship families, many of whom advocate homeopathic remedies, and
natural childbirth and family planning methods. Jennifer said that when she married she would like try natural family planning “where you just don’t have sex during the time when you could get pregnant. My friends are doing that, and it worked for them,” she said.

**Conclusion**

The message of courtship discourse—first comes marriage—resonates with covenant marriage politics, which seek to reinforce and privilege the institution of heterosexual marriage. Courtship literature advocates prioritizing family relationships, familiarizing potentially romantic relationships, practicing for future families, surveilling the courtship process in the context of the family home and moving directly from one nuclear family structure to the next. In this way, the courtship movement attempts to recuperate what courtship proponents understand as God’s plan for romance and the family. Reflecting is deep ties to Christian Reconstructionist theology and the Quiverfull movement, the courtship movement advocates the reproduction of the patriarchal nuclear family, and it is connected to instances of young marriage and parenthood and large families. Unlike Christian abstinence campaigns, which simply advocate saving sex for marriage no matter how late marriage happens, the courtship movement supports young marriage.

Despite idealizing warm imagery of the nuclear family and the family home, courtship sometimes hurts sibling relationships and relationships with parents. These idealized images also obscure the unpaid reproductive labor that women and girls do in order to make families function. Sentimental ideas about romance and marriage masks the ways in which the girls in the courtship system are objectified as gifts exchanged
between men, and financial interests play a bigger role in the system than courtship books
suggest. Rather than a functioning an initial screening process, the early stage of
courtship functions more like a site of normalization of conservative family values,
although not all girls consent to leaving decisions of family planning solely in God’s
hands.
Conclusion

Breaking away from the casual conversation circulating around the table that morning, Ashley leans in over our bagels and coffee and asks me, quietly but earnestly, “What do you think about everything you’ve heard here this weekend?” It is our final meal together at Leslie Ludy’s Set-Apart Girl conference, a short purity retreat hosted in the cold early days of January at the Ludy’s cozy Colorado Ellerslie campus. The snow is falling quickly outside the windows of the campus’ tiny dining room, and other diners are checking the status of their flights on one mother’s smart phone. While the winter weather was not unexpected in Colorado, there were snow storms brewing throughout the country and girls who had come from as far away as Texas and Georgia were worried that their flights home might be cancelled.

As I consider my answer to Ashley’s question, the other girls slowly turn their attention to me. When I begin to share a kind of circuitous answer, another of our dining companions, Paige, cuts in, bluntly asking, “What do really think?” It’s a question I got a lot during my research. And while I think Ashley had a more evangelical impulse in her question—she was hoping to begin a conversation about my religious status and whether the weekend had inspired me to consider the salvation message—Paige, like others, wanted to know what I thought about courtship principles and this Christian approach to romance. Paige was right, in part, to suspect that I was hedging my answer in order to avoid saying something that would be offensive to my dining companions.
But I had genuinely complicated thoughts about courtship, and I wasn’t sure I could sum them up very succinctly, especially since I was now rushing to finish my coffee before chapel. Despite the threatening weather, Ellerslie’s weekly Sunday service was still on, and we were all expected to attend. I didn’t have time to answer Ashley’s question before the dining hall exodus began, but the question returned to me often as I worked on this project. My immediate impulse is to say that it doesn’t matter what I think about courtship—as a researcher, my goal is to understand the movement, not to judge it. Of course, in reality, this kind of objectivity is impossible, and as I mentioned in the introduction, my status as an insider or outsider was never clear cut or fixed. Over time, I realized that I couldn’t separate my perspective on the courtship movement from my own experience of sorting out questions of family, career and romance. In reviewing my conversations with participants, I came to the assessment that Christian courtship operates on a series of hopeful promises that it is not capable of fully fulfilling.

