

WORLD VISION | FROM HOMELESSNESS TO HOPE | HELPING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

new identity

God in focus. World in scope.

MAGAZINE

**WHAT
HAPPENS
IN MEXICO
WILL NOT
STAY IN
MEXICO**

A JOURNEY TO
CIUDAD DE JUAREZ

**MINISTRY
101**

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WANTED TO KNOW
ABOUT THE GIFT OF
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**IS SMOKING
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PLUS
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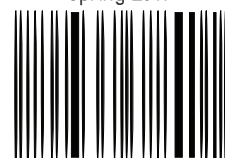
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SPRING 2011

Spring 2011



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welcome...



INSPIRATION. What is it that inspires you? What gets you burning with a passion for God that can only be satisfied by action? You know what inspires me? Those that live for God in a way that defines them to His standard and not to the world's standard. Those that stand in the gap between faith and culture and connect the two sides together. Those that dare to be

different because it's how God created them, not how society would change them.

There's so much confusion in the world when it comes to identity. Who are we? Where have we come from? Where are we going? How does God intertwine with every aspect of our lives? This continues to be the inspiration for our magazine. I think New Identity Magazine is inspiration and action. In this issue there are many stories of individuals inspired to action, but also stories that are inspired by the humility and humanity seen in others. Our contributors are not only inspired by the stories they write or interviews they conduct, but they are putting themselves into action by using their words, putting their great gifts to use to produce each issue. I thank the writers for their action and their inspiration. They are standing in the gap and daring to go against the norm to bring you some amazing articles that reflect God in who their subjects are and who they are.

I hope you enjoy this issue of New Identity Magazine—and I hope that you are not only inspired by the stories herein, but that perhaps you may also feel compelled to action, whether that be in your church, in your community or in another area of your life.

Cailin

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep
darkness
a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his
shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:2-6 (NIV)

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 daytime phone number. *New Identity Magazine*, P.O. Box 375, Torrance, CA 90508. Phone: (310) 947-8707; feedback@newidentitymagazine.com

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MAGAZINE



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THE PITFALLS OF TAKING
WHAT YOU LIKE FROM THE BIBLE
AND LEAVING THE REST

THE
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FINDING THE BEST BIBLE
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ONE DJ WANTS TO BRING GOD
INTO THE NIGHTCLUBS OF SPAIN

Breaking Bread & Breaking Barriers

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DIFFERENCES

PLUS:

WHAT IS PRAYER?

SURFING AND SERVING IN PANAMA

HOW GOD CHANGES YOUR BRAIN

INSIGHTS FROM A CHRISTIAN VEGETARIAN

Equally Yoked

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE
"EQUALLY YOKED?"

new identity

MAGAZINE

SPRING 2011

VOLUME 3 NUMBER 2

For new believers and those that are interested in who Christians are and 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 as a publication is to help people find their new identity in Christ by presenting interesting topics, issues and ideas from multiple Christian perspectives. Through this, New Identity Magazine hopes to generate the communication and understanding to unite people that hail from different ends of the spectrum 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 have questions, wonder, ponder, 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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A Light In The Dark

Even in harsh
economic times, World
Vision is helping to
transform communities
for good.



Photo by © Jason Verwey | Flickr (CC)



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.

According to the poverty statistics on their website, World Vision states that 6,000 children die every day because of disease-infested drinking water.

fact

In these tough economic times, the concept of reaching those in need has touched many on a more personal level. During prosperous times, spare income spent on non-essentials such as gym memberships, premium cable, and recreational vehicles were simply an enjoyable allocation of funds. Unfortunately, charitable contributions are often grouped into this category.

So, when the worldwide recession came along and suddenly motorcycles, boats and golf clubs started flooding the for sale listings on Craigslist, another negative indicator of present economics came to light: the fact that all charities from the Red Cross to Goodwill, both nationally and abroad, no longer had the income and funds to do the same level of work as before.

For those that are able to still make some kind of financial sacrifice and contribute, World Vision provides an opportunity to make a significant impact on the life of a specific person in a harmful environment so severe that even our tough economic times in the United States still pale in comparison. It's no secret that mostly everyone's funds are limited nowadays, which makes all of us more responsible with our money. So it's comforting to know that World Vision has received the status of Trustworthy Organization by Charity Navigator, an organization that reviews the financial responsibility of non-profit organizations. In their most recent report, World Vision demonstrated that nearly 90% of funds went directly to helping the recipients of the aid.

While there are many charities that provide aid to those impoverished and in need all over the world, such as OXFAM, CARE and Children International, World Vision provides assistance from the Christian perspective based on Christ's words in Matthew 25:40, "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

While World Vision provides its resources from a Christian purpose, it is clear that its intent is to help all. By contributing to World Vision one helps groups of believers that come from many different backgrounds like those in the Catholic, Evangelical, Protestant and Orthodox faiths. Workers sign a Statement of Faith confirming their core values of charity in the Christian tradition, but they must also abide by World Vision's Code of Conduct, which

clearly forbids proselytizing while providing aid. This allows World Vision opportunities to work and provide help in non-Christian areas while also living out its Vision Statement, which is:

*Our vision for every child, life in all its fullness;
Our prayer for every heart, the will to make it so.*

What World Vision offers is not simply a donation to a charitable organization, but an actual investment in a person's life. By contributing to the sponsorship of a child, you can see first hand the development and growth that you have helped to make possible.

When thinking of those areas where people are in chronic need of basic necessities such as clean water, adequate food and comfortable shelter, we often think exclusively of third world countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the overpopulated region of southern Asia or the disaster prone island countries of the Caribbean. What makes World Vision unique is that it not only supplies aid to these regions but it also recognizes that help is needed all over the world. World Vision helps in almost 100 different countries providing help to the poor.

In addition to supplying direct aid in the form of food, building supplies, and learning materials, World Vision works in industrialized nations such as France, Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands as an advocacy group for the impoverished and exploited.

With all that is wrong with the world that causes people to suffer, such as war, poverty, disease, and prejudice, it can be overwhelming. We all know that there is so much work to be done, we often don't know where to start. Donating to World Vision helps make a difference in the lives of individuals, impacting their lives in the most direct way possible.

Learn more at worldvision.org



Like Father, Like Son

Craig Stanley Cliver plays golf. He's a pro. He's also partially blind. You've probably never heard of him.

It's Saturday and another gorgeous day in California. The sun and a cool breeze keep the temperature in the low eighties. I'm standing on the tee box overlooking a long par five. The fairway's clipped clean in perfect manicured lawn-mowed stripes. The green sits some five-hundred plus yards away; a slight dog-leg right, obscured by eucalyptus trees. And I'm a happy man in my obnoxious spectator golf shoes, argyle socks and khaki shorts.

I'm with three other guys. A pro with a golden Don Johnson tan. A young kid with perfect hair and expensive threads. And the head pro of Valencia Country Club, Craig Stanley Cliver.

I'm first up and shank my drive left into some trees. "I normally don't play this well," I joke. "So you've played before," Craig says. This cracks everyone up.

Next on the tee is "Don Johnson." He sends a respectable shot down the left-side. The kid also hits a good drive and lands his ball near the center of the fairway.

Finally, Craig steps up. He takes one practice swing, lays the face of his driver along side the tee and SPANKS the ball. The ball doesn't so much climb as rockets into the sky, hitting a speed and distance I think NASA would respect. Eventually it begins a descent, cutting the corner out entirely and easily out-distancing everyone's drive by nearly seventy-five yards.

"Beauty," I say. And immediately want to go home.



NOAH NELSON

Noah Nelson is a writer for television. Credits include *The District* and *CSI:NY*. His proudest achievements though are his two daughters, Kyrra and Sophia.

Moments later Craig pounds an iron stiff and holes it. Double-eagle. He's partially blind, I mention that?

At twelve, Craig was hit in the right eye by a baseball putting a hole in his retina. "It's like looking at a movie screen with a giant black hole in the center," He says.

Craig's forty-one now. He's six foot something with an athletic build and handsome. He has one of the best laughs I've ever heard. It's not quite a snort, not quite a snicker, rather it comes out as one long drawl and tugs at you to join him. He's also one of those rare characters with dual opposing personalities. While he can be charming and gregarious one minute, he's quiet and detached the next.

"Man, you're good," I tell him.

"I normally don't play this bad," He says grinning.

"Why aren't you on tour?" I ask. Craig says nothing. But then —

"You know, this isn't what I wanted to do," he says.

"What did you want to do?" I ask.

"I wanted to be a fighter pilot. My dream was to be like my dad," He says.

Craig's father retired a Two Star General in the Air Force. As a kid, he'd bring his dad to every show-and-tell. He was his hero and Craig wanted nothing more than to be his duplicate. And who can blame him?

The uniform, shades, call signs and fearless bravado. Fighter pilots embody a veritable force of cool. They defy gravity and death. They put their lives on the line to save ours. Name another career where you ride the wind, pierce clouds and break the sound barrier. Superhero comes to mind.

As it was, providence had other plans. When Craig was struck in the right eye by a baseball, the impairment to his vision killed any chance he had of becoming a pilot.

"I got fat. I was depressed and found comfort in food," Craig says. "I felt like if I ate as much as my dad did, it was a way I could still be like him."

Craig became an outsider in school and his family. So, he took up golf.

"Why golf?"

"It's a loners game. It was an escape." He says. Craig would hit the links alone. He would walk the course and talk with God.

"When did you reconcile the fact you would never be a pilot like your dad?"

"Not until college. I went to Auburn University and majored in Aerospace engineering. I figured I'd make planes I could fly," He says. "Problem was, Aerospace engineering is hard. Really hard."

Craig changed his major and graduated with a degree in finance. And yet all through college Craig continued to play golf. His skill and natural ability was not lost on others. Some offered golf scholarships. Craig turned them all down.

"Why?"

"I knew what it took to become a touring pro and I didn't care enough about me or the game to do it," He says.

Years went by. He tried other career paths, but none stuck. Eventually a friend convinced Craig to try out for the PAT or Player's Ability Test; a test you have to pass should you want to become a PGA professional.

Craig passed. After a brief apprenticeship and working as an assistant golf professional, Craig was offered the much coveted head pro position at Valencia Country Club located in Southern California. It's a beautiful and exclusive course and Craig's a bit of a celebrity there. He's loved and respected by both the members and staff.

On the second tee, I approach the ball and Craig jokes, "Just swing as hard as you can in case you make contact," and then, "We're all counting on you." Snickers follow.

Later I ask Craig, "Do you believe it was God's will to take you on this path rather than one similar to your father's?"

"I thought about this a lot. I'll tell you the truth. I don't know. I know I believe in God's will," He says. "I believe God's in control of all the random moments in your life... I believe there's a God that cares about me."

Craig's skill with a golf club is legendary to those who have seen him play. With a little time and dedication, Craig could stand up to the best the touring pros have to offer. He's the golf equivalent of a Seabiscuit. So, what's stopping him?

"Ironical, you end up in a career that demands you to be social, in a game you initially took up to be alone," I say.

"Yeah. Funny thing is I don't like golf." He says.

"C'mon, seriously?"

"I don't. Not really. It's making tents. Serving. I just show up everyday."

"But you're good. *Really* good." I say.

"Yeah, but I don't want to find my worth in that," Craig says.

"But you would have found your worth as a fighter pilot," I say.

"I guess. Thank God I didn't become a pilot," Craig says smiling.

On the eighteenth hole, he crushes his drive. And this time I swear the heavens will open up and swallow the golf ball whole. It will disappear into blue sky. It will never touch earth again. The looks on the other players tell me I'm not alone.

"Wow," Says the kid.

A perfect word to sum up the day. And a guy, like Craig Stanley Cliver.



Worthy of Relationship

*The story of one woman's journey
from homelessness to hope.*

Photos courtesy of Stephanie Tillman

Stephanie and husband Shomari in their Salvation Army shelter room.



ASHLEY HIGH

Ashley High is a communications and Bible major at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. She enjoys writing short stories, reading classic literature, running (especially in cold weather), exploring new places, and having in-depth conversations. Ashley hopes to write thought-provoking material and to minister in Europe as she helps others tell their stories. It is her goal to live every day with passion and commitment as she pursues God and loves others.

She was six years old when her mother abandoned her and took off for Florida. She was 22 the Valentine's Day when her drug dealer boyfriend dumped her and their newborn son on the couch while he left to play basketball with friends. She was 26 when she moved into Room 4 at the local homeless shelter. And she was 33 last year when her graphic design company grew 553% and she happily celebrated her seventh wedding anniversary with her husband.

Now, in 2011, Stephanie's fingers fly over her bright pink laptop as yet another email pings into her inbox. "I know God gave me this graphic design company so I can provide low-cost products to ministries and to others who can't normally afford graphic design," she says. "And I want to bring hope to the world by telling my story--which I've named *Homeless to Greatness*."

Stephanie twists toward the printer; her floor-length blue dress accentuates her loose blonde curls and her sometimes-green, sometimes-blue eyes as her heavy silver necklace clicks against the desk. Her swift, vibrant movements are infused with energy and absolute confidence that life is good. William High, one of Stephanie's clients, notes, "When I first met Stephanie, I was impressed by her fearlessness and optimism [...] She always has a mischievous smile on her face and a glint in her eye. Her 'can do' attitude coupled with this energy is infectious and attractive to clients."

In the main office where a half dozen people are at work, a painted orange wave springs up the wall from behind a startlingly white couch. Floating on the wave is the word "*ikros*." Stephanie's company has a name, an identity. And for the first time in almost 34 years, Stephanie can say the same for herself: "I now understand who God created me to be," she explains. "When I look in mirror, I see my reflection as who I am in God."

It has not always been this way.

"If I had been worthy, perhaps my mom wouldn't have left me and moved to Florida," 6-year-old Stephanie reasoned, unable to factor in her mom's adult reasons for leaving. Stephanie's thoughts continued, "If my mom thinks I'm unworthy, other people must think that also."

Stephanie's parents' divorce split her life into two worlds. Every summer she left her dad's home in Missouri and flew to

Florida to visit her mom. Because Stephanie spent so much time away from home, she missed out on all the things that cement childhood friendships...summer camps, slumber parties, and whispered secrets.

In the midst of this tension between her families and friendships, Stephanie retreated from conflict and desperately tried to find worth within herself. She made decent grades and stayed out of trouble in school, but her dad and stepmom always managed to find a reason to ground her or to keep her from doing activities other kids participated in.

"Before she turned 21, she was engaged; however, her parents did not approve. Still trapped by her controlling parents, she left her fiancé. But once she turned 21, something snapped. Stephanie began drinking and partying, declaring that her parents could not dominate her any longer. 'I was trying to fill the 'unworthy' void,' Stephanie says.

That October, one of her girlfriends asked Stephanie to attend the homecoming game. And there, Stephanie saw him: a tall African-American young man wearing camouflage pants and a black hoodie.

At a party later that night, she ran into the same guy. He introduced himself as Shomari and asked her to dance. After attempting to pawn him off onto her girlfriend, she agreed.

Shortly afterward, Stephanie and Shomari entered a relationship—soon they were smoking weed and drinking together. But regardless of what they did on Saturday night, Shomari always drove to church the next morning to play the drums. "Shomari was my first glimpse of a relationship with God," Stephanie recalls, "I didn't understand how he made it to church. I was usually so hung over that I could not remember anything from the night before."

About six months later, Stephanie became pregnant. But this did nothing for her rapidly disintegrating relationship with Shomari. "If there wasn't a [romantic] relationship involved, we would have been the best road dogs...We were each other's best friend and worst enemy. However, since there was a relationship, it was rough. Rough to the point that we got into physical fights, rough to the point that I once tried to run over Shomari," Stephanie says.

In December 1998, their daughter Desiree was born. "I was a crazy baby momma," Stephanie declares, "If Shomari wasn't with me and Desiree every moment, I felt unworthy."

Even after Desiree's birth, Shomari continued to sell drugs, something he'd been doing even before meeting Stephanie. Stephanie remembers, "There were enough drugs in his car to send him to jail for life. He was probably supplying weed for the entire campus [where he attended college]."

