

new identity

God in focus. World in scope.

MAGAZINE

HEAVEN IS HOME

A REAL PLACE, WITH
REAL BODIES, SERVING
A REAL GOD

THE CHURCH SEARCH

CONNECTING
TO A CHURCH
COMMUNITY

COMFORT

BEING UNCOMFORTABLE
WITH COMFORT

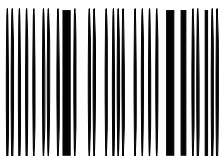
Is There Really Free Will?

ONE WRITER'S
PERSPECTIVE ON OUR
CHOICES VERSUS GOD'S
PLAN

CASH
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pg 36

ISSUE 16



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Reforming Worship

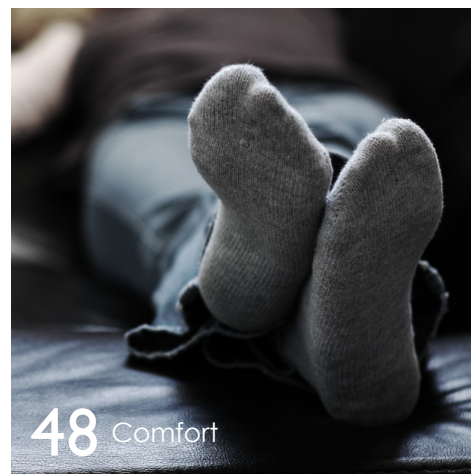
WHAT IT MEANS TO TRULY WORSHIP



9 Reforming Worship



16 Heaven Is Home



48 Comfort

GROW

Spotlight: In Perspective

6 To Vote or Not to Vote?
The Christian voting conundrum in the United States.

Growth & Maturity

9 Reforming Worship
What it means to truly worship.

Foundation

12 Is There Really Free Will?
One writer's perspective on our choices versus God's plan.

16 Heaven Is Home
A real place, with real bodies, serving a real God.

Practical Application

20 The 5th Commandment
The 5th commandment to honor your father and mother extends to the community.

CONNECT

Life Together

23 Teaching Right from Wrong
Issues in parenting and shaping morality.

Discovering God

26 Beauty for Ashes
One young woman's journey from struggle to security.

Community

28 The Church Search
Overcoming your fears and connecting to a church community.

31 Disability in the Church
How one church is embracing disabilities beyond the norm.

God Talk

33 Five Truths about Depression in My Life
Talking about depression in a Christian context.

36 Cash Strapped
Tithing during tough financial times.

LIVE

Give Back

38 Union Rescue Mission
One organization who is helping the homeless of Los Angeles' Skid Row.

People

40 Creative Serving
Katie Cook lives a full and meaningful life.

Culture & Creativity

44 Counter Culture: Comfort
Being uncomfortable with comfort.

Careers & Callings

48 A Christ-like Approach to Nursing
Viewing the medical field through Jesus-colored glasses.

IN EVERY ISSUE

3 From the Editor
4 News, Fun Finds & Opportunities
5 Masthead
52 Prayer

Be a learner...



*"To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth
Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,
to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles." —Proverbs 1:2-6*



WRITE TO US:

What are your thoughts on this issue? What topics or perspectives do you want to read about or hear from? We love getting feedback. Send your message via e-mail or letter and please include your name, address and day-time phone number. *New Identity Magazine*, P.O. Box 375, Torrance, CA 90508. Phone: (310) 947-8707; feedback@newidentity-magazine.com

WE SHOULD ALWAYS BE LEARNERS. GOD'S WISDOM IS SO VAST THAT what we know, or think we know is only a tiny droplet of God's knowledge. I just finished taking a class on the global Christian movement which made a point to show a picture of the vastness of God's plan throughout all of history and what's happening today. It was a wonderful reminder of how amazing God is and how his story is so much bigger than you or me.

While our lives may be a small part of God's overall plan and picture, how we live them and who we live them for matters abundantly. Constantly seeking God's heart, wisdom and knowledge is a key to how we live our lives for and with Christ and not just for ourselves. Our motives may be shift, but by seeking more of God and always being learners, we can gain new insight. God can change our motives to those of genuine trust, care for doing his will, having a purpose and playing a part in his magnificent vision and love story for humankind.

All of the articles in this issue are written by learners. Those such as Anna Anderson seeking to understand what heaven may be like, Delbert Teachout on what it means to be predestined by God versus having free will, or Ramon Mayo on how to be countercultural while being surrounded by a world obsessed with comfort. We learn from God's word, we learn from trying wholeheartedly to live out what he has shown and continues to show us. We are learners when we continue to be closer, stay longer and listen more intently to what God is doing in our lives, in the lives of others and throughout the world.

Cailin

CAILIN BRIODY HENSON
Editor-in-Chief

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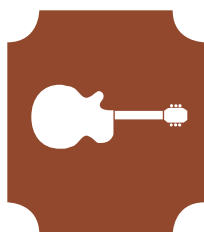
Taize

The Taize Community in France offers a unique opportunity for travelers who seek rest, community, and prayer. Established in 1940 by a Catholic priest as a refuge for those escaping persecution during the World War II, Taize has grown to be a self-sufficient ecumenical community of Catholic and Protestant brothers. Taize now receives visitors from all over the world, from university students to families on vacation to Christian pilgrims. Visitors can not only enjoy the beauty of France but can also participate in worship with music written by the members of the community, bible study, and meditation. For information on travel to the Taize Community, visit their website: www.taize.fr and choose the English language site.



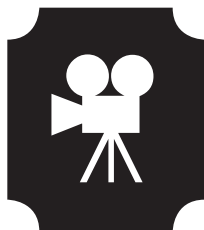
Pilgrim Paddle

Rev. Dr. David Ellingson, a professor and pastor from Everett, Washington has begun his kayak journey on the Mississippi River as part of his sabbatical. The purpose of Ellingson's pilgrimage is to learn more about God's creation and our care of it, to expand community through interactions of those he meets on his travels, and to raise awareness and support for The Cedar Tree Institute. The Cedar Tree Institute works in partnership with churches and religious communities to promote healing and wholeness in the areas of religion, mental health and the environment. To follow this unique pilgrim travel, you can read Ellingson's blog at paddlepilgrim.blogspot.com.



2012 Christian Music Festivals

Looking for an event filled with music, friendship, and good times? Check out www.christianfestivals.org which lists all the major music festivals around the country featuring the latest Christian rock bands. Upcoming listings include the Creation festivals in Pennsylvania and Washington state, Hills Alive in South Dakota, and Rock the Desert in Texas. Artists featured at these festivals include Relient K, Chris Tomlin, MercyMe, Switchfoot, Aaron Gillespie, and Family Force 5. The website links to each festival for specific festival information, and to iTickets.com for ticket purchases.



Karitos

Started in 1995, Karitos is an organization that seeks to provide Biblically-based artistic and technical growth experiences to Christian artists through an annual conference. Participants can improve their skills and expand their knowledge in areas such as visual art, dance, worship and voice, theatre, film, writing, and the music industry. Workshops, led by leaders in their respective areas of expertise from around the world, are designed to help artists take what they've learned back to their homes, churches, schools, and work places with the purpose of sharing God's word. To learn more about the Karitos Christian Arts Festival, visit www.karitos.com. —Rachel Gooneratne

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For new believers and those interested in what Christians think about the world we live in.

God in focus. World in Scope.

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MISSION STATEMENT

New Identity Magazine's mission is to help people find their new identity in Christ by presenting interesting topics from multiple Christian perspectives. Through this, *New Identity Magazine* hopes to generate communication and understanding to unite people that have different perspectives and encourage thought provoking discussion and commonality through Christ. By using scriptures of the Holy Bible as the source, the Word that binds Christians together, and highlighting different insights into their intention and application, *New Identity Magazine* aims to help readers live a more stimulating, inclusive, and passionate life with God. In addition, *New Identity Magazine* is a publication that encourages learning, wisdom, creative expression, and showcases the cultural and world aspects of life and following God.

Our goal is to represent true-to-life followers of Christ that wonder, dream and have a willingness to learn about varying viewpoints. We desire to dissolve the rules, categories and stereotypes placed on Christians and non-Christians, shed God's light into the areas that may be forgotten or rarely talked about but are vital in many people's lives, and provide coverage of topics often overlooked by the mainstream media or in religious circles.

REFERENCING THE BIBLE:

There are many Bible translations out there. Just a few are the New International Version, The Message, and the New Living Translation. You'll see these referenced as NIV, NLT, The Message etc. When we reference a Bible verse, such as John 3:16, 'John' is the book in the Bible. There are 66 books total. 3 is the chapter in the book and 16 is the verse in the chapter.

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IN PERSPECTIVE

Showcasing today's touchy subjects.



To Vote or Not to Vote?

*The Christian voting conundrum in the
United States.*

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EMILY ANDERSON

Emily Anderson comes from a military family—having lived in seven cities, she has traveled extensively throughout the United States. With a bachelor's degree in history from Biola University in the Los Angeles area, and taking every opportunity to volunteer at church, she has also worked on various political campaigns. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in education from Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma.



Red, white, and blue covered every wall as thousands came together in the massive arena. Music blared over loud speakers, pulsing energy through the excited crowd with every beat.

Cordoned off by state, people held signs, wore tall red, white, and blue hats, and cheered loudly as a tall man dressed in a suit with shiny black shoes walked onto the grandiose stage. The speaker began to powerfully engage his audience, which soon broke into a loud and triumphant chant: “USA! USA!”

Most party national conventions have a similar picture and tone: excitement, pride, anticipation. For centuries, Americans have stated their opinions whether or not Christians should involve themselves in the political process, and it is not a discussion that originated in the United States—Christians have been discussing and debating the answer since the beginning of the church. In today's America, we find the discussion continues, and sometimes becomes rather intense.

Both sides of the issue generally recognize that we are accountable to God for our actions and decisions, and America's Founding Fathers (the authors of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution) agree. Samuel Adams once wrote in the Boston Gazette, “Let each citizen remember at the moment he is offering his vote that he is not making a present or a compliment to please and individuals—or at least that he ought not so to do; but that he is executing one of the most solemn trusts in human society for which he is accountable to God and his country.” Fifty-three members of the original 55 in the Continental Congress were active members in their churches, many of whom were the pastors. They signed the Declaration of Independence, pronouncing that King George III was not only rebelling against his common man, but he was rebelling against God. Many of the prominent evangelists of early American history agreed whole-heartedly with the Founders. Although there were other minority views, such as several of the Anabaptist groups who often believed society should be governed by the church elders and in small groups, like villages, Charles Finney, a leader during the Second

Great Awakening, represented the dominant Christian view in the United States throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. He declared in his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, “[T]he time has come that Christians must vote for honest men and take consistent ground in politics or the Lord will curse them....Christians have been exceedingly guilty in this matter. But the time has come when they must act differently....Christians seem to act as if they thought God did not see what they do in politics. But I tell you He does see it—and He will bless or curse this national according to the course [Christians] take [in politics].” Finney's statement leads Christians to ask “should a Christian be involved in politics, and if so, how should he or she vote and to what extent should a Christian be involved?” The responses to this idea are often varied and nuanced. Due to my travels around the western half of the United States, I have been able to speak with many people I have met along the way and gather their opinions and perspectives.

Disengagement

The pastor of a 300-member church in Missouri believes participation in secular government has little if any place in the Christian life. He often states that Christians should be ever mindful that their citizenship lies in heaven and not with any nation here on earth. This perspective often finds politics to be a dirty business, and Christians need not be concerned with the things of the physical world. Instead, Christians should primarily focus on the things of God.

Since Christians have accepted Christ as their Savior, they now belong to God. Therefore, their actions should solely concern ministering to other people, rather than spending time concerned with politics, as the political world changes frequently. When several of the congregants at this church spoke to me about politics they focused on a verse found in Matthew 5, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called

sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). Several congregants emphasized that they strive to be “peacemakers” by not interjecting in the political debates and causing fury from one group or another, thus avoiding confrontations and creating more difficulties. This same group of people told me that as Jesus said to “render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's” (Mark 12:17), Christians should submit to God first and then give their minimum requirements, such as taxes, to earthly governments and those he has put in authority, though indicating that we should not challenge that authority.

A university student in her early twenties, who agrees with this view, primarily referenced Romans 13:1 “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.” While some interpret this Scripture as the power held by authorities comes from God, since all power and authority is derived from Him, others

*Both sides of the issue
generally recognize that we
are accountable to God for our
actions and decisions.*

interpret this verse as the individual person who holds the position (e.g. a president, congressman, senator, etc.) is specifically ordained by God to hold that position. Most people whom I spoke with who believe in stepping back from the political process seem to agree that each person in authority is chosen by God, and therefore needs to be submitted to. If whoever is appointed to government positions is appointed by God, they don't need to worry about voting the person in, they simply must respect whoever receives the position.

Disinterest

Following several discussions with young adult Christians who have the privilege of voting, I encountered a great deal of apathy towards the political process. Several young Christians expressed a complete disinterest in voting or politics in general, shrugging "It doesn't really affect me so...why care?" Others were vaguely interested but forgot to register to vote. Most of these young people said, "Oh well. There's always next time, right?" A few young people said they knew nothing of the candidates' policies or religious beliefs, but would vote for so-and-so because they "like him" or thought he was "cool."

None of these young people specifically enumerated what standard they use to weigh the options, typically saying that they "just pick" based on their own opinions and ideas. When prompted, these twenty-somethings said that if they were to vote, they would probably pray and ask God which candidate they should choose. However, their reactions were rather flippant, shrugging shoulders, always prefacing their decision with "if" rather than "when." The typical reaction was that God does not care how they should vote, or they would not include God and their Christian beliefs in voting at all, since he already knows who will win or what will be decided. Although most young voters I have met are quite indifferent toward politics, some expressed they wanted to vote for the best and most godly candidate, but were too disinterested in politics to figure out which candidate was the best. The majority with whom I spoke, who voted for the first time in the 2008 presidential election, decided to wait until the parties chose the nominees before declaring who they would support, which was typically based on party affiliation, thus not becoming involved in the political primaries. Although most of the individuals I interviewed in their early to mid-twenties were generally uninterested in politics, I eventually met several young people who believe Christians participating in the political process is vital. All of these young people had two things in common: their parents were interested in politics and their pastor taught the importance of Christian political involvement.


