

**Princesses and Soldiers:
Girls' Gender Construction at Faithspring Baptist Church, Atlanta**

Lucia Hulsether

ABSTRACT

Princesses and Soldiers grew out of an undergraduate ethnography assignment. It explores the constructions of gender and sexuality in a Baptist youth group examining the motifs of fairytale and war games with which the girls learned to approach their femininity and protect their virtue. The author considers gender constructions and the ways in which they are affected by categories of class and race. The Afterword serves as a reflection on how one positions one's self as ethnographer, asking questions about both responsibility to the ethnographic subject and to one's own political ideals.

Introduction

At the end of a small group Bible study session at Faithspring Baptist Church, a leader asked her racially and socioeconomically diverse class of middle school girls to share their prayer requests. Several girls volunteered prayers for improved grades, healed friendships, and sick family members. When it looked like nobody was going to speak again, an African American girl in the back hesitantly raised her hand and requested a prayer for her single mother: "I want to pray for my mom, because she can't find a job. I want to pray that she finds a job soon." The leader—who was also African American—then began to pray, repeating almost verbatim each

of the concerns that the girls had mentioned. Her prayer for the girl's mother, however, diverged sharply from the pattern: "And Lord, I just pray that Tamika's mother could find a job, but only one that would not take away from her first priority to support her family as a mother. I pray all of these things in Your name. Amen."

Scholars from many subfields of religious studies are interested in the intersecting dynamics of race, class, age and gender as they play out in concrete contexts involving religion; the youth program at Atlanta's racially- and socioeconomically-diverse Faithspring Baptist Church is a promising starting point for examining such dynamics. FBC is a member of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and claims a membership base of 17,000 people. Although the church is famous for its international media broadcasts and its influence in the national SBC, FBC also has paid special attention to the development of its youth program. This program is divided into sex-segregated subgroups, and the church website highlights the girls' program as a place for girls to be "disciplined and trained up into the godly women [they are] created to be."

This paper will incorporate gender theory, document analysis, and participant observation to examine the specific ways that the girls' youth program at FBC attempts to shape the gendered behaviors of adolescent girls within the congregation, and how race and level of economic privilege influences how the girls responded to these messages. The following questions will frame my analysis: What are the most important gender messages that FBC—and perhaps by extension other conservative evangelical churches—communicate to adolescent girls? To what extent do race and economic privilege influence how the girls interpret messages about gender identity?

Theoretical Foundation

It is important to begin with two distinctions: between sex as a relatively fixed set of biological characteristics and gender as a more fluid, socially-constructed set of meanings, as well as between any given individual sense of sex and gender identity and surrounding social expectations related to it.¹ Following a well-worn path in gender theory, sociologist Michael Kimmel stresses that when people discuss gender they are often thinking primarily of individual gender identity—how people define themselves as "male" and "female" in different settings and situations.² But such gender identities do not develop in isolation; they are also constructed in relationship to the environments and institutions where people live, work, and socialize. Social institutions and organizations are gendered because they create and enforce norms for individuals' gendered interactions and roles. As people move among institutions with distinctive gender expectations—such as school, family, and church—they perform gender in different ways based on the expectations they encounter in different contexts and the ways that they interpret these expectations.³

Sometimes personal gender identities and performances come into tension with hegemonic, institutional expectations of gender roles. If a person experiences discrimination in a setting that marginalizes an aspect of her identity (gender or otherwise), she will still actively construct her

identity in relation to the marginalizing environment. For example, if Christina attends a church that restricts females from leadership positions, she might start believing that she should submit to male authority, but she might also react against such messages by attending seminary and becoming a minister. In the latter case, the product of her engagement with the church's gender messages would diverge sharply from the church's goals. Christina's response would likely differ from that of her fellow church members; people with different relationships to a given institutional narrative often interpret otherwise identical messages in unique ways. Relationships between individuals and institutions are always shaped by individual social locations—and an analysis of gender is incomplete without also acknowledging the intersecting issues of race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and economic privilege, which all affect gender constructions. Because of these many tensions sociologists describe gender formation as an ongoing process that varies across social and geographic variables.⁴ It is with this process in mind that I begin my analysis of FBC as a physical space for gender formation—one that is complex because of the multiple social variables at play within the space.