Then, in February 2000, their son Isaiah was born. On Valentine's Day, Shomari drove Stephanie and the new baby home, and then he left to play basketball for the afternoon. Stephanie just sat on the couch with her children and cried. She was terrified because she didn't know what would happen or how her family would survive.

A year later, in May 2001, Shomari graduated from college and relocated to Columbia, Missouri alone to continue the drug lifestyle with his friends. Stephanie begged Shomari to give her money to move to the nearby Kansas City because she wanted her kids to know their dad. She knew Shomari would commute between Columbia and Kansas City to see his children. Once in Kansas City, Stephanie's family looked fine outwardly: she lived in a good neighborhood, obtained a steady job at a pool hall, and shortly afterward, Shomari finally resettled in Kansas City.

One day, Shomari's mother invited Stephanie to church. At first, Stephanie hesitated. She knew what others did not see—weed, cocaine, and wet (embalming fluid laced with PCP) filled Stephanie's house. However, she finally agreed to go.

At church that night, a young woman gave her testimony about almost dying of a drug overdose. As the girl spoke, Stephanie thought, "That girl could be me!" Stephanie walked to the altar in tears and

turned her life over to Christ. But once she returned home, she found Shomari in the exact place she left him—unchanged.

The next month, Shomari was arrested after a night out at a club. With Shomari in jail, Stephanie had to quit her job to watch her kids. She spent the rest of the month watching her children and praying while their already-low cash supply rapidly disappeared.

Meanwhile, Shomari met a minister in jail who encouraged Shomari to return to God. Upon Shomari's release, he and Stephanie looked at each other: "Are we going to do this together or should we separate and just have visitation rights?" They decided to stick it out. In what Stephanie calls "the first adult decision of our relationship," they purchased a marriage license with money borrowed from a friend. On July 1, 2002, they celebrated their marriage in a park complete with a beautiful sunset and a total of

"I thought I'd let everyone down because I couldn't even take care of my family. There was nothing that could have broken me any further. But there was also something hopeful. I began to see that God had a plan for us. And I didn't feel like I had to fight for love. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had a family."

STEPHANIE TILLMAN



The Tillman family outside their Salvation Army room.



Stephanie Tillman, CEO of ikros

three wedding pictures.

After their wedding, Stephanie and Shomari had no place to turn. Their landlord was evicting them, Shomari could not find a job, and 9/11 had turned the economy upside down. However, the Tillmans clearly heard God telling them to pack their things and then, to be still. A few days later, the Salvation Army called. Somehow, they knew about Stephanie's situation and had a place for them. So, a week after Stephanie's wedding, her family moved

into Room 4 at the Johnson County Family Lodge that housed nine other homeless families.

"I was so embarrassed and humiliated," Stephanie says. "I thought I'd let everyone down because I couldn't even take care of my family. There was nothing that could have broken me any further. But there was also something hopeful. I began to see that God had a plan for us. And I didn't feel like I had to fight for love. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had a family."

After four months in the homeless shelter, the Salvation Army helped Stephanie and Shomari find jobs and move into a duplex. Those first days outside the shelter were difficult. Stephanie recalls one week when she needed orange juice for her kids' colds. She spent twenty minutes in the grocery store staring at the juice and wrestling with God because she did not have enough money to help her kids. God told her to get the biggest juice bottle. And when she took the juice to the cashier, he discovered the price was marked wrong—so he gave Stephanie the juice for free.


In Stephanie's spare time, she self-taught herself Microsoft Publisher and designed a postcard for a friend's film project. That first project led to other design clients for Stephanie.

One day in June 2007, Stephanie spent the morning folding laundry in her bedroom and asking God whether she should pursue design full time. Around 10 a.m., Shomari called. After consulting with H&R Block for two years, they had just offered him a job with full benefits. With their family's insurance needs covered, Stephanie submitted her two weeks' notice to her job and founded her graphic design business in her home. Her title read CEO, designer, marketing manager and everything else rolled into one.

There were rough days and months as Stephanie wrote business plans, hired employees, and dealt with frustrated customers as she fell behind on projects due to her company's rapid growth. Yet, *ikros* survived and flourished, even growing 553% from 2008-2009.

Today *ikros* has a new building and eight full-time employees along with freelance designers living everywhere from the United Kingdom to Vietnam. Project Director Sarah DeGarmo says, "Every day, miracles happen at *ikros*. Some miracles are small and some are large, but they all come from Him: I know it, our team knows it, and our clients know it." Shomari adds with a smile, "I never saw it coming to this point, but [Stephanie] had a vision."

As Stephanie looks ahead, she is excited about the future. "In two years, Shomari and I will have our tenth wedding anniversary. Maybe we'll actually be able to buy wedding rings!" She laughs. "I would also like to be an author who has published multiple times—one book is in the final editing phase now. And I see our *Homeless to Greatness* story gaining visibility as I step back from the day-to-day tasks at *ikros* and speak about my story."

Stephanie pauses, leaning forward, "Now that I am secure in the person God created me to be, I get to use my story and voice to influence culture and bridge gaps on multiple levels. There are stories out there about someone coming from homelessness, but my story is about how God can take people from homelessness and give them hope." She smiles, "Romans 5:5, 'And hope does not disappoint us.'" 

What is the Sabbath?

The age old debate about the Sabbath is explored.



KELLI WARD

With an intense love of and for the Lord (which didn't manifest itself in her until her early 20's), Kelli wants to share her experiences in being a Christian with the world in a down-home-direct way. As an aspiring screenwriter living in Los Angeles with an M.F.A. from USC, Kelli has also most recently decided to devote her writing talent to educating the masses about the Christian walk.

I once participated in a heated discussion with my friend of another denomination about the Christian Sabbath. She insisted that the seventh day, meaning Saturday, is the Sabbath. She even had me count out the days, and I could not disagree with her. Thinking her point proved correct, I felt ashamed that I couldn't put forth any rebuttal as to why I go to church and spend extra time with God on Sunday. But 2 Timothy 2:15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth," inspired me to find out more about the Sabbath. What is it? Why is it important? And does it matter which day we honor the Sabbath?

A Day Of Rest

Genesis 2:3 reads, "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating he had done." God - rested? Rest may sound like a foreign concept in this day and age, with the constant barrage of stimuli - but rest is important. Though we are made in God's image, God most likely rested by choice, but we humans *need* to rest. Not only is it important physically, as in sleep, but mentally and spiritually as well. In Exodus 23:12 God says, "Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed." We rest because God tells us to. We call this the Sabbath. Though we may rest because God asks us to, He does so for our own health and benefit. He loves and cares for us and wants us to be refreshed. Resting also expresses our faith in God, as we honor Him and do what He commands of us.

Is the Sabbath a certain day? Saturday or Sunday?

There is no specific verse in the New Testament that states *when* Christians should keep the Sabbath, and the word Sunday is never mentioned in the Bible. Sunday has become a culturally ac-

ceptable day of worship since Constantine declared it so (the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity), but in reality, every day is equal. It says in Colossians 2:16-17, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." Paul's words trump the discussion of whether the Sabbath should be Saturday or Sunday, or if any specific day is better than another and reminds us to focus on Christ, rather than technicalities. Which day to reserve the Sabbath becomes a moot point that is determined by tradition and preference, rather than Scripture directly. However, both Sabbath days are not without meaning, and can have much historical or personal significance.

In the Roman period, what we now know as the seven days of the week were created. The days were named after planets (passed down from the Greeks) and numbered. The Roman Empire selected Sunday (after the Sun) as the first day of the week and named Saturday (after Saturn) the seventh day. Because God rested on the seventh day and made it holy, followers of God wanted to honor that seventh day of rest because God did, which is how the Jewish Sabbath became Saturday. You could say that's a good reason to choose a Saturday Sabbath. As Jesus was a Jew, he kept the Sabbath on Saturday (as do Jews still and some Christian denominations), so as a follower of Jesus, you might also want to keep the Sabbath on a Saturday like he did. This too could be a meaningful reason to reserve a Saturday Sabbath. But, because Jesus wasn't *just* a Jew, but also the Son of God, Mark 2:28 says, "So the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath." Jesus healed people on Saturday the Sabbath, he performed miracles, and the religious leaders of the day considered that work and considered it wrong. Jesus spoke otherwise in Luke 13:10-17:

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

This was Jesus' way of saying, many of us have missed the point of the Sabbath. It should not be a rule to keep just for the sake of keeping. Having to "rest" should not keep you from helping others or doing things that are necessary – cooking, eating, showering, etc. The Sabbath is meant for rejuvenation and refresh-

ment from the week's work and our busy schedules and can allow us some down time to seek God in more meaningful ways, longer times of prayer or a renewed joy in seeking a fresh perspective from God and evaluating our week, goals, plans, dreams, or purpose.

Why is the Sabbath now Sunday for most people you may ask? What are the supporting arguments for a Sunday Sabbath? In the 4th Century AD, Constantine declared:

All judges and city people and the craftsmen shall rest upon the venerable day of the sun. Country people, however, may freely attend to the cultivation of the fields, because it frequently happens that no other days are better adapted for planting the grain in the furrows or the vines in trenches. So that the advantage given by heavenly providence may not for the occasion of a short time perish.

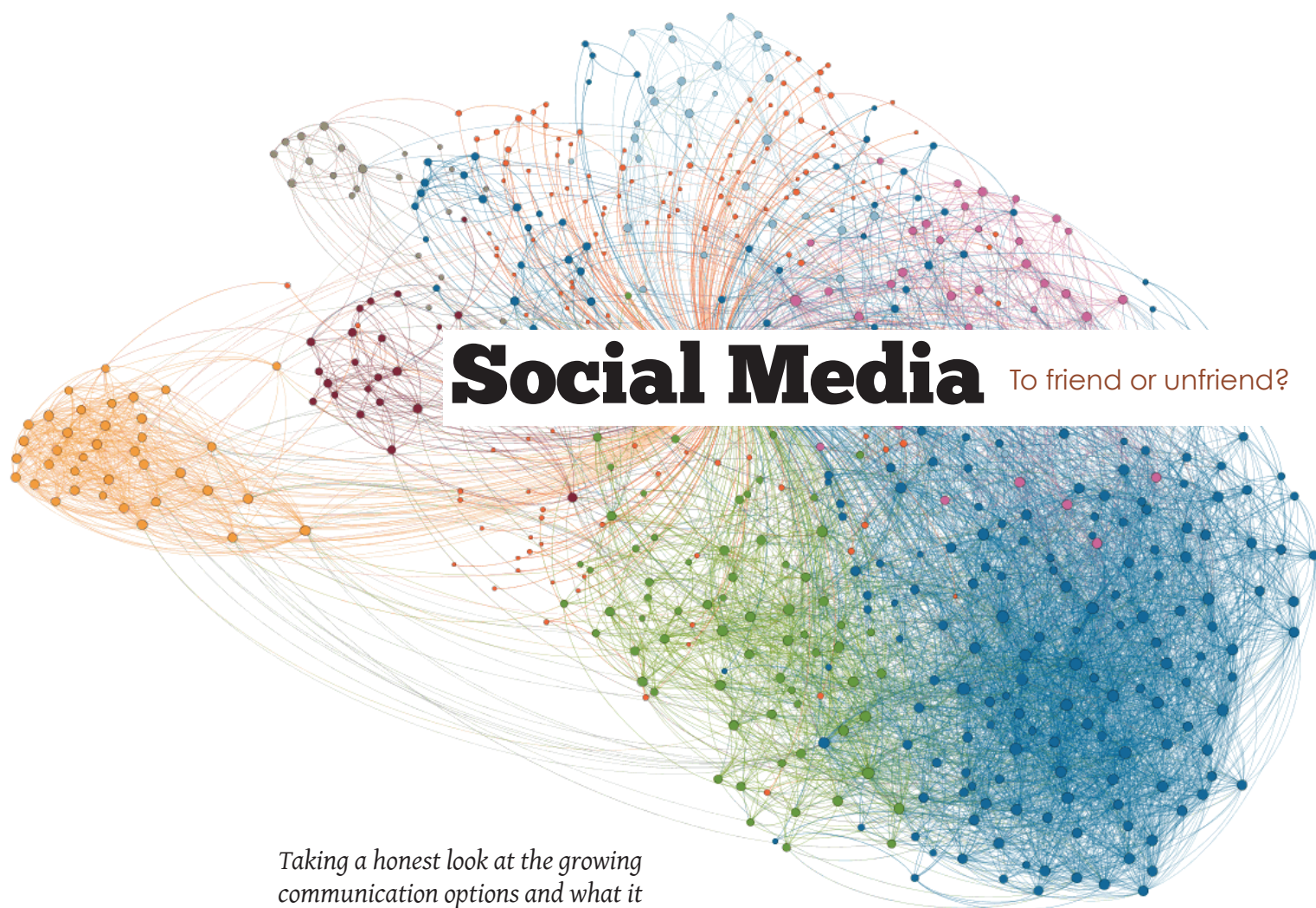
— Joseph Cullen Ayer, *A Source Book for Ancient Church History*

But Constantine wasn't the first to put aside Sunday instead of Saturday as the Sabbath. In Acts 20:7 the early church came together on Sundays, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight."

Some Christians see Sunday as their symbolic holy day of rest because of Jesus' resurrection occurring on a Sunday. They choose to put aside Sunday in honor and celebration of Christ overcoming sin and rising from the dead. Mark 16:1-6 says, "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him."

Reserving a Sunday Sabbath, or the first day of the week, could also mean to celebrate the shift and inclusion of non-Jews (or Gentiles) into God's Kingdom. Through Christ's death and resurrection, the whole world now has access to God through the belief in Jesus. This may have been part of the reason that the early church shifted the Sabbath day from that of the traditional Saturday Jewish Sabbath to Sunday. Either way, it's the principle that is important. Exercise your faith and love in God by working the other six days of the week and resting one. Honor God by devoting time to him and putting other work aside. Sometimes resting makes us restless, especially in our go-go-go society, but when we say Monday through Saturday, "I'm too tired," God tells us in Matthew 11:28, "I will give you rest."

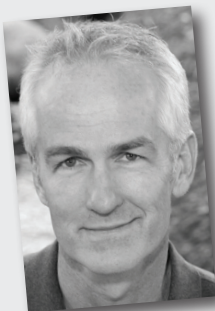




Social Media

To friend or unfriend?

*Taking a honest look at the growing
communication options and what it
means for Christians.*



TOM KOEL

Tom Koel became a Christian at 28, twenty years ago. He says they've been interesting years and that the Lord has done a lot of work on him. Tom has had several careers spanning manufacturing, teaching, preaching, and the motion picture industry and is sure there will be more. Tom has been blessed to have his sweet wife by his side through it all and has two fantastic boys, ages 10 and 5.

When did the postal service really get started? When was it feasible for an average someone to send a letter across town or country? I'm told that in America it was no later than 1639. How fun it must have been when Aunt Phyllis' nephew, after traveling for days across the state for his once-every-two-years visit, sat at her dinner table and said "So, in Mom's letter she told me that those corns on your feet are keeping you from wearing those expensive shoes you got from Mr. Landry, the tailor, last month."

And what did it feel like when the first phones were installed? The first switchboards came in around 1877. What a rush it must have been to pick up a phone and hear the voice of a friend across town. How precious those first numbers must have been. Probably complete neighborhoods got wired all at the same time. I bet the new construction got it, while retrofitting older neighborhoods was a lesser priority, unless it was in the rich part of town. Did everyone really know their neighbors in those days? Did they have to go door to door to get their neighbor's number, or were those numbers public right from the start? The operators must have known them. I bet they were private or, at least, not published, in which case you would have had to unfriend someone to their face.

The Timeline of Technology

Sometime in the late 1960s those huge answering machines became commonplace, so you could leave a message for someone unable or unwilling to answer the phone. Suddenly the guy who wanted to say something trumped the guy who didn't want to hear anything. The speaker became the focus. Email, pagers, and then the communication staple, the cell phone, emerged. Not soon after that it seemed like the Web was born. It took several years before it found its feet, but now it has. And these days, if you are in an office building that loses its Internet during the work day, you'll see people flood out to the street, cell phones in hand, as if the electricity had been cut and the inside was dark.