Duty

One form of political contribution is voting. A large, non-denominational church in Oklahoma believes so strongly that Christians should participate in America's political process that they bring a voter registration table into the lobby for the last week or

two before registration closes for fall elections. The congregants at this church are much more apt to openly and frequently participate in politics, often stating that as the Bible teaches to be good stewards of one's money, or whatever a person has (Luke 16:10-14), people should remain good stewards of everything they have, including their right to vote, especially since they are fortunate to have such a right in first place. The individuals, a wide range of backgrounds and ages, from this church whom I spoke with used several biblical examples to uphold their political ideals and involvement. They showed me that voting was exercised in Deuteronomy when God instructed Moses to tell the Israelites to choose, from each tribe, "wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men" to become the leaders (Deuteronomy 1:13). If God instructed the Israelites to create a governmental hierarchy based on their own opinions of their peers, then, as more than one person expressed to me, Christians should imitate the examples given to us in the Bible. Christians should examine our fellow Americans and elect them to our governmental positions.

Rather than believing that politics and government have no bearing on Christians, or declaring that voter participation is fruitless, this belief holds that Christians need to participate and support godly candidates and measures. Congregants are encouraged to check everything in life against the Scriptures, following the path that is closely aligned with God's Word, just as the Bereans did in Acts 17. This idea then translates into the political realm as Christians weigh what a bill or candidate believes and advocates. As these Christians cast their votes, comment on the current political affairs, and research the candidates and laws, they echo the sentiments of Samuel Adams: we are held accountable for how we vote, both to country and God as the results will benefit or damage the nation while reflecting our hearts.

How Should We Respond

After examining a few positions regarding Christian political involvement, Christians now must determine their own participation. Although these are only a few ideas, there are many more existing in our society and unlimited nuances to each idea. As we grow and mature in our faith, how we live will change to fit the new mold of our enlightened Christianity. Whatever position each Christian decides, it should be done through prayer and wisdom, acknowledging the free exchange of ideas and respecting others' opinions. While there are many divisive issues considered on numerous ballots and debated in the news and on the radio, Christians should be able to show Christ's love. Though we may have our own strong opinions about a person or issue, we must keep in mind that we are to remain loving and kind, as we are examples of Christ. We can tactfully, and with strength, stand for our positions or our readings of the Bible without succumbing to slander. As we strive to remain true to God's word in our politics, we must keep in mind that we should also remain true to his word in our actions and words. Our subsequent political participation, or lack thereof, should then remain influenced by our Christian beliefs, prayer, God's word, and the wisdom he gives us. 

Reforming Worship

What it means to truly worship.

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LINDSEY FREDERICK

Lindsey A. Frederick is an editor in the Washington DC area and writes frequently about life, art and faith. You can follow her on Twitter @la_frederick or visit her online: www.wix.com/lindseyfrederick/writes

“W

hat do you think heaven will be like?” I asked my mom one night as she tucked me in bed. “The Bible says everyone will worship God all day and all night.”

I thought about church worship and about singing in the pews. I thought about how some people closed their eyes and threw open their arms as they raised their smiling face toward the vaulted ceiling. And I thought about how others stood rigid with glances darting; they barely moved their lips like they couldn’t wait to get the whole touchy-feely ordeal over with.



The disparity confused me. To be honest, it seemed like a boring way to spend eternity. I wanted to dance on rainbows and nap on clouds. And I wondered why God wanted our worship if all it consisted of was half-hearted pew-singing.

What Is Worship?

"If it were not for the traditional use of the word 'worship' amongst Christians, substantial arguments could be raised against its continued use," writes Dr. Lee Campbell in an essay titled, "What is Worship?" Campbell says the American Evangelical community often operates out of a limited understanding of the biblical teachings of worship. Most American church-goers culturally associate worship with a twenty minute Sunday morning sing-along, but that is only part of the biblical definition.

Campbell points out that according to Greek and Hebrew translations, worship refers to a range of activities and outlooks from a humble submissive posture (kneeling) and reverential fear and adoration (*proskynēo* and *shachah*), to service and sacrifice directed toward God and his creation (*latreia*). This means worship embraces every aspect of our lives, as it weaves through the fabric of our daily acts, attitudes, and articulations. Let's reframe.

Reframing Worship

Would you believe me if I told you everyone, everywhere, worships all the time? That it's not just a church thing? And apart from our cultural understanding of worship, it doesn't matter whether you're an atheist or an agnostic; a follower of Christ, Buddha, or Krishna? Are you intrigued? Uncomfortable? Do you think I'm treading on shaky, theological ground? Good, stick with me.

"Human beings are not created to worship, but rather we are created worshipping," says Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. He says while what we worship and how we worship may vary from person to person, the act is the same. In other words, to live is to worship. It isn't just a thing we do. Rather, what we do—whatever we orient our time, thoughts and energies around—is what we worship. And we either worship God, or we worship something else.

To give a picture of the all-encompassing, inescapable act of worship, Driscoll highlights a phrase from Philippians 3:19 in which Paul calls out the citizens of Philippi for worshipping something other than God: "Their destiny is destruction, *their god is their stomach*, and their glory is in their shame" (emphasis mine).

While the concept of worshipping your stomach might seem strange, Driscoll explains why it makes perfect sense: "If your stomach is in the position of glory and you think about food *all the time*; and you eat food *all the time*; and you plan to eat more food later; and you always have within arm's reach a snack and a beverage and a drawer full of candy at work, what you're saying is

'I glory in food and I go to the fridge, like a temple, to worship.'"

"Stomach" is a euphemism for any number of things we put ahead of God. Whether it's conscious or unconscious, we make sacrifices and create space, time and limitless excuses in order to satisfy what we crave most, often at the expense of our relationship with God. If our desire is to love, please, and worship God, perhaps we should examine the nature of our cravings. Do the things we desire focus our vision and draw us into closer relationship with God, or with ourselves?

Refocusing Worship

So how do we make sure our worship is God-centered? Francis Chan, author of *Crazy Love*, explains in Moses' time people believed their "center of being" was their heart. How does your heart respond to the thought of God? If it doesn't stir in some way, it might be time for a good, old-fashioned "define the relationship" chat with God. I had one recently, and it wasn't pretty—I yelled at him.

Once I calmed down, I realized God and I were not as tight as I thought. As I examined my feelings, I found resentment in place of gratitude; anger in place of peace. In short, I am like a petulant child when I think God is holding out on my requests and human desires. Instead of outstretching my hands to receive his goodness, I point an accusing

finger. Rather than close my eyes to soak in his otherness, I glare in suspicion.

After my rant, a warm whisper buzzed through my chest, "I will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4), and with it came a new understanding of what this means:

In a letter to the Romans, Paul writes "Offer your *bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship" (emphasis mine). If I'm going to be in a relationship with God, I need to wholly and actively participate in it. I need to carve out time, tell him how I feel (even if it isn't positive) and be willing to fight for our relationship when it feels, to me, like it is dying. Not because these actions will somehow make God love me, or even like me more. The Bible says God already loved us *before he made the world* (Ephesians 1:4), that his love "surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19a), and nothing in all creation can separate us from it (Romans 8:38-39). Rather, because we're motivated by our own love for him. In this messy process, *he* will satisfy me. Not with stuff and things and shallow wants, but with a growing relational closeness.

When I intentionally carve out a few specific minutes of quiet, his warm, buzzy whispers return. And my heart stirs in greater gratitude and grows its capacity to receive his love and utter mine back. No matter how feeble, limited, or fumbling, our humble attempts to refocus and reconnect with our maker are at the very heart of worship.

"What we do—whatever we orient our time, thoughts and energies around—is what we worship."


“We are each created uniquely to reveal a distinct facet of our outrageously imaginative God. We only need to glance down at our fingerprints to remember there is no one quite like us. Why would a God, who went to so much trouble to give us singular identities, expect us to express ourselves to him in duplication?”

Reforming Worship

Once we've reframed and refocused worship, we might wonder how exactly to express it. This is the part where the singing comes in. I hear you tone deaf, timbreless folks groaning and I have good news: Singing is just *one* worship expression.

We are each created uniquely to reveal a distinct facet of our outrageously imaginative God. We only need to glance down at our fingerprints to remember there is no one quite like us. Why would a God, who went to so much trouble to give us singular identities, expect us to express ourselves to him in duplication?

Maybe you don't sing, but perhaps you paint or dance or act. Or maybe you're not creative at all and express yourself in other, no less profound and valuable, ways. Our worship language is born out of our God-given skills and aptitudes. By being ourselves, without fear or shame, we give others permission to do the same. When we live out of our authentic selves, we acknowledge God's supremacy and nod in agreement with him when he created people as a reflection of himself and called them "excellent in every way" (Genesis 1:31 NLT).

As we continuously and reverently fix our gaze on God, our intimate understanding and growing appreciation of him meld, reforming our mundane, everyday tasks into sacred expressions of worship. *This worship* is the most personal and genuine we can offer. 

Cellist
Surfer
Comic
Cyclist
Vegetarian
Composer
Teacher
Poet
Chef
Golfer
Carpenter
Dancer
Hiker
Actor
Gamer
Parent
Singer
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Tennis player
Sculptor

Who are you in Christ?

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Is There Really Free Will?

*One writer's perspective on our choices
versus God's plan.*

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DELBERT TEACHOUT

Delbert Teachout has been married for 37 years. He is currently retired from military and civilian careers. Ordained into ministry in 2002, Delbert is now pursuing freelance writing as a ministry. You can read his blog at dteachout.wordpress.com

What is the most important decision you have ever made? I knew a man who decided to go to college after high school. His grades were too low so the college expelled him. Having nowhere else to turn, he thought he would join the Air Force. While in the Air Force he was rapidly promoted. He got married but he and his wife had problems and they ended up getting a divorce. Soon he decided to remarry and had four children. He attended college while in the Air Force and graduated with a 4.0 GPA. He was selected for Officer's Training School and had a successful career, eventually retiring from the military. His children grew up to be successful in their careers. The question is how much of what this man experiences was his own free will and how much of it was God-directed?

Did God cause this man to flunk out of school or marry the wrong person? Were those events part of God's plan for this man? Did God direct his career and make him successful or was that his free will also? There is so much debate on the topic of free will, that I can't cover all the varying arguments. I can offer my own thoughts that I've formulated over the years, look to see what both philosophy and scripture says on the topic, and address ideas of how they can be applied to daily living and salvation.

Philosophers have thought about the conflict between free will and God's will for centuries. A few of their ideas are called determinism, deism, and process theology. Determinism is the idea that events, including choices, are the inevitable result of previous events. Every cause has an effect which results in another cause. Deism is the belief that God created everything and then distanced himself from his creation allowing events to occur naturally without divine influence. Process theology is a school of thought that emphasizes experience and free will while de-emphasizing God's sovereignty. God cannot regulate events but influences change by offering possibilities to the agents of free will.

On the other hand, the Bible seems to argue against the philosophies mentioned. For example: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be," (Ps 139:16) argues against determinism. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight," (Prov 3:5-6, some translations say "he will direct your path"), counters the claim of the deists. Also the

following verse argues against process theology “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord,” (Jer 29:11).

Philosophy seems to be emphasizing that humans have a right to free will, to self determination, to choose and control their own destiny. Scripture seems to say God has a predetermined plan for all believers. I searched from Genesis to Revelation and found no verse that said God controls people’s behavior. He guides, directs, and creates circumstances, but the ultimate choice is up to us.

Day to Day Decisions

Looking at the scriptures we might conclude that our day to day choices are also predetermined. We see that God has a plan, it is written in his book, and it was written before we ever believed. Does God have predetermined answers to questions of where to live, where to work, who to marry, where to go to school, or what ministry to pursue? If so, how do we find his will and how do we know our choice aligns with his will? God gives us three sources of information. We need to first seek scripture for advice, and then pray for specifics. Lastly, we need to follow the Holy Spirit’s leading of our heart.

How does a new believer know how to find God’s will? First, the best place to start when looking for God’s will is scripture. “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light for my path,” (Ps 119:105). Scripture can tell us general principles about what type of behavior is acceptable to God but does it give answers to specific circumstances? Remember Proverbs 3:6 if we trust the Lord with all our hearts, and lean not on our own understanding, he will direct our paths. He will help us choose our spouse, our church, our vocation, our friends, and any other thing we need help with.

When we have a question we can call upon God. “Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know,” (Jer 33:3). We are admonished to worry about nothing but to pray about everything. God will lead us when we ask him.

The Bible says God will give us the desires of our hearts. In other words, God puts the desire in our hearts. When our hearts are set on a course of action we can move forward in that direction. We can trust that God will not give us desires that are opposed to his plan and will for us. I believe he will cause events and circumstances to block our actions if we move against his will.

Rather than telling me audibly, God has given me ideas and desires, then led me through a process I call opening and closing of doors. When he did not want me to do something, the way was blocked. When he wanted me to do something, the way was open. When I began to pursue a bachelor’s degree I had to choose a major. God used the counselors at the school to open doors. When looking for employment I trusted that where I was hired was an open door. I even believe God led me through prayer and consultation with my wife, to purchase the house we live in and the cars we drive.

We can test our day to day choices by scripture, by prayer, and by the Holy Spirit leading our hearts. The decision is ours but God gives us sufficient information to make the decision. Remember

he knew in advance what decision we would make and based his will for us on his foreknowledge and what we may need help with.