Gender Construction in FBC Girls' Bible Study Guides

FBC segregates its youth programs into boys' and girls' groups that follow separate curricula. During spring 2008 the girls' groups were using a devotional guidebook entitled *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers*, which is authored by the girls' program director but published internationally. Each chapter describes a way that girls should imagine their relationship with God, but the book's recurring and overarching metaphor is of Christian girls as "princesses" who live in a "palace" with the "King." Because of these characteristics, *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* is an ideal starting point for exploring the gender messages at FBC. To evaluate the curriculum, I analyzed and coded the book with a focus on its gendering narratives.

NARRATIVE I: RELATING GOD AND MALE FIGURES

The first narrative draws parallels between God and the male-constructed figures with which girls are expected to form relationships. This paradigm rests on the book's basic, essentialist claim that "girls are relational beings" seeking a masculine "prince, hero, protector" to complete them. Although some feminists have used variations on this distinction to empower women, such characterizations of females as "relational" and males as "protectors" presuppose an implicit power hierarchy between such gender essences and legitimate them with appeals to biological perspectives of gender, which argue that gender hierarchies are a natural imperative rooted in evolution.⁵ FBC not only follows this line of thought but also maps a theological interpretation of gender onto it. *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* stresses that God intentionally created two static genders with specific purposes, qualities, and needs. For example, the author consistently refers to God

as “Lover” and “Ultimate Prince Charming” and instructs her female readers be “obedient” and “vulnerable” to this male God who “pursues us so that we [can] have a relationship with him.” In one analogy, the author compares knowing Christ to “catch[ing] a hottie.” She warns readers, “In the Ms. Independent role there is no place for the vulnerable ... frankly, it isn’t possible to [catch a hottie] and be Ms. Independent.” This type of language implies that young women should measure their success by the extent to which men “protect” and pursue them, even though women’s stated role in male-female relationships grants them limited power as autonomous agents.

Sometimes *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* takes this sexualized language a step further and implies that girls should think of their physical bodies only in relation to the metaphorical husband-God with whom they have formed a permanent, monogamous relationship. The “Bouquets and Boutineers [sic]” chapter asks girls if they are “cheating on” their “bridegroom.” It states, “Over and over Scripture talks about God being a jealous God, and He should be! He paid the ultimate price to buy us, and we have no right to push him into a corner and run off with other lovers!” If internalized by young women and/or the men around them, such self-images could pose serious risks—with potential for contributing to climates of violence against women, damaging self esteem, and generally devaluing young women’s emotional, intellectual, and physical agencies. The tendency of the book to alternately portray God as a sexualized “husband” and an authoritative “father” compounds this problem. Consolidating two separate, relational male figures into one supreme authority with full reign over girls’ selves further denies girls the opportunity to imagine themselves as autonomous in regard to sexuality and decision-making power. Instead, it only offers a model of sexuality that is “owned” by someone else.⁶

NARRATIVE II: PAUPER TO PRINCESS

The second narrative centers on the image of Cinderella and uses the “pauper to princess” motif with strong implications for both gender and class identity constructions. *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* uses “poverty” as a metaphor for individual separation from God. The book repeatedly invokes the phrase “sin and poverty,” thus drawing a strong association between the two concepts and correlating poverty more with individual choices than with systemic and structural injustices. Metaphors in *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* intensify this connection. In the preface to the book, the author explains, “We are by nature paupers ... those around us suggest digging in the garbage to meet our nourishment needs,” but “we have a King offering a banquet table.” In order to access this table, “we must allow Christ to remove the way we thought when we were paupers.” Even if the author is not trying to demean people who live in poverty, the book’s metaphors build from a foundation of negative stereotypes of poor people. Defining the “way” a person thinks and correlating this definition with her financial status might be interpreted as implying that poor people are sinful and/or unintelligent and/or choosing their own circumstances—or, conversely, that material wealth is a reward from God or a symbol of integrity.