I've wondered why all the technology took so long to break. For thousands of years there was just the messenger. Just three hundred and seventy years ago the postal service comes

along and it's only another two hundred and forty years before the next change. Since high school I've seen the answering machine, pager, cell phone, and Internet. If we were to trace the development of the key communications devices and the technology we are the most dependent upon, we would see the dots on the graph pinching up closer and closer toward the end of the line to the degree where the current time, now, would be one big fuzzy dot. The curve is shooting straight up.

Here's another way of putting this in perspective. Let's say that there were perhaps 7,000 years of reasonably verifiable recorded history. (Even though this is no doubt a very conservative number, to make the number bigger only further demonstrates the point.) If we took that number of 7,000 years and translated it into an hour's time, Christ came along 2,000 years ago, which would, in this example, have been about seventeen minutes and nine seconds ago. Now let's apply this to our technology developments. The average American would have been able to mail a letter for the first time just three minutes and ten seconds ago. The first phone calls that could have been made across town took place just one minute and seven seconds ago. And the first girl to come home to a blinking light on her answering machine and seventeen unanswered calls from a guy trying to ask her to the prom, happened just twenty-five seconds ago. Facebook, three seconds ago.

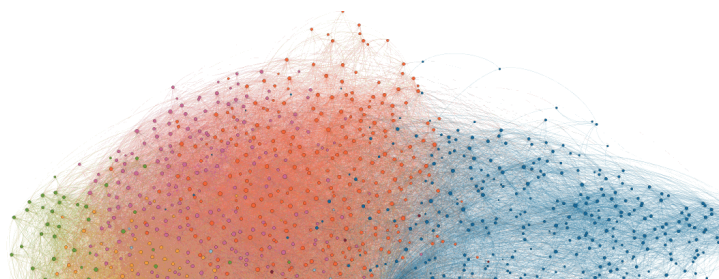
Personally, I don't give us much credit for it all. I don't think we are smarter today than those who ran those letters by horse and runner. In fact we are not nearly as smart as the men and women before us. Nonetheless, at least technologically, we are racing forward as if about to cross the finishing line.

The Desire to Communicate

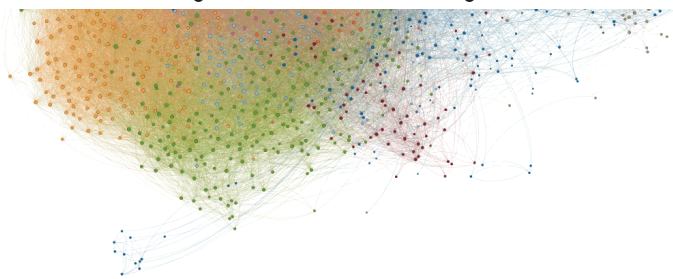
So far I have not commented on whether we should or should not be immersing ourselves in this technology. The observable timeline, though, suggests that given the opportunity, the ability to communicate at will with anyone anywhere is something many people want to do. The guys who first thought up texting must have known that. Imagine being in the room when they first pitched their idea. I can't imagine trying to sell that. When I first heard about it I thought it was insane.

The desire to communicate is wired into us. Most of us, anyway. Even if we do it poorly, we want to do it. It is a character trait of the creature. To press the point, if we were designed with this desire, and if we cannot trace it to The Fall, then we can hardly say it is a bad thing without implicating our Maker.

Back to the recent phenomenon of social networking. I am an "older" man, about to leave my forties. And though it is said that fifty is the new forty – a phrase only spoken and popularized by those fifty and above – I cannot help but see the gulf between the teenagers and myself. Though my spirit is forever young, my tent is conspicuously older. Also, and most importantly, the context of my life is different. I have two young boys. I look at social networking on two levels. How will I be involved on Facebook, Youtube, and the like? And what degree of involvement will I allow my children?



"Being Christian means being social."



In the past, those new developments in technology and engineering went through the parents to the kids. Power Steering, the microwave, the answering machine, and the video player were brought home by mom and dad. But not social networking. That started with the kids. Facebook was released by a twenty year-old, Twitter by a thirty year old (the new twenty). I am part of the only generation that sits on the fence with regard to these communication developments. My parents are distinctly suspicious. Privacy is a big concern of theirs. On the other hand, every kid in the world seems to be eager to post a profile at any one of the social networking sites in order to be rid of their privacy - in order to be known. At a sales conference about a year ago, the young tech-savvy spokesperson scolded us, "Big Brother is already here. Get over it!" He's right. My generation is the only one that is trying to decide what to do. My kids and theirs will accept it without a question, as they already have.

Some may argue that a Stalinesque misuse of the information commonly posted on these sites could turn back the clock on our rush to share. But I think that the global power of individuals to communicate with one another is actually more powerful than any one government's ability to abuse it. I don't think government is organized enough, nor world governments allies enough, to organize themselves against the citizenry at large. There are cases, to be sure, where abuses have happened. But whole societies cannot be monitored or terrorized with this communication. In fact, as far as I've seen, the only way to forcibly control the population is to cut off the communication, shut down the Internet.

Anyway, whether I'm a prognosticator or not, it is here. And, if it is not scientific, it is at least antidotal that the young embrace it so much. I do not think they do so because they are foolish. I think they do so because they find it natural. The youth embrace social networking because it is fun. Communicating is fun. It is we jaded, burned out, tired, grumps who live for twenty years in a

quaint neighborhood and never know those who live next door, who find it threatening.

When my wife and I take our young boys to a dinner party, it is a guarantee that though they will not have known any one when they got there, they will be sad to leave because of the fun they are having with the other kids they just met. It is my wife and I that will be complaining about those who weren't friendly.

When we were younger, we were more friendly.

And, really! How cool would these types of media and communication have been when I was in high school? It would have been such a blast (although I'm sure I would have made a huge melodrama out of all of it) to have been able to track every one and every clique on campus, to have read all the status updates, all the he-said she-said, all the wonderful drama! Who would not have loved it? I would have jumped on it. I would have been completely immersed in it.

In the years before the emergence of social media networking, I found myself wondering where all those people who had shaped my life had gone. I had lost touch with the huge chunks of people who had spent their limited days and years in mine. I was no longer responsible to them, and their effect on me. Being so far away in my memory, their impact was seeping out of me. How many times in your life can you cast away ten or twenty years work on a relationship just to have to start over again? Not many.

What does the Bible say about Facebook?

I cannot find anything in scripture that says that we should beware of communicating or that we should isolate ourselves away. I can find lessons in scripture about how to communicate. We should be in the world, but not of it (John 17:11-17, 1 Cor 5:9-10). That must mean that although we interact with the world and move in it, we do so with a distinction that sets us apart. We use clean language when we speak (James 3:6). We avoid foolish arguments (2Tim 2:24-26). We do not gossip (1 Tim 5:13). We are to be wise as serpents but gentle as doves (Mat 10:16).

C. S. Lewis, in a defense of learning theology in *Mere Christianity* said that as the years and millennia marched on, we had a responsibly to know more about God than our forefathers. The temperature is going up. The world is moving faster. When you're in a car that is moving faster, you have to pay more attention. It is the same here. As Christians, we have a responsibility to act and speak with more integrity than ever before. We must know our Scriptures. We need to be alert. We must be ready more than ever with an answer for the hope that lies within us (1 Peter 3:15). And if there are a million more conversations going on now than just ten years ago, the number of times we are going to be required to give our witness is also going to rise exponentially.

But our tendency is to hide ourselves away. We attempt to avoid society and its changes. I remember when the answer to the temptations of the Internet was to unplug the computer. That didn't turn out to be a realistic approach. Our greater responsibility was

to increase our holiness to overcome the temptations of the Internet. That same challenge exists now. When technology is more and more able to satisfy our desires to be social, it doesn't work for us to turn our backs. And, while it may be a choice for us, it will not be a choice for our kids. If we want our kids to survive (let alone leave a witness), we better teach them how to succeed with social media, not avoid it. Avoidance is not an option.

The Young versus Not-so-young

Let's talk more about our children and social media networking. I see three primary fears that we have about our children and the Internet and social networking. First, we fear that they will have interaction with those they should not trust. Second, we fear they will involve themselves in things and practices that we are unfamiliar with and fall out of our ability to protect them. Finally, we fear that our kids are going to choose the facelessness of the small screen as their primary way of being social.

The first two fears are all the more scary because my experience has been that my child can change his set of friends and have a whole new set of interests in a very short period of time. On the one hand, he's experimenting, testing this and testing that. On the other, he's trying desperately to fit in. If I'm not checking in regularly, I will be completely disconnected with his world within a very short period of time.

So, I have to stay connected. His mom and I have to regularly check in. Or maybe the best approach is not to check out. In our house, we sacrifice privacy for freedom. That is, our kids get only as much freedom as we can monitor. All emails are considered reviewable and are only sent through phones, computers and devices that we can monitor. The Internet connections are monitored and tracked – we use Covenant Eyes. Devices that do not allow a flow through that, go through the parents, or are not allowed.

To pull this off we have to handle the information we are reviewing very carefully. We have to give our kids room to converse as they wish, for the most part. Most of the time we say nothing. Once in a while we'll risk offering advice. Of course, when we see something potentially dangerous, we step in.

This doesn't work unless our kids feel they have the freedom to ask us *anything*. This is much easier said than done. The questions my sixth grader comes home from school with are unbelievable, frankly shocking. Nonetheless, we answer fully, honestly, and calmly. If your child does not see you as his or her best source of information, then he or she will seek another source. You don't want that.

For me, a key part of this has been realizing that it is my child's sense of his own survival that is more powerful than my sense of his survival. Each day he gets older, he becomes more driven to take care of himself, to see himself succeed. My goal, then, cannot be to slow him down, but to serve that desire. I have to come along side him, not stand in front of him.

Of course we are trying to steer our children, and sometimes we put our foot down. But the fact is that our days of being

able to do that are evaporating quickly, especially for our oldest.

These days require more responsibility and involvement on the part of parents. That will only increase. As for the fear that they will prefer the Internet to face to face involvement, from what I've seen, that is not a legitimate concern. If you watch kids these days, you'll see them involved on the Internet, texting etc., but not at the expense of being face to face. It's not all glazed over eyes, staring at the small screen. The only time a kid prefers the Internet to actually going to the party is when he can't stand those at the party. Kids want all the connection they can get.


Now, back to us. How should we adults approach social media networking? What about the happily married father hooking up with the high-school girlfriend and blowing up his marriage?

Here, too, the answer is more responsibility. If you can see no good coming from a conversation, don't engage. Don't be naïve. Be suspicious. Use some common sense.

On the other hand, social networking could legitimately get you back in touch with the people of your life, those who know you and want to talk to you, those you've had memories with. And it is very important to stay connected. These are the only days and years that you have. Beware of walking away from relationships. Resist isolating yourself. Be willing to be accountable to those who know you.

Saving the unsaved on Facebook

As far as being a Christian witness, you can't be accused of being a good witness or a bad one if you're not interacting with people. You have to get out there. But here's a social networking rule. When you're on Facebook, pretend that you are at a house party. No one at a house party wants you to sell them anything. People who use social networking to try to get their friends to buy stuff from them, don't get far. It is the same with witnessing. No one wants to hear you preach. On the other hand, they do want you to be yourself. They want to know how you honestly feel, what is really happening in your life, and they want you to chime in to the conversation. They may want to ask you about God directly, but wait for them to do that. Otherwise, just be real. Don't have an agenda.

I believe that being Christian means being social. Yes, social networking is scary. I'm not advocating that parents sit back on the side lines. And as mature grown up individuals, we must watch our step out there. We must act with integrity and treat this as the awesome frontier that it is. Obviously there comes a time to turn off the gadgets. Do it. But let's look for the good in it, too. Let's try to remember what it was like when being social was more important than work. And, most of all, let's face those technological developments that are here to stay, and that, by the way, have been driven by the pure ageless desire to be in community. Get involved. Get on the net. Remember your old friends, and be social. This is the world now. It's not going anywhere. 

IN PERSPECTIVE

Showcasing today's touchy subjects.

Is smoking marijuana against God?

Christians weigh in on finding a faith-based perspective on marijuana.



Perspectives compiled by Cailin Henson

Photo by Troy Holden | Flickr (CC)

Marijuana use may be socially accepted by many, but it's illegal in most countries. With a recent change in California law (where we have the New Identity Magazine office), it seems that the punishment for marijuana possession has weakened. Previously it was a criminal offense or misdemeanor to be in possession of one ounce or less of marijuana, but since January 1, 2011, it is instead an infraction, punishable by no more than a \$100 fine, with no criminal record, court cost or court appearance. This leads to some confusion between social acceptance and law. How can something so socially accepted still be illegal? Or even more peculiar, why is something illegal so socially accepted? Is there a Christian perspective? Is smoking marijuana against God? Is it anti-Christian? What about for medical use? What does the Bible say?

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

A Christian perspective on marijuana use may first seem difficult to obtain, as talking about marijuana and Scripture may well be a sort of anachronism. Though the Bible does not expressly forbid the use of marijuana, there was also nothing in the ancient world that can be compared to what marijuana is today – a substance that is consumed individually but with large sociopolitical implications.

“Nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean,” said Jesus. (Mk. 7:18). “What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. For from within, out of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly” (Mk. 7:20-22). Marijuana (the cannabis plant) is not good or bad in itself, but many Christians see the consequences of its consumption as being where the issue lies.

Affecting motivation

From the perspective of consumption, marijuana, a relatively mild narcotic, is mostly used for recreational purposes. There are several medical reports about the relative inoffensiveness of the drug compared to other substances or alcohol, and there are even proven benefits in its medical use. But, per one perspective, marijuana is not without damage to an individual's health and especially to his or her social life. The reasoning is that all Christians are ultimately called to be a part of the body of Christ (the community of believers) in some way. One of the implications of Paul's discussion on sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 6, is that when one person makes him or herself impure by fornication, it affects the purity of the entire body, since they are joined as one by the Spirit.

In this way, it's argued that the social consequences of one person's lack of sobriety can have a larger effect on the community of Christ as a whole. Many see marijuana (as well as some other substances) causing harm to the body of Christ in this way. In addition many view marijuana as resulting in a strong lack of motivation which, in the long run, can affect family, school, work and children. Concerning casual or recreational usage, there is clear medical evidence that marijuana usage impairs, at least temporarily, cognitive function. And 1 Peter 5:8 charges Christians to “Be sober; be on alert.” [LEB]

Supporting the Drug Trade & The Legality of It All

The consumption of marijuana has other implications, basically supporting a system that is profoundly detrimental: the international drug trade and the traffickers that bring violence and fear to people in producing and transit countries and in countless neighborhoods. It could be argued that every time someone lights up a marijuana cigarette, they are empowering a criminal organization. Some may say this is an argument in favor of legalizing marijuana. They say that if marijuana were legal, the demand would decrease as people begin to farm it or sell or trade it. How often is there news of organized cartels or violence centered on tobacco farming? But there's more to it than that. You could say alcohol is legal and it still causes health concerns, affects motivation and has socioeconomic implications if over consumed. To understand the correct perspective about marijuana or any other habit, it's important to look at the consequences and not just the substance itself - understanding that there are other issues that need to be considered.

REASONS FOR USAGE

A Retreat From My Problems

Some believe the question shouldn't be is smoking marijuana against God, but rather, why is someone smoking marijuana in the first place? In other words, what led that person to turn to marijuana? Is it to help relax, ease stress, or find relief from an emotional issue they are going through? Does it help or hinder the well-being of that person in the long term? If marijuana is used as a way to avoid a problem or issue, rather than deal with it - this could be hurting the person, instead of helping. God wants us to go to him with our emotional problems or painful past, rather than mask them or avoid them entirely. God can especially work through the body of Christ (other Christians in a church community) to bring healing, freedom and understanding in such areas. In a church community the individual facing the problem doesn't have to go-it-alone, but can come together with other believers, who through Christ, become a supportive team. This team strives for growth and change, to live a life like Jesus modeled. Some argue that the

use of marijuana encourages the avoidance of personal issues and does not help the individual, even if they think it's helping in the short term. Those that feel this way, desire for the overall betterment of the person, and not just a temporary solution.