Salvation

Ephesians 1:5, NLT says, “God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.” The word predestined comes from the Greek word *proorizo* and means “before determined.” Paraphrasing the verse we see that God had already made up his mind to choose us to become his children.

People were chosen to receive their adoption as children of God, due to the work of Jesus and the grace of God, before he ever created the world.

What criteria did God use in selecting who would become his adopted children? We need to look at Romans 8:29 for that answer. “For whom he did foreknow, he also predestined.” God is omniscient. He knows everything. God had foreknowledge of who would choose to follow Jesus. Those people who he knew would become followers are the people he predestinated. God’s plan is to choose people who choose his son and use them to carry out his will on earth.

Many volumes have been written to explain the concept of predestination. Two arguments prevail. First, some people say that the God of knowledge predetermines everything and nothing can be changed. God has chosen to pass by some people and chosen other people. Salvation is only because of his grace in selecting certain people. People who hold these beliefs usually call themselves ‘Calvinist.’

Second, other people say that God has foreknowledge of everyone who will become believers and he wills that those people should be saved. Salvation comes through faith and repentance. People are free to believe or not believe, even though God already knows what they choose. People who hold this belief usually call themselves “Arminian.”

Whichever opinion ultimately turns out to be correct they both agree on at least two points. One, believers are predestined for salvation because of God’s plan, Jesus’ blood, and the Holy Spirit’s sealing. Two, the Bible says believers will inherit a place in Heaven. (John 14:3).

What is the purpose of our predestination? We are chosen to do good works, to become like Jesus, to obtain eternal glory, and to be adopted as sons and daughters of God. Give God glory and praise. Again, we see that God has a plan for us, but the decision to follow that plan is ours.

Having the ability to choose can be stressful for us who want to follow God’s will. What if we make the wrong decision and miss his will? “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever,” (Isa 26: 3-4). God has a plan for us but he doesn’t leave us alone to blindly grope for it. We have his word, prayer, and the desires he places in our heart. When we trust him he will lead us into his will and perfect peace. 🏠

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HEAVEN IS HOME

*A real place, with real bodies,
serving a real God.*

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ANNA ANDERSON

Anna Anderson is a recent graduate from Biola University and received her BA in English. She will be spending the next year in China teaching oral English at an International University. Anna enjoys drinking English tea, re-reading childhood novels and backpacking in the Trinity Alps.

Between the quintessential blaring light and creepy armed cherubs, popular culture presents heaven as a mythical and ultimately undesirable place. Thankfully, Christians escape the cheesy harp and halo and instead look forward to living in a real place, with real bodies, serving a real God.

Christians sometimes use the verse, “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,” to suggest that no one can know much about heaven (1 Cor 2:9, NIV). This passage does not say “you can never understand anything about heaven,” instead it says, “these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.” The Holy Spirit within Christians gives them new insight into God’s great mysteries. While certain aspects of heaven are still mysterious, many others are explained in scripture.

A Real Place

Heaven is not a vague idea somewhere in the sky. The heaven Christians look forward to will be brought by Jesus when he returns. After Jesus has come back, he will bring the “new heaven and new earth” where we will spend eternity. The phrase “new heaven and new earth” comes from a passage in Revelation. John, the writer of Revelation claims:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them” (Rev 21:1-4).

After Jesus comes back, removes all of Satan’s power and rules over everything, the Christian’s new resurrected body lives on Christ’s redeemed earth. This new earth is linked and connected with God’s dwelling place. On this present earth we live with pain and self-centeredness because we lost our connection with God. But in the new heaven and new earth we can have a relationship with him totally free from sin.

Revelation 21-22 provides a picture of the end, when the relationship between God and humans is perfectly redeemed. The

holy city, or 'Jerusalem' descends from the clouds and John describes its great walls and jewels. This will be a place of unconquerable strength and surpassing beauty. John also describes the throne of God, and from it flows a river of life that flows past the tree of life. Some believe these verses prove there will be trees and rivers, solid and familiar as we know them now. Others interpret John's vision metaphorically, understanding the flowing river and leafing tree to represent new and abundant life.

Max Lucado's book *3:16, The Numbers of Hope* reminds Christians, "Jesus has gone to 'prepare a place' (John 14:2). Like hell, heaven is tangible and touchable: as real as the soil in your garden, as physical as the fruit in your orchard." Far better than a never-ending church service, Revelation conveys a Holy City descending from above. Cities, Holy or not, contain culture, architecture, fellowship and vivacity. We get to experience perfect 'city life' inundated with God's goodness and beauty.

A Real Body

Another teaching in the Bible about life after death is that we will be given new bodies. After Jesus resurrected from the dead, he was not only a spirit or a ghost, but he had a real body. When the disciples first saw him, they were afraid and thought he was a spirit. Jesus responded "Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And right after this, Jesus said he was hungry and he ate some fish (Luke 24:36-43). From this account it seems clear that we will have real functioning bodies that touch, feel and experience hunger. Although Jesus' body functioned like a normal human body, it also had supernatural functions. Jesus was able to suddenly appear and disappear places (John 20:19) and withhold his identity (Luke 24:16). It is unclear if we will have these same supernatural qualities, but it is clear that we will be given an immortal body. 1 Corinthians 15 gives a joyous account of our bodies, that we started "perishable, but will be raised imperishable" (15:42). Our bodies will not be made of the old flesh and blood that could be killed and eventually will die, but our bodies will be made of a spiritual and unconquerable quality, so that death will no longer be able to conquer us with its disease and creeping old age.

What happens in between death and Jesus' return?

If heaven doesn't come until Jesus returns, some may wonder, "what happens in the meantime?" When people die right now, where do they go? Many evangelical Christians argue strongly for the view of an 'intermediate heaven.' This intermediate heaven

would be a 'body-less' time in God's presence. In other words, if I died tonight I would be in God's presence but I would not yet have a new physical body, and I would not yet be living in the new heaven and new earth. One reason for believing this from scripture is Paul's account in 2 Corinthians 12 when he talks about a man, probably himself, having a vision or experience of paradise. Paul says, "I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows" (2:2). Paul's account here gives Christians a reason to believe that there is a dwelling place with God in the interim, and when Christians die they are immediately taken to God's presence.

There is an alternate view held by some people that when a Christian dies there is no intermediate experience. There is simply a death, and then when Jesus comes back there is a resurrection of that body. People who take this "physicalist" view believe that there isn't a soul or spirit to leave the body after death and experience heaven. Rather there is only the body, that body dies and again resurrects at the right time. This view seems to make sense of the phrase Paul uses that some people have "fallen asleep" as a euphemism for death. Perhaps Paul says this because Christian bodies "sleep" for a time and are resurrected at the end.

These two views are relatively unimportant in the grand scheme of God's promise, because whichever way he chooses to do it, we will live with him in paradise. In William Shakespeare's plays, a tragedy ends in death and a comedy ends with a wedding. In this sense, the bible is a comedy. It ends with the marriage of Christ and his bride, the perfect ending in God's perfect plan.

Who gets to live in the New Heaven and New Earth?

Christians and many non-Christians believe in heaven. When you ask, most people would say that when they die they are going to heaven. One non-Christian friend told me, "The people who get to go to heaven are those who are 'good.'

I believe you just know if you are good or bad." In my interviews, non-believers overwhelmingly agreed that to go to heaven you have to be good. On one level, they are right. The accessibility of heaven hinges upon goodness. Perfection, actually. The difference is that Christians confess they can never be good enough to be saved. As such, they need a savior, Jesus Christ, to cover them. If a Christian died tonight and God asked him or her, "Why should I let you into heaven?" he or she could confidently respond "on my own, I don't deserve heaven. But I believe the promise that Jesus covered all my failures. Because of Jesus, you should let me in." No matter how 'good' we think we are on our own, goodness is not enough to save us. Jesus' sacrifice is the only thing good enough to save us. Salvation rests in Christ alone, confessing his death and resurrection and obeying all he has commanded (Romans 10: 9-13).

Most people are afraid to die and can't believe dying would be better than living.

"Better by Far?"

Whether we know it or not, all of our hearts long for heaven. Paul, the great follower of Jesus, claims that dying and being with Christ "would be better by far" than continuing to live on this earth (Phil 1:23). Most people are afraid to die, and cannot believe Paul thinks that dying would be better than living. Paul knows that life does not end when he dies and he looks forward to being reunited with Jesus. When heaven and earth are reunited, God promises, "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Revelation 21:4)." God perfectly designed a place for his children free from this world's diseases and heartache.

In this perfectly designed realm, we will also worship God with all the nations. People from every tribe and language will worship God together. Heaven will be a place of diversity and joy, a place where there is peace and

everything wrong in the world is set right. Isaiah prophesies of a time when, "The lion will lie down with the lamb"—signifying the end of death and destruction for personal gain (Isaiah 11:6). It's so hard for us to imagine a place free from darkness, but heaven promises to be a joyful place overcome by the light of Christ.

Heaven also promises to be "better by far" because God promises to give his people work to do. Not only do we get to spend eternity with God, we also inherit land to rule over and take care of. Surprisingly, the Bible teaches that Christians receive the title "co-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8) and they will "reign with him (2 Timothy 2:12)." God gives us positions of power to lovingly rule over his creation. It is unclear what kind of reigning humans will do, but the Bible promises shared power with Jesus Christ. Power and authority is often abused in this world. However, the authority we gain with Christ is loving and good. Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* comments on a Christian's allowance of authority,

all things will eventually be subject to us, under the kingship of the man Christ Jesus...this will fulfill God's original plan to have everything in the world subject to the human beings that he had made. In this sense, then, we will 'inherit the earth' and reign over it as God originally intended.

Imagining God giving us the ability to reign over the earth seems unbelievable, but God gives an example of this generosity in the story of Adam and Eve. When God created humans, he commanded men and women to "fill the earth and subdue it. Rule

over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:27-28). In the same way that God created Adam and Eve to rule over the earth, in the new heaven and new earth God will restore humanity's perfect authority over the earth. We will not be bored.

Living a redeemed life in resurrected bodies, on a perfect earth, free of pain and suffering, equipped with authority and activity, makes heaven incredibly desirable. After

all, what human does not long for perfection? And yet, a large part of our humanity still clings to this earth. C.S. Lewis, well known author of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* displays a Christian's desire for this present earth in the last book of his series called, *The Last Battle*. In this book, the children reach heaven and their friend exclaims "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the

land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now." Christians will not long for heaven until they properly realize that heaven is home, the only place they will every truly belong.

How Does Heaven Apply to Daily Life?

A proper belief of heaven positively affects the way we live every day. Looking forward to heaven offers hope and encouragement. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "If only for this life we hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor 15:19). Paul claims that if Christians live with no expectation of life after death they deserve pity. Knowing that Jesus resurrected gives us confidence we will also defeat death in the end.

A firm belief in heaven inspires good and courageous acts. C. S. Lewis' work *Mere Christianity* says, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next... Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in' aim at earth and you will get neither." Lewis believes that to do any good on earth we must think more about heaven than about our present existence.

Dr. Langer, professor of integrative learning at Biola University, uses Martin Luther King Jr. as an example. Langer says, "King had a sincere Christian faith, a hope and a vision for justice. His courage is born among a confident hope in heaven

*Christians will not long for heaven
until they properly realize that
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will every truly belong.*

that led him to faithful action.” King’s hope of heaven helped him continue hoping and working in the face of daily death threats. Viewing heaven as a place filled with pleasure and freedom instills valor and perseverance in Christians while they live on this earth.

Afraid to Die

After all this explanation of heaven, and how wonderful it will be, you still might be afraid to die. Some people think that Christians shouldn’t be afraid, and if they are then they do not have very good faith. This concept is not true. It is okay to be afraid of death. Some Christians you meet will tell you they are not afraid to die at all, because they have a peace and a confidence about everything heaven will be. This response is awesome and I fully believe God blesses people with such faith that eradicates all fear. But, some Christians also say, “Yes, I am afraid of death.” When I told a professor that I felt afraid to die, his response helped me so much. He said “In the words of Paul, ‘death is our last great enemy,’ so in some senses, I don’t think you’re supposed to feel too good about death.” Death is an enemy, it is not beautiful. That being said, this enemy has been defeated by Christ. Even a fear of the death’s unknowns does not need to paralyze us. Jesus teaches us to trust him in this life, which means we can fully and completely trust him with our life to come. 🙏



*Honor your father
and mother so that
your days may be
long in the land
which Yahweh, your
God, gives to you.*
-Exodus 20:12

THE 5TH COMMANDMENT

*The 5th commandment to honor you
father and mother extends to the
community.*



ERICA MONGÉ-GREER

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This series has been working backward through the Ten Commandments as they are found in the Old Testament of the Bible, in Exodus 20. The fifth commandment is the first time a conditional law appears. It describes a reward for keeping the command. Why should one honor his or her father and mother? So that one may reap the reward of a long life in the land gifted by God. This article will explore why and how honor is given as well as who is considered to be father and mother by looking at what this law meant to the people who first

received its teaching and applying that understanding to our present culture. As with each of the commandments reviewed in this series, the reason for this commandment is to preserve community.

Why do we honor?

The promise of a long life in the land, provided for in the fifth commandment, indicates that those who follow this commandment will live in peace and not destroy each other. In the New Testament, Paul's letter to the Ephesians describes this commandment as "the first commandment with a promise: so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." The fulfillment of God's commandment to honor father and mother is a whole life, a life well and good, long lasting. (Ephesians 6:2-3)

How do we honor?

The fifth commandment has much in common with the Golden Rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" requires the same force of respect for self and others as does the bold reality of the fifth commandment: honor your elders so that your children will honor you. Honoring others includes a component of self-respect. Honor is not blind obedience. Honor works two ways: it must be both given and received. One person cannot simply honor another. Two must come together, with mutual respect for one another and for themselves. The commandment offers a motivation of long life and a prosperous future. We can best honor others by showing the respect and care that we, ourselves, would wish to receive.

Who do we honor?