Extending this celebration of material wealth, *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* advises girls about the dress code and grooming practices that will supposedly help them attract men; each piece of advice serves as an analogy for how girls can be faithful to God. Thus the book again affiliates men with God, but now the metaphor relies on an appeal to how women adorn their physical bodies. In the chapter entitled “Bouquets and Boutineers [sic],” the author uses a wedding-day checklist to “dig into what it means to be the bride of Christ.” Before the bride can see the groom, “her hair [must be] perfectly pinned in place, her make up [must be] just right and her dress [must hang] on her beautifully, accenting her body in all the right ways.” Appearance is important on more than just a woman’s wedding day; even the book’s title affiliates women’s “discipleship” with appearance and fragility. Encouraging girls to manipulate their bodies to attract God/men briefly complicates the earlier language in which God alone is in charge of transforming girls from “paupers” to “princesses.” Although God can recognize girls’ inner beauty before “He” transforms them, the text counsels young women to uphold a specific beauty standard—which presupposes both that they identify with it and that they can afford it. Young women who actually do live in poverty, without money to buy a princess wardrobe, are less likely to achieve this ideal until either Prince Charming or a fairy godmother arrives to transform them.

The “pauper to princess” narrative carries unique theological significance because it contradicts theologies in which Christ transforms the entire world by taking on human poverty. In the FBC account, Christ redeems *individuals* by removing them *from* a world of “sin and poverty” and “granting them the status of royalty.” It imagines fundamentalist Christian girls as hopelessly outnumbered and persecuted by society, just like Cinderella. Girls are unable to transcend “poverty” and persecution until Christ intervenes on their behalf; until then, however, they must deferentially endure suffering with the quiet knowledge that they will eventually be rescued. In a mutuality paradigm, where God lives in community with poor people, the metaphor might teach girls that suffering is something to be resisted and overcome in solidarity with others—not that accepting it is a Christ-like virtue. The FBC metaphor, which highlights silence and powerlessness in the face of suffering, effectively denies girls’ power to resist oppression on their own terms.

NARRATIVE III: FROM CINDERELLA TO SNIPER IN A SPIRITUAL WAR

After *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* belabors the princess metaphor for seven chapters, its core metaphor unexpectedly shifts to one of violence and warfare in the final chapter, entitled “After the Honeymoon Comes the Battlefield.” Presuming that the girls have “formed a relationship” with Christ by this point in the curriculum, the author exhorts them to “get out [their] sniper boots and boxing gloves” and prepare to wage war against worldly distractions that “hinder [their] relationship with [their] one true Love.” The chapter’s structure is based on a “Battle Gear Boot Camp” checklist that details the “spiritual armor” that girls must wear in order to “be victorious” against Satan. At first glance, this new narrative looks less restrictive than the previous one—af-

ter all, sniper boots are more physically empowering than glass slippers, and girls now have the responsibility to defend themselves. Like the princess narrative, however, the soldier metaphor involves just as many, if not more, implications of forced submission and obedience: God's soldiers do not hold leadership positions or question (male) authority in battle. The chapter urges girls to "put to death [their] desires on a daily, minute-by-minute basis" and "recognize that [thoughts that do not match up with Scripture] are from the enemy." Like with the Cinderella metaphor, girls and women who constantly deny their own "desires" for a higher, pre-determined purpose will eventually reap rewards. Salvation depends on waging successful war against "enemies"—and "enemies" presumably includes gender norms that conflict with those presented by their church.

Although *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* does not necessarily set out to prove points about acceptable gender behaviors, its gendered metaphors about God suggest underlying messages about women's roles in their personal and material relationships. Although the curriculum does not always relay a consistent message—there are contradictions in the way it describes God and it imagines girls as both princesses and soldiers—in all cases girls are required to take cues from an external authority that has been constructed as a man. As the rest of this article will describe, this underlying message carries implications not only for gender roles but also for other social factors like class and race.