Medical Marijuana To Ease The Pain

While there is a federal law prohibiting marijuana usage in the United States, there are a number of states that have repealed their own state law in order that marijuana may be used as a medical product for those who are terminally ill. Though many in the scientific community have praised the effects of medical marijuana for pain relief, some wonder whether the use of medical marijuana is a supplement for a reliance of God. They ask what about prayer for medical use or prayer as a pain reliever? Do we discount God's power to heal or to change our lives? We cannot assume that God won't heal, but there isn't a guarantee He will either. It's a delicate balance of faith and practicality. Most believe that God has provided many amazing cures through medical science and created beneficial plants and herbs that provide remedies for our bodies. And it would be unwise to dismiss these. The argument is not likened to encouraging people to pray for safety rather than use a seat belt, rather it's more about how we can abuse the blessing or not think of God at all in the process. Do we pray for a headache to go away? Do we evaluate what might be causing it (such a dehydration)? Or do we simply take an aspirin? We need to pray *and* use what medical options God has made available to us. But since much marijuana use is recreational, those that use it for recreational purposes can't claim it as a justifiable pain reliever or physical remedy unless they have a prescription for it. Especially for terminal illness, marijuana use may be a legitimate medicinal option for those who reside in states where the plant is legal.

It's Natural – So It's God Approved

Some have even argued that since marijuana is an herb then that makes using it permissible and endorsed by God as long as we don't abuse it. (Genesis 2:5). The argument is that if God created it then it must be good. The scriptures used to support this argument are Gen 1:11 and Gen 1:29. The first scripture is the charge by God for the earth to produce "seed-bearing" plants. The second scripture is the statement by God that He has "given [humankind] every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth..." [LEB] But most say that the "God created it" stance is not a good enough argument to endorse use of marijuana. God also created poison ivy but it does not mean we should rub it all over our bodies.

One of the scriptures against the use of marijuana, is Paul's instruction in Romans 13:1-5 to "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience." As a Christian this would exclude using marijuana in the United States of America since there is a federal law prohibiting its use.

If we as Christians didn't necessarily find it wrong, holding ourselves accountable to the law and being above reproach should be plenty enough of a reason to hold to a higher standard as "lights of the world" (Ephesians 5:8). Whether or not marijuana in itself is against God is debatable, but as a substance that is against the law, we are still subject to the law. It's important as Christians to be consistent in our honoring of authority. After all, speeding, burning copyrighted music and under-age drinking are all against the law as well. In addition, marijuana, as with other substances, has the potential to lead to acts certainly considered against God (Ephesians 5:11).

SELF CONTROL: BEING IN YOUR RIGHT MIND

Paul the apostle wrote: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). Although Paul surely never heard of marijuana, he knew about the effects of wine, another "stimulant" that was used in the Mediterranean world for strengthening bonds, but also with a recreational and escapist purpose, something that had the capacity to disrupt social life, just as it does today. Wine, of course, is not bad in itself and surely Paul could not condemn it—it was, after all, a symbol of the presence of Christ, but in his letter to the Ephesians, he was warning about excessive indulgence and moral relaxation that happens when one crosses a certain line. Wine, in one word, is blessed; drunkards are not.

It seems fairly clear in the Scriptures as a whole that drunkenness goes hand in hand with sin. And while the Bible does not address marijuana specifically, it can probably be noted that it produces a certain kind of intoxication that could be understood as similar

CONSCIENCE & BREAKING THE LAW

to drunkenness in the biblical sense. Indeed, anything that produces a change in our mental function which causes us not to see clearly seems to be biblically suspect. The only caveat here is that in the Psalms, David speaks of “wine that gladdens the heart of man...” [Ps 104:15] In addition, there are numerous scriptures with the theme of wine as bringing joy or gladness: cf Ps. 4:7; Ecc 9:7; Zech 10:7.

While it may be the case that consuming wine in the biblical sense can be an occasion for joy, such as during weddings and feasts, the idea of losing control is usually never understood as the right thing. Some say that marijuana is more or less the equivalent of wine for the ancient world: something that is good with moderation, a symbol of blessing, but bad in excess. Others say it depends on the level of intoxication you receive from the substance. Does a glass of wine or a joint of marijuana produce equivalent highs? Some would argue that the consequent “drunkenness” attained by these levels of consumption (a glass or a joint) are very different in practice. Others say that to identify when “drunkenness” occurs from moderate intake is so particular to each individual person, it’s nearly impossible to nail down numerically what a limit might be (as in more than two glasses of wine equals drunkenness, etc.).

SPIRITUAL VULNERABILITY

Spiritually speaking, marijuana can open doorways and allow opportunities for spiritual attack (Ephesians 6:12). When we put our minds in a trance-like state, we are not in control. Instead of dizzying our minds, rather it would be better to renew our minds in Christ as it says in Romans 12: 1-2. Apostle Paul writes to the believers in Christ: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (ESV) As people of God, when we stray outside of the will of God into ungodly chatter, matters, and musters, we open ourselves up to Satan’s charms. Some believe that engaging in the smoking of marijuana and even cigarettes can pull us away from God; we should rather strive to be involved in things that edify. Bringing God into focus rather than out of focus.

BEING A GOOD WITNESS

Romans 14:19-21 (AMP) says, “So let us then definitely aim for and eagerly pursue what makes for harmony and for mutual up-building (edification and development) of one another. You must not, for the sake of food, undo and break down and destroy the work of God! Everything is indeed [ceremonially] clean and pure, but it is wrong for anyone to hurt the conscience of others or to make them fall by what he eats. The right thing is to eat no meat or

drink no wine [at all], or [do anything else] if it makes your brother stumble or hurts his conscience or offends or weakens him.”

Some argue that to them it’s not even about personal effects of smoking marijuana, but that one should abstain from smoking when it makes others uncomfortable. Current culture has been conditioned that marijuana use is forbidden by Christians, whether or not this is true (apart from legally), the argument still stands that smoking marijuana goes against the conscience of many believers and non-believers alike. Does smoking marijuana offend your family or your friends? Does the habit cause others to question whether or not you are a follower of Christ? Similarly for alcohol, there are some cultures where drinking represents a sinful lifestyle. Whether this is the case or not is a moot point, the perspective is still valid for those who hold it. This would seem to make the argument that drinking a glass of wine with dinner or smoking marijuana from time to time should be done in the privacy of one’s own home – not to pressure others to conform to the habit; make anyone uncomfortable by using it; cause others to stumble because they disagree with it or consider it something to avoid.

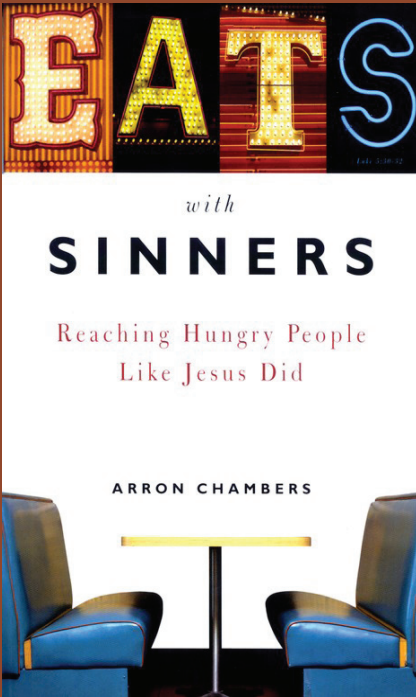
But then one may ask, is smoking marijuana even helpful to our life as a Christ-follower at all? Does it promote better health? Does it bring us closer to God? In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul talks about how as a follower of Christ “all things are permissible for him but not all things are helpful.” What help are we being as living examples of Christ in our world by smoking marijuana? Is smoking marijuana a necessary part of being an example of Christ to those that don’t know him? Or has smoking become a habit to partake in (as are other things), regardless of whether it’s a productive or glorifying use of our time? Has it become an idol (priority above God) in life? In Exodus 34:17, the Lord says, “Do not make any idols.”

In the end, we should not judge one another on whether we agree or disagree on the topic, as it says in Luke 6:37, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” The text of the Bible provides many reasons to be cautious of marijuana but also no definitive do or don’t (besides when it is illegal), and no single argument is conclusive on its own. Such unclear and complex issues always need to be worked out in faith communities, with the larger church’s historic traditions and doctrines serving as conversation partners and guides. As with all psychoactive substances, there are many questions to ask, whether about legality, health, medicinal purposes, or honoring God, and even more consequences to consider. It’s clearly an issue that needs continued dialogue with other believers.



NIM: What are your thoughts? Join the discussion at www.newidentitymagazine.com

BOOKS EATS WITH SINNERS



Arron Chambers, author of *Eats with Sinners*, minces no words when he states, "In my experience, the more committed some Christians become to God, the more isolated they become from lost people." In his in-your-face style, Chambers challenges Christians to actively and intentionally engage their friends in conversations about God. *Eats with Sinners* offers real-life practicals that will help any Christian deepen their

relationships with non-Christians so that talking about God no longer feels awkward and forced.

With humor and honesty, Chambers writes about the importance of talking to people about God and Jesus, and he challenges Christians to do so without hesitancy. Using scripture, he explains how Jesus' efforts were often executed around meals. "He ate with lost people," Chambers points out. Undoubtedly, he argues, that is probably the most effective way to break down the barriers between Christian and non-Christians. Not only a guide to effective evangelism, but also a cookbook, Chambers offers simple easy recipes such as 'Friendship Chocolate Pie,' 'Resolution Red Beans and Rice,' and 'Can you Tolerate the Heat Chili.'

Chambers' book incorporates a range of ideas to reach out to anyone, not just friends. He stresses having a plan, especially when it comes to reaching out to homeless people. A practical solution he suggests is to keep a cooler in your car with non-perishable items like granola bars, sealed fruit cups, and snack crackers, so that you can offer the people you see regularly on your daily commute a thoughtful snack. It's cool ideas like these that adds a sharpness to Chambers' book.

Eats with Sinners is also a devotional that asks the reader to examine him/herself through a series of probing questions. At the end of each chapter, Chambers includes questions as a guide for personal reflection. *Eats with Sinners* is fulfilling on multiple levels and would make a great gift for new and old Christians alike. —Jerine Griffith

JARGON COMMUNION

Dictionary of Christian Jargon for the Ordinary Person

by Ramon Mayo

Communion. It sounds very spiritual and it is. It is also a very worldly word that we lean into all the time without even knowing it. Communion is shared experience. When we are at a football game or a baseball game we have communion with all the other fans. We share the experience. When we buy that latest Apple or Mac technological innovation we have a shared experience—communion—with all of the other consumers and users of that product. When a husband and wife make commitments to spend the rest of their lives together and consummate their vows on their wedding night they experience communion.

The thing that distinguishes Christian communion from all of these other forms is that not only is it a shared experience but it is a shared experience of a person. When Christians talk about Communion they are talking about their shared experience of the person of Jesus Christ. This shared experience is relived and remembered through taking something as mundane as bread and wine (or crackers and grape juice for those who abstain from alcohol) and consuming it in remembrance of everything that Jesus has done for them. We take the bread as a representation of Jesus' body that was broken for us on the Cross. We drink from the cup, and the wine or juice represents his blood that was shed for us. This is our shared experience of Christ. This is what Christians mean when they say Communion.

**Let the trees of the forest sing,
let them sing for joy before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
Cry out, Save us, God our Savior;
gather us and deliver us from the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name,
and glory in your praise.**

1 Chronicles 16:33-35 (NIV)

MEDIABOOKSHELF PARABLES

A Grown-Up Perspective on Children's Literature

Photo by Sarah Ross | Flickr (CC)

KEVIN C. NEECE

In addition to being a husband and dad, Kevin is an adjunct professor of Fine Arts and Developing a Christian Mind at Dallas Baptist University. His work has appeared in *Next Wave Magazine*, *Breakpoint Worldview Church Report* and *Baptist Life*, among others. He also contributed to the forthcoming book *Light Shining in a Dark Place: Discovering Theology Through Film*. You can read his blog, connect with him and book him as a speaker at kevincneece.com.

As the father of a one and a half year-old boy, I read a lot of children's books. I read so many, in fact, that I have four Dr. Seuss books memorized and I'm working on my fifth. Some dads may dread reading the same books over and over, annoyed by the simplistic, repetitive text of many a slender tome, but I love reading children's literature. I always have, really, but I gained a new appreciation for it long before I was a dad, during my wife's years as an elementary school teacher and librarian.

Sitting around, waiting for her to finish her work when I came to pick her up from the school, there was little else to do but peruse the numerous tiny volumes around me. Some were dreadful,

with poor meter, badly rhymed verse and pointless, nonsensical plots unconvincingly passed off as whimsy. Others, however, were surprisingly delightful and even deeply moving. By the end of the first year, I was an ardent fan of the genre. The not so good books were fun to criticize, at least, and the good ones were enjoyable reads that made me smile. But the great ones – the truly great ones, I found, were concise yet thoughtful narratives, describing contours of the human condition and often impressions of our relationship to the Divine.

One such book (which also happens to be one of my son's favorites) is the 2005 Caldecott Medal winner, *Kitten's First Full Moon*. In this beautifully crafted work, author and illustrator Kevin Henkes takes us on a journey with a kitten who mistakes the first full moon she sees for "a little bowl of milk in the sky" – one she wants very badly to drink. After unsuccessfully attempting to lick it out of the sky, Kitten chases it far from the front porch of her house and out into the night.

As you can imagine, Kitten never attains her prize. Like many of us, she is drawn away from where she is safe and loved into potential danger, seeking after something that isn't really there for the taking. Just as we may pursue the illusion of happiness or satisfaction in things that cause us to move away from values we know we should hold and people who love us, so Kitten ventures into the dark, trying to take a sip from the moon. In Henkes' celebrated black-and-white illustrations, Kitten's focus on the moon becomes our own as the bright, white circle in each scene inevitably

draws the eye. Her frustration is apparent as the orb grows no closer, no matter how far she chases it.


“Still,” Henkes repeats, “there was the little bowl of milk, just waiting.” On these pages, only this single line of text bridges the gulf between Kitten on the lower left side of the first page and the moon on the upper right section of the next. This emphasizes the standoff between the two and Kitten’s continued determination, even as she licks her wounds from her previous attempts. In the same way, so many of us are dazzled by the promise of success on the other side of unwise choices and even sinful actions. We don’t just make rash, foolish decisions in the moment. We keep up the pursuit, in spite of the cost or setbacks that we encounter, because we are driven by a desire, a hunger, for something that ultimately eludes us.

The grandest and most dangerous illusion comes for Kitten as, frightened atop a tree, she sees a bigger bowl of milk below her – the moon’s reflection in the pond. Running down the tree trunk and leaping after a promise far too good to be true, Kitten ultimately finds herself “wet and sad and tired and hungry.” Indeed, though we go to great lengths in our lives to find happiness and hope away from the things that truly offer them, we often find ourselves deeply, coldly immersed in the harsh reality of our illusions and filled with a hunger that has not gone away, but is in fact stronger than ever. It is at these times, when we have become utterly lost within our vain pursuits, that the error and foolishness of our desires becomes uncomfortably clear to us. It is at these times that many of us give up hope.

But Kitten knows what to do. She goes back home. At first dripping with the evidence of her greed and pride, she gradually dries off as she walks back toward the house where she lives. By the time she arrives at the walkway leading up to the front porch, she is completely dry. Similarly for us, the damage done by our mistakes can often be reversed by simply turning around and going the other way. It may take time for us to be restored – longer, in fact, as we walk wearily over the ground we once ran across – but restoration will indeed come. All we need do is set course for home.