In today's world, with the growing number of blended families and complicated familial ties, it is difficult to define relationship with a literal mother and father. Looking at the historical context of the ancients may help us determine who are our mother and father for the sake of following the commandment.

The ancient people of Israel lived in a culture that valued the elderly, whether they were blood related or not: age was evidence of wisdom. Elderly people in a community, both men and women, were seen as leaders. These commandments were addressed to adults in the community, not to young children. Keep in mind, though, that a person was considered grown around the age of thirteen. Women were expected to marry and begin having children as soon as they could. In a community like this, who then would be mother and father? Ancient writings, such as letters of correspondence and other written records besides the Bible, clearly indicate that familial terms were used to recognize hierarchy and status, rather than blood relation. For example, a servant who wrote to a queen would address her as "mother." A king who wrote to another king of equal status, would address him as "brother." A high king would be addressed as "father." This sort of association was not limited to royalty. In the same way, an elder

The fifth commandment is meant to help us preserve our community and grow as a community of believers.


in a village or small community would be referred to as “father” or “mother.”

A person in ancient times had more than two parents—every elderly person in his or her community was mother or father to each. In the context of this scripture, we may appropriately understand that to honor your father and mother means to honor those leaders in one's own community. In today's world, those who serve God make up a community within the church. As Christians, we belong to that community. Paul, a writer of New Testament letters, often greeted other Christ followers as family (Romans 16:13; Galatians 4:26).

The fifth commandment is meant to help us preserve our community and grow as a community of believers. For some of us, our parents are among the elders and leaders of our community. For others, whose parents are not among the community, this commandment does not apply in the same way.

Conclusion

Ideally, households would belong to the same community. One's own mother would also be an elder in one's own community. This is often not the case for families in the twenty first century. Jesus predicted this downfall. The New Testament records him to have stated that after his coming “five in one household will be divided ... father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (Lk.12.52-3, also in Mt.10.35). Now, the community of believers is family. Christian women are mothers, sisters and daughters; Christian men are fathers, brothers and sons.

Those who claim to follow God must do so each on his or her own terms. In so doing, everyone who follows after Christ belongs to a new family—the community of believers. In this family, the fifth commandment may be truly fulfilled. Honor is reciprocated in order to preserve the future of God's community and personal well-being. 

JARGON TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

Dictionary of Christian Jargon for the Ordinary Person

The phrase “take up your cross” can stir our imagination in many different ways. A thousand years ago the cross was a symbol of conquest as thousands of crusaders swarmed across Europe to repossess the Holy Land. In recent years, a cross around the neck has been a fashion statement for rappers with or without a religious affiliation. The phrase can be interpreted in many different ways and in the church context it denotes self sacrifice and self denial.

When Jesus said it (Luke 9:23), the phrase struck a chord of fear and confusion. It would be the same as telling a slave in the eighteenth century south to come and be shackled. To say, “take up your cross” in Jesus' context was like telling a Jew in 1940's Poland to march to the concentration camp. To those who heard it, it was a death sentence. Jesus' intention in speaking this phrase to his followers was to let them know that following him was not going to be comfortable. Anything that stood in the way of becoming more like him was like facing a death sentence.

Often this call to take up our cross is confused with losing our personality and becoming a totally different person. To some it means death to one's personality. This is not only far from the truth but it is impossible. We cannot lose who we are. Taking up our cross means giving up the rights to live our lives independently of God. It does not mean giving up our personality as much as it means putting to death the desires--many of them fueled by our personality--that get in the way of Christ and the life he has for us.

Taking up our cross is also confused with giving up material possessions and living a life of poverty. Although it could mean these things, the reality is that you can be a pauper and never take up your cross because it's not about external possessions. It is about the internal state of your heart and whether your possessions possess you. It means you are willing to put a death sentence to the things in your life that keep you from following Christ and becoming more like him.

The cross has been used as an instrument of fear and manipulation by power hungry crusaders and hate filled KKK members. It has been taken up by young street kids and rappers as a sign of wealth and status. Jesus did not intend any of these uses for an instrument of death. For him it was a metaphor for the life of surrender and sacrifice that all must take when they follow the one who was hung on a cross over 2,000 years ago. It is an internal reality that Jesus commands every one of his followers to embrace. It is the reality that we must die to our selfish ambition and desires in order to truly live our lives as he did. —Ramon Mayo

TEACHING RIGHT FROM WRONG

Issues in parenting and shaping morality.



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ERIC LEE

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How do you teach your children right from wrong? Especially during the all important, toddler years from 2-5 years old? I have a particularly vested interest in this in that my own son, Elijah, is in this stage! Eli is a little over 2 ½ years old right now. He's smack dab in the middle of the "terrible two's."

According to the article in the March 2011 issue of *Livestrong.com*, the *Journal of Genetic Psychology* states that the toddler stage is critical to the internal concept of morality in people. One of the most important things that a toddler learns during this



stage of life is self-control. This self-control is what will help he or she to resist wrongful desires and instead obey commands and follow rules.

The *Journal* also says that your child will still defy, ignore, and reject your commands until they are around four years old.

From what I've experienced so far as a stay-at-home dad, he has been throwing himself on the floor more, crying, and trying to hit me when I carry him to do something he doesn't want to do (usually to go to the bathroom or to bed).

So what my wife Cyndy and I resort to is to give Eli time outs. We tell Eli what it is he did wrong. This can be anything from hitting us, spitting, or throwing an object in our direction. We then put him in his time out area for two minutes (one minute for every year). Even with his time-outs, he still throws tantrums.

This leaves me thinking – “Is that all I can do to shape his moral behavior?”

Real life examples

I decided to tap into the resources of our church by asking the more veteran parents what they did/ do to help shape the moral behaviors of their children.

I interviewed some of the more experienced parents and friends at my church on this subject just to get different perspectives on the subject.

My first question was :
“What are some positive things you've done to help shape your kids moral behavior and personality?”

My friend Donna, a mother of four, shared what she thinks about how to shape moral behavior in a child.

“Let them realize there are consequences to what they do...don't always be there to rescue them. Sometimes they forget their lunch. After a while, I didn't go to the school and bring it to them. Another important thing to do is to give them opportunities to make mistakes. They will learn from their mistakes. Ultimately, the Bible is what is going to shape your child's character.”

Donna likes having her kids hanging out with other Christian friends, aunts and uncles. That way if her kids don't feel comfortable talking to her about something they have someone else to talk to about it. She adds, “If we didn't have those people around, they might not get the same foundation and values as their parents have.”

Our pastor, Don, said, “Contrary to popular teaching, I believe that saying ‘no’ is actually a positive thing in teaching life skills and morality. Learning boundaries are important. Your child will learn them from the world around them or from you. In those early years, the parents need to be a consistent, influential voice in shaping what is right and wrong. With that said, saying yes is

equally valuable. A few words of encouragement go a long way especially when your child makes good choices.”

Don also believes in allowing room for mistakes. He believes that it's not our job as parents to create perfect children.

Don thinks that reading the Bible together as a family teaches morality. He believes that the Bible contains universal truths and wisdom about the family and how we should raise our children. A great example of this is in 1 Corinthians 4:14-21.

“I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

“Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?”

These verses illustrate why we discipline our children. The parent (Paul) is speaking to his children (the Corinthian church). As parents, we model God's unconditional love. When we admonish our children, we should do so because we love them

unconditionally. In doing this, we shouldn't shame our kids. Shame is based on fear not love. Since admonishing means to reprove gently but earnestly, we need to remember why we admonish: as a way to advise against something or to remind our children of something disregarded (such as a responsibility). I see these things come into play when I give my son a time-out. He needs to realize there are consequences for his actions e.g. hitting, throwing things, etc. He also needs to know that after his time-out is done, I still love him. I make sure that I kiss him and that I say, “Daddy loves you, but you can't hit me or throw things.”

Having a consistent playtime is another way that Don thinks we can teach our children important life lessons. Some examples of this time would be playing a game, playing at the park, or reading a book together. I personally can remember times I would take Eli to the park and other kids would share their toys with him. Also, without me telling him, he would push other kids in the swing. These are moments you can't plan. They just happen in real time.

This brings up a good point. What are the advantages and

“Contrary to popular teaching, I believe that saying ‘no’ is actually a positive thing in teaching life skills and morality. Learning boundaries are important. Your child will learn them from the world around them or from you.”

disadvantages of having your kids around other children?

Just one of the crowd?

Some of the advantages can be that kids will learn how to share, stand up for themselves, how to communicate with others, and to tell the teacher when something is going on they don't like.

As far as disadvantages, kids can pick up bad habits or bad behaviors. Donna adds, "Kids will be kids. But ultimately the adults need to control that. I never blame bad behavior on the child. It comes down to, 'Are the parents disciplining their kids?'"

Another friend of mine, Nasar, a parent of three boys, looks at this subject as a matter of parenting styles. He sees advantages of being around kids whose parents' parenting styles are similar to his own. His belief is that you should be as strict as you can be from 6 months until 12 or 13 years and then you slowly ease up.

He said, "These are some of the most important years. There's a common understanding between parents and kids. After that, you can't do much. The values should be established by then." This is the point that Proverbs 22:6 makes when it says, "Train a child in the way he/she should go and when he/she is old he/she will not turn from it."

Teaching how to share

Since my wife has a huge family, I know that it is inevitable that Eli will be around other children. He has an older cousin, Sammy, that just turned four this year and also another cousin, Nicholas, that just turned five. Naturally, he will want to imitate what they do. One of the biggest issues with kids is sharing toys, computers, etc.

So what are some good ways to teach sharing to your children?

I've read sources that say that you should model it for your child. But, teaching by example is not enough. We as parents need to tell our children what to do and why we do it. They need to know our values and beliefs.

Nasar, said that he just told his kids to share. If they didn't share, then they would have the toy taken from them.

Still others say that childrens' behaviors are based on emotions rather than rationale. So we need to appeal to their emotions more when they are younger. If a child takes a toy from

another without asking, we should say to the child that took it, "see how that made your friend sad when he doesn't get to play with the toy."

I usually tell Eli that he should share with any child he plays with. However, I have found that he still either takes a toy or gets it taken from him over and over again. Kids that are at the toddler stage act very impulsively. They don't stop to try and rationalize their behaviors. They just know what toy they like or want to play with. Usually it's the toy that the other kid has.

In the end, I believe that it all comes back to modeling the act of sharing to a child and allowing your child to practice it with other children.

Final words of wisdom

So now that my friends have been through or are going through this stage of shaping with their kids, what are some parting words of wisdom?


Donna's advice had to do with discipline. She said, "Even though disciplining is a lot of work, it pays to do it at a young age. It is tiresome, but will help in the long run. It's always harder to re-do things than doing it right the first time."

Nasar wished he could have spent more time with his kids. He did make sure he spent time with his kids at bedtime.

Don's advice is to be intentional with your time. Make sure you plan outings with your kids. Since time flies by so fast, it's important to have consistent time out with your kids.

Also, celebrate things that are obvious to you. So if you see your child sharing with another kid or being kind to someone; praise him or her on the spot.

Finally, keep the conversation going. It doesn't matter that your child has a limited vocabulary, keep talking to your kids. That way they will know

your voice well. This last bit of advice is very biblical in that it models something Jesus said in John 10. John 10:14 says, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me. In verse 27 it says, 'My sheep recognize my voice and follow me.'" As parents, we are shepherds for our children as much as Jesus is our shepherd. A big part of our job as Christians is to know Jesus' voice so that we can follow his commands and his example. So too, our kids need to know our voice so that they will follow us. 

As parents, we model God's unconditional love. When we admonish our children, we should do so because we love them unconditionally. In doing this, we shouldn't shame our kids. Shame is based on fear not love. Since admonishing means to reprove gently but earnestly, we need to remember why we admonish: as a way to advise against something or to remind our children of something disregarded such as a responsibility.



One young woman's journey from struggle to security.

Beauty for Ashes

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NICHOLAS SOWELL

Nicholas Sowell has been involved in full time ministry since age 16. He has served as a lay minister, youth pastor, Christian radio DJ, Christian music production company owner, surf missionary, and now young adults pastor. Nicholas has used his love for writing to inspire, educate, and most importantly: further the kingdom of God. Now married and living in Austin, Texas, Nicholas enjoys staying active and passionately seeking after the Lord.

One of my best friends, I will call her Sarah, has a story to tell. Her name has been changed and this is the interview that took place when I asked her to share her story. I wanted to tell it for her. This is her testimony.

I was born to a mother who was raised in an abusive home; both physically and mentally. She moved out at sixteen finding love in all of the wrong places, including a boyfriend who got her pregnant and then left her. I was that baby. My mom's family wanted her to have an abortion; even to the point of



telling her she'd be disowned if she decided to actually have me. My grandfather then told my grandmother if she helped my mom at all, he'd divorce her. With little value for women, he refused to support my mom in having me. To my mother's defense, she never thought about aborting me, though all of her outside sources were directing her onto that path.

She had me as a single mom, to the objection of those around her, but as I was born, my grandfather saw me and his heart was changed, willingly wanting to help raise me and be a part of my life. I grew up with no money and experienced a childhood where my mom couldn't even afford to buy me gum or a happy meal or any of the things most Americans enjoy. My mother worked hard trying to work to support us, but struggled. Eventually my mom married another man who turned out to be an abusive alcoholic when I was three. In a way, it seemed my mom married a man similar to her father and repeated the cycle. I can recall nights where my stepfather would come home drunk and we'd have to run away and hide our car and have friends pick us up. There were times he'd disconnect wiring in the car so we couldn't get away or disconnect the phone lines so we couldn't call for help. It was a really scary environment for a little girl to grow up in. My mom would tell me about the Lord as much as she knew. We would pray at night, but there really wasn't a relationship. I remember giving my life to the Lord around the age of six, but only so that I wouldn't go to hell. That was a very valid fear I had and wanted safety from it, just like my stepfather.

