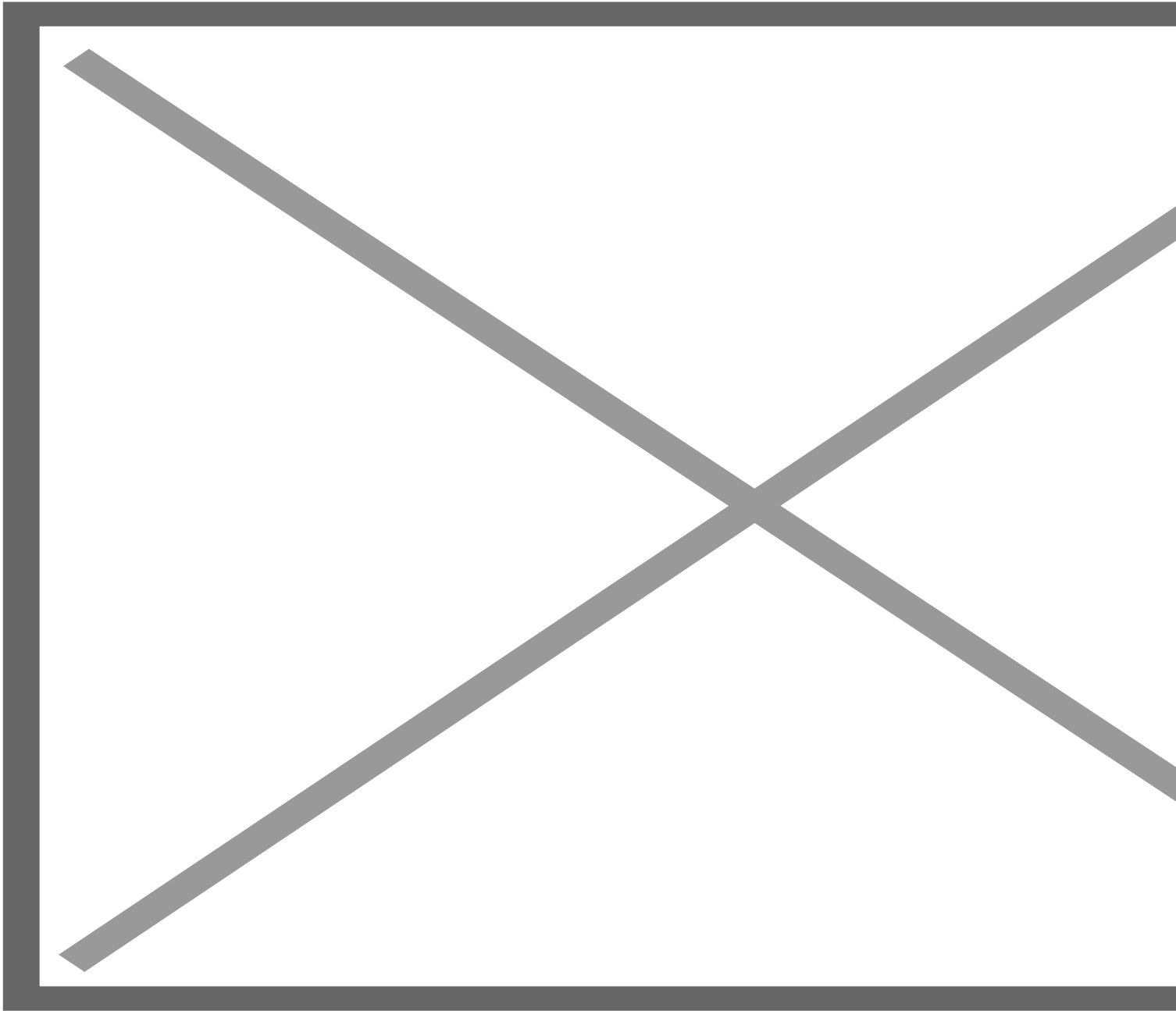


Michael Jackson and the boys we don't talk about

We reached consensus on Epstein and Cosby. Why are we buying tickets to see *Michael*?