Expecting nothing but merely a better condition than being stranded in the middle of a pond, Kitten pads her way up the steps and onto the porch. There, she is surprised by what she should have known would be there all along, “a great big bowl of milk on the porch...just waiting for her.” The prodigal Kitten comes home to greater joy and satisfaction than she ever could have found elsewhere. She finds forgiveness and renewal in a bountiful meal she did not need to go in search of. Kitten finds, as we do, what singer/songwriter Billy Crockett calls “love we have not earned,” for which he entreats us in the song of the same name to be, “thankful boys and girls.” Kitten is indeed thankful as she curls her tired body up next to a now empty bowl of milk and drifts into a comforted, satisfied sleep.

Kitten’s First Full Moon is a simple, yet powerful and beautiful picture of the love and redemption available to us in the equally simple and powerful gospel of grace. Through this beautiful work, I hope these ideas continue to take root in my son’s heart, even as I am reminded each time I read of the truth that I needn’t

venture far to find everything I need. To me, the best children’s books – the truly great ones – are written not just for children, but for the parents whose privilege it is to share them with their young sons and daughters. You don’t have to be a child to learn, as Mister Rogers was fond of saying, “something old every day” from these elegant and insightful books. Sometimes the things we learn as children are the lessons that we as adults most need to hear and remember again. 

Five Great Children’s Books for Adults

1. *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale* by Mo Willems

This book reminds me as a dad that, if you love your kids, you must love what they love. It also demonstrates that, in a child’s eyes, nothing can replace the everyday heroism of a parent who loves them. Oh, and it’s really funny!

2. *When Marian Sang* by Pam Muñoz, Pictures by Brian Selznick

The true life story of 1930s American singing great Marian Anderson, whose voice captivated audiences around the world and helped break down racial divisions in the United States is elegantly and dramatically told. Muñoz’s text itself sings, interlaced with the lyrics of the Gospel songs Anderson shared around the world. Celebrated illustrator Brian Selznick brings luminous emotional depth to her story.

3. *The Cats in Krasinski Square* by Karen Hesse, Illustrated by Wendy Watson

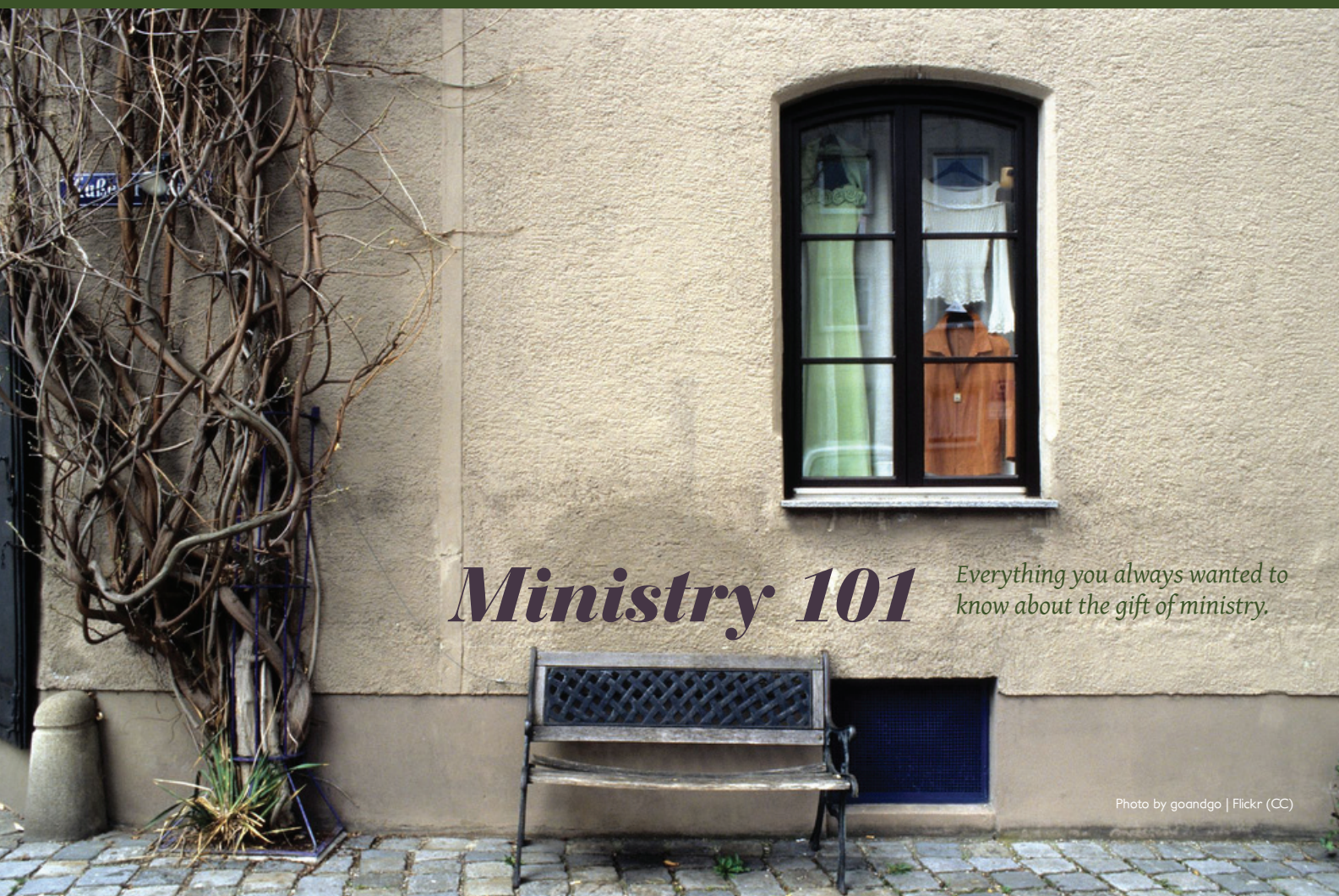
Set in the Warsaw ghetto during World War II, this book tells a true and remarkable story from the eyes of the girl who lived it as Hesse imagines her. Both thoroughly researched and heart-breakingly hopeful, this simple tale reveals complex struggles and unlikely heroes. Nobility and strength are found here in the “least of these.”

4. *The Selfish Giant* by Oscar Wilde

Written in 1888, there are many editions available, but I recommend the edition featuring illustrations by Gertraud and Walter Reiner from their prize-winning 1964 film. An elegantly told tale of repentance and forgiveness, this book asks all of us to examine our hearts and find where we have selfishly banished Christ and how we might invite him back in.

5. *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak

Similarly to *Kitten’s First Full Moon*, this classic is also the story of a prodigal. Sendak, however, chooses to focus on the process of anger and forgiveness and the limits of revenge fantasies to truly satisfy our deeper hunger as humans - to be loved. –Kevin C. Neece



Ministry 101

Everything you always wanted to know about the gift of ministry.

Photo by goandgo | Flickr (CC)



DELBERT TEACHOUT

Delbert Teachout has been married for 35 years. He is currently retired from military and civilian careers. Ordained into ministry in 2002, Delbert is now pursuing freelance writing as a ministry.

Have you ever heard anyone say that twenty percent of the people in a church do eighty percent of the work? Could it be that some of those who are not working don't understand that they have a ministry? The Bible tells us that, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph 2:10) In other words, everyone has a ministry. However, not everyone has a good un-

derstanding of their ministry. Not everyone knows to keep God the focus. Nor does everyone know how to perform their ministry in a meaningful way.

Understanding Ministry

The word ministry isn't merely Christian jargon. Ministry can be defined by three Greek words: *leitourgos*, which means a servant; *huperetes*, a personal attendant carrying out the desires and orders of another; and *diakono*, a minister of the gospel. Therefore, ministry means to serve, or the act of ministering, either in public, to a private individual, or in a church. The New Testament gives examples of all three types (Romans 15:16, Luke 4:20, and Galatians 2:17 respectively) although most people in the church think of *diakono* when they think of ministry.

Within any church there are numerous jobs to be done and numerous opportunities for ministry. Yet, only one in five "born again" believers in America attend church once every six months. Only thirty-five percent attend church once a week. I wonder how God's work is getting done if people are not in church using their

gifts. If you want to enjoy using your gift for ministry, regular attendance at a church is important.

"We have different gifts, according to the grace given to us." (Rom. 12: 6) It is our duty to submit to God and determine what our gift is with an open mind and an obedient heart. Dwight L. Moody said, "The Lord must teach us what our work shall be." For some people it is easy, especially if they are gifted in music or singing. But if a person is not using his or her gift there is a void in that area. Sometimes a person can see a need and volunteer to fill it. Sometimes others will ask the person to fill the void.

What I have learned is that when we discover our gift, we will already be using it. One church I belonged to asked each first time visitor to fill out a visitor card. Then sometime within a week someone from the church would go to that person's home to answer any questions about the church and encourage the person to come again. The first time I ever went to a person's home, my knees sounded like a snare drum because I was so nervous. Within a few months after making home visits, church leaders told me it was my gift. I was selected as the visitation outreach director of the entire church. I didn't know I had that gift until I started using it.

The gifts of ministry in the church could be any number of things, from working in the nursery to cleaning the church sanctuary. It could be a greeter at the door or pushing the lawn mower. It could be driving the van to playing kick the can with the kids. If you can walk, talk, or use either hand, there is a ministry for you. Your job is to be faithful to do whatever is needed. I've been in churches where volunteers cleaned the church and mowed the grass because they could not afford a custodian. Wherever there is a need there is a ministry. Some ministries are so basic they require no gift except to be willing to work. Most people can push a lawn mower or shovel snow, or sweep a sidewalk, or operate a vacuum cleaner. People who have these ministry gifts are a vital part of the church because they make it function more efficiently.

The church in America is struggling because people either don't attend church or aren't involved. Studies by The Barna Group in 2005 indicate that there were about thirteen million unchurched "Christians" in our country, with the number expected to double in the next twenty years. It's impossible to use your ministry gift in church if you do not attend. I believe that every Christian man and woman should regularly exercise his or her ministry gift. This is not only in accordance with Biblical teaching, but it is also vitally important for the church and the believer. The believer needs that time of corporate worship, Bible teaching, and fellowship with other believers. These three keep us strong in our faith and without them our faith tends to erode.

In the fall of 2007, *Enrichment Magazine* reported a survey of why people attended church. The highest reason reported at twenty-three percent was for spiritual growth. Other reasons were:

to worship God, being brought up in church, for fellowship, belief in God, and to remain grounded in their faith. Not one reason was to perform a person's ministry. The emphasis was on serving oneself instead of serving God. Performing our ministry ought to be high on our list of why we attend church.

Keep God the focus

"You have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right before God," (Acts 8:21). The first way to keep God the focus (keep our hearts right) of our ministry is to keep God as a priority in our lives. Regular church attendance is one way we do this. It is not the one sermon that suddenly strikes a nerve that makes a difference, it's the steady and regular Word of God being heard week after week that makes the real significant difference. When I was a Sunday school superintendent I had teachers tell me they were having trouble completing the entire lesson in the time they had. I told them they had to remember they were teaching children, not teaching lessons. The most important thing was that the child was there, heard part of a Bible story, and wanted to come back the next week. It is the week after week lessons that build up and change a person — they are making God their first priority.

Secondly, we need to remember true ministry is about using God's gift to serve others. In his book, *Whose Love is it Anyway*, Judson Cornwall said that loving God isn't all praise and worship but it also involves love given to others. Worship isn't always through music. True worship of God is serving Him by serving His people. Our motives for ministry must be to meet the needs of others, leading to their salvation or spiritual growth, and to bring glory to God. Anything less than that and the motive becomes pride, which God will not respect. Author of *The Ministry*, Charles Slattery, reminds us that "there is no end

"Ministry is not shouting 'Hallelujah' at a football game when your team scores."

of the ways in which a [human] can serve God."

When a person is advancing in their spiritual maturity, they will begin to minister. Slattery says they help anyone in any way they can. They will spread their seed, the seed of love, everywhere they go. If they help few, few will be saved. If they help many, many will be saved. They could choose to reap thirty-fold, or a hundred-fold depending on their fervency and love for the Lord.

A third way to keep God the focus of your ministry is to perform it regularly and faithfully. "The priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry out their ministry." (Heb 9:6) The faithful person will perform his or her ministry regularly. People will count on them. Sales people know that the way to make sales is personal contact on a regular basis. The same principle applies to ministry. Ministry is a personal involvement in the life of another. Regular performance of our ministries will produce the results of salvation or edification. When performed regularly, we can keep our focus

on God. If we lose our focus we also lose our faithfulness and reduce the results.

Where to start serving

The ministry of the kingdom of God goes beyond the walls of the church. It is in the highways and byways wherever there are people. Slattery said, "What we want is personal contact with them." Did Jesus sit in the synagogue and help only those in attendance or did he go to where the people were? Did he give them a passing glance or did he stop to help them? I have some terribly distressing news but we are not saved to ride through life in our own little bubble passing by the world as we travel.

Even though God gifted us to serve the church, sometimes our ministry takes us out of the church. People live in neighborhoods, work in businesses, and shop in shopping centers. Where there are people, there is the kingdom work. There is where God wants us. He wants us to grow the church.

Neighborhood Bible studies need leaders and administrators, and homes to meet in, and food to eat, and games to play. We could do bus or van ministries, or minister to people who cannot get out of their home, teach Bible classes to people in jail or nursing homes where there are people who would love a visit. Prison groups, outreach visitation, adopt-a-block, and similar activities all need workers. There is more work to do than there are people to do it! God's work is with the homeless alcoholics who cannot overcome their addiction long enough to obtain employment or secure housing. God's work is in soup kitchens, hospitals, nurseries, nursing homes, jails and prisons, on our streets and in our homes.

How to perform ministry

We participate in what God is doing in the world. That's the bottom-line. There are seventy-six million people in America who do not ever attend a church service. If you want God to say to you, "Well done good and faithful servant," (Matt 25:23) then get out of the church and go where the people are. That does not mean going to a football game on Sunday and shouting "Hallelujah" when your favorite team scores a touchdown. God's work is small things like helping the person in front of you at the grocery store who suddenly comes up a little short to pay for the groceries, volunteering at shelters or locations where others are hurting, and even taking people shopping who do not have transportation of their own.

Real ministry is serving others. Sometimes we don't enjoy what serving involves but we do it anyway. I am reminded of a time when a man so intoxicated he could hardly stand came into the rescue mission where I worked. He was smelly and his clothing was soiled. Two men who were staying at the mission took this man to the showers. They cleaned him up and gave him clean clothes to wear. They are the epitome of what it means to minister.

What about overdoing it? Bible heroes gave their lives in ministry. Look at Jesus, Moses, Joshua, the twelve disciples, and


through history all the martyrs left along the way. Unless a person has gone to the cross for someone to see that person saved, there is no such thing as overdoing it. We were made to serve.

From zero to extremes

Some will say they don't have to minister. They might even quote the scripture, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast," (Eph 2:8). These folks make up the large group of Christians who do nothing. They are a part of the thirty-eight percent who attend church once a month or less. Some boast that they don't have to work, forgetting that God calls everyone for a preordained purpose.

On the other hand, there are people who are always working, fueled by James 2:14, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?" Some boast about their work, forgetting it was God who called, gifted, and provided opportunities for ministry. They will tell you that there is always something else to do, to write, to teach, another person to visit, another person without food, and the list is endless. They can somehow become so involved with the ministry they forget the purpose of the ministry. They always strive to improve "their" results. If they work for a non-profit agency and depend on donations for support, they must keep the emphasis on the numbers in order to be funded. If not careful the numbers can become more important than the reason for the ministry: souls won to the Lord.

The truth is somewhere in the middle. Yes we are saved by grace but we will be judged by what we did. Our works done by faith can lead to a heavenly reward, unless the work leads to forgetting who we are working for or why we are working.

We need to thank God, praise God, and perform our ministry. We need to understand our ministry, keep the focus on God, and serve in a meaningful way. 