When I was nine, they finally divorced. My mom started over as we moved to another state and went into welfare to make it without a man's salary adding to our home. She put herself through nursing school while working to provide for me. Still not having any money, we lived in a mobile home and struggled to make ends meet. We couldn't even afford a track shirt for me in school; I remember a friend had to buy my shirt for me just so I could partake in a regular P.E. class. Upon graduating nursing school, we moved again for my mother to finally get a good job. Because of experiencing such dysfunction at a young age, I was dealing with depression by the age of thirteen. It was around this time I started going to church. But, like many, it was a "religious church." You know, churches that have more value for you looking like them, playing the part and doing as they did rather than being concerned with what someone was really dealing with. I experienced God there, but what I grew up in was religion. By religion I mean I grew up in the belief that God is good and he loves you, but only because of Jesus. If it weren't for Jesus, he would basically hate you. It was a lot of performance. I believe, as a direct

result of this, that is where I started to get my identity as well. For me, religion says, salvation wasn't enough. I had to conform to the church for acceptance, I had to attend so many services, I had to jump through the "church hoops" so to speak and never felt it was right, never felt that's how God intended it. I got my value from performance through being the good girl, and by the time I was in high school, I started getting my identity from cheerleading, good grades, and guys. I really just wanted to be loved, but was finding what I thought was love in all of the wrong places. Later in high school though, I started to know God differently. I started knowing him relationally. I had joined a women's bible study and starting to know God in a more real and tangible way.

I had a boyfriend at the same time and after two years of dating I found out that he had been cheating on me for a year of the relationship. It hurt because most of my needs were being met by him; my needs physically, emotionally, and relationally. So it brought back another struggle with depression. And again I didn't know who I was or who God really was or his heart for me. I didn't feel his love. I had no fathers around to speak truth, love or identity over me. Because of this, I really struggled with abandonment and rejection as well. My thought was, "If my own father didn't care


enough to stick around for me, I must not be worth anything, I must not have value." Even though I was popular in school, I didn't know who I was and I didn't feel loved. Around this time, I also suffered an injury in cheerleading where a girl fell on top of my head, severing tendons and causing severe pain. That began a season of traveling and talking to surgeons to see what could be done to fix it. After meeting with several neurologists, surgeons, and doctors, the consensus was that nothing could be done. Because of this they just put me on a lot of different medications. Those medications led to problems with moods, behaviors and thyroid. So

they had to put me on more meds to help deal with the problems my other meds were supposedly taking care of. My hopes and dreams of attending college seemed to go down the drain. I was bed ridden for almost two years with most of those days involving tears from pain, lost dreams, and disappointments. I no longer had cheerleading, I no longer had a boyfriend, I no longer had even the things that gave me my false value. My world was crumbling around me on all sides. I also wasn't feeling God's love or presence. With this injury that was seemingly permanent, I had people around me telling me that God was trying to teach me a lesson or that if maybe I learned whatever lesson God intended for me, then I would be healed. That maybe God allowed me to go through all this pain to build my character or to punish me for doing something wrong.

"People came up to me and had loving words and were inviting, giving me words of how God saw me. It restored hope in my life. They gave me a message about God bringing healing and restoration and that sickness and pain were of the enemy and not God."

“I now know that there’s no way to be too far away from him. He loves unconditionally and is a restorer of hope. Your identity is found in him and he can make you excited about life. No place is too dark for his love to go.”

It was at this point I really fell apart. Mostly because I knew in my heart I had repented for any sin I had done and was crying out for healing. I knew that if God was really like that and just sent sickness on people I didn't want to have anything to do with him. So I didn't deny him but no longer wanted to spend time with him. My mindset was God was my only hope, but if he was the one who put this on me, what hope did I have left? I saw no way out and no solution.

It was roughly around this time an old friend from junior high invited me to a church she'd been going to. This church seemed to be more concerned with having a relationship with God and not just having to do things for him. They seemed to be different from the church I grew up in: surrounded by a martyr mentality or slave mentality. The people in this church seemed to be alive, and happy, unlike any other church I'd been in. People came up to me and had loving words and were inviting, giving me words of how God saw me. It restored hope in my life. They gave me a message about God bringing healing and restoration and that sickness and pain were of the enemy and not God. This was like fresh air to my life and my hope was restored. I realized any anger I had towards God was not God, but people misrepresenting him. I began forgiving those in my life that had wronged me. I got involved in a small group, weaning off of my medication and received more function of my body. It started changing my life. I started a process of feeling whole, shedding shame, and walking into restoration. It was the body of God that helped walk me into all of this and providing a safe place and a source of love that I had lacked in my life previously. God gave me sisters in the faith and was able to further remove shame and lies from my life, revealing more of who he truly was and not what I had been shown growing up as a child. He allowed me to relearn things and I now feel found by God. I now know that there's no way to be too far away from him. He loves unconditionally and is a restorer of hope. Your identity is found in him and he can make you excited about life. No place is too dark for his love to go. 

The Church Search

Overcoming your fears and connecting to a church community.



LARA TOVMASSIAN

Lara Tovmassian is an English/Writing major at Biola University who has been passionate about writing since she was a child. Lara is eager to use her writing for the advancement of God's kingdom and hopes to pursue a career in magazine writing after she graduates. Some of her favorite past-times include journaling, reading, exercising, and baking.



Photo © Jessica Preskitt | CreationSwap

Walking through unfamiliar church doors can be overwhelming. Young adults and siblings. Grandparents and newlyweds. Teens and toddlers. Whether through family ties or past experiences, everybody seems connected in this finely tuned church system. It is easy to be intimidated by the immediate synergy we find within these walls.

Until my Freshman year of college, my parents had opened every church door I ever walked through. My father has been a pastor since before I was born and I had always attended the

churches where he pastored. These churches provided a firm foundation for my faith; throughout my childhood, I knew that any church my parents brought me to would challenge me to grow through prayer, community and Scripture. When I moved away from home for college however, I began searching for a church near my university. During this search, I was forced out of my comfort zone and into a deep consideration of what I value in a church community.

One of the first churches that I attended was a mega church with at least two thousand regular Sunday attendees, mostly college and career-aged. The pastor of this church was

a passionate man of God; his messages were captivating, articulate, and grounded in Scripture. Drawn to his sound biblical messages, I attended this church for several months. Despite the convicting teaching, it was hard to feel a part of the community. Every Sunday, I would enter and exit with the same group and was rarely approached by people outside of my carpool. I was being spiritually nourished by Scriptural messages, but I thirsted for a more intimate and diverse community. Being unable to find this, I continued searching for another church.

My sense of displacement was partially rooted in the familiar church experience from which I had just recently been removed. I was no longer the senior pastor's daughter; I no longer had Dad's office to retreat to or his name to refer to. I was just another attendee, sheepishly waiting to be greeted by the first friendly member to extend a right hand. Regardless of the reasoning behind my feelings of displacement, my encounter made me realize that I value genuine and transparent community in a church family. I was unsettled by the idea of worshipping alongside fellow believers who I only knew by face. A strong church community allows for accountability, prayer, discussion and mentorship. I knew that I needed these things in order to be holistically nourished in my faith.

Days after deciding to restart my church search, I was invited to attend another church right around the corner from my university. Excited to experience another worship atmosphere, I entered through yet another pair of unfamiliar church doors. Here, I was refreshed by the sight of mingling generations and families. Arriving a few minutes late to the service, our group was silently escorted to our seats by the usher. During the time of musical worship, I noted the diversity of the worship band, with members spanning from twenty to fifty years of age. While the pastor shared his message, I watched as the jittery toddler in front of me twirled uncomfortably in her all-too-confining cushioned seat. I could see the life of this church through its members; there were people in all different stages of life sitting shoulder to shoulder.

Reflecting on the service later that day, I found great value in this blending of varied generations; this allows all members to learn from each other's experiences and grow through

“My sense of displacement was partially rooted in the familiar church experience from which I had just recently been removed.


I was no longer the senior pastor's daughter; I no longer had dad's office to retreat to or his name to refer to. I was just another attendee, sheepishly waiting to be greeted by the first friendly member to extend a right hand.”

conversation and communion. After a few weeks of attending this church, I was comfortable there. The teaching was biblical, the members were inviting, and opportunities to grow in community were many.

To prevent the endlessly unsatisfying church search and the rise of unrealistic expectations, it helps to remember that there is no such thing as 'the perfect church.' In finding the right church, one must sift through his or her own convictions and consider what is truly important. What theological principles do I hold as foundational to my faith and which ones can I bear to hold in suspension? Is the church's method of administering Communion more important to me than its stance on infant baptism? Would I want to raise a family in a church with sound theology but no generational diversity? In this way, finding a church prevents one from becoming close-minded, as it forces us to reconsider and challenge our beliefs. Approaching your church search with stubbornness and dogmatism will bring nothing but frustration and dissatisfaction. Once you have found a church, you will learn to

love it despite its shortcomings.

But this is only the beginning. After finding a church to attend on Sunday mornings, the next step is to get involved. Converse with people in the pews. Join a community group. Consider your own strengths, areas in which the Lord has gifted you for his service. Would I like to serve as a leader? A teacher? An event organizer? Asking these questions will help in finding opportunities to serve in the church.

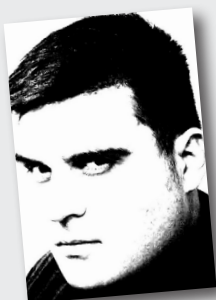
Through my church search, I realized that I need to be surrounded by a diverse community of believers and that I need to be open to varied forms of worship. The biblical teaching must be coupled with strong community in order to be fully nourishing. The members of a congregation will teach me just as much about God as the pastor preaching from the pulpit. Of course, the journey was marked by distinct moments of discomfort, with the occasional awkward silence or strand of empty seats on either side of me. Even so, God is faithful to guide us toward himself. He teaches us great lessons in our efforts to meet with him. Through Scripture, prayer, and diligence, he will bring us to the church in which he has us serving. 



DISABILITY IN THE CHURCH

How one church is embracing disabilities beyond the norm.

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MATTHEW HAMILTON

Matthew Hamilton is a published photographer and writer that lives with his wife, two cats and a dog in Wilmington, Delaware. He has written articles for New Identity and the pop culture blog The Critical Masses at criticalmassesmedia.com. You can also check out his personal blogs Black and White in Color and Five Questions Blog at blogger.com.

The church has long been seen as a place of refuge and acceptance for those that are looking for help spiritually. People seeking the comfort of a community of faith often do so because they are missing something that they cannot seem to find in the larger world. And while it is important to think and dwell at times on the messages coming from small groups and the pulpit about our spirit, there are often non-verbal messages that can demonstrate a group's acceptance of something that is actually more noticeable to the naked eye. That is, the church's role towards those with disabilities.

It does not seem to be coincidental that many of Christ's miracles mentioned in scripture involve his impact to those that are impaired. His encounter with a blind man in Bethsaida recounted in Mark 8:22-26 showed both a recognition for man's physical lack of sight, but also served as a platform for sharing how a believing faith can help spiritually as well.

The account of Christ healing a paralyzed man in Capernaum is recounted in three gospels: Matthew 9:1-8, Mark 2:1-12 and Luke 5:17-26. There are two unique aspects of this episode as to how Jesus treated those who were disabled in his day. First, Jesus was made aware that this disabled man was seeking just to glimpse him. Jesus, aware that this man was not able to go into the building to see him, accommodated the man by going to him. Secondly, after Jesus performs that physical miracle of enabling the man to walk, he extended a spiritual healing as well, much to the chagrin of the religious leaders of the Pharisees that were standing nearby. "When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, 'Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'" (Luke 5:22-23 ESV)

Most believers don't expect those with disabilities to demonstrate complete reversal of blindness or paralysis when attending a worship service. But as demonstrated by Christ's treatment of those who were impaired around him, efforts can be made to make sure that those with disabilities can play an active role in the church service, rather than passive participation by just sitting in the pews.

One of the best examples of recognizing the worth and abilities of all Christians is a recent initiative by the Christian Reformed Church, a denomination that has churches throughout Canada and the United States. With the motto of "Everybody Belongs, Everybody Serves," this organization has specific rules and handbooks to incorporate both the recognition and inclusion of those members that have physical and mental disabilities as a vibrant and active part of the church family. Starting in 1982 with the hiring of one staff person and first edition of a newsletter which continues to be printed today, *Breaking Barriers*, the Christian Reformed Church has sought to inform all of its members of the rights of worship for all. There is also an initiative to recognize those who may have not attended a church service because of feelings of isolation.

I recently spoke with Mark Stephenson, Director of Disability Concerns at the Christian Reformed Church, to find out more about how this denomination is working towards inclusion of all members, particularly those with disabilities.

Mr. Stephenson said that the CRC has taken a multi-faceted approach for making worship more accessible, adapting the physical worship environment and adapting the actions of worship. Physical accommodations include pew cuts, ramps, elevators,


accessible bathrooms (including family bathrooms), power doors, and lifts and/or ramps to the pulpit area.

Communication accommodations include hearing loop and other hearing assistance systems, large print and Braille bulletins and newsletters, good lighting in sanctuaries, and ensuring that slides projected on overhead screens are as accessible as possible to people with visual impairments. Programmatic accommodations include development by their ministry of an extensive network of volunteers (over 200 in Canada alone), providing an annual conference and a training handbook for these volunteers.

Educational accommodations including Friendship Groups and setting up church ed. classes to be as welcoming as possible. Resources they often recommend in that regard are *Autism and Your Church*, and *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities* both by Barbara J. Newman, and *A Compassionate Journey: Coming Alongside People with Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses* by John G. Cook.