On-the-Ground Interactions at FBC

How did messages in *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* manifest themselves in concrete contexts at FBC? To answer this question I attended several events sponsored by the FBC youth program—including a two-day conference for female teenagers, a girls' Sunday school class, and a co-ed Wednesday worship service. The events' format and leadership varied, but the core of youth participants remained consistent. The racial demographics of the youth were divided equally between black and white at every event except Sunday school (where most of the girls were black), and participants seemed to represent a range of economic statuses.⁷ The small groups that I attended were facilitated by middle-aged African American women, and the worship services were generally led by Euro-American women in their thirties. I am not sure why this division of labor existed.

Before embarking on this project I asked the permission of the girls' program director and explained that I was a student seeking to do research on how the FBC youth group taught gender ideals to young women in the congregation. The girls and small group leaders knew the intent of my project, that I was a young, white undergraduate student, and that I identified as a Christian. My upbringing as the daughter of a U.S. religion professor and a Presbyterian (U.S.A.) minister prepared me to enter FBC with a working knowledge of the official theology and language of the Southern Baptist Convention.

At each event that I attended, the girls freely expressed themselves to their leaders and to each

other; what differed case by case was how the girls' respective social locations seemed to influence their statements and how their leaders responded. In class discussions and prayers, I noticed a dichotomy between the concerns expressed by the girls who seemed relatively wealthy (and were all white) and the girls who seemed less economically privileged (and were largely black). In a small group for middle school girls at the conference, one of the leaders asked her group to offer examples of times that "God did not answer your prayer immediately or you got an answer that you did not expect." The first person who raised her hand was an African American girl who had already referenced her mother's sudden death to cancer in the previous year (partially because of her inability to afford healthcare): "Like I said, when my mom was dying I prayed for her to live. I had to wait for God's answer, but He did answer because I got over it [when she died]." A Euro-American girl with pearls and a Coach purse immediately counterbalanced this story with a long-winded account of her prayers to God for an iPhone. She was "mad" at God for not answering her prayer and had "given up" until "one day I got home from school and my parents had given me a Sidekick for a surprise early birthday present—and that phone is newer and better, so God delayed his answer to give me something better."

These differences were striking, but I was most surprised to see the leaders treat each concern (regardless of subject matter) as relatively equal in emotional weight. The small group leaders nodded their heads at the story of the dying mother, but they noted that the cell phone story was a "good example." As with the example of Tamika praying for her single mother to find a job, at times the leaders even rearticulated the girls' points to make them conform to an experience that could be more readily associated with middle- and upper-class ideals of women's roles. Tamika had not asked for a stay-at-home mother; one could reasonably guess that she mainly wanted a stable source of income for her single-parent family. I wondered if the experience of being black and female in the U.S. south would affect the leaders' responses to the more urgent prayers of their African American students, but I did not notice any major differences if they existed. Rather, the leaders seemed most intent on constructing the image of a God who blesses people materially—even though this did not fully reflect reality for many of their students.

This prosperity theology was easy to see in a Sunday school lesson on Matthew 19, taught by an African American teacher to her talkative and engaged class of eighteen African American girls and two Euro-American girls. In this passage, Jesus tells a rich man that he will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless he sells all of his belongings and gives the money to the poor.⁸ Throughout the lesson the teacher used "jewelry, dresses, and clothes" as obvious examples of "things girls like" but that they should not "put before God." Midway through the lesson, one of the girls raised her hand and asked, "Does Jesus *really* mean we have to give up all our stuff?" The teacher incredulously bounced the question back to the class: "What do y'all think? Are there rich people in heaven?" A few of the students responded, "Yes," but at least ten of them shouted, "No!" as if the answer should have been obvious. One of them continued with a further indictment of the teacher's point: "Rich people don't care about God." The teacher looked taken aback

by this answer and quickly assured the girls that “It isn’t what you own. It’s whether you know Christ—Jesus just doesn’t want us to get too distracted by our things.” In a church setting that often uses biblical literalism to justify doctrines of submission for women, the leader’s reaction was notable in that it employed an uncharacteristically loose biblical interpretation to justify women’s ownership of material items that supposedly highlight femininity. Nevertheless, the girls’ outright rejection of their teacher’s point underscored a divide between two clearly present theologies, and perhaps the respective experiences informing those theologies.