**Promises**

In Chapter One, I explored the roots of the courtship movement and its connections to Christian homeschooling, Quiverfull and Reconstructionist theology. I found that courtship participants are hesitant to identify with labels that might signal their adherence to rigid rules and principles. But, rather than relaxing courtship standards, “liberal” titles like Joshua Harris’ *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and Eric and Leslie Ludy’s *When Dreams Come True* actually function more effectively to maintain the guiding principles of courtship than do conservative titles. I also questioned whether attempts to spread courtship outside the boundary of homeschool networks would be successful without the structure and values common amongst homeschool families.
In Chapter Two, I defined the characteristics of luminous femininity, an outward-focused and active mix of hospitality and warm nurturing and radiant modesty. Contrary to critiques that equate traditional femininity with passivity, I argued that by embracing luminous femininity and radiant modesty, girls in the courtship movement actively engage in a bargain in which they trade service and nurturing for a chance at protection and economic security. However, I found the standards of luminous femininity to sometimes be contradictory and impossible to achieve, for example, a young woman who is poised and elegant, as well as real and relatable. In addition, I found that while radiant modesty is supposed to protect girls from boys’ predatory gazes, it actually serves to intensify this gaze and contributes to what Jessica Valenti calls the fetishization of girls’ virginity.

Chapter Three examined the role of romance in courtship, which the movement defines as a combination of emotional intimacy (sharing personal hopes, dreams and fears) and carefully orchestrated displays of affection by young men for young women. Research on abstinence education and Christian abstinence campaigns like *True Love Waits* suggests that these platforms increasingly understand sexuality to be a comprehensive and finite dynamic, and they teach that premature sexual intimacy will have negative physical, spiritual and emotional consequences. Courtship takes this message one step further, and it teaches Christian singles that even engaging in premature emotional intimacy will have devastating effects on a believer’s future marriage. In this case it is romance, not just sex, which is the real prize worth waiting for. But courtship participants report that it is impossible to completely “guard their heart” from the
possibility of emotional pain. As one courtship mother said, “People are looking for a
guarantee, but there is no such thing.”

In Chapter Four, I argued that the courtship movement, like recent efforts to enact
covenant marriage laws in several states, can be seen as a political response to the
growing success of the Marriage Equality movement. Courtship goes further than other
sexual abstinence platforms in reinforcing the institutions of heterosexual marriage and
the nuclear family. It does this by romanticizing familial relationships and familiarizing
romantic relationships, creating a structure to support young marriage, and normalizing
conservative Christian values like patriarchy and traditional gender roles. The Christian
courtship movement, with its Reconstructionist roots, also reflects Quiverfull ideals about
large families and early parenthood. Courtship attempts to narrow the gap between age of
sexual maturity and marriage, which many sociologists of religion have identified as a
glaring omission in Christian abstinence campaigns.

However, the movement’s focus on young marriage, and its Reconstructionist
roots, make courtship participants, especially girls, less likely to attend college and more
likely to become young parents. Sometimes, when a girl who was very close to her
parents and siblings leaves suddenly after a short courtship, the family is left reeling with
the sudden loss. Emphasis on male authority and the role of girl’s virginity in the sealing
of a marriage covenant also contribute to a kind of marriage market, similar to the
dynamic that Gayle Rubin identifies in “The Traffic in Women.” Girls become gifts
exchanged between men. Romantic images of the nuclear family and an emphasis on
traditional gender roles also mask the large amount of unpaid reproductive labor that girls
in the Christian courtship movement are supposed to learn to perform with joy.
Common Threads

While each chapter addresses a distinct dynamic of the movement, there are many common threads running through these analyses. My research reveals the ways in which courtship functions like a market in which girls are exchanged, passing from the authority of their fathers to that of their husbands. Romance in the courtship movement is also understood in economic terms—romance, like sexuality, is something that people fear running out of, so they save up for marriage. What they miss out on in quantity, they hope to make up for in the elaborate romantic character of their courtships, thus maximizing the profit of their emotional investment. In this way, courtship advice functions like the women’s romance advice authors that Arlie Russell Hochschild examines in *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*—they are “emotional investment counselors.” Girls in the courtship movement actively bargain for their successful futures by embodying the characteristics of luminous femininity in an effort to attract the ideal husband. Successful courtship authors, like the Harris brothers and the Mally siblings who are homeschool graduates steeped in entrepreneurial spirit, have perfected a business/ministry model and marketed the message of courtship, which thrives on a customer base of voracious readers.