Probably most important of all, many churches have asked their members who have disabilities what they would find most helpful with regard to building, program, communication, and so on. There are some in the denomination that have taken the initiative to go extend outreach even further than what has been mandated by the organization. One volunteer, for example, hosted a meeting of senior citizens from the Christian Reformed Churches in her town, and asked them what they found helpful and not helpful with regard to their congregation's accessibility. In addition, an entire regional group of Christian Reformed churches hired two marriage and family therapists to help the people in the churches learn better how to minister to and with people with mental illnesses. The group is called Faith and Hope Ministries. Also, a group of volunteers, most from Alberta, have produced a presentation that has been used in churches: "Being Community: Walking Beside Someone with Mental Illness."

Mr. Stephenson stated that difficulties implementing these measures were minimal and mainly regarded concern about cost for big ticket items such as elevators and accessible bathrooms. Another step towards including those with disabilities into worship was the organization of a mental health task force that included both of the marriage and family therapists. They produced a four-session Bible study on mental illness titled "Let's Talk! Breaking the Silence around Mental Illness in Our Communities of Faith."

While it is important to note that worship can often be private and very personal, the act of worship is often done in a group setting. How we share in the worship experience with others is a reflection of how we both appreciate the differences of those around us as well as our overall goal of seeking closeness with God. It is clear that there are steps that we all can take that will ensure that all of us have the opportunity to share in the experience. 

Most believers don't expect those with disabilities to demonstrate complete reversal of blindness or paralysis when attending a worship service, but efforts can be made to make sure that those with disabilities can play an active role in the church service.

Five Truths about Depression in My Life

*Talking about depression in a
Christian context.*

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SARAH DONAWERTH

Sarah Donawerth is a published poet and currently studying English at Biola University. Her depression led her to become a writer so that her experiences could reach readers and glorify God. In her spare time, she plays Disney songs on the ukulele and reads the works of Jane Austen.

You might read the title and wonder how I could get away with writing about something that only concerns me. You could also wonder why you should read it if it doesn't apply to you. My answer is simple: Depression is not easy. It is messy, hard, painful, and difficult to deal with. I can't describe anyone's experience with depression except my own. It is my hope

that the strides I've made to understand my depression from a biblical perspective might assist in your own unique dealings with sadness, depression, and the joy of Christ.

1. Anyone can have depression, Christian or not.

I was diagnosed with clinical depression at the age of 15, when I had already been a Christian for almost 10 years. My depression was a deep sadness that had no source or cause. It made me agitated, affected my sleep, and I lost motivation for doing anything, including activities as simple as getting out of bed. I slept for 16 hours a day sometimes. I dropped out of all the extracurricular activities that I loved. I stopped playing the violin, even though I had been playing for over ten years, and I changed from an honors student to someone who was flunking out of high school.

Before my diagnosis, I thought I was immune to psychological problems. I thought that God would never let anything bad happen to me. However, God never promises an easy life for Christians. Trials will arise, but God has a plan, and these things

can help us grow and become what God wants of us. So, both Christians and non-Christians alike can have depression. It could point to a sin issue in your life, but it could also just be an illness. In the Bible, illnesses and trials are seen to have many causes. Sometimes it is allowed by God in order to draw us back into a relationship with him, but other times it is just a trial of life that we have to deal with. Only you or God can determine which is the case, but it is important that you ask God what the purpose in this suffering is.

2. God helps us in our struggles and that help can come from earthly sources.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. A misguided but well-intentioned youth pastor told me that medications were shortcuts and showed a lack of faith. I refused all treatments for my depression for years because of this pastor's misleading advice. God wants us to ask for help. God gives us mentors, pastors, and parents so we have a support system. My mother was a huge encouragement during my struggles with depression because she was constantly pointing me to positive, biblical, and sound advice. She held me when I cried and coaxed me through panic attacks, all the while reminding me of God's unending love and overarching plan for my life.

Speaking from my own experience, I would recommend surrounding yourself with supportive people, so you don't lose sight of God in dark, difficult times. Also, get the help you need. We wouldn't think twice about seeking cancer treatment, or taking cold medicine, or drinking a health shakes to help with nutrition. So why are we so hesitant to treat depression? Depression is a treatable illness. If you're still uncomfortable about some treatments, then start with those that are simple. Therapy was extremely useful in helping me identify when my thoughts were stuck in a negative cycle. The cycle would start pedaling with something a friend said, or something that happened in school, and would quickly spiral out of control. With a lot of training, I was able to recognize the pedaling from the start and cut the thoughts off before I destroyed myself.

I also sought help in bible studies, support groups, journaling, visits to nutritionists, and prayer pals. I explored and relied on all of these treatments before I tried medications. I encourage you to ask doctors and friends what has helped others with depression. There are plenty of options, but depression will not

get better from doing nothing.

3. Depression can get worse before it gets better.

This has been an especially troublesome point for me. I hesitated to include it, but the truth is the truth: my depression got worse after I started treatments, and then I hit rock bottom. But it was not the treatment that made my depression worse; my depression was continuing its original course as I slowly tried to overtake it and gain control of my illness. However, depression *will* get better. There is always hope.

My friend was not so fortunate. My childhood friend, also a Christian, committed suicide when she could no longer cope with her depression. She did not want to continue suffering, but had no hope that it would get better. She could only despair that it kept getting worse. If I could have convinced her of one thing, it would be that there is hope.

When I finally surveyed the damage my depression had caused, I was confronted by a life that had completely unraveled. I had no friends because I had withdrawn. I was barely passing school because I missed so many classes. I had gone from a popular honor roll student to a girl barely scraping by in an independent study program. However, I also had the opportunity to rebuild my life the way that God wanted it to be. I made better friends with Christians who would keep me accountable and wouldn't let me drift away from them like I had done with my other friends.

With a cleared schedule, I took on volunteer work, spent time reading the Bible and using my talents to glorify God. In the end, I built a life that was more pleasing to God than the one I had been pursuing before my diagnosis.

4. God can use depression for his plan and purposes.

When I treated my depression, I realized there was a purpose to my struggles. Through depression, God taught me to have compassion for those who struggle in life. Before, I was judgmental and quick to assume that I was better than anyone suffering. Now, I am able to see how all people are loved by God and that they all have experiences that they have to deal with. It is not their fault, it is just the circumstances that they have been


I thought that God would never let anything bad happen to me. However, God never promises an easy life for Christians. Trials will arise, but God has a plan, and these things can help us grow and become what God wants of us. So, both Christians and non-Christians alike can have depression.

I made better friends with Christians who would keep me accountable and wouldn't let me drift away from them like I had done with my other friends.

dealt. I also learned the importance of making my life count. At its worst, depression was a fog that kept me from enjoying anything, doing anything, or even being anything. I had played violin for years, but I couldn't motivate myself to pick it up. I stopped reading, even though I had once been an avid reader. I even stopped volunteering at church because I just couldn't pull myself out of bed. Now, I see why "Carpe Diem" [Seize the day] is such a good motto. We only have a finite amount of time in life, and we should be using it for what God has planned for us. I want to use the gifts God has given me. I volunteer in my church's nursery, write inspirational fiction, and play violin in church services. I have also been studying how to get involved with people around me in need. I could never have related to what they go through if I hadn't been depressed, so now I want to help foster children who are struggling, just like I did, in high school. I am learning sign language so I can reach the Deaf Community with the Gospel and I am learning about cults in the United States so that I can witness to them. I am also working on becoming a tutor for students in high school who need extra help like I did.

5. There is joy in Jesus Christ.

I saved this point for last because it was the hardest for me to grasp in my own walk with God. I had always heard about the struggles, trials, and hardships of the Christian walk. We never seemed to focus on the joy and celebration found in Christ. When we are saved and given the Holy Spirit, we abide in Christ and are able to enjoy our lives. In our struggles, with depression or anything else, we can know that it is all for Christ. Christ is our sustainer and redeemer. He will get us through life's trials. We should rejoice over that! We follow truth, and we know that an all-powerful God loves us. He helps us grow and prosper along the way. We can lose sight of that in depression, but we can also take the opportunity to see what God is doing in our lives and make sure we are preparing for God's work. God has a plan for your life to further his kingdom. He is calling you to action and these experiences could be the preparation that you need.

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11 ESV). 

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Cash Strapped

Tithing during tough financial times.

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KENDRA T. GREENE

Kendra Greene is a minister in training and member of the praise and worship team at her local church. She is a seeker of knowledge and is passionate about ministry and about seeking truth. She also has a zeal for the arts and traveling.

The recent years have been affected by unemployment, recession, and changes in healthcare insurance coverage. All these changes have caused strain in a very important part

of life—our finances. With all of the pressures affecting personal finances how should we tithe? You may be asking yourself, how can I tithe if I barely have food to eat, or gas in my car? These are valid questions and are critical to those that believe in the truth of the word of God. Genesis 14:18-20 provides us the first account of tithing. In this story Abraham gave a tithe to the priest of the Most High God Melchizedek.

“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand. And he gave him a tithe of all.”


To further understand the principles of tithing, we must understand its importance. Tithing is completed in an act of faith. It is an act of total surrender to God. With tithing, you have to first recognize that God is the creator of all things and that he gives resources to us every day. Psalm 24:1 (NKJV) states “the earth is the Lord’s and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein.” God’s provision encompasses his people to understand their place in the earth. After grasping this concept, the second aspect of tithing addresses faithfulness and obedience to God’s instructions

2 Chronicles 31 (NKJV) tells of the story of Hezekiah and how he threw out

idolatry in the land and reassembled the people of Israel to worship God. To show faithfulness to God and to the Levites who were the priests, the people began to bring their first fruits and tithes into the house of the Lord. The chief priest Azariah saw how liberal the people of Israel were and he said in the tenth verse, “Since the people began to bring the offerings into the house of the Lord, we have had enough to eat and have plenty left, for the Lord has blessed His people; and what is left is this great abundance.” Verse 12 states that the people “faithfully brought in the offerings, the tithes, and the dedicated things...” The Israelites recognized that a total act of surrender to God was to offer up part of what they had. Even after they had worshiped other gods, even after they messed up, they begin to listen and serve God again. They reaped a material bounty and an abundance of freedom in God.

Lastly, one must have a heart to give. As Christians we must remember John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” The very thing God loved, he also gave. In our

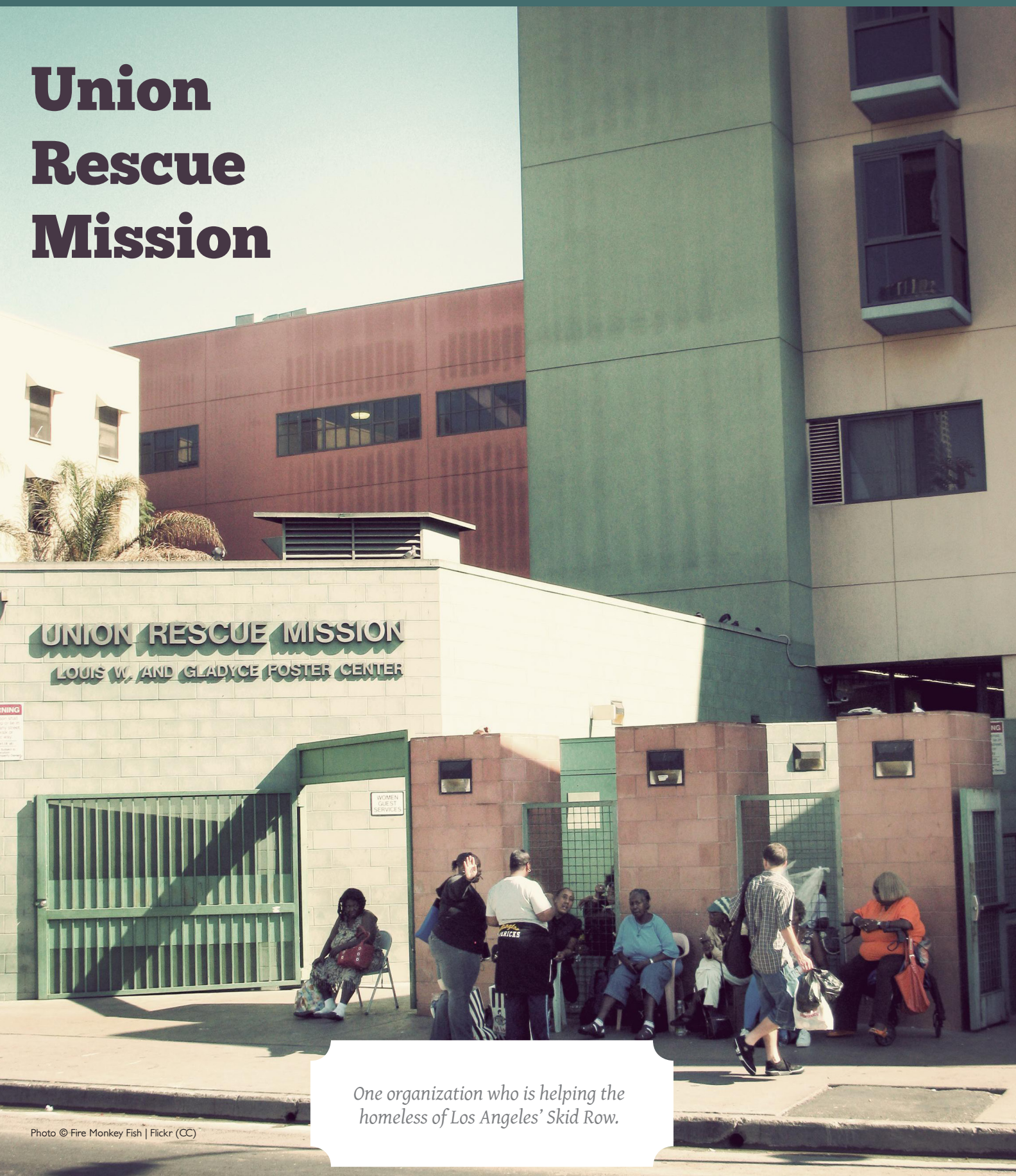
life money is a great asset; it is how we fund the “necessities” of life, as we know it. If our hearts are in tune with God we must be free to give freely. This not only includes your time but your resources—your money. 2 Corinthians 9:6-8 (NKJV) states “But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have abundance for every good work.” In today’s society a 10 percent tithe is a normal practice. While this is the standard, remember that the Bible states that we should give as you have purposed in your heart and cheerfully.