In worship services it was the white leaders who broke from the prosperity theology; their lessons and speeches were more likely to emphasize personal suffering as opportunities, or even prerequisites, for connecting with God. For example, in her keynote speech at the conference, a prominent fundamentalist Christian television hostess detailed her battles with eating disorders and “dependency and addiction to boys.” After twenty minutes of describing her daily caloric intake and abusive boyfriends, she abruptly turned her narrative: “Suddenly I realized that the only thing I needed to feed on was the Word because Jesus is the bread of life ... God redeems our crisis moments for His use later.” Even though she validated struggles of many adolescent girls, the speaker did not suggest ways to achieve “redemption” outside one particular form of suffering. Her narrative did not acknowledge suffering from poverty or systemic inequalities—issues that seemed critical to many of these girls, judging by their prayer requests. After her speech many of the white girls in the room cried and hugged each other for several minutes after the conclusion of the service—something that they had not done at other worship services I attended. The most emotion I saw from any group of African American girls was among three girls who were holding hands and singing, which they did in each worship service I attended. This is not to say that no black girls in the room struggled with dependency issues or that none of them connected with the speaker’s message—but I do think it gives important clues about what kind of struggles were most validated from major public platforms at FBC. Even if the black leaders’ emphasis on prosperity theology does not directly work toward systemic social transformation, they at least were addressing issues of poverty. On the other hand, poverty did not seem even to be on the white leaders’ radar screens, and this difference had visible implications for the girls’ levels of engagement.

Because I mostly interacted with FBC youth in highly supervised settings at the church, it is difficult to judge how they negotiated FBC gender messages vis-à-vis others they encountered in other settings and their emerging individual gender identities; it is clear, however, that in many cases the girls actively reshaped and resisted their leaders’ messages about acceptable gender roles. I saw the majority of this overt resistance in settings where youth leaders were absent or not paying attention: During the Wednesday night worship service, for example, a female high school student offered a sermon when none of the youth leaders were in the room. Despite knowing the institutional narrative of obedience, she went on a stream-of-consciousness rant in which she asked of her male head youth leader, “Why is he spending our money on THAT?” Similarly, in the Sunday school class, one middle-school girl muttered under her breath, “I don’t *own* dresses”

when her teacher suggested “girls like dresses and jewelry.” These subversive responses crossed race and class lines.

As shown by earlier examples of student-leader interaction, sometimes the girls asked questions and answered their leaders’ inquiries in ways that subtly undermined FBC’s dominant narrative about gender and class roles. During the first session at the girls’ conference, a leader asked her class to think of examples of Bible stories in which something “unexpected” had happened. One of the shyest girls in the class approached me and told me the story of Tamar being raped (she said “taken”) by her brother; she finished her story with the line, “*That was unexpected.*” Later she shared the story with the class and was met with a long pause after finishing. Although the leaders did not directly engage her and instead refocused the discussion on Sarah’s unexpected pregnancy with Isaac, the pause created by this student’s contribution explicitly denoted a break from the hegemonic narrative pushed by the church—and the leaders seemed not to know how to respond to her. Each time a young person named an individual reality outside the church norm or recognized knowledge that seemed to contradict the institutional narrative, she created a crack of resistance within the hegemonic scheme of the church—whether or not she knew she was doing so and whether or not the leader actually acknowledged her question. In an institution that promotes a very specific image of what girlhood and womanhood look like, contributions like these have potential to accumulate and eventually make the overall narrative less rigid, even if only a few listeners notice at first. At FBC, where several girls named realities other than the one endorsed by the youth group, such a shift seems like a distinct possibility.

The girls who seemed to be accepting the FBC theology most readily and with the least reservations were the white students who were being homeschooled. At each event these students were particularly eager to introduce themselves to me and tell me about their church. Over lunch at the conference one girl explained her career plans: “I want to be a teacher, but only if it’s okay with my husband ... I like to watch my mother to be like her—that’s my purpose.” I heard one homeschooler exclaim how “awkward” it was that her male cousin’s *Facebook* profile depicted him holding a baby. These comments reflected the gender ideology promoted by FBC. Although not all homeschooling is exactly the same, these students seemed to fit a pattern of conservative evangelical homeschooling,⁹ and the ease and sincerity with which the homeschoolers reiterated FBC’s gender narrative suggests that the degree of acceptance (as opposed to rejection or modification) of FBC gender messages correlated with girls’ levels of exposure to alternative gender constructs in their schools and communities. Based on my research it is impossible to judge the relative importance of homeschooling, race, and class. In this case all three factors were relevant: all of the homeschoolers were white and, obviously, lived in homes that were financially stable enough for at least one parent to stay home to teach the kids.