The Space Between

*Seeking the Sacred Between the
Pages of Pop Culture*



The Undiscovered Country

Okay, I realize the new *Star Trek* film doesn't hit theatres for about fifteen more months. So, why talk about *Star Trek* now? Well, there are two reasons. One: I'm a huge Trek fan and I can talk or write about it pretty much any time. Two: Maybe talking about it now might inspire you to familiarize (or re-familiarize) yourself with some of the franchise's many TV series and films before the next movie comes out. Why would you want to do that? Well, I think *Star Trek* has a lot to say that we need to hear. In particular, I think it holds a great deal of interest from a Christian perspective. For me, looking at it with fresh eyes over the last few years has been a rewarding experience. Maybe it can be for you too.

Star Trek has always been about a quest for something beyond our earthbound human grasp. While its six TV series and eleven (soon to be twelve) feature films are certainly concerned with the future, technology, exploration and how humans might advance as a species, the journey of the Enterprise has always been a metaphorical one. Though the ship's crew may encounter strange alien species, these species merely stand in for different types of humans.

Through its fictitious peoples and their imagined struggles, *Star Trek* has always been able to address relevant cultural issues, sometimes in ways that would never have been directly discussed on television. Over the years, its stories have been thinly veiled discussions of such topics as racism, war, religion, homosexuality, terrorism, bigotry, and euthanasia, to name a few. Hiding within a science fiction adventure show has always been a philosophical inquest. The true journey of *Star Trek* has never been simply a



KEVIN C. NEECE

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journey outward, but also a journey inward.

For many modern Christians, the venerable sci-fi franchise's focus on humanity is uncomfortable. Western Christian thought often sees a strong divide between the spirit and the flesh. Seeking to avoid the messy, complicated, sinful world of the here and now, this view focuses instead on what might be called a "there and then" ideal, where spiritual purity lies waiting on the other side of an escape from the prison of a human body. Because of this perspective, many of us live in a state of constantly denying the needs, beauty and purpose of our human nature. If there is an undiscovered country in modern Christianity, it just might be our own humanity.

But, we are human for a reason. God created us as humans to be humans and not anything else. If we can deeply understand and explore what it means to be human, then we can discover what it means to become the best humans we can be – in other words, what it means to be human to the glory of God. But, where is God in *Star Trek*? Its creator, Gene Roddenberry is thought of by many as a prominent celebrity atheist. But here's the trick – he wasn't.

"As nearly as I can concentrate on the question today," he said in the book *God & by Terrence Sweeney*, "I believe I am God; certainly you are, I think we intelligent beings on this planet are all a piece of God, are becoming God." Now, that's hardly Christian orthodoxy, but Roddenberry noticed in human beings something transcendent that he saw as parts of God. Christians recognize this Divine spark as the fingerprints of our Creator on His "very good" creation. These "fingerprints" are a strong and essential element of *Star Trek's* worldview.

The founding concept of the *Star Trek* universe is that it takes place in a future time when mankind has evolved enough and has achieved sufficient technological advancement to eradicate many diseases, end war and conflict, end hunger and unite as one world to reach out into the stars. This evolution is not one of human DNA, but of the human spirit. *Star Trek* is about what might happen if we humans chose, as a race, to try to exercise the best parts of ourselves toward the common good of humanity.

This supposed utopia of Roddenberry's imagination, however, is mentioned but never fully realized. The simple reason for this is that *Star Trek's* writers have always understood that

story thrives on conflict. Without conflict there is – in general – no story. In short, in a perfect world, nothing interesting ever happens. Maybe that's why *Star Trek's* characters venture out into the galaxy. If life on Earth is as idyllic it sounds, then perhaps the men and women of Starfleet are, in a way, actually seeking out the conflicts they often find in space. Since human beings need conflict and struggle to grow, an Earth that no longer included these obstacles might compel humans to look for challenges elsewhere.

This demonstrates a kind of faith in the unseen, a hope for what lies “out there” at the heart of scientific inquiry in *Star Trek*. Mystery here exists comfortably alongside the known. And mystery is an essential part of a pursuit of God. Some may ask why God doesn't blatantly show Himself, why we must seek to find Him instead of getting megaphone messages from the sky. I would say that God is mysterious, perhaps because He operates according to an aspect of human nature that He created and that *Star Trek* understands deeply: curiosity.

It's one thing to have the answer handed to us. But, humans are clever. As such, we distrust things that ask us not to be. Instead, we are drawn by our curiosity to things on the outer edges of our perception. Perhaps God remains a mystery to be sought after so that, in our curiosity, we may desire to seek Him – so that we are not forced irrefutably, but drawn irresistibly. As *Star Trek* reminds us, our human curiosity is insatiable. It is compelling enough a force to drive us to the very stars. For that reason, we value both the journey we embark upon and the things we discover along the way far more than if they had simply been dropped into our laps. We treasure those things. We have earned them and we will not let them go.

I hope you, too, will take another look at *Star Trek*. I hope it will spark your curiosity about the deep questions of life and why God created us to be – of all things – human.



This column was adapted from my paper, “The Undiscovered Country: Star Trek and the Christian's Human Journey.”

Also, check out my Star Trek devotional guide, available now on my website, www.kevincneece.com as well as on Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com.

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What Happens In Mexico Will Not Stay In Mexico

A journey to Ciudad de Juarez



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RAMON MAYO

Ramon Mayo is the lead pastor of VX church, a multiethnic church in Harbor City, CA. He has helped to initiate a Vineyard church planting movement in Ethiopia and formed a multinational partnership to continue these efforts. Currently he attends Fuller Seminary and is married to Yvette. They have two wonderful children Kaydon and Syenna. Check out his blog at mayosmegaphone.wordpress.com

The night before we left for Juarez, Mexico our team of three had dinner at La Capilla restaurant in Torrance, California to get us in the mood for our trip. After being filled with enchiladas and tacos, we walked out and a guy overheard us saying that we would

be picking each other up at 4:00am in the morning. This immediately sparked his interest and he asked us where we were going. Our reply was Mexico. He inquired further, "What city?" We told him Juarez. He offered to get our numbers to check up on us and feared for our safety. What a great way to start a trip.

Our trip to Juarez, Mexico was a life changing experience and it could never be given justice in an article or even a documentary film. You had to be there. Although this experience cannot be replicated or even shared in its fullness it will not remain in Mexico. I got a couple of souvenirs from a gift shop but this is not the only thing that I brought back with me. I returned with an unexpected faith and passion for God. Here are some snapshots of this faith and passion from my journal:

The city and the people

Been in Juarez for four hours and a taco vendor tried to stiff us because we are Americans. 5,000 people have been killed in the last three years. That is a long time to deal with a hopeless environment. The crime, poverty, and corruption can take its toll on you. Juarez is like the wild west. The law is under the control of the cartels. The federales seized guns from them and they broke into the station and stole them back!"

Went to a cultural dance showcase. I did not know there were so many varieties of culture in Mexico. I really like being here. Today we are going to the worst part of Juarez called Alta Vista and then later on tonight we will go to give hot chocolate and cookies to the homeless.

The city of Juarez is known for its crime and for right now being one of the most dangerous places in the world. One of the things that first strikes you about the city is that the people are very happy and upon first inspection you would not know that there have been 10,000 people murdered in the last three years. The presence of the federal police with their masks and automatic weapons quickly alerts you to this reality.

Our visit to Juarez gave us a picture of exciting and poignant contrasts. As we drove through one of the worst neighborhoods in Juarez we noticed shacks and squatters along the unpaved muddy roads. At the same time all we had to do was turn around and see the view of El Paso across the border and the massive University of El Paso as a symbol of American affluence. It was a very insightful and disturbing moment. To see such affluence only a few miles from utter poverty. There was an immediate consciousness of my American identity and all of the privileges that comes with being a United States citizen.

I also realized how little I knew about Mexico. We had the opportunity to go to a buffet restaurant and during our time we got a chance to catch a cultural dance showcase. I have known Mexican people all my life and live only a few hours from the border and yet I did not see the richness of its cultural treasures. It was really eye opening to see the different aspects of Mexican culture and I am sure that I did not get the full breadth of it.

As we traveled all over the city I began to develop a heart for the people living there. I know that I could not continue to live there in the face of such hopelessness and despair and yet many remain to run their businesses, teach children, and live their lives. Some have hope in spite of everything they see and others do not see any other option but to plod along. Being there in the midst of it caused me to grieve for the city and my heart burst with compassion for the children who have to grow up in such a violent environment.

Went to the Assembly of God church and preached. The kids really loved my rapping. One girl Rosario asked me to adopt her. What are we doing for the future of the children of the world? A glimpse of genuine Christian community. This group of Christians do not call themselves a church they call themselves a "community." They love each other so much that they hang out with each other sometimes past midnight. Israel got land donated from a businessman to build a community center. Going to preach at a street crusade. 40 people were killed in the area in the last month. Cartels used dead bodies as speed bumps in the street. Last night was so amazing. I loved the worship time-the girls with the banderas and the people dancing.

We were invited to Juarez by our sister church VX Juarez which was initiated by Israel Robles. Israel managed to gather about sixteen people from Juarez to do church in a different way that resonates more with the ministry of Jesus. There is no hype or fanfare, just a group of people who have committed to being community for each other and following Jesus in the purest sense. They meet together and share the Word. They care for each other and pray for each other. In the summer they are involved in a mission road trip called

“Juarez is a city of broken dreams much like any major urban area.”

Terra Tour. It is just like Jesus and his disciples traveling to minister in first century Palestine. The only difference is this road trip spans fifteen Latin American countries!

They have chosen to remain small and focus on blessing the community. When we arrived in Juarez, Israel told us of plans to build a community center to offer job training and classes on sustainable living and that they were just praying for the land. The next day he was offered a plot of land from a local businessman who had heard of his plans and wanted to see something different happening in Juarez. It was definitely God orchestrated. I believe Juarez is a place where you have to step out in faith and this was a time where I saw that faith rewarded.

We went to go serve the homeless and although going into downtown Juarez at night is not recommended, it turned out to be a very rich experience. It was not as dangerous as I had imagined and I believe that many times we shortchange God and His protection. Talking to the homeless and hearing some of their stories made me realize how much Juarez is a city of broken dreams much like any major urban area. Juarez collects broken dreams even more so because of its position as a border town. So many people from all over Central and even South America travel here to get to the United States only to remain stuck in Juarez. This is a story that we heard from many as we gave out hot chocolate and cookies.

During our stay I was asked to preach at an Assembly of God church and at the end of my preaching I asked if anyone would

The church and the mission

like to receive prayer in response to the message. About eighty percent of the church walked up to the front to receive prayer. I realized that this was not about how great a preacher I was but how hungry and desperate for God the believers in Juarez are. The conditions they have to live under provoke them to seek God's intervention. I began to see how much the comfort of America had caused my faith to grow cold and how much I trusted in my own resources, skills, and technology and not in the power of God. It was amazing to see this same phenomena happen again at an outdoor street rally that was hosted by another church. I preached and called the people up and the whole church came up for prayer. It was overwhelming. The sound of the worship music and the people's cries to God were a boost to my passion and faith that God can do the impossible. This church was right in the neighborhood where the drug cartels operate and the people are constantly in prayer. They live out their trust in God everyday and they are desperate for God to change the situation in Juarez. I thought to myself "Am I as desperate for God to change Los Angeles? Am I on my knees in prayer with that kind of desperation?"

Aftermath and passion

Stories of Terra Tour inspire me to give my all to Christ. God I want more of you. More faith! More risk! I think we came here to bless Israel and the folks in Juarez but I also believe that God wants us in a receiving position. We are supposed to take something away from this that we will not get anywhere else. So we definitely need the mindset of learners. Last night Dan and I talked about Mexican culture and do we feel bad being Americans – American Christians. It is because our culture seems to work against what God wants to do. It is so routine, programmed, and predictable. Yet at the same time there are aspects of our culture that represent godly values like freedom of religion, tolerance, limits of human power, etc. It also made me think how no culture is all good or all bad. It is our mandate to honor God within the culture. Every time I go away to a place where people are in poverty, I realize how much clutter and useless junk is in my house and in my life.

Although I did buy some great souvenirs like a luchador mask (Mexican wrestler. Think *Nacho Libre*) for my son, I came back from Juarez stripped down and lighter. The burden of living up to the standards of our materialistic and task-oriented society was lifted off of me. The truly important and weighty things of life bubbled up to the surface of my heart. Things like God, family, relationships, and the passion of seeing God's blessing being passed on to others have become more of a priority than ever before. To see the passion of the followers of Christ in such a dangerous city and their heart to serve him in that kind of environment showed me how apathetic and complacent I have become. It also showed me how versatile and resilient the Christian faith is. It can grow and blossom even in a place like Juarez where crime and poverty have ravaged so many lives. This experience showed me that even in a place where hope seems dried out and life seems barren God is

"making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." (Isaiah 43:19)

Going on this pilgrimage to Juarez has caused me to be reborn. It has reminded me of some things that I have known for quite a long time but were buried by the everyday stress and blur of life in America. One way that I have chosen to remember and keep the things that God has placed on my heart is to write down the specific lessons and principles that God has reminded me of and taught me during the trip.

1. Pray like mad!!! (Like you really want something from God.)
2. Everything is not so serious. Have faith in God.
3. The Kingdom of God is everything.
4. God is concerned with one thing: Relationship with Him.
5. God has a heart for the nations and I want to have this same heart.
6. Have a vision that is big enough for God.

Now I am back in the States and life is back to normal. There are bills to be paid and deadlines for my seminary classes. There are problems to be sorted out and plans to be made for our church community. Although these things are the everyday mundane things that can be stressful and make life chaotic at times they are now seen through a different lens. It is a lens that I received from our trip to Juarez and the lessons that I learned there. Continuing to keep these lessons before me is why what happened in Mexico will not stay in Mexico. 🇲🇽

Helping the Persecuted Abroad

A Reflection from Home

Skylar Cobb shares his real thoughts and feelings about religious persecution.

Photo by Paul Hocksenar | Flickr (CC)



SKYLAR COBB

Skylar Cobb considers himself just another muggle. Originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico, he spent his high school and college years playing in Colorado. After graduation and a brief stint abroad, Skylar took a corporate job in Southern California, where he now resides.

Let the search for truth continue...

In June of 2009, a Pakistani woman by the name of Asia Bibi was beaten and arrested for blasphemy against Islam after refusing to renounce her Christian faith while at work. According to Voice of the Martyrs, a ministry “dedicated to assisting the persecuted church worldwide,” in November of 2010 Asia Bibi received a sentence of death under the legal court system and, on top of that, a Pakistani citizen funded a bounty of 6,000 USD for her murder.

As I continue to read the recent news of Christian persecution abroad, I see stories of imprisoned Afghani believers denied legal representation, Chinese pastors imprisoned for “gathering people to disturb the public order,” followers of Jesus violently oppressed in eastern India, and a multitude of church bombings in Iraq. And I ask myself: What does this imply for me as a 21st century Christian? What about as a 21st century American?

First, I think it is nearly impossible for me to relate to the persecuted overseas. From my experience while living in America, oppression due to my beliefs is more prevalent as a contagious cold than as a flag waving mob. For example, throughout my life, I witnessed friends right next to me and strangers on the T.V. screen boast blasphemies, all for the sake of entertainment. By sitting idly by or worse yet, by partaking in the laughter, how have I responded to this minor level of harassment (i.e. persecution)? For persecution on the home front in the U.S. is no longer sweating against the sharp edge of a sword, answering either “Yes” or “No” to “Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” Such distinct choices on how to respond to faith-focused harassment in modern America are dangerously blurred.

“Christians in America far too easily side with the persecuted, without ever examining the dark side of that same coin; without reflecting on if we are indeed the persecutors.”