Tithing is a requirement of all Christians as it exhibits a level of faith that is insurmountable and parallel with a Christian’s understanding of honoring God. Tithing should be completed to your local church body and to any place that you are being “fed” the word of God. In a cash strapped world we must begin to activate the faith God has given us. Sometimes this means that we will have to come out of a place of comfort to a place of faith and trust in him. God is the provider of ALL things. Remember that tithing is an investment into God’s church. An investment in God is the best investment that you can make. 



Tithing is completed in an act of faith. It is an act of total surrender to God. With tithing, you have to first recognize that God is the creator of all things and that he gives resources to us every day.

Union Rescue Mission



One organization who is helping the homeless of Los Angeles' Skid Row.

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LARA TOVMASSIAN

Lara Tovmassian is an English Writing major at Biola University who has been passionate about writing since she was a child. Lara is eager to use her writing for the advancement of God's kingdom and hopes to pursue a career in magazine writing after she graduates. Some of her favorite past-times include journaling, reading, exercising, and baking.

Standing atop the Union Rescue Mission, I peer over the roof ledge and through the tearful night sky. Knowing that I am but a short distance removed from our nation's largest concentration of people experiencing homelessness, my heart is immediately burdened. I wonder how I can serve, what I can do, where I should start. Witnessing the roughness of Skid Row from an outsider's perspective, there exists still a layer of separation between myself and the hopeless alcoholic living out of his grocery cart. I see only the surface level of the interactions occurring across the sidewalk. I can smell the odious stench, but I cannot identify their source. There is much more happening on these streets than meets my eye; there is damaged life hidden under a thick veil of misplaced garbage and jaded indifference.

In light of the overwhelming realization that poverty is much bigger than any one person's passion, an organization like the Union Rescue Mission (URM) serves as ample assurance that the effects of poverty can be combatted.

URM is a non-profit organization located on San Pedro Street in the heart of downtown Los Angeles. Their mission is to offer hope and aid through Christ to those


experiencing homelessness on the streets of LA. They provide a vast array of services for men, women, and children, including food, shelter, clothing, education, and counseling. Even so, their efforts go far beyond providing for physical needs; the love of Christ is the cornerstone of their mission. Staff members and volunteers firmly believe in the power of God's Word to transform lives and restore the broken. The tight interplay that URM has established between spiritual, mental, and physical aid shows a desire for holistic rehabilitation of each individual. They have recognized and responded to the reality that addressing one need while ignoring another will not provide for a sustainably restored life.

Along with emphasizing the need for holistic aid, URM has referred to itself as "the way home." The hope is that those who come to the mission will receive the proper tools to reintegrate themselves back into society, so as to become productive members of it. Simply walking into the mission is not an end in itself; on the contrary, it is only the beginning. The gradual recovery that occurs over time at the mission should lead one to find a home beyond the streets of Skid Row. Therefore, the intent is not for URM to become "a home for the homeless," but rather a means through which people experiencing homelessness can find "the way home."

"Witnessing the roughness of Skid Row from an outsider's perspective, there exists still a layer of separation between myself and the hopeless alcoholic living out of his grocery cart."



The Union Rescue Mission is always welcoming new volunteers; from serving meals throughout the day to mentoring children in the afternoons, volunteers are crucial to the work that URM does. By partnering with such ministries, we can make our humble contribution to the daunting battle against both spiritual and physical poverty.

The work done by the Union Rescue Mission has a profound spiritual and physical impact on poverty in Los Angeles. Although one person or organization's efforts cannot altogether overcome the vicious cycle of poverty, we as believers must follow Christ's example and care for those less fortunate in any way that we can. Whether this means donating clothes to Goodwill or working full-time with an organization like the Union Rescue Mission, our contributions to the struggle against poverty are crucial because they are rooted in an earnestness for the advancement and proclamation of God's kingdom. 

creative serving

Katie Cook lives a full and meaningful life.



ANNA ANDERSON

Anna Anderson is a recent graduate from Biola University and received her BA in English. She will be spending the next year in China teaching oral English at an International University. Anna enjoys drinking English tea, re-reading childhood novels and backpacking in the Trinity Alps.

“Africa is boring,” Katie Cook thought to herself as she walked to the bus stop. As she quickly took her seat she glanced at the young man next to her. Through a brief introduction Katie learned he was a refugee from Sudan. Out of curiosity she asked the man to tell his story. “You don’t want to hear my story,” he told her. She insisted, and an hour later she never thought Africa was boring again.

This young man explained he was one of the “lost boys”—a group of 20,000 boys forced to flee their village because of militia attacks during the Second Sudanese Civil War. Because of these attacks the boys were placed in refugee camps across Kenya and Ethiopia. These boys endured a horrific journey and thousands died of starvation, dehydration and animal attacks. In 2001, under president Clinton, about 3,800 of the boys were resettled in the U.S. Katie says the man who explained this “was 7 ft tall and had scars all over his body. Something literally cracked in my heart and I thought, how could this ever happen? Then I thought, how did I know nothing about this?”

Katie added an African History minor to her International Relations major at the University of California Davis. Katie was so moved by this man’s story she volunteered for Invisible Children, an organization committed to raising awareness about Ugandan child slavery through media. The summer after she graduated Katie worked at Mount Hermon, a Christian summer camp. Out of love for Africa and a creative

spirit, Katie began spray-painting Africa on T-shirts. The shirts were so popular, she thought, “I should start a non-profit where I design T-shirts and all the money could go to different organizations in Africa.” Hence, Africa Hope Apparel was born, and her small idea

raised over 30,000 dollars for various organizations in Africa.

Advocating for child slaves and starting a non-profit are only the beginnings of Katie’s adventures in pursuing a relationship with Christ. She spent a year in Thailand teaching English, and while there she worked in a refugee camp where God showed her the importance of justice. After Thailand she officially worked a year for Invisible Children. Experiencing the typical “what should I do with my life?” question, Katie finished her job with Invisible Children and didn’t know what to do next. Randomly, an organization in Southern California called Empowering Lives International, emailed her and asked if they could receive money from her Africa Hope non-profit. Katie was impressed with this organization and off-handedly mentioned if they ever had a position open, she’d love to be part of their organization. A month later she was working for them. Reflecting on her current position, Katie says, “It was so God. Nobody was hiring for non-profit.” Katie credits God for guiding her and giving her a job where she can serve him.

Empowering Lives International is a non-profit that takes a holistic approach to developing communities in Africa, “helping them reach greater levels of hope, sustainability, and empowerment.” Katie’s first position involved leading mission trips from Azusa Pacific University to minister and provide aid to countries in Africa. One time Katie even traveled to Africa by herself—meeting in-country staff and learning about their needs first hand. After working in this position, Katie moved into her current position as community engagement coordinator. In her current role she travels to different schools and churches in the United States to tell them about work in Africa and share how they can be involved.

One of the most inspiring things about Katie’s life is her willingness to live like Christ in her community at home, not only in Africa. After traveling to Thailand, working with refugees and doing work among the poor in Africa, Katie came to a point of discontent, “every time I travel I work with the poor, and in my own country

I’m really isolated from the poor. God convicted me in that.” In response to this reality, Katie prayed “God I want to find a community where I can move into and you can use me.”

God honored her prayer. One Sunday at church Tommy, the director of a ministry called Solidarity, happened to be speaking. Tommy talked about how their company had a girl’s and guy’s apartment in a low income housing neighborhood working to

bring Jesus’ love into their community. Katie decided she wanted to be a part of their ministry and went to an interview. “In my mind, going into this interview I thought maybe I’d volunteer with them for a year, and then maybe I could move into the neighborhood.”

After traveling to Thailand, working with refugees and doing work among the poor in Africa, Katie came to a point of dis-content, “every time I travel I work with the poor, and in my own country I’m really isolated from the poor. God convicted me in that.”

God had something even bigger planned for her. Katie says, “after the interview, this girl I didn’t even know walks up to me and she said, ‘are you looking for housing? We’re looking for a fourth roommate.’ I had been praying for five months that God would show me where to live.” After praying about the decision, Katie moved into the neighborhood and began loving her neighbors.

Katie has learned a lot of life lessons in her new community—some uplifting, and others challenging. As a Christian, it’s easy to feel like God will only love you if you’re constantly doing good works for him. Katie felt this pressure, and after moving to her new neighborhood she decided, “What I really wanted to do was ‘just be.’” God convicted her that she wasn’t there to necessarily start a bunch of new programs and look really good. “Don’t try and do all these things, just be in this neighborhood,” God told her. “Love the people.” Loving the people in her community has involved some new programs, but also a lot of relationship building and making time to listen to people. After running a program for elementary and Jr. High girls at her home, and later inviting a small group of post high school age girls Katie has realized, “As Christians we don’t have to try and save the world. We just have to make ourselves available and God will work.”

Katie learned another unexpected lesson while leading a bible study on the topic of immigration. After hearing some girl’s stories about crossing over the border Katie more firmly believes, “Our identity is not ‘American.’ Our identity is in Christ. He calls us to love our neighbor, which is really anybody in the world. The Christian church can have so much animosity to immigrants.” Even in looking at the life of Jesus, they learned together that Jesus was a foreigner too. He had to leave his land and he lived the first part of his life in a foreign country. Katie thinks, “So often we put these geo-political boundaries in front of being a Christian. Regardless of if people have papers or not, they are children of God. Who are we that we should turn anyone away?”

While serving in her community, Katie dated and married Kevin, a friend also serving in the community. Katie and Kevin now


Katie’s life is one example of a person changed by God and following him wholeheartedly.

Sometimes it’s easy to look a person’s life and feel guilty because you aren’t serving the same way she or he is. Katie reminded me, “God’s heart is that we’re missional wherever we live.” Any hobby, job or passion can be used to love people for the sake of Christ.

live in their own apartment and serve their community together. Although God has blessed them tremendously in their community, they have encountered some hard situations. One of their old neighbors, a father of three little boys, was shot and killed by the police. Katie says, “seeing their family fall apart and the mom not doing helpful things for her children was hard. Watching their kids turn away from God or become a part of a gang or things like that are hard to see.”

Another challenge is enduring and experiencing the different seasons relationships go through. Katie has become best friends with people, only to have them move on or stop communicating with her. Katie responds in a mature and understanding way, “It’s okay that people go through seasons. As Christians we need to keep praying for people.” She remembers that God loves her through all of her own seasons of following him, so she continues to pray and love those people who come in and out of her life.

Katie’s life is one example of a person changed by God and following him wholeheartedly. Sometimes it’s easy to look a person’s life and feel guilty because you aren’t serving the same way she or he is. Katie

reminded me, “God’s heart is that we’re missional wherever we live.” Any hobby, job or passion can be used to love people for the sake of Christ. 

Interested in Volunteering for ELI or Solidarity? Email Katie at: katiecook@empoweringlives.org

You can also read Katie’s blog at: hopeengaged.blogspot.com

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Counter Culture

COMFORT

Being Uncomfortable with Comfort



RAMON MAYO

Ramon Mayo is the former pastor of a multiethnic church in Los Angeles, CA. Currently he lives in Pittsburgh, PA with his wife Yvette and their two kids Kaydon and Syenna plotting his next moves in the kingdom of God. Ramon blogs at ramonmayo.com

“If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair.” -C.S. Lewis

In our mother's womb we are shielded from the world's ugliness and pain. Then we are suddenly thrust out into the world and from there on out we say goodbye to comfort. We say goodbye to being insulated from war, crime, and poverty. We say goodbye to being shielded from divorce, rejection, loneliness, and lay offs. We bid farewell to safety and ease and say hello to standing in long lines at the DMV and shoveling snow every winter.

We enter a life of discomfort and this is part of what makes comfort so appealing. In a world besieged by Murphy's law or what Christians call “the fall,” comfort is an ever elusive commodity. It is always temporary and every good night's sleep is awakened and disturbed by the sound of an alarm. Every appliance designed for our convenience eventually needs repair or some other equipment to keep it running smoothly. Like most things in this world, comfort never lasts forever, so we always seek after it.

This explains why comfort is a “god” in our culture. By “god” I mean something that dominates and controls our lives; influencing almost every decision and the measurement of our satisfaction. Another synonym for comfort is convenience. The American Heritage Dictionary defines convenience as “something

*Comfort is a “god” in our culture.
By “god” I mean something that
dominates and controls our lives;
influencing almost every decision
and the measurement of our
satisfaction.*

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that is suitable to one's comfort, purposes, or needs" and again as "something that increases comfort or saves work." Because of this obsession with comfort our streets are littered with convenience stores. Our stores are filled with convenience foods which we cook in microwaves, one of the many devices created to make our lives more convenient. In these small things we see a culture that runs away from delayed gratification because it is not comfortable. To delay comfort in the present in order to gain true and lasting value in the future is foreign to so many modern ears. Waiting for something or having to actually make it yourself has lost its luster for the majority of our culture. Get it cheap, fast, and with the least amount of effort is the mantra of the day! This has led to the illusion that we should never experience discomfort, pain, and suffering and if there is a god, he needs to turn in a resignation letter the minute that we do.

This is not only a problem in the wider Western culture but it is also a very widespread problem in those who claim to follow Christ. To put it directly: Comfort is a god in the evangelical church. We like to assemble and gather in nice plush church buildings with state of the art multimedia presentations. We want to be a part of an organization that boasts of something for everyone. We have actually flipped around Jesus' words in Mark 10:45. We do not want to serve we want to be served.