by [Martha Tatarnic](#)

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Jaafar Jackson as Michael Jackson in *Michael* (Photo courtesy of Universal Pictures)

It might seem like things have gotten a little better for women. There is widespread consensus that Jeffrey Epstein did a bad thing in trafficking girls, and one person is now behind bars for those crimes (even if it is his female partner). In the church, stained-glass ceilings have been visibly broken; women hold the highest offices in a number of mainline denominations around the globe. Taylor Swift was named by *The New York Times* as one of the 30 best living songwriters, and a male critic, Sam Sifton, offered a distinctly feminist spin in conferring the honor:

Swift has done as much as anyone in modern popular music history to advance the idea of the song—its construction and impact, its tensions and limitations—as an important art form. But she has also done it while foregrounding the agency and emotional lives of young women.

Of course, women aren't meaningfully advancing in the area of paid labor, still just making 71 to 88 percent of the wage a man makes for the same work. And many of our denominations, despite celebrating milestone anniversaries in the ordination of women, have seen numbers around the ordination of women stall and even backslide. Women continue to feel mostly unsafe seeking justice in incidents of sexual misconduct, with studies suggesting that up to 95 percent of sexual assaults are not reported to police. On average, every ten minutes a woman or girl is killed by an intimate partner or family member somewhere in the world. Sometimes I find myself sinking into the depressing conclusion that the world still doesn't really care about women.

But as frustrated as I feel about the position of women in our world, lately I've found myself consumed with the thought that our disdain for the voices, well-being, and safety of women is nothing compared to the low regard in which we hold boys. We have been shockingly slow to respond in meaningful ways to allegations of sexual abuse against women, but at least there is cultural consensus on people like Jeffrey Epstein and Bill Cosby. We don't have to have a debate about canceling them. We know that we do not want to hear from them in the public sphere again.

We have no such common mind about Michael Jackson and the multiple, credible, detailed allegations made by people who have told the public, in graphic detail, that he groomed and assaulted them when they were little boys. As Constance Grady notes in a recent *Vox* article,

At least 10 people have publicly accused Jackson of sexually abusing them as children, in remarkably consistent and detailed stories. Only one accusation resulted in a criminal trial, in 2005, and Jackson was found not guilty. That, however, is par for the course when it comes to child sex abuse cases, even those in which the accused adult doesn't have millions of dollars to spend in their defense.

In the documentary *Leaving Neverland*, Wade Robson and James Safechuk describe in horrific detail how Jackson abused them. Neither of the boys received any financial compensation for telling their stories, and both have struggled with significant mental distress throughout their adult lives.

I bristle every time I hear Jackson's music casually playing in the background at the grocery store. I was astonished to see the public line up in record-breaking numbers to buy popcorn and watch the biopic *Michael*.

The movie was originally shot to include the sexual abuse allegations of Jordan Chandler, who was 13 years old when he accused Jackson in 1993. But when lawyers from the Jackson estate discovered a clause in the settlement with Chandler that forbade the depiction or mention of him in any movie, the movie was edited to exclude reference to abuse. The resulting story tells nothing of the young lives that were destroyed. "Would

these people be part of a movie that glorified the films of Harvey Weinstein without ever mentioning that he raped women?” asks *Leaving Neverland* director Dan Reed. Or “a great promotional film about the charitable works of Jeffrey Epstein?”

I wonder about that blind eye revealed by *Michael*’s success. Is it that we really don’t want to have to wrestle with such horrifying allegations? Is there something about the assault of male children that we’re not willing to account for? Are we socialized to believe that the male gender is somehow compromised by admitting that they can be vulnerable, too? Is Jackson’s music so catchy that we just can’t resist? I wonder if there is such a rampant underbelly of unaddressed sexual abuse in boy culture that enjoying watching an actor do the moon walk on a biopic becomes more appealing and more realistic than trying to hold a dead celebrity to account.