Secondly, in my humble opinion, Christians in America far too easily side with the persecuted, without ever examining the dark side of that same coin; without reflecting on if we are indeed the persecutors. I ask myself, what is my opinion of other religions? Any intolerance I might possess against different faiths is probably just means of justifying my own, and if I were to hold ill-thoughts of another religion I may as well be the man who placed the bounty on Asia Bibi. As I continue this self-critical reflection, I examine oppression of God's creation in the broader sense, outside of faith focusing on all human beings. I sit here in sunny Southern California and I ponder how my very lifestyle is a conduit for disenfranchising the lower socioeconomic classes around the globe? ChildFund International only asks for \$28 dollars a month, less than I spend on lunch in a week, to meet the nutrition, education and health care needs of a child in Senegal. How is being a citizen of the world's richest nation, making us the world's richest people, systematically oppressing the poor around the globe? According to Planet Green, \$11.3 billion, approximately 2% of the money we, as America, spend on military defense, will “provide basic levels of service for drinking and waste water in Africa and Asia.”

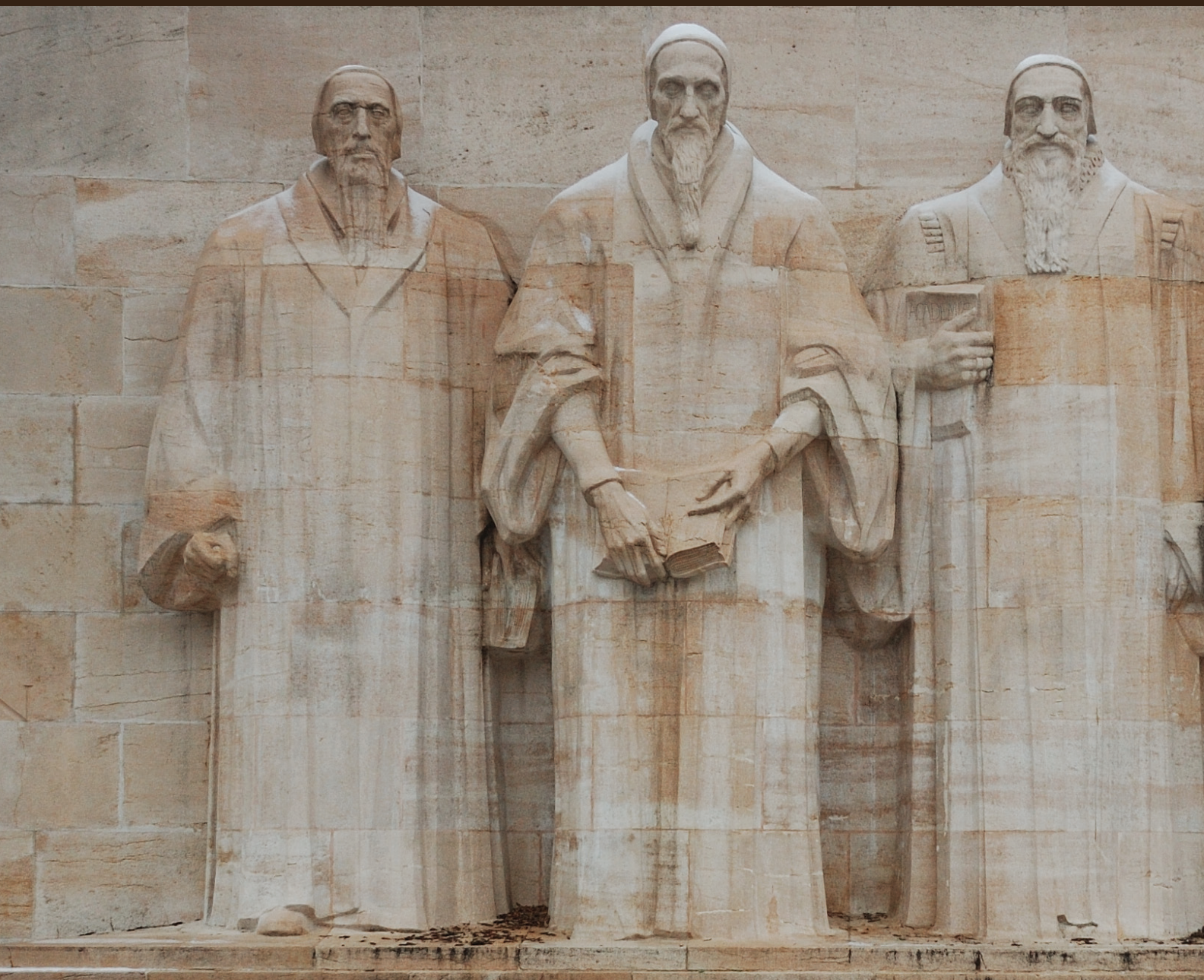
Finally, I ask, how should I choose to respond to the persecuted and victimized of this world? It's easy to tell myself, “Simple, just follow the direction given in Hebrews, ‘Be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as of yourselves, for you also are in the body’ (Hebrews 13:3 NAB).” However, to truly put into practice these words is a miracle of God.

Over 3,000,000 people, larger than the entire population of Mississippi, have been killed during the Congo conflicts within the last sixteen years; do I even sympathize with such ill-treatment in my heart? What about in my prayers? The Assyrians – an ancient people with a nearly two thousand year heritage of Christianity – to this day struggle to preserve their nation, culture and religion from continual persecution in their homelands of Northern Iraq and Syria; am I even attentive to this level of imprisonment?

My reflections and experience lead me to think that the best first-step in helping my suffering brothers and sisters, both in Christ and in God's creation, is to attempt to change myself, not the world. That I must grow intolerant of persecution in

my daily life and dare to be tolerant of what I do not understand. That I must seek a steadfast faith, just as Asia Bibi demonstrates, and recognize that only a heart and mind overflowing with God's compassion will ever allow me to be mindful of the imprisoned, and share in their ill-treatment as if it were my own.

May God have mercy. 🙏



Making Sense of the Reformation

An overview of the origins of one of the most influential change movements in Christian history.

Photo by Cha già José | Flickr (CC)



Reformation



The Reformation Wall in Geneva, Switzerland.



NATHAN RUTAN

Nathan Rutan is a recent graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. In his spare time Nathan enjoys keeping up on technology, spending time with his family, exercising and working on a math-less theory of gravitation which he developed on a napkin many years ago.

The Reformation was a wild and tumultuous time in European history. It was a time when many different groups of people pulled away from the power and control of the Roman Catholic Church.

Previously in the year 1054, the Church (then called the Holy Catholic Church--Catholic meaning "universal") split off into two main groups, the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Protestant Reformation, taking place in the early 1500s, represents another major split in the Roman Catholic branch of the Church, this time splintering into many different subgroups roughly called "Protestant" meaning those that were "protesting" against the Roman Catholic Church.

The ideas and changes brought about during that time have made a lasting impact on the world. However, like the War in Afghanistan or the Civil Rights movement, the Reformation was not a monolithic period of history with easily defined borders and ideas. In fact, there were many different themes and societal forces at work that collectively produced many of the changes attributed to the Reformation. In order to speak meaningfully about the Reformation and due to the scope of this topic, I will have to limit our discussion of the Reformation to a few main points.

The Rumblings of Change

There are a few important focal points that can be used in order to begin to trace a broad outline of the Reformation. To start, one of the most important background issues is the socio-economic change across Europe in the late Middle Ages. During this period, Europe began to see a huge burst in population. This population explosion gave rise to new forms of society, government, business and trade. The economy of Europe during this time saw an unprecedented explosion in growth as well as rising rates of inflation. In addition, a new "money economy" was created in place of the more labor-based economy of the past. This meant that bankers were now lending large sums of money and also outsourcing labor which created a separation between money and labor. And because the economy was rising so fast in scale and scope, almost everyone began charging payments, rents and

fees. Indeed, everyone got in on the game as the Roman Catholic Church, landholders, nobility, kings and nation-states began charging heavier fees, collecting taxes and progressively overburdening the population.

Adding to the rise of population and a new economy undergirded by money lending and haunted by inflation, the political situation was changing as well. For centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire in late antiquity, the Roman Catholic Church had operated more or less like a monarchy with the Pope in control of not only the spiritual realm, but also the temporal political realm. And while all along there had been different territorial governments and parliaments, the Church and the Pope for the most part exercised control over much of Europe. This began to slowly change sometime around the 1200s and leading up to the threshold of the Reformation in the early 1500s.

During this time, many nation-states began to develop and pull away from the power and influence of the Pope, challenging the authority of the Church on a more frequent basis. Even as this happened, the Church appeared to be ever-more vital in its religion and its grip on the everyday lives of the people. As the socio-economic situation developed into less of a blend of Church and state, and different "states" began to untangle themselves from the Church, there were also a host of technological developments that greatly aided the Reformation. The two most important developments were Gutenberg's printing press and the newfound ability to manufacture cheap paper. In fact, some scholars wonder whether the Reformation would have been possible without the invention of the printing press and its cheap paper counterpart. Nevertheless, as these technologies began to spread across Europe, they were received by an increasingly educated lay audience. During the 13th and 14th centuries many universities were founded and the education of the general populous was on the rise.

It must be noted here as well that the Reformation initially spread the quickest in the urban centers across Europe as these were the places where the young, educated and wealthy tended to live. It has been said by some scholars that the uneducated rural locations around Europe were slower to adopt the reforms set out by the Reformation.

Doctrine that birthed the Reformation

We now come to the key question; what were the reforms about? Was it just about getting rid of the Pope and all of the

flashiness of the Roman Catholic Church, or was there something more profound happening here? The truth is that it's difficult to easily discuss all of the doctrinal issues that were at stake during the Reformation, however, we can highlight the most important problems that needed addressing.

Probably one of the most important issues at stake was the system of sacraments that was slowly developed and refined by the Church over the centuries. Indeed, probably the most important "sacrament" or operation of the Church which touched the lives of regular people frequently was the sacrament of "penance." This is sometimes referred to as the "penitential system." It's important to see here that the penitential system, in other words, the confession of sins to the priest and the "satisfaction" (some form of giving alms, prayers and/or other acts of "humility") that the priest

prescribed to the sinner, became more complex but at the same time failed to address the inner anxiety experienced by everyday believers in the Church.

The religious climate of the Middle Ages was highly superstitious and in many ways focused on the supernatural. As well, the teaching of the Church created a sense that one was always in spiritual danger, and without the constant application of the sacraments one was in danger of being lost forever into eternal suffering. The general feeling of the people during that time was that the world was fundamentally supernatural and filled with all manner of demons, fairies, spirits and angels. In addition, the Church was seen as the only source of salvation and to be

excommunicated was the ultimate form of punishment because it left the victim open to the wiles of the devil and his demons and ultimately the eternal fires of hell.

Enter Martin Luther

One of the best ways of getting a glimpse of the inner life of a believer during the Middle Ages is to understand that no one truly had a strong assurance of salvation. The phrase "assurance of salvation" is important theologically as this was a point of reference going into the Reformation and beyond. Enter Martin Luther. In Luther we find a former "monk's monk" who had tried his hardest to find perfection in his religious duties as a monk, even to the point of being told by the headmaster of his monastery that he basically needed to take it easy on himself. Eventually Luther had an epiphany as he read the writings of St. Paul one day in the "cloaca" or on the toilet and he emerged to declare that righteousness was through

faith alone and that the righteousness of Christ could be transferred to the account of the sinner solely on the basis of faith and not by any works done by the sinner. Indeed, this is the core of Martin Luther's objections to the system of his time and really the core of his entire life's work.

So it can be said with a good amount of confidence that the real issue in the Church in the Middle Ages, and what set the stage for the Reformation is the two-pronged problem of power abuses by the Church and also a failure of the whole system to bring about a real sense of assurance for the believer. This situation, coupled with the socio-economic situation and the new ability to quickly and cheaply disseminate information in the form of tracts, pamphlets and books across Europe all came together to create the explosion in change that we call the Reformation.

Of course, there were many other names involved in the Reformation and indeed many "reformations" in different regions. In fact, many scholars refer to "Luther's Reformation" the "Swiss Reformation," "English Reformation" and so on. Many others were involved in the general dissent against the abuses and ineffectual system of the Roman Catholic Church. Once the Reformation was underway, one of the most important uses of the printing press was not only to print tracts and pamphlets, but "vernacular" versions of the Bible, which means translations of the Bible from Greek and Latin into basic languages like German, English and French, such that the common people could read with ease.

The printing of vernacular Bibles became a huge source of inspiration, fanning the flames of the Reformation as the Word of God was taken out of the hands of the elite and put into the hands of everyday people. And, while Martin Luther and others such as someone named Erasmus produced their own translations of the Bible, a man named John Wyclif helped to launch the whole Bible translation endeavor a couple hundred years earlier. Both Wyclif and a priest named John Huss had a major impact on the people in the area of Bohemia in the 1300s. They helped to spark a pre-cursor movement to the Reformation spearheaded by a group called the "Lollards." It's important to see that some of these pre-Reformation movements closely resembled much of what the later reformers such as Luther, Calvin and Zwingli taught.


Teachings of the Reformers

While a discussion of the finer points of the reformer's teaching is not possible here, we can at least skim the surface. Basically, in keeping with the growing unrest among the people due to both the inability of the Church to provide relief for a gnawing sense of anxiety among believers as well as a continual abuse of power and overburdening of the people at almost every turn, the thrust of the Reformation was focused on the "priesthood of believers." This refers to the notion in 1 Peter 2:9 that all believers were able to come to God on their own accord without the aid of some medium like a priest or clergy member. Christ was the mediator between God and people according to the scriptures and the reformers felt that it was time to press this against the

ineffectual and alienating system of the Church. Many times there is a misconception that the Roman Catholic Church had become lax about sin with all of the indulgences and special privileges given to clergy, but the opposite was actually true. The sacraments and the system of penance had become such a burden to the people that they were ravenous for a Christianity that could be practiced by the individual, and one that brought forth a sense of being satisfied or assured that one's personal salvation was secure.

As the Reformation rolled on, spurred by the soon-to-be famous "Ninety-Five Theses" of Luther and his three other most important essays "The Freedom of a Christian," "To The Christian Nobility Of The German Nation" and "The Babylonian Captivity Of The Church," the people of Europe found that they were liberated by a new sense of individual freedom. And, while it may not have assisted in the the healthiest formation of community, the new individual freedom brought about a certain sense of empowerment as households began to feel that they could teach their own children straight from the Bible without the instruction of a priest or interference from the Church. This idea of the "Bible alone" became important later as the reformers did away with much of the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church. In place of the traditional sacraments, the new Protestants affirmed both preaching and the Word of God as their main sacraments.

Later in the Reformation, figures such as John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli would go on to challenge many of the former teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and eventually set out the new Protestant beliefs in great works such as Calvin's "Institutes" which helped to bring the teachings of the Reformation into sharp focus. As well, much of Luther's writings were later brought into focus by people such as Philip Melancthon and used on a regular basis by believers (in this case German believers) in the form of the Augsburg Confession and later the Book of Concord (among other works).

In conclusion, some of the most important things to remember about the Reformation are the complementary ideas of the assurance of salvation, along with the notion of righteousness by faith alone. These ideas sum up much of what the Reformation was about. Of course, there were all of the preceding socio-economic factors leading up to the Reformation, as well as the rising tide of Church abuses along with heavier government control of the people. But, even given all of the socio-economic forces, what really fueled the Reformation at the core was a desire to connect with God in an intimate and individual way. During that period in history there was a collective yearning for a sense of peace that could only be found in the Gospel message. The problem was that the powerful were attempting to hold captive the Gospel. We know from God's Word however, that "the Word of God is not bound..." [2 Tim. LEB] Indeed, as in other times and places in history, the Gospel message and the work of the Holy Spirit brought about profound and deep changes in the lives of many, many people. This is the power of the Word of God at work on a broad scale. But the beauty of the Gospel and the power of God is that it's like the sun, it can warm the entire earth while also warming an individual blade of grass. 



Eco-Fabulous

Wendy Harbottle discovers that going green with your fashion choices is about more than just wearing the right shade.



WENDY HARBOTTLE

Wendy Harbottle blogs about her journey at www.halfformedwish.blogspot.com and is currently earning her keep as Head of Production of a 24-hour Christian Music Channel in Johannesburg, South Africa.