And so we search for the just right church with the pastor who says everything we want him to say along with the band that plays exactly the songs we want to hear. This is combined with the other members of the congregation who dress like we dress, make the same amount of money, shop where we shop, and pretty much remind us of how great it is to be...well, you know...us. That's comfortable. We definitely do not want to grow or stretch. We do not want to be around other people who don't look like us or who smell like alcohol, cigarettes, or garbage. That would be...well, you know...uncomfortable.

What does the Bible says about comfort?

The Bible doesn't have a lot of positive things to say about comfort. Part of that is because ancient people were not as influenced by consumerism as much as we are and took a life of discomfort for granted. The masses of people at the time lived a shorter life and that life was filled with a lot of work and none of the amenities that we consider normal. There were no grocery stores with over 387 choices of cereal, no phones, no cars, no customer service, and no internet. In fact, royalty were the only type of people who could afford an indoor bathroom with running water. Comfort was something that was longed for in the afterlife or a result of divine intervention and favor (see Deuteronomy 28). It was not a thing that was taken for granted.

Comfort was reserved for those who were wealthy and

influential and some of the harshest critiques of comfort were aimed at the rich and powerful. Amos, the eighth century prophet, scolded the wealthy of Israel and pronounced a warning to those who lived a life of comfort at the expense of the poor:

*"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,
and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the
notable men of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel comes! (Amos 6:1 ESV)*

These were scathing words to those who began to take the idea of comfort to the next level. The idea of comfort had gripped them so much that they exploited the poor in order to live a lifestyle where they could afford summer and winter homes with the latest upgrades of the time, "designer" clothes, and expensive entertainment (Amos 3:15, 6:4). Reading about their comfortable lifestyle supported by the oppression of the poor can cause us to point the finger and judge those who have more than we have. It actually should prompt us to evaluate our own lifestyles to discern whether our small comforts are gained from the backbreaking work and exploitation of those who are needy.


Jesus never advocated a life of comfort. During a brief

exchange in the gospel of Luke, Jesus told would-be followers that, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58 ESV).

He was letting these potential followers know that the journey with him would cost them something. That something was comfort. This is not to say that followers of Christ never experience comfort, but that comfort along with anything else when compared to following Christ is dispensable.

And to nail the coffin shut on the myth of a comfortable Christian life, Jesus also said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny

himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23 ESV).

The day to day existence for a Christian is filled with uncomfortable choices. Some are on a larger scale than others but an authentic Christian life is marked by discomfort. This is undoubtedly so if we imitate the life of one who shunned the comfort of being God to experience and taste the gamut of human pain and suffering. Jesus not only lived the uncomfortable life of being born a poor Palestinian Jew in the 1st century. He also was a traveling itinerant preacher who had to deal with being on the road for the last three years of his life and being dependent on others for his livelihood. In the end he was tortured and crucified on a Roman cross for the sins of the whole world and for the joy that was set before him. What was that joy? To be raised from the dead and sit at the right hand of his Father and to be in relationship with those who would choose to follow him as their Saviour and Lord. The most amazing human life possible was also a very uncomfortable life. Could it be that we have it all wrong? 

*Comfort is an ever elusive
commodity. It is always
temporary and every good
night's sleep is awakened
and disturbed by the sound
of an alarm.*

How to Destroy the Idol of Comfort

1. Volunteer at a charity or non-profit organization.
By serving others you will have to look out for someone else's needs instead of your own; the antithesis of comfort.
2. Become exposed to the lifestyles of the poor in your own country and abroad. Watch some documentaries on how folks live in many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Better yet, go there and experience it in person. You will definitely see that it is possible to live a rich full life without our modern comforts and conveniences and you will also realize how good you have it.
3. Take risks. One of the best ways to make discomfort the new normal is to take risks. Befriend someone of a different ethnicity or social class from your own. Try learning a new sport or hobby. Make something from scratch. You will see that the greatest joys in life actually have an element of discomfort.
4. Live beneath your means. One of the quickest ways to go into debt is to take the path of comfort by buying things you don't need. How about going in the opposite direction by seeing how many things you can live without. You will see how unnecessary many of our modern comforts are.
5. Listen to a difficult person. This one can be the hardest of all but actually listening to the rantings and ramblings of someone who is either a) cranky or b) obnoxious really does make you more accustomed to other hard uncomfortable things in life. It can build patience and self control and can help to set you free from the need for everything having to serve you and bring you comfort.
6. Finally, live in the power and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the gospel of John, Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Comforter. In the original Greek the word means "someone who stands alongside." When we are experiencing uncomfortableness, and even downright horrible circumstances, we can be encouraged that we have a Comforter going through it with us.

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A Christ-like Approach to Nursing

Viewing the medical field through Jesus-colored glasses.

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SARA NAPIER

Born in Southern California, Sara Napier has spent most of her life between California and Arizona. At the age of 22 she has begun to be established as an entrepreneur, musician and writer and has worked in ministry with Kingman Foursquare Church for the last 6 years. In her spare time Sara performs, designs clothing and writes for various blogs, including her own KingdomJournal.tumblr.com.



It was early in the week during a late morning shift. The hallway stretched as far as the eye could see and the rooms were especially cold. She made her way down the hallway twice as fast as everyone else. She never stopped working, never stopped checking on patients and never let her instruments go out of her sight.

Maggie* is a nurse in a county hospital. A tall woman with short, blonde hair, her pink scrubs have cuddly kittens on them. She stops for only a moment to speak and only about the needs of a patient she has just gone to see. She thinks nothing of the fact that she has been on her feet for over four hours.

At the end of the long hallway, she finds some relief at a nurses station. It is full of computers, charts and various documents and the certified assistants pass from one side of the station to the other. The time is nearing 11AM as a co-worker walks by to ask when she had her last break. She sits in a rolling chair, takes a drink from her water bottle and say "I've been here since six and I think this is the first time I've sat down," she takes another sip, looks at her watch and adds with a smile, "It looks like we're right on schedule"

This is the typical shift for a nurse: Long hours, diverse patients and the need for comfortable shoes. There is very little time to socialize even though they are expected to be in tune with every need of their patients and other staff members.

Nursing is a challenging career to pursue, one that not everyone feels they are cut out for. Nurses have to think ahead, be prepared for anything and be ready to act quickly. It is a job that can be difficult for some to understand or appreciate to the fullest and for even the most qualified, the job proves to be too stressful at times.

Nurses play a key role in holding

a team of medical professionals together. They are responsible for treating the patients and performing procedures with the guidance of doctors. They are also the main source of information for the certified nursing assistants (CNAs) which they supervise and help train for the daily tasks of caring for patients. Besides working so closely with doctors and CNAs, they play the most personal role in patient interaction.

When caring for patients, nurses are responsible for creating a healthy, safe environment. They educate the patients and their loved ones on the important information about the patient's condition. They answer any questions the patient may have and bring them comfort and encouragement, no matter how critical the illness may be.

Some say that having a job that involves sickness and the possibility of death will change the way a person views life. That it either strengthens their faith in God, changes the way they view life or causes them to question what they had previously believed. For Maggie, a nurse of 12 years and a woman that identifies most with the views of Buddhism, being a nurse has changed the way she looks at life. "More than anything," she said, "It's changed the way I want to treat people."

When Maggie began college two decades ago, she never thought she would become a nurse. She had always hoped to help people but never thought it would be in such a direct way. "I studied business. I wanted to change the world by creating jobs and opportunities for others. I've always wanted to do something good and that just seemed like the most exciting thing."

It wasn't until her second year of college that she gained an interest in the medical field, "My roommate was in the nursing program. She was practicing a bunch of techniques on me and I found myself becoming more and more curious about her studies. Soon I was more interested in what she was reading than what I had to read. Everything about nursing was so hands-on and real! I loved it."

Maggie eventually entered the nursing program and excelled to the top of her class. She graduated with honors and has known from her first day working as a nurse that it was what she wants to do for the rest of her life. She has no plans to retire any time soon.

Over the years, she has had to handle some situations that have made her uncomfortable and caused her to examine her life differently. She says it has given her more compassion for suffering and the beliefs of others. "Every time we have to break bad news to a patient, it's hard. The

"Every time we have to break bad news to a patient, it's hard. The hardest part for me is seeing their families stand there as the doctor tells them the person they love may not make it to their next birthday."

hardest part for me is seeing their families stand there as the doctor tells them the person they love may not make it to their next birthday. But there is something about that moment when they comfort each other. A lot of families will pray together. They pray to their god or their saints or the angels or whatever, and something about that is so moving," she added "I never prayed before but I'm starting to wonder if I should and I'm really starting to believe in miracles"

When it comes to handling death, Maggie remains very professional "It's a natural part of life. More than anything, I just feel bad for the families." She continues, "I've been there when people took their last breath, some of natural causes and some before their time. Not that long ago, I held a patient's hand during his final moments. It just makes me want to hug my kids a little tighter and now I don't care if [my husband] picked up milk from the store or not... life is more important than all of those little things."

Be it the economy, the depressing news stories on TV or all the recent natural disasters, it doesn't take much to figure out that life is fragile. This is only amplified by working as a nurse. With a job like this, it is easy to feel overwhelmed but Christians can find hope in God through Jesus Christ. Every day, they see a world of suffering and they are given the opportunity to help those people gain a second chance at life. Some nurses see their job as a way to renew their passion for life after helping someone else renew their own.

A Christian Perspective

On the other side of town, in a comfortable suburb, Jane* offers tea and smiles widely as she says "Jesus is my savior, healer and best friend." A retired nurse with a career spanning over 40 years, she has seen everything there is to see when it comes to medicine. To this day, she says she looks at life much more carefully and that her faith in God has only been made stronger, even during the hard times on the job.

Jane decided to become a nurse because she was a very sick child. She had been born in the 1940's with a missing chamber in her heart. At the time, the procedures for heart patients were not anywhere near what they are today and as a result, she spent a lot of her childhood bedridden in hospitals with a small chance of survival. She decided at the age of 12 that if she lived to be an adult, she would help people the same way the nurses helped her.

Faith has played a huge role in her career, Jane has plenty of stories about how her faith kept her sane and has seen many things she calls "truly miraculous", adding "I have helped deliver babies, just trying to understand how something so fragile [as an infant] can go through such a stressful process in the first seconds of life is a miracle"

Like most nurses, Jane has experienced a lot of death. She began her career during an outbreak of a fatal illness similar to the flu, "I probably watched more people die during my first five

years [as a nurse] than I did for the rest of my career combined," she said carefully. "It made me start to ask myself 'How could such a loving God really be here when there's so much pain?' and I got my answer... the Bible says [in Ecclesiastes 3] that there is a season for everything, even death. I think I was blessed to be a part of life in all of its seasons. Why did it happen? I don't think I'll ever know but I also don't think it's my place to ask. Let's just let it be and enjoy the time that we have left."

In describing the hardest part of her job, she says that it comes down to not judging others for making mistakes. Mistakes are much less common than one would think. In a delightfully dramatic culture, it's easy to assume the worst and believe that every hospital has employees that make a mess during a routine procedure but since nurses know their responsibilities could mean the difference between life and death, there are very few mistakes for a passionate nurse. Over time, even an inexperienced nurse is able to assist with anything.

Though when something does go wrong, there are several things that can be done. Some have trouble overcoming mistakes at work because they often affect the well-being of another person "I've known some people on the last hour of their shift ...[they] may do something like break regulations, mess up important documents and once I saw a nurse almost hand out the wrong medicine."

It taught both Jane and Maggie to be more careful but also to work better as a team. Handling failures can be difficult but

like Maggie, Jane said it is much easier to bounce back when there is a supportive group of coworkers that will help make it a little less awkward. Everybody has a bad work day but for a patient, a mistake can be disastrous.

Along with living life more carefully, there is a view of nursing that goes hand in hand with the hope to live a passionate life. Some believe that nursing (or any job in the medical field) is a


Similar to a Christ-like approach to nursing, some Christians think that this is the best way to bring peace to the world. Rather than allow people to remain sick and injured, helping people feel better, meets the needs of the community around them.

way to be more like Christ. He is often referred to as "The Healer" seen through examples like Matthew 8:14-17 when Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and fulfilled the prophecy that Christ would take away all illnesses and bare all disease (Isaiah 53). Nursing is a great way to feel closer to Jesus in the aspect that nurses help in the healing process, it makes what may seem like an average job into an example of Christ's love and passion for people.

Similar to a Christ-like approach to nursing, some Christians think that this is the best way to bring peace to the world. Rather than allow people to remain sick and injured, helping people feel better, meets the needs of the community around them. Living by the ideas found in the motto of the LA Dream Center "find a need and fill it, find a hurt and heal it" works as motivation to do the best possible job each day.

Non-believers also know the value of finding a need to fill. Personal belief aside, it is obvious that nurses can help people. By helping relieve pain, comforting fears before a procedure or even a basic hygiene routine of a bedridden patient, there is a sense of compassion that can be felt by anyone. It is a chance to help spread peace to the world and heal a hurt, believer or not.

It seems that, even for those that had no specific faith when entering the career of nursing, God reveals himself through this job. Through the miracles of seeing patients healed, the hardships of watching someone die and the fragility of being responsible for the well-being of others. This is a job that is impossible without hope and an idea of something greater than humanity. Through Jesus Christ, we are made whole and given the ultimate assurance of hope for everlasting life, a hope that makes nursing feel complete.

In helping those that cannot help themselves, nurses and other medical professionals can genuinely love their job and appreciate life no matter the circumstances. They find their calling in helping others live. No matter what is going on in the world or how many people are suffering, the passion of nursing lives in the fact that someone somewhere will always need help. 

**name has been changed to protect identity.*

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Dear God,
Thank you for the opportunity to read the stories of what you are doing in the lives of others. I desire to know you more and find my purpose and identity in you. I want to take my first steps by simply coming to you and asking you to forgive me for all the things that have kept me from you. Jesus, I recognize that my sins are forgiven because you cleared all my wrongs on the cross. May you cleanse me and make me new. Holy Spirit, guide me in all truth and give me the strength to follow in your ways. In Jesus' name, Amen