Conclusion

It would be a dangerous oversimplification to rely only on race and socioeconomic demographics to explain complexities in gender dynamics, and the case of FBC certainly cannot stand alone. However, this limited analysis of the FBC girls' program reveals preliminary clues that can be expanded with further research: Gender- and class-bound messages conveyed by the FBC devotional guidebook and FBC youth group leaders often contained contradictions, both internally and with each other. The leaders' social locations also seemed to influence the gender messages and theologies that they conveyed to the youth. Second, teenagers at FBC who were more closely connected to experiences of white privilege were more likely to accept institutional gender narratives—perhaps because they had such strong implications for class identity construction. In any case, this study of the girls' youth program at FBC shows that one cannot examine religious gendering practices without paying attention to dynamics of race and class as they intersect in these settings.

These observations leave several questions open for further exploration: How do girls who do not necessarily fall along clear class divides (such as wealthier black girls or less economically privileged white girls) relate to FBC's messages about gender? How do race and socioeconomic privilege influence the way church leaders convey gendered messages to the girls? How do the girls' and boys' youth programs at FBC compare to each other? As they get older, to what extent will these adolescents accept or modify the gender messages promoted their church? Finally, how will girls' interpretation of these gender messages shape the future and influence of evangelical Christianity in the United States?

Afterword: Now what?

The questions at the end of my article point to complicated issues related to ethnographic research. As this essay has circulated in some academic circles, I have begun to fear that by not explicitly naming the methodological, ethical, and theological questions raised by this project my scholarship has crossed into the realm of non-reflexive, non-feminist, non-empowering ethnographic research. This is not where I want it to be.

What does it mean that the leadership of FBC would probably hate my paper? What does it mean that when I tried to follow up with the leader of the FBC girls' youth group, she did not respond? Was I reflexive enough in my writing style and in approaching people at FBC? Is it judgmental and elitist to critique areas where FBC theology might be marginalizing and/or complicit with oppressive power structures? If, as students and scholars of religion we do question the effects of a community's theology, is it a violation to use our conclusions to pose alternative ways of doing theology and work with young people? Or do we have a responsibility to suggest alternative models? What would these models look like? Whose realities do we affirm (or condemn) by considering these questions at all? Who is "we"? Can this article be constructive instead of solely descriptive?

Is this essay credible if it does not try to answer, or at least carefully consider, these questions?
I do not think so.

To be sure, for many people it is considerably more exciting to gawk at fundamentalist youth groups without reflecting about whether this is actually fair or considering what their practices and beliefs actually mean. As my friend Ben teased me before I presented this paper at a conference, “I hear flashy is in this season. Even if your audience does not catch any of the points you’re trying to convey, they will be thoroughly impressed.”

Although Ben helped allay some of my anxiety at the time, his comment is probably not positive in the grand scheme of things. I do not know if my readers and listeners “catch my points”—but many people who have spoken to me about my paper *do*, to my mind, focus too much on belittling the religious practices and beliefs of fundamentalist Christians. During my presentation, much of the audience laughed at several anecdotes from FBC youth events; other attendees just looked horrified the entire time. When I tell people about my project, the most common reaction falls somewhere along a continuum of “How did you put up with such brainwashed fools?” to “This is dangerous and should be illegal.”