I don't know about you but when I hear the term green clothing my first thoughts are, 'What shade of green?' and 'Will it bring out my eyes?' Thoughts of whether or not my fashion choices are good for the environment and humanity don't spring to mind and neither do the words, "Bamboo," "Hemp," "Soya" or "Cotton." But they should. Every item of clothing that we cover ourselves with impacts the environment and the sustainability of the planet. Knowing what your clothes are made of, who made them, where they were made and how they were made all impact how green your clothing is.

But let's start at the very beginning with what eco-fashion is. In short, green fashion consists of clothing and accessories that are either reused, recycled or made from sustainable fabrics and are usually made completely or primarily with organic fabrics like hemp, bamboo, soya or cotton which have been naturally dyed, without chemicals. Eco-chic doesn't end with what you put on, green fashionistas also care about who made their clothes and where and how their fashion choices fit into the sustainability of a community and the planet at large.

Telling your organics from your synthetics

Still a little confused by all this fabric speak? Then this might help you clear it up. There are basically two types of fabrics, those which come from natural fibers and occur in fabrics like cotton, linen, wool, cashmere, silk and hemp and the second type of fibers which are human-made and synthetic and are found in clothing like acrylics, polyester, rayon, acetate, nylon and just about anything labeled static-resistant, wrinkle-resistant, permanent-press, no-iron, stain-proof or moth-repellent.

So why are synthetics so bad for the environment and for you? Well, let's take a pair of nylon stockings as an example. Just to begin with, nylon (and polyester) are made from petrochemicals, whose production creates nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas that's 310 times more potent than carbon dioxide. The nylon is then treated with a formaldehyde product to prevent shrinkage, since

this is applied with heat it remains in your stockings permanently. If you're starting to wonder if you should go barelegged then you might not want to think about the suspected carcinogens in acrylic fabrics, or the caustic soda and sulphuric acid that is used to treat the wood used in rayon.

Even when it comes to natural fabrics some are greener than others so it pays to read the labels. For instance, the label might say 100% cotton but did you know that although conventional cotton is marketed as clean, fresh, and natural, it takes a third of a pound of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to produce the cotton for one T-shirt? In fact, 10% of all agricultural chemicals and 25% of insecticides in the U.S. are used to grow cotton so you might want to think twice before you pull that cotton T-shirt over your head. However, not all fabrics are bad for the environment. If the label says "made from organic cotton/hemp/linen" then you can be sure that it comes from all-natural materials (no synthetics like polyester or rayon) and there are no pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, rodenticides, radiation or genetically modified organisms.

Green Fiber

There are six main sources of sustainable fibers for eco-friendly fashion so if you're thinking of going green with your wardrobe here's a quick guide to separating your hemp from your bamboo. The most common form of green fabric is sourced from organic cotton fields. Organic cotton is more expensive than conventional cotton because it uses a farming system that reduces environmental impact and increases human participation. It's worth checking labels at large retailers, who often blend organic cottons into fabric. While 5% organic cotton may seem like a drop in the ocean, the large amounts ordered by these companies help smaller organic farmers make ends meet and grow their farms.

Other eco-fashion items might be made from organic wool, from sheep that are not dipped in synthetic chemicals. While organic wool is soft to the touch, hemp material has a rather rough feel that softens with washing. Like hemp, bamboo is a rapidly growing plant, adding not only to saving the environment but the sustainability of the fabric too. In addition, bamboo is naturally odor resistant, anti-bacterial and more absorbent than cotton. The last natural fiber you'll need to know to green your wardrobe is soya. This soft, silky fabric is often seen as a replacement to petrochemical-based synthetic fabric. Finally, there are recycled synthetic fibers. Normally, made from recycled polyester from plastic bottles, these items are a great way to reduce, reuse and recycle while you stay warm in winter.

Fashionably Green

If you're worried that your greener wardrobe might make you look like a hippie you don't need to worry. With more and more fashion designers and clothing retailers intentionally becoming greener, finding garb that is both fashionable and eco-conscious is becoming easier and easier. Stella McCartney and Edun are two

“Eco-chic doesn’t end with what you put on, green fashionistas also care about who made their clothes and where and how their fashion choices fit into the sustainability of a community and the planet at large.”

labels that are leading the way in being responsible and trendy at the same time. South African designer, Craig Jacobs, keeps wastage to a minimum by sending offcuts to a group of destitute woman to make quilts and blankets, and by donating last season’s clothes to the homeless. If designer labels aren’t quite in your budget, the Internet is a great place to source environmentally friendly clothing. Visit www.treehugger.com or www.ecofashionworld.com if you need some inspiration for your eco-friendly wardrobe.

Being a green fashionista isn’t just about checking the label for the percentage of natural fibers used; it’s also about not throwing out torn or damaged clothes but taking them to a tailor to be repaired. It is also about developing relationships with people and organizations in your community which will allow you to resell, pass on and redistribute your old clothing. Being eco-friendly can even involve getting creative and modifying existing garments rather than just tossing it out. It can also mean buying from second hand stores or simply washing your clothes with eco-balls rather than harmful detergents. Simply changing the way you wash your clothes can have a big impact on the environment.

One of the easiest ways to green your wardrobe is simply to buy locally. Buying clothes made in your own country, or even better in your own home-town, reduces the carbon emissions, creates jobs and uses less fuel. It can also give you peace of mind that your clothes aren’t being made by people under poor working conditions or in sweatshops, as it’s possible to stop by the factory and see how it is run. In the end going green is all about living a sustainable lifestyle for this generation and the next. ♻️

tip

Green Fashion Items That Will Stand The Test of Time

Sunglasses (www.eco-optics.com) – Made from recycled stainless steel and re-purposed plastic Earth Conscious Optics sunglasses will see you through years of summers.

Tank Top (shop.hoodlamb.com) – This dutch company offers great basic tanks that are perfect to mix & match. Made from a hemp/ organic cotton/soy blend.

Laptop Bag (www.englishretreads.com) – It’s made from reclaimed rubber and has enough Pockets for your cell phone, pens, credit card and ID, and your lap top.

Slip-on Shoes (www.tomshoes.com) – They make their shoes out of recycled material, so they’re eco-friendly and earth friendly. Plus for every shoe purchased, they give a pair of shoes to a child in need in countries all over the world.

Men's Jumper (www.frankandfaith.com) – 100% organic cotton made in Britain to support and nurture small factories and businesses in the UK.

Blue Jeans (www.allamericanclothing.com) – Blue jeans never go out of fashion. So invest in a pair that were grown and sewn in America. The website even allows to trace your jeans back to the very farm where they were grown.

Scarf (www.cambodianthreads.com) – Cambodian Threads is a socially responsible company that offers fair trade silk scarves from Cambodia. For every scarf sold, they purchase basic school supplies for ten Cambodian public school children. –Wendy Harbottle

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PREMIER
ISSUE

Art To Glorify

How artists reveal their faith through works

SUPA BRINGING GOD INTO THE NIGHT CLUBS OF SPAIN
REDEEMING THE HEART OF HIP HOP
EARTHBOUND: STEWARDSHIP OF THE PLANET



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Super-size

Cristian Vasquez takes an honest look at the eating habits of a growing number of Americans.

Photo by nicodeux | Flickr (CC)



CRISTIAN VASQUEZ

Cristian Vasquez is a freelance journalist in the South Bay area of Los Angeles. He's covered topics ranging from sports and politics to community events and human interest stories. Cristian's love for journalism was discovered at El Camino College in Torrance, CA where he was part of the student newspaper for two years.

Fast-food restaurants offer larger drinks and sides for a few extra cents. Buffet restaurants compete to offer the cheapest price for unlimited trips to the all-you-can-eat table. For many Americans, that is the new way of life. Get the most food for the least amount of money.

Getting more food for less is part of the demand and supply element that drives capitalism. However, with the number of

Obesity contributes to 300,000 deaths in America each year, points out certified health coach and youth pastor Jason Lohrke, who works at Take Shape for Life, a weight loss clinic. "It becomes a choice every day, but we have also been targeted; we've been bombarded by multi-billion dollar corporations, food companies and fast food restaurants," Lohrke said. "We live in a free enterprise, capitalistic society which is a great thing but someone has to step up and have a heart and say 'look, we are dying by the thousands'."

Lohrke has helped countless amounts of people change to a healthier lifestyle through Take Shape Through Life. He is able to combine his nutritional knowledge and spiritual faith to help people make the transition to a healthy lifestyle and stay the course. "As far as food, there are a lot of different ways that we can look at who we are in Christ and what we're supposed to be as his disciples," Lohrke said. "From a biblical world view, our bodies are temples where the Holy Spirit resides. If our bodies are supposed to be temples then we aren't supposed to abuse them in any way, shape or form."

The ability to control gluttonous behavior involves more than just an attempt to diet and make the commitment to exercise. It will require that Americans who indulge in such behavior come to

"The ability to control gluttonous behavior involves more than just an attempt to diet and make the commitment to exercise."

people suffering from obesity rising every year and Type II diabetes becoming more common among children and adults, there is concern that the search for more food at cheaper prices is a sign of gluttonous behaviors.

"Gluttony can take the place of greed or lusting after something, namely food," says Robert Doss, a practicing Christian. "The Bible mentions the act of gluttony several times. The bottom line is that I believe that if something gets in the way of you living for the Lord, then it can't be good."

With the fast-paced life that many Americans live, especially in bigger cities, stopping on the way home for an already made meal is not just cheaper at times but quick and convenient. Although the negative side effects of consuming fast-food in larger amounts may vary, in many cases it can lead to life-threatening diseases such as high-blood pressure and heart disease. "As a matter of fact, it becomes dangerous and harmful," Doss said, "not only to your spiritual growth, but to your body as well.

terms with what they are doing in contrast to what they should be doing. "It's not impossible, but it's very hard when every fast food restaurant and grocery store promotes their items in bulk quantity," says Doss. "It's up to the individual to know his or her limitations. I've been know to 'super size' a drink because I was thirsty; sometimes it takes an extra refill to clinch a thirst."

While it is understood by both Doss and Lohrke that the 'super size' issue is more of a health dilemma rather than a moral one, they agree that getting caught up in having more food for less money does take control of some people's lives. "I've heard about gluttonous people but I have never actually met a person who seems to live to eat," Doss said. "We should be promoting the message that our bodies are temples of God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and we should manage it as if it wasn't our own but God's body." 🗣️



Ready, Set, Pray!

Nicholas Sowell shares his perspective about praying before sporting events.

Photo by Ed Yourdon | Flickr (CC)



NICHOLAS SOWELL

Nicholas Sowell has been involved in full time ministry since the age of 16. Having served as a lay minister, youth pastor, Christian radio DJ, Christian music production company owner, and surf missionary, Nick has used his love for writing to publish, inspire, educate, and most importantly, further the Kingdom of God. Now living in the South Bay, Nick enjoys staying active, and passionately seeking after the Lord.

On June 19th of 2000, The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Texas public schools were no longer allowed to begin football games with a student organized prayer over a PA system. This was the first ruling against public prayer before football games. But in high schools and intermediate schools all around the nation it is now banned, not just Texas. Even public universities are by law unable to take part in a public pre-game prayer. In all of my years in scholastic sports (including junior high through high school) we always started with the Lord's prayer before we ever left the locker room and stepped foot on the basketball court. Every game. As I graduated from high school and moved to a private university I was used to hearing a public prayer over the PA system for the entire attending crowd, still knowing full well that most of the country didn't have this freedom, high schools and universities included.

While I was in school public prayer had not yet been banned. Teachers were allowed to lead prayer, students were allowed to lead prayer, schools were allowed to pray over games in front of a crowd before two teams met on a court or playing field. It was a beautiful thing that allowed me to always remember that I was on the court to glorify the Lord. It was something I look back on fondly and always reminisce about, feeling the butterflies in the locker room before hand and taking a knee to lift my heart up to my Father. All the time growing up I would pray that God would cause our team to be victorious. We always prayed as a team however, to come out safely with no injuries. The interesting part about prayer is how it seems to vastly differ from one team to another as well as one sport to another.

We see prayer in sports, but even more often than not in college and professional football. Pre-game prayer with a knee

down seems to be the norm. The Washington Post in an October 2007 article stated that "Historians say that prayer has been fused with American sport for at least the past 100 years, but it was not until the late 1970's that football players began kneeling on one knee to pray during games." We see countless sports movies that seem to have the famous pre-game prayer before leaving it all out on the field. Why do we see such a common practice, especially in the realm of Christian prayer? Why as a nation have we found prayer before games so offensive and thus outlawed? There seems to be three separate areas in which you can find prayer being integrated into sports: one being for the team praying to be victorious in their pursuits, another being praying for safety. Third, even a small amount lift up a prayer because of superstition or ritual, taking a knee in prayer simply because that's what they've grown up with, and it helps having comfort and ritual before a game, whether one believes in the power of prayer or not.

In pre-game prayer, when the teams lift prayers to be victorious, we have a seemingly strong conundrum. For instance, what if the two teams facing each other are both praying to God for victory? Would the team that won then infer that God wanted them to win more than the other team? Would it allow one to assume that God had more grace for one team over the other, or that God would even have favor and a preference over

whom he wanted to win? Hardly. This is why prayer in this instance can be questionable. Prayer for selfish reasons can be a fine-line and especially prayer for self-glory would be wrong. Regardless of God having chosen people throughout the Bible, I doubt God has chosen teams or franchises (Lakers being the exception... kidding!). So then, as an obvious observation, could the prayer be victory? This takes prayer to new heights as we know it. We can think of prayer as a way to intercede for others in need or lift up loved ones, maybe even pray for our sick or injured. When looking at praying for a purpose, does sports hardly compare?

This leads me to why I believe prayer *should* be in sports: protection. Many teams in sports pray before games so that players would be protected. The prayer in most cases is to pray for the safety of each team and for no one to be hurt. Conflict? I say no way. To lift up the players and pray safety and protection over them before a game is honoring. It makes logical sense to conclude that praying for no injuries and no harm to come to any players in the game is more along the lines of where God's heart lies. Does God want to protect his children? Yes. Does God care who wins? That's up for debate.

Our third area of prayer in sports is that of superstition and ritual. We can read countless stories of pre-game superstitions

*“Would [a certain] team
that won then infer that
God wanted them to
win more than the other
team?”*

professional athletes partake in. A certain meal before every game, a lucky rabbits foot, a same pair of socks, or a pre-game song always listened to. These athletes truly believe that by undergoing a similar superstition that has seemingly brought success, they will be better off for giving in to such power. This has incredible implications. To say that the power of prayer is comparable to yet another rabbits foot seems almost offensive to Christians. Yet, it is there. Some credit needs to be given here for those athletes who believe in the power of God and thus prayer itself, those using their efforts and talents to give glory to God and point towards him when success falls upon them. These are athletes relinquishing the spotlight on themselves to give glory to the Lord for such achievement.

When it's all said and done, the bottom line is that prayer will never be removed from sports. Even if it's taken out of public schools or universities, it will still go on in the private sector. Even if pre-game prayer is not allowed over a PA system, it will still go on in the hearts of athletes, and even if a faculty member or coach can't lead his team in prayer, that still won't stop the students from leading it. Why you ask? Because students know the power of prayer, even student athletes can tell you that prayer has substance and fulfillment. Sports are one of the most integrated aspects of our culture, maybe more so than religion. We must realize that we naturally transfer what is in our hearts into all that we do – and that includes sports.



What are your thoughts? We would love to hear from you! Leave your comments about prayer before your sports games on our website.

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1

Seek wisdom this Spring by regularly reading a chapter each day in Proverbs.

2

Lost inspiration? Try to get it back by doing something you love or used to love that you haven't done in a long time. It could be playing a certain sport, working on an oil painting or journaling some poetry.

3

Offer your help to others, whether that be in the form of time or money. Pray about a way you might help a friend or neighbor with a talent or gift of yours that could be shared and be a blessing to another person.

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