

Let's not condemn the victims of the evangelical bubble



I don't know Joshua Harris and I haven't read his book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, so I really don't have anything to add to the discussion about his recent decision to end his marriage and abandon his faith.

I can only guess how painful the journey must have been for him to move from being the poster boy for evangelical purity culture to a divorced unbeliever.

I feel for him. And for his wife and family.

It's too easy to heap scorn on him as a "backslider" or an apostate. Like a whole generation of teens, he was swept up into the all-consuming world of conservative evangelicalism. They were "on fire". They were "Jesus Freaks."

They were immersed in the world of youth conferences and Amy Grant and True Love Waits. It was intoxicating.

And Joshua Harris drank the Kool Aid. More than that, at 21, he wrote the handbook on purity culture.

I'd heard he'd disowned the book a while ago, asking for forgiveness for what he wrote and how it had messed with so many kids' lives.

Then came his recent revelation that his own marriage had ended.

Then came yet another disclosure that he'd lost his faith altogether.

Like I said, I don't know him. I can't reflect on his journey specifically. But he's not the only one who's gone down this road. He's not the only one who

became so utterly consumed by evangelical youth culture that he found himself completely unprepared for life in the real world.

In her astonishing book, *When We Were On Fire*, Addie Zierman describes that world in all its cringeworthy glory:

“You were born into a world within a world. Evangelicalism. It is spinning on its own axis, powered by its own sun—the radiance of God’s glory bright above you.”

She goes on to depict the strange, us-versus-them Christian subculture of the 1990s, where your worth was measured by how many WWJD bracelets you wore and whether you had kissed dating goodbye and how much Christian music you listened to.

She writes,

“And, remember, you were born into this. You asked Jesus into your heart, and you belonged to the Church People who had known you forever, who loved you like their own... From there, Jesus became your thing, your own kind of extracurricular activity. You’d found your safe place, and you stayed there, burrowing deeper and deeper into it. You had God. You had Jesus the way other kids had soccer or drama or choir. You had youth group pizza parties and bike trips and weekend retreats.... It felt so big to you, that fire in your heart. It filled your body, gave you buoyancy and belonging, a sense of purpose... At fourteen, we believed in these things. Bigness. Numbers. Revival. We wanted a hundred people, a thousand people, a million different voices all saying the same thing... We wanted everything.”

Wow.

I remember watching Rachel Grady’s and Heidi Ewing’s documentary, *Jesus Camp*, about evangelical summer camps, where children are taught that they have prophetic gifts and are trained to “take back America for Christ” by laying hands on a life-sized cutout of the then-president George W. Bush. In another scene they are given plastic models of fetuses to pray over. Some of them become traumatized by the experience, weeping uncontrollably.

If you grew up in that world – of homeschooling, creationism, proselytizing strangers at malls, begging for God’s forgiveness at summer camps – and then you graduated into 1990’s evangelical

youth culture, it was all just too intense. You were literally submerged into it.

In her book, Zierman chronicles what it was like to be on fire for God, until she wasn't.

The flame dwindled and then it burned out.

She had thrown herself — unprepared and angry — into marriage, so when she dropped out of church, sailing off on a sea of tequila and depression, her marriage nearly floated off as well.

Joshua Harris writes of his experience, “The popular phrase for this is ‘deconstruction’, the biblical phrase is ‘falling away’. By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian. Many people tell me that there is a different way to practise faith and I want to remain open to this, but I’m not there now.”

Similarly, Addie Zierman isn't sure if she'll ever go back either.

Some evangelical commentators have been pretty harsh on Harris' very public disclosures about his loss of faith and his apology to the LGBTQ+ community for his previous stance against same-sex marriage.

But is it possible for evangelicals to take a look at the kind of church culture that is spitting out these disillusioned adults?

It's like evangelical churches are raising kids and teens in an alternate universe, making them fit for that world alone, offering them no preparation for life in the messy, gray, complex world in which they will live as adults. And then condemning them when they fail to retain their faith as adults.

Are we raising church kids a bit like tropical fish who need the water temperature to be perfectly moderate, and the pH levels balanced, and the tank kept pristine, and regular feeding? When they graduate from youth ministries and summer camps and make their way in the world, it's like they've been removed from the aquarium and dumped in an ocean. And despite what you saw in *Finding Nemo*, aquarium fish don't survive in the ocean. They die. Quickly.

Let's stop condemning the victims of the evangelical bubble. In the Joshua Harris case, it's futile. Harris has left the church. He doesn't care what you think.

Maybe, we need to turn our attention back to our own church culture to ask the really difficult questions about how to disciple children and teenagers to develop a strong, robust faith with enough flex to cope with the complex moral world into which they will one day swim.

by Michael Frost