I am not the first person who has had to deal with this type of response. In her study of Aglow women’s prayer fellowships, religion scholar R. Marie Griffith discusses how she has tried to be both “critical” and “empathetic” in her portrayal of women whom many feminists and progressives would (and do) label as brainwashed enablers of their own oppression.¹⁰ She recognizes that such a stance makes her vulnerable to attacks from all sides: many feminists and pro-feminists will dislike her display of empathy, and her informants will dislike her critiques. Griffith decided to take this risk, citing a hope to redress the one-dimensional caricatures drawn of evangelical women and arguing that there are plenty of people condemning evangelicals and not enough writing about why their practices are meaningful (or not meaningful, as the case may be).¹¹

I agree with Griffith. We should not pretend that it is fair to take cheap jabs at fundamentalists who think of Jesus as a husband and/or create theologies in which they imagine themselves as princesses: First, those jokes are stale and overplayed, and jokes are not analysis. Second, the issues are too complex, multilayered, and relevant to real lives.

The practical question then becomes, how does one strike a balance between empathy and critique, or how does one do both simultaneously? This has been a struggle for me as I carried out research at FBC. I am the type of feminist who believes that all girls and women should be taught that their appearance, relationships, and social status have no bearing on their worth; I cringed when reading parts of *Learning to Walk in Glass Slippers* and had to think twice about how I framed questions at FBC events. I am also the type of feminist who finds it problematic when people in positions of power tell people in positions of relatively less power how their lives should be. This commitment makes me critically aware not only of the leaders who play a major part in creating FBC’s gender narratives, but also of researchers’ ability to use writing and publishing platforms to condemn informants with whom we disagree. For me, writing about FBC became an

intentional process of recognizing my instinctive reactions to FBC rhetoric and processing them enough to take seriously my more important goal of creating a fair, if situated and incomplete, analysis of what is going on at FBC.

But as I make these points, I think of the particular analyses I directed toward FBC's curriculum; I wonder where analysis becomes an attack. Not only does my analysis in "Princesses and Soldiers" seem harsh, I also arrived at it without the direct, collaborative input of the girls and leaders of the FBC youth group. This seems potentially oppressive on my part; it takes away the FBC youth members' power to name their own realities and instead gives me the power to define them using only my own situated lens. Furthermore, I trust my feminist sociology and anthropology teachers when they emphasize the importance of reciprocity in any ethnographic project. That is to say, a researcher should not be the only person benefiting in the research relationship; the people who informed the research should also come out on top. I never in any way "compensated" the girls for sharing their space with me or explaining their church's routine to me when they noticed that I was clueless; our relationship lasted only as long as I did fieldwork at the church.

Yet it also seems relevant that during my short time at FBC, I unintentionally (yet willingly) became a resource for several of the students in the small groups. I think students began to see me as a safe person after the second small group session at the girls' conference. A student asked her teacher "how God could send someone to hell if they had never heard about Christ," and the leader abruptly told *me* to answer the question and did not address it herself. After this interaction students in this small group began approaching me with their deeply held theological and personal questions (including ones about theodicy, the ethics of proselytization, and general concerns about high school) that they had not asked during their official sessions.

Although I felt honored that these girls considered me a trustworthy person, I had no idea how to react to their questions: Should I tell them what I *really* think, at the risk of shocking and alienating them and/or their leaders? Should I defy all of my personal inclinations and give them the answers endorsed by their church? I settled on a middle ground of using FBC's language to highlight points that were simultaneously diplomatic and divergent from church messages that I personally objected to. To the student who asked about God sending people to hell, I tried to emphasize that, to me, the issue was not about God being vindictive, since God loves all people; I said that I thought Christians should think less about heaven and hell and instead consider how they can show God's love through their actions right now. This response might have come off as a non-answer; I felt entirely unprepared to answer such a question with any authority, and I still wonder what I could have done differently.

In any case, these conversations tipped me off about two implications of my research project: First, it is significant that these young people decided to approach me; perhaps being available and present to them was some form of reciprocity in itself. Analytically, the girls' eagerness to talk to me instead of their leaders—who seemed to be making a decent effort to reach out to the participants—might imply that the FBC program was failing to provide these young people an outlet that

they needed to express themselves. Second, it presses the questions of how concerned students and scholars should approach programs like the one at FBC and, more broadly, how to create an empowering framework for engaging in theological inquiry with young people.

