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Ritual Body: Growing Up Female and Evangelical

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Ritual Body: Growing Up Female and Evangelical

Abstract

"Like many of the writers in the collection, it took leaving the church I grew up in to find my way to a new understanding of God."

Posting about the book *Jesus Girls* from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/my-story-of-coming-to-faith/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

The Ritual Body: Growing up female and evangelical

 [all in allthings.org /my-story-of-coming-to-faith/](http://allthings.org/my-story-of-coming-to-faith/)

Aleisa Dornbierer-Schat

Title: Jesus Girls: True Tales of Growing Up Female and Evangelical

Editor: Hannah Faith Notess

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I was baptized in late spring, 1984. I was an infant, half-blind, able to recognize my mother's face only when held very close. The sanctuary was angular and spare: one empty cross, narrow wooden pews, dim kaleidoscope light on the floor.

It was my first experience of sacramental life in the church, and I imagine the memory of it lives somewhere in my body, like trauma does, only as a memory of belonging and great love. I would grow up in that church, stumble searchingly toward God there, and come over time to a kind of belief. Then, like most young people in my small Midwestern town, I left.

My story of coming to faith—often uneasily, uncertainly—would be at home alongside the essays collected in [Jesus Girls: True Tales of Growing Up Female and Evangelical](#). Like many of the collection's contributors, I grew up in a church that didn't openly claim the evangelical mantle. Yet like theirs, my story registers the peculiar attitude, the *feeling*, that animates American evangelicalism, giving shape to the set of practices, convictions, and commitments that cohere beneath its broad umbrella.

Still, I would have never used the word *evangelical* to describe myself growing up. The church I was born into was Reformed—and it *felt* Reformed. Then, over time, things began to change. The austere ritual beauty of my baptism, the recitation of creeds, the liturgy, everything steeped in tradition—all of that was pushed to the margins of worship, giving way to something new and different.

It surfaced in spontaneous prayers and the slow loosening of stiff Reformed postures through contemporary worship music. The hymnal was replaced by a projector screen, the organ by drums and guitars. Congregants began to sway half-heartedly to praise songs, lifting timid hands. Others resisted, uncomfortable with the idea the Holy Spirit might electrify a body as well as a mind.

In many churches across America, a new mood was settling in. Contributor Anastasia McAteer describes this change in worship's tone and choreography as "the praise chorus revolution." Raised on old hymns, she recalls walking uneasily into a service filled with worshippers moving to upbeat music, eyes closed, withdrawn into interior emotional worlds.

What was happening in sanctuaries found expression elsewhere in the life of the church. Among my peers, catechisms and doctrinal study gave way to scavenger hunts and deeply personal conversations about our "walk" with Jesus. Many of my girlfriends embraced a kind of Jesus-as-boyfriend theology, and religious devotion acquired a casual tone, expressed in the earnest hyperbole of American adolescence.

I attended youth rallies with tearful altar calls, read books about dating and not dating, kissing and not kissing. I grew wary of the various deceptions of secular culture—its music and books and films. I sought out Christian alternatives, dutifully but half-heartedly, unable to fully give up MTV or the desire to date boys and not be courted by

them.

The essays in *Jesus Girls* register similar themes. Yet despite everything they share, they exhibit a remarkable diversity. One writer grew up in the Mennonite tradition, then found herself at an evangelical college, puzzled and out of place. Another was raised by Jesus Freaks in 1970s California. Another came to faith in South Baltimore, where she attended an African Methodist Episcopal Church.

That the writers in *Jesus Girls* come from such a wide variety of cultural and denominational backgrounds is a testament to American evangelicalism's wiliness and power. More than a tradition, it's a kind of movement, a shape-shifter, disrupting denominational boundaries, challenging cultural distinctions, borrowing from popular culture, then baptizing it with religious themes. A master of adaptation and assimilation, it's difficult to historicize or define, impossible to neatly contain. (And given the unsavory political meanings that have accrued to it, nearly to the point of crisis, it's worth considering whether the term can be meaningfully reclaimed.)

In *Jesus Girls*, a picture of American evangelicalism takes halting, fragmentary shape across essays. There are no lists of essential characteristics, no talk of creeds or confessions, no efforts toward a defining doctrinal synthesis. Rather, the collection's driving force is story. And in the spirit of the tradition they set out to explore, the stories in *Jesus Girls* are deeply personal ones. In their tone of disclosure, they call to mind the evangelical testimony genre, described by Melanie Springer Mock in "Inventing a Testimony." However, they challenge the genre's linear arc and strict set of conventions.