Another dynamic that emerged again and again in research is the way that elaborate romantic productions and sentimental ideals attempt to mask some of the more pragmatic, or even unsavory, realities of courtship. Concepts like sacred singleness, romantic intimacy with the heavenly prince, and the hopeful ideal of the future husband are supposed to give a girl purpose during her single years. But many girls and parents expressed concern about the gender imbalance of the courtship market, suggesting there
is reason to fear that there are not enough godly men to go around. Courtship discourse promises Christian singles that if they guard their heart, they will one day be rewarded with a beautiful romance, but courtship participants say it is impossible to completely guard their hearts. They often report that they were emotionally invested in a courtship as soon as it started, and there are stories of courtships that end in heartbreak. Authors highlight the differences between dating and courtship, emphasizing that courtship happens in the context of the family, with a girl passing from the authority of her father to her husband. But warm, naturalized images of home and family obscure the unpaid labor that makes them function. Tightly-knit homeschool families sometimes feel ripped apart in the aftermath of quick courtships, and courtship authors fail to acknowledge the role that financial security actually plays in parents’ estimation of an ideal suitor.

Warm sentiment and romance also attempt to paint courtship as a natural process, when the movement, and its individual relationships, are in fact produced. Eric and Leslie Ludy advocate that Christian singles turn their metaphorical pen over to the hand of God and allow him to “write their love story,” but their engagement, the ultimate fairy tale element of their own relationship, was carefully scripted by Eric to include an element of surprise and a movie-like soundtrack. Many of the couples I met followed this lead with young men organizing elaborate engagements. The Ludys documented not only their romance, but they also continue to document their family’s growth with pictures and updates on their ministry’s website. Courtship couples like David and Lindsay have followed suit, documenting each stage of their courtship and producing a DVD to tell their story. Courtship language also evokes a misremembered past and a glossy nostalgia for old-fashioned romance as it was in the fictional past of, for example, Jane Austen
romance novels. Advocates say that courtship returns Christian singles to God’s pure ideal for romance. By avoiding labels and claiming only that they are sharing God’s revelation to them about true romance, courtship authors fail to acknowledge the ways that the movement is not natural, but a production with an identifiable history, theology and discourse.

On Matchmakers and Bachelors

In Chapter One, I asked whether courtship would successfully take on outside of homeschooling. I suspect that the heavy family involvement and incidents of young marriage characteristic of contemporary courtship would not hold up outside of the social world of homeschooling. However, I think that other courtship principles could succeed outside of homeschooling and perhaps outside of Christianity altogether, and it’s possible that they already are. Meeting a spouse through an online dating site is no longer stigmatized the way it once was. These sites, which match couples based on compatibility and interest, match courtship principles which suggest a young man should only pursue romance if he is in the season of marriage and that couples should assess compatibility at the beginning of their relationship. The popularity of television shows like ABC’s Bachelor franchise and Bravo’s lineup of Millionaire Matchmaker, Miss Advised and Love Broker, which all profile people seeking not just love, but marriage, resonates with courtship’s “first comes marriage” message. Future scholarship might explore this resurgence of marriage in the popular imagination, but it seems like both Christian courtship, as well as these television fairy tales, resonate with desires for security and romance and an attempt to do the impossible—to eliminate risk and uncertainty from the marriage marketplace.
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Harris, Alex and Brett Harris, *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Multnomah Books, 2008).


Appendix A: Interview Participants

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<th>Age at Interview</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
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