My FBC paper tries to identify some social tensions and competing individual realities that existed in the youth program at FBC, and I hope that these observations can help spur consideration for how youth programs might address such dynamics. In her book *Doing Girlfriend Theology*, Dori Grinenko Baker outlines a model for using story theology to create safe spaces for young people (specifically young women) to engage in theological conversations by writing, sharing, and reflecting about significant experiences in small groups of peers and adult mentors. Baker uses Nelle Morton's concept of "hearing to speech" to describe the ways that such conversations can be empowering for both speakers and listeners, and she emphasizes Sharon Welch's concept of identifying "dangerous memory" as a consciousness-raising goal of such groups.¹²

Baker's model is useful in that it endorses not only acknowledging but also dwelling in different realities of participants in such groups, with an ideal goal of creating theologies by building outward from young people's experiences. Ideally, in a group that uses Baker's format, the FBC student's attempt to discuss Tamar would not only take precedence in the discussion but also be obvious material for a conversation about gender-based oppression and abuse. In contexts like FBC where gaps in privilege led to lapses in communication, this model might create space for young people to name their experiences while also being transformed by hearing their peers' experiences in new ways.¹³ With focused leadership from respectful adult mentors, the discussion groups could be transformative spaces for young women to deconstruct privileges, develop ways to resist oppressions, and ground their religious understandings in the stories they hear and share. Instead of trying to apply an institutional narrative *about* girls' lives, this alternative way of engaging would empower young people to create narratives *out of* their *own* lives. Like my conversations with young people at FBC, I imagine that the discussions would grow out of the intersection between personal experiences and the evocative, unanswerable questions that critically shape the lives of young people.

And it is not just young people who might benefit from recognizing and discussing such questions; whether they are in relation to a specific faith tradition or not, students and scholars from all fields can take hints from a model that builds community, recognizes plurality of meaning, and deconstructs oppressions. The academic study of religion is not the same as the practice of creating lived theologies with young people—but I think that, at least in the context of this paper, the two fields share a responsibility to engage both in respectful dialogue and in seeking out pressing questions that might otherwise be hidden. Furthermore, at the core of honest engagement in both settings is a commitment to acknowledging open-endedness; academic and theological discourses usually create more loose ends than they tie up. Perhaps thinking more about how to deal with this ambiguity would plant seeds for a more empowering and participatory framework for academic research: Should researchers deconstruct how we gained our ideas in the first place, or should we

assume that our research is worth expanding and pose questions from there? As an undergraduate student considering further study in religion, I believe that it is both possible and essential to live in both worlds.

Notes

1 Michael Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 3.

2 Ibid., 3-4.

3 Ibid., 102-6.

4 Michael Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 95-7.

5 Ibid., 46-7.

6 The conflation of the sexual and paternal raises the key question of how FBC addresses young women's transition from being daughters to being wives. Despite its many wedding metaphors, the book gives few directions about marriage itself. The last chapter takes place post-wedding and emphasizes submission, a point to which I will return.

7 Although I have no quantitative data about individual family incomes, the following indicators provided evidence about the girls' respective levels of economic privilege: wardrobe and possessions, ability to afford private/home schooling, and, in two cases, comments about parents not having adequate health insurance coverage and being on food stamps.

8 Mat 19: 16-30.

9 Jason Bivens, *The Fracture of Good Order: Christian Antiliberalism and the Challenge to American Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 100-5.

10 R. Marie Griffith. *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 23.

11 Ibid., 22.

12 Baker, Dori Grinenko, *Doing Girlfriend Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005).

13 While I believe that Baker's model is excellent, my explanation of its possible application diverges slightly from the model she presents. While Baker draws her conclusions in conversation with feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologies of liberation, her case studies do not emphasize privilege. I am uncomfortable with some parts of the book that denote hegemonic assumptions about power: The title perpetuates a normative male-female gender binary that seems to exclude transgender issues from its scope of reference. Furthermore, Baker seems to over-focus on the role of the leader in the group; for example, she gives pre-written ground rules for leaders (not students) to prescribe at the first meeting and suggests that leaders read participants' stories in advance of meetings. Even with these drawbacks, Baker's model is

highly adaptable and useful in many contexts (which is why this critique appears in a footnote and not in the article proper).