Rather than dramatic tales of moral transformation, turning decisively "on the axis of God's grace," the stories in *Jesus Girls* go in circles. They resist closure. Some challenge the evangelical tradition for its abuses and oversimplifications; others attempt to reclaim and rework it. By the end of each essay, the writer has arrived somewhere, but it's not a simple conclusion. One writer walks away from faith altogether, unable to resolve the tension between belief and doubt. Another sees the two as intimately connected, one requiring the other, locked into a kind of necessary dance.

Through all this, the collection achieves a tenuous but compelling unity. Across essays, there are clear threads of shared experience, and readers will recognize a return to common evangelical themes: an understanding of faith as a journey, a preoccupation with soul salvation, a high view of biblical authority.

In this way, the essays speak broadly. Their concerns are not narrowly women's concerns, nor do they serve a particular agenda. Still, their themes are deeply inflected by the gender of their subjects.

One writer tells the story of nearly drowning during swimming lessons in her pastor's pool, pulled beneath the water's surface by folds of billowing cloth. In order to hide her adolescent curves from the eyes of boys and men, she had been made to swim in a dress. As this and other stories demonstrate, evangelical attitudes toward the female body are fraught with anxiety, and several writers explore its place as a site of contested cultural and theological meanings.

My experience in the tradition—a girl, then no longer a girl—was less harrowing than a near drowning, but it was still harmful. I remember more than once sitting cross-legged in youth group, facing a panel of my male peers. We listened as they shared their struggles to safeguard their spiritual purity, some speaking earnestly and directly, others glancing down at their hands. Together, they entreated us for help, offering advice about our clothing, our manner, our posture and speech.

Many of us listening were athletes, or studied ballet. We remembered running barefoot in the lawn, tanned and coltish, looking very much like boys. We tried to reimagine our bodies as objects of suspicion and distrust (and many of us would spend the rest of our lives trying to unlearn what we'd been told about ourselves, the threat we posed).

I had yet to learn that my tradition wasn't alone in trying to contain this particular threat. Women throughout history have been identified with the body—unruly and unpredictable vessels, beholden to feeling, unyielding to reason,

dangerous. Though I didn't have the tools to contextualize the disparity in church conversations about modesty, it stayed with me, taking form below the level of speech, discernible only in the skeptical tilt of my head, an intake of breath, a tension in my shoulders.

In a similar way, Kimberly George locates an early form of unspoken knowledge in the body of her childhood self. In "Feminist in Waiting," she recalls sitting rigidly in a pew, questioning received truths in her posture, yet lacking "the language to translate [her] resistance." In college, she finds the feminist language she was waiting for—and she finds it within the Christian tradition itself.

In "Keep the Feast," Nicole Sheets constructs a similar kind of bodily epistemology, discovered through her experiences worshipping in an Episcopal church. More than merely a container for the mind, Sheets comes to see the body as essential to who we are as creatures—the means through which we come to know the world, our place in it, and what that has to do with God.

Like Sheets, I was drawn by the solemnity and strangeness of a High Church tradition. In college, I walked through the bright red door of an Episcopal church. The sanctuary was dim. I remember robes brushing over the floor, unfamiliar hymns, a deep and compelling weirdness in the sound of 17th century words in 21st century throats. During each service, I found myself recalled, again and again, to the fact of my body—kneeling before God, extending my palms to receive the bread, the body of Christ on my tongue.

In that church and later, in a more highly liturgical Reformed church, I was able to imagine a fuller, more theologically rich role for bodies in worship than the emotive singing and swaying of my evangelical childhood. Over time, I grew to understand rituals and rites as meaningful invitations to participate in the biblical story—to perform it corporately, and in a profoundly embodied way. This corporeality is perhaps most dramatically evident in the celebration of the Eucharist, which Sheets likens to lovemaking. It is "a calling forth of the Body to receive ... the Body," God's love for the church given ritual shape.

Like many of the writers in the collection, it took leaving the church I grew up in to find my way to a new understanding of God. But in fact, this "faith journey" was a kind of return—to something my childhood church community had once known, but forgotten. It was an act of remembering a truth that dwelled in me from infancy: the sprinkling of water, a few ancient words, my startled cry. I have come to see the church as much like that infant—half-blind, searching out the features of its mother's face. We see dimly by the light of the sacraments, incompletely, but with deep recognition of the love we only partially apprehend there, and eventually begin to name.