I floated test balloons on all of these theories in various conversations in the wake of the *Michael* release, and my sense is that while there is certainly some truth in each of them—“I think that people just really like his music,” my son commented in response—there is also a more complicated story at play. Music is emotional. The biggest songs of the ’80s underwrote the fashion, the relationships, the parties, the coming of age of an entire generation; Jackson’s hits defined an era and are hard to exile from public consciousness.

Baked into that emotional complexity is a racially charged reality. Jackson was a Black man. His success punched through popular culture and into astronomical mainstream success in ways that had previously been impossible for Black artists. The accusations against him, credible though they are, get filtered through the lens of Black enslavement, the cultural appropriation of Black culture that so long denied commercial success to anyone other than White people, and a justice system that has targeted Black men and destroyed Black lives.

There is no moral high ground for the church to claim here. Our faith has been weaponized against Black and Indigenous people, among others, and the intergenerational trauma of systems that we cosigned and perpetrated remains an all-too-present reality of woundedness. At the same time, many of our denominations, including the one that I serve, have failed to make any meaningful headway on addressing sexual abuse in our congregations. We continue to prioritize protecting power structures over putting in place autonomous and victim-centered policies that would allow those who have been harmed to feel safe and protected in coming forward with complaints. In the Anglican Church of Canada, we lack systems of accountability for those in positions of power who have failed to safeguard and have therefore allowed real harm to go unaddressed and real people to be hurt. Too often, our churches continue to rely more on the whisper network and moving problematic religious leaders into other congregations than on addressing abusive behaviour.

The failure to protect people from violence and injustice is also well established in our sacred stories. The Bible routinely assumes sexual violence toward marginalized people is a norm, if not completely sanctioned. The beloved King David operates on the assumption that he could have whatever woman of the kingdom he wished. Bathsheba, the woman he most famously targets, is never portrayed as having anything to say in the matter, even if the prophet Nathan does call David out for killing off Bathsheba’s husband. In two separate biblical accounts, Abraham is seen as giving his wife Sarah up for rape by powerful men in order to protect his own skin.

Surely that doesn’t mean, though, that we should shrug our shoulders, sigh that “it was ever thus,” and buy our tickets to see *Michael*. I don’t think that Michael Jackson needs to be canceled so much as that the predatory abuse he is accused of should be centered in the narrative. I can’t pretend that Jackson’s voice can be teased out from the power that he gained because so many millions of people wanted to pay money to listen to him. I can’t hear that voice separated from the evidence that he used his power to destroy innocent lives.

So maybe we speak up on this as people who live with the weight of all the ways that we, ourselves, have failed to safeguard, have legitimized abusive power, and have had to come to terms with our own naivety and willed ignorance. Maybe we can speak up with ongoing words of sincere and unmitigated apology for our own

shortcomings, with a commitment to pursue systemic change oriented toward accountability for how our institutions and stories have failed the vulnerable. Maybe we speak up from the context of communities that are well positioned to have difficult conversations that eschew easy answers. Maybe we speak up as people whose history tells us that it takes a long time and many, many people not settling for easy answers for narratives to shift and for our institutions and our public dollars to become less oriented toward protecting the powerful. Maybe we speak up as people who know it takes a long time and effort, but that doesn't let us off the hook from doing it anyway.

Certainly, we have to speak up as people who know, at the core of our faith, even if we have been so shabby at living it out, that the dignity of every single person matters. Respecting that dignity matters. We do care about women. We care about Black people. And we care about boys, too. I continue to fight for, and I believe in, a feminist church—in the most expansive sense of what that means. Each person matters, even when it's complicated.

Martha Tatarnc chats with the *Century's* community engagement editor Jon Mathieu about celebrity misdeeds, (lack of) public outrage, and what it means to speak up for